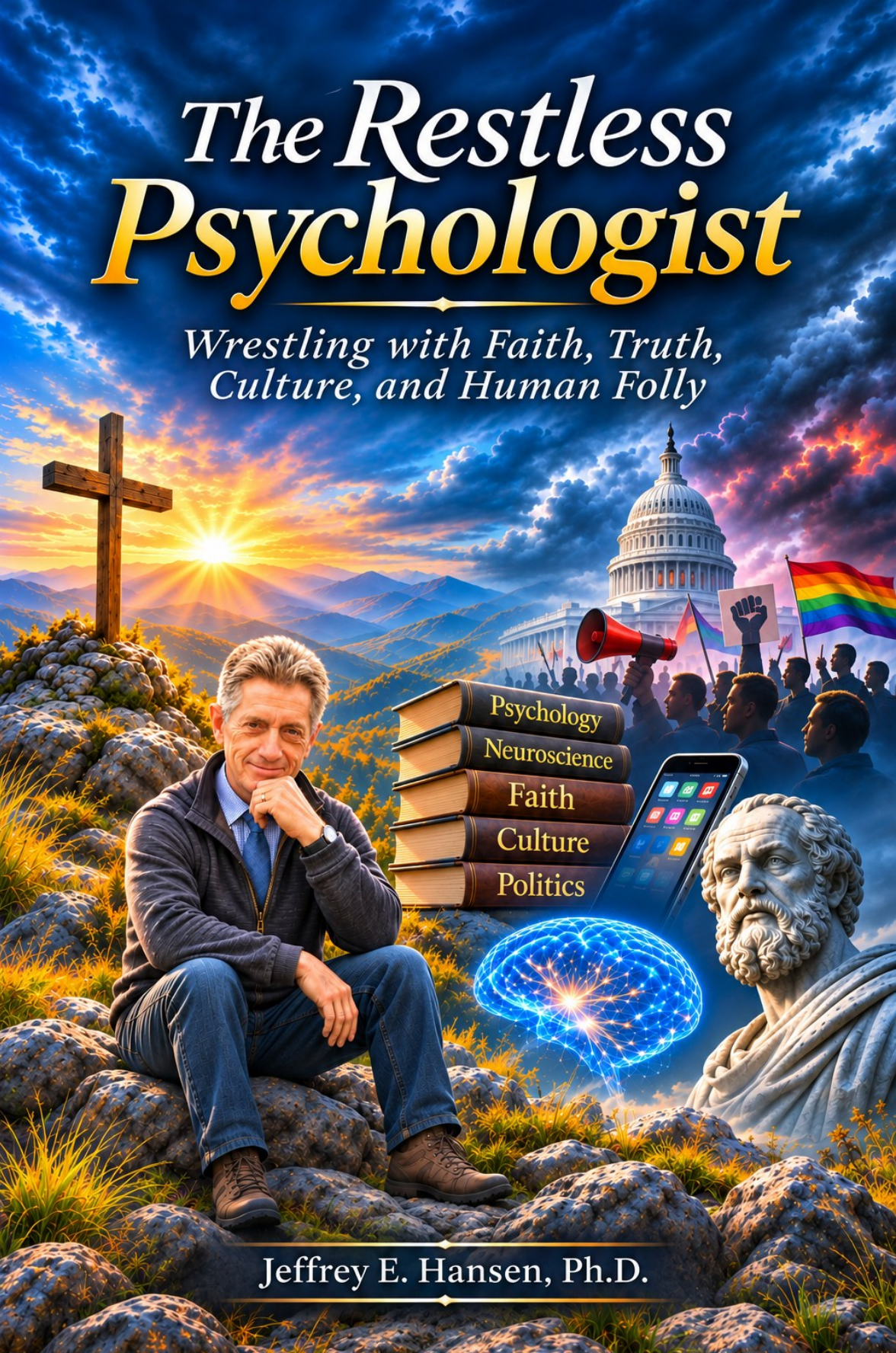
The Restless Psychologist

Wrestling with Faith, Truth, Culture, and Human Folly



Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

The Restless Psychologist

Wrestling with Faith, Truth, Culture, and Human Folly

Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

NO MEDICAL ADVICE IS GIVEN NOR PROVIDED IN THIS BOOK. SUCH INFORMATION, WHICH MAY BE MEDICAL IN NATURE, IS INFORMATION ONLY FOR THE USE OF LICENSED AND EXPERIENCED MEDICAL PRACTITIONERS. A READER INTERESTED IN MEDICAL ADVICE OR MEDICAL TREATMENT SHOULD CONSULT A MEDICAL PRACTITIONER WITH AN APPROPRIATE SPECIALTY WHO IS PROPERLY LICENSED IN THE READER'S JURISDICTION.

Authors' Note on AI Contributions

Limited parts of this book were crafted with the support of ChatGPT, an AI tool that helped refine transitions and assist with research. Every effort has been made to ensure that all sources and information are accurate and reliable. Additionally, several images were created with the help of AI technology. We invite readers to explore the content with an open mind, and where applicable, feel free to consult other sources for further insight.

Copyright © Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D. et al.
Published by NeuroFaith® LLC
Prescott Valley, AZ
2026 Jeffrey E. Hansen

Dedication

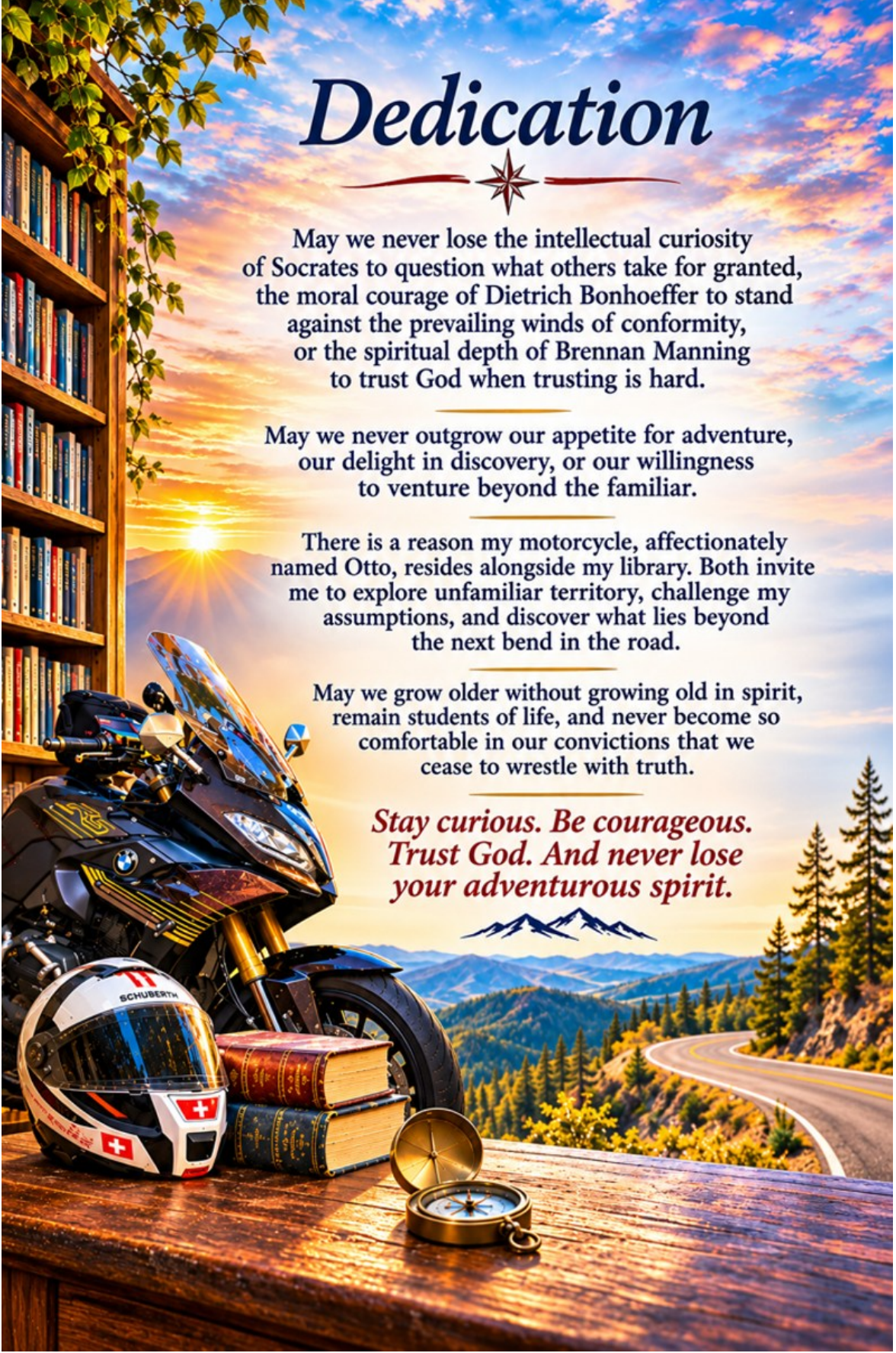
May we never lose the intellectual curiosity of Socrates to question what others take for granted, the moral courage of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to stand against the prevailing winds of conformity, or the spiritual depth of Brennan Manning to trust God when trusting is hard.

May we never outgrow our appetite for adventure, our delight in discovery, or our willingness to venture beyond the familiar.

There is a reason my motorcycle, affectionately named Otto, resides alongside my library. Both invite me to explore unfamiliar territory, challenge my assumptions, and discover what lies beyond the next bend in the road.

May we grow older without growing old in spirit, remain students of life, and never become so comfortable in our convictions that we cease to wrestle with truth.

Stay curious. Be courageous. Trust God. And never lose your adventurous spirit.



In the Pages Ahead in
The Restless Psychologist

Opening Reflections 6

The Toxic Asterisk of Shame 20

We Owe Them Better: A Wake-Up Call for Addiction Recovery 41

Milquetoast Christianity: When the Church Falls Asleep 56

What Matters: An Unexpected Act of Brotherhood 91

Calendar Deficit Disorder (CDD): Confessions of an Aging Psychologist .. 106

And They Still Killed Socrates: Plato's Ship of Fools 118

Man the Hell Up!: Carl Jung and the Eternal Boy 135

PASOGNY! When Did Celebrating Women Require Belittling Men? 149

When Silence Becomes Cowardice: The Man I Decided to Become 164

The Therapy Room Is Not the State's Territory 178

The Phone, the Email, and the Interface 187

Why Do You Hate Trump? 205

Where Has All the Wonder Gone? 216

Closing Reflections: A Restless Mind and a Grateful Heart 233

Meet the Man Behind the Machinations 249



Opening Reflections

Wrestling with Faith, Truth, Culture, and Human Folly

I have come to accept that I possess a rather unquiet mind. There are things I struggle with, ponder, machinate over, and chew on endlessly. I go to sleep thinking about them and, much to my occasional annoyance, wake up thinking about them. My restless brain seems particularly fond of engaging me in intellectual wrestling matches at ungodly hours of the morning. Apparently, my default mode network has little regard for my need for sleep. At 72, I have pretty much given up trying to negotiate with it.

But my goodness, what an exhilarating time to be intellectually restless! We live in a world of extraordinary scientific discovery, technological advancement, philosophical intrigue, cultural upheaval, and seemingly endless manifestations of human folly. There are things that fascinate me, things that inspire me, things that break my heart, and things that quite frankly tick me off. Occasionally, I experience all four before finishing my first cup of coffee.

This book is a collection of those wrestling matches. It represents an effort to bring some coherence to the assortment of thoughts inhabiting my restless brain and to invite you into what I hope will be an intellectually stimulating, personally meaningful, and occasionally irreverent adventure.

How is it that extraordinarily intelligent people can do remarkably stupid things? Why are we so willing to surrender our capacity for independent thought in exchange for belonging? Why do we defend that which is demonstrably untrue, even when the evidence to the contrary is staring us in the face? Why do fear, shame, and tribal loyalties exert such a powerful influence over our thinking? And why, when presented with opportunities to extend grace to one another, do we so frequently choose condemnation?

These are not simply academic questions for me. They are deeply personal ones. And as much as I enjoy exploring their psychological and neurological underpinnings, I cannot leave faith out of the conversation. To do so would be to leave out an essential part of who I am and how I have come to understand the human condition.

Oh, My Goodness, I Am a Christian!

Am I not supposed to be perpetually positive, cheerful, and dispensing encouraging little morsels of spiritual wisdom? Happy, happy, happy! Surely, as a Christian, I ought to be writing uplifting little essays that leave everyone feeling good about themselves.

Well, not so fast.

I happen to believe that we can be profoundly grateful for this life God has given us while simultaneously wrestling with its darker and more troubling dimensions. We can cherish humanity while being thoroughly perplexed by its behavior. We can love our country while questioning its direction, cherish our profession while challenging some of its

practices, and love the Christian church while feeling compelled to give it an occasional, rather vigorous spanking.

There is something psychologically and spiritually liberating about embracing the *dialectic*—the capacity to hold seemingly opposing realities without feeling compelled to discard one in favor of the other. Gratitude need not become complacency, nor must critical inquiry descend into cynicism. We can be optimistic without being oblivious and joyful without being intellectually dishonest.

Good grief, why should being a Christian require me to disengage the very neurological machinery God has given me to contemplate the complexities of His creation?

The hard questions are rarely comfortable. They can be painful, disruptive, and occasionally quite costly. But they are necessary. As a psychologist, I have spent much of my professional life encouraging people to venture into precisely those territories of their psychological existence they would prefer to avoid. We cannot meaningfully address what we are unwilling to examine.

Why should that principle apply any less to our families, our professions, our churches, our institutions, or our civilization?

A Psychologist Who Needed a Psychologist

Before we venture too far into this literary adventure, perhaps I ought to disclose a little about the fellow inviting you along. I would hate to give anyone the mistaken impression that I am writing from some lofty perch of psychological enlightenment, having successfully mastered the complexities of my own humanity.

Good grief, nothing could be further from the truth.

My introduction to trauma came long before I understood the word in any clinical sense. The developmental trauma I experienced in my formative years left a substantial imprint on my developing nervous system and my emerging understanding of who I was. Like many children who experience developmental trauma, I became adept at adapting to my circumstances. Achievement, discipline, hard work, and the pursuit of excellence became important ingredients in that adaptation.

One of the peculiar things about developmental trauma is that its adaptations can be enormously useful. They may produce highly motivated, disciplined, and accomplished human beings. The world applauds their achievements, often without recognizing the psychological machinery driving them. The individual, meanwhile, may remain largely unaware of the distinction between pursuing excellence out of joy and pursuing excellence out of an unconscious need to establish one's worth.

I went on to become a clinical psychologist, served as an Army officer, raised a family, established a clinical practice, taught, supervised, and devoted much of my professional life to helping others navigate their emotional wounds. All the while, I carried some substantial unresolved wounds of my own. For the better part of three decades, I managed to keep them sufficiently buried that I could remain highly functional and, by most external measures, reasonably successful.

Until, of course, I could not.

A convergence of difficult circumstances in my adult life began to dismantle the elaborate psychological infrastructure I had constructed over the years. There were frightening health challenges involving my beloved wife, Leah, and my daughter, and my son was serving as a United States Marine in Iraq. As a husband and father, I found myself confronting circumstances over which I had painfully little control. I

could not simply work harder, achieve more, or summon sufficient intellectual horsepower to make everything right.

Those circumstances reached into places within me that I had spent decades keeping relatively inaccessible. The cumulative burden of unresolved developmental trauma, combined with the demands and uncertainties of the present, finally overwhelmed the very adaptations that had served me so well for much of my life.

And when I say that I came apart, I mean that I flew apart so spectacularly in the state of Washington that they practically had to send out search parties to retrieve the scattered pieces of me from across the Evergreen State.

There is something profoundly humbling about being a psychologist who suddenly finds himself unable to regulate his own emotional world. All those years of education, clinical experience, professional accomplishments, and fancy letters after my name did not exempt me from the realities of being human. I could articulate the psychological mechanisms involved in trauma with considerable sophistication, but understanding those mechanisms intellectually was a decidedly different proposition from experiencing them within my own nervous system.

I had spent much of my professional life helping others find their way through difficult circumstances. Now I found myself in desperate need of the very things I had encouraged others to seek: help, connection, compassion, understanding, and healing.

And I desperately needed God.

The Recipe That Saved This Psychologist

As God began putting me back together, I found myself searching more deeply into neuroscience and psychological theory than I ever had

before. After all, this was no longer merely an academic exercise. I had a substantial personal investment in figuring out what had happened to me and how I might heal. The psychologist had become his own research project, albeit a rather challenging research subject!

I wanted to understand what had transpired within my nervous system, why the psychological defenses that had served me for so many years had finally failed me, and how I might move beyond simply restoring myself to some semblance of functionality. I did not particularly want to return to being the same fellow who had gotten himself into this predicament in the first place. I wanted something more.

My search led me more deeply into neuroscience, polyvagal theory, HeartMath® and the fascinating field of neurocardiology, and Richard Schwartz's Internal Family Systems model. Each provided another piece of the puzzle, helping me understand how developmental trauma had shaped my nervous system, psychological defenses, relationships, and, perhaps most importantly, my understanding of who I was.

I became fascinated by the relationship between physiological regulation and psychological functioning. I began to appreciate how our nervous systems influence our perceptions of safety and danger, how our physiological states affect our emotional and cognitive functioning, and how the quality of our relationships can contribute to either our healing or our continued suffering.

Internal Family Systems helped me understand the various parts of myself that had emerged over the course of my development. The driven little fellow who felt compelled to achieve, the inner critic who was rarely satisfied, and those protective parts that had become extraordinarily adept at anticipating danger were not simply psychological nuisances to be eradicated. They had served important purposes. I began to appreciate them for what they had done while recognizing that they did not need to continue governing my life.

But the most profound discoveries came when I began integrating these insights with my Christian faith. What neuroscience and psychology were helping me understand about my adaptations to trauma, my faith was helping me understand in the context of my identity, my relationship with God, and His extraordinary grace.

If my identity was ultimately grounded in being a beloved child of God, rather than in my achievements, the approval of others, or the narratives that had emerged from my developmental experiences, then perhaps I did not have to spend the remainder of my life proving my worth. Perhaps I could simply live from a place of worth that had already been established.

There is a profound difference between spending one's life trying to become worthy of love and living one's life from the understanding that one is already loved.

What emerged from that journey was NeuroFaith®. It was not born out of an entrepreneurial ambition to develop another therapeutic model, nor was it an effort to establish myself as some authority on transformational healing. Quite simply, it was the recipe that saved Jeff Hansen's life. Having benefited so profoundly from that integration, I felt compelled to offer it to others.

A Little Something God Left Behind

By the grace of God, I was redeemed, restored, and put back together in a way that, in some respects, left me better than I had been before. Perhaps one of the most extraordinary gifts God gave me during that process was something He chose not to give back to me.

Fear.

I had spent much of my life unknowingly negotiating with fear, compensating for it, and accommodating it. Fear of failure, fear of

disapproval, fear of disappointing others, and fear of the consequences of not measuring up had exerted more influence over my life than I had previously appreciated. When I flew apart, I asked God to leave that particular ingredient out of the recipe as He reassembled me. And, in what I consider a mighty demonstration of His grace, He obliged.

Somewhere in the great expanse of Washington State lies that discarded piece of Jeff Hansen. I suspect it may be somewhere in the Cascade Mountains. Should you happen upon it in your travels, kindly leave it where it is. I have no particular interest in reclaiming it, much less reintegrating it.

Fear simply no longer occupies the position of authority in my life that it once did. And what a liberating experience that has been! It has allowed me to reach people, venture into places, engage in conversations, and undertake endeavors that I might otherwise never have had the courage to pursue. It has allowed me to speak more freely, question more courageously, and become considerably less preoccupied with whether others approve of me.

Of course, fearlessness does not necessarily confer wisdom. One can be quite fearless and still be quite wrong. I suspect my dear wife could provide a rather impressive list of examples from our years together.

Nevertheless, when we become less preoccupied with protecting our reputations, maintaining our social standing, or securing the approval of others, we become freer to examine difficult truths and challenge the assumptions of the very groups to which we belong.

Sometimes, in the process of putting us back together, God does not simply restore us to what we once were. He fashions us into something different. I take no particular credit for that transformation. It was a gift, and one for which I remain profoundly grateful.

NeuroFaith®: A Lens Through Which I See the World

Over time, NeuroFaith became more than an approach to clinical practice. It became the lens through which I increasingly viewed the world. I have come to embrace what I affectionately call a *Neurobiopsychosocialspiritual* understanding of the human experience. Good grief, what a magnificent mouthful of a word! It may not roll off the tongue particularly gracefully, but it captures something I believe is essential to understanding the complexity of our humanity.

We are neurological creatures, biological creatures, psychological creatures, social creatures, and spiritual creatures. These dimensions of our existence are not neatly compartmentalized systems operating independently of one another. They are dynamically interconnected, continually influencing and shaping one another.

Our nervous systems influence how we perceive the world. Our physiological states influence our capacity to reason, connect, and extend compassion. Our early relational experiences shape our expectations of ourselves and others. Our psychological narratives influence how we interpret subsequent experiences, while our social environments reinforce or challenge those narratives. And our spiritual understanding of who we are, why we exist, and to whom we ultimately belong can profoundly influence all of the above.

NeuroFaith represents my effort to bring these dimensions into a more coherent conversation. It rests upon four complementary pillars, each of which contributed to my own healing and continues to inform my clinical work and understanding of human behavior.

Polyvagal-Informed Therapy invites us to consider the relationship between our autonomic nervous systems, our perceptions of safety and danger, our capacity for physiological regulation, and our ability to connect meaningfully with others.

HeartMath® and Neurocardiology draw our attention to the remarkable communication between the heart and brain and the

relationship between physiological regulation, emotional experience, and cognitive functioning.

Internal Family Systems provides a compassionate framework for understanding the protective and wounded parts of ourselves, helping us appreciate the adaptations that emerged throughout our lives without allowing those adaptations to define the totality of who we are.

Faith and Spirituality bring us into a conversation about identity, meaning, purpose, grace, redemption, and transformation that extends beyond the boundaries of conventional psychological discourse.

For me, as a Christian, that fourth pillar is not an incidental addition to an otherwise secular model. It permeates the other three and is foundational to my understanding of the human person. I find no inherent contradiction between my fascination with the intricacies of the human brain and my reverence for the God who created us. Indeed, the more I learn about the complexity of our neurological and physiological systems, the more profoundly I stand in awe of our Creator.

I am particularly interested in the distinction between symptom management and transformational healing. Helping people become less anxious, less depressed, and more functional is certainly worthwhile. But what if we could help them move beyond the very narratives of identity that have perpetuated their suffering? What if we could help them discover that they are more than the sum of their wounds, failures, accomplishments, or the judgments of others?

And what might happen if we brought that same analytical curiosity to the larger world in which we live?

Taking Psychology Out of the Therapy Room

Although much of my professional career has been devoted to understanding and healing the individual human psyche, I have never lost my fascination with social psychology, sociology, philosophy, history, politics, and the dynamics of human beings functioning collectively.

In this book, I am taking the analytical skills I have developed over decades of clinical practice beyond the walls of the therapy room, moving from the microcosm of individual human experience to the macrocosm of our collective humanity.

When I observe the polarization of our culture, for example, I find myself wondering not simply about the merits of competing political positions, but about the psychological processes that make those positions so emotionally indispensable to people. When I observe intelligent individuals abandoning critical thinking in service of group loyalty, I wonder about the powerful interplay between identity, belonging, fear, and the human nervous system.

When our political, professional, religious, or social affiliations become so deeply intertwined with our sense of self that questioning them feels like a threat to our very identity, our capacity for independent thought can become compromised. We may find ourselves defending positions not because they are necessarily true, but because relinquishing them would come at an intolerable psychological or social cost.

When I observe the erosion of compassion and civil discourse, I wonder how much of what we are witnessing reflects human beings desperately seeking safety, certainty, validation, and belonging. We have created a technological infrastructure that allows us to communicate with virtually anyone on the planet, yet we seem increasingly incapable of having meaningful conversations with people who disagree with us.

And when I observe institutions resisting uncomfortable truths, I cannot help but recognize parallels with the psychological defenses I

have encountered throughout my clinical career. An individual who continually avoids examining painful realities is unlikely to experience meaningful transformation. Why would we expect denial, avoidance, rationalization, and conformity to produce healthier institutions?

Now there is something worth chewing on!

I intend to poke at some uncomfortable things in this book. I will challenge my own profession, our healthcare system, our educational institutions, our political culture, our media, and, yes, my beloved Christian church. We will examine what happens when intellectual inquiry becomes subordinate to ideological allegiance, when convenience takes precedence over responsibility, and when professional security becomes more important than moral courage.

And lest anyone imagine that this old psychologist is exempt from scrutiny, I have accumulated enough personal foolishness over the course of my life to provide a rather substantial research sample.

One of the great dangers of being a psychologist is the temptation to become so adept at identifying the psychological peculiarities of others that one becomes considerably less adept at recognizing one's own. I suspect that psychologists, theologians, politicians, academics, and assorted other self-appointed arbiters of truth would all benefit from occasionally directing their analytical talents inward.

My Christian faith further challenges me to consider the distinction between courage and arrogance, discernment and condemnation, conviction and self-righteousness.

Christ did not call us to abandon truth in the interest of being agreeable, nor did He call us to abandon love in the pursuit of truth.

Holding those two commitments simultaneously is more difficult than it might initially appear. I struggle with it. I suspect I always will.

An Invitation to Wrestle

My dear reader, we are about to embark upon something of an intellectual adventure, and I hope you find it as exhilarating as I have found writing it.

We will wander through the public squares of ancient Athens, venture into the remarkable circuitry of the human brain, contemplate the disturbing insights of philosophers and theologians, explore the darker recesses of shame and human suffering, and examine the seductive power of ideological belonging. We will encounter courage and cowardice, wisdom and stupidity, healing and hypocrisy, and some of the beautiful and painful contradictions of being human.

And somewhere along the way, I suspect we will have a little fun at the expense of our collective foolishness.

Some of these essays will be heavily grounded in psychological and scientific literature. Others will be more philosophical, theological, cultural, or simply personal. But this is not intended to be an academic textbook. I have spent enough years immersed in academia to appreciate both its contributions and its occasional propensity to take something reasonably understandable and render it virtually incomprehensible.

Nor am I attempting to present some grand, unified theory of everything. Good grief, I am still trying to figure out a few things about myself!

Some of these reflections may make you laugh, others may make you uncomfortable, and a few may prompt you to wonder whether this old psychologist has finally gone off the rails altogether.

Fair enough.

I do not expect you to agree with everything I have to say. Indeed, I would be somewhat disappointed if you did. I would much rather wrestle imperfectly with difficult questions than surrender my intellectual curiosity for the comfort of unquestioned certainty. Agreement is not a prerequisite for meaningful connection, and disagreement need not be an act of hostility. Somewhere along the way, I fear we have forgotten that fundamental truth.

But please understand something about the fellow inviting you on this adventure. As much as the follies of humankind occasionally drive me to distraction, I remain profoundly grateful for the privilege of being human. I have experienced too much goodness, witnessed too much courage, received too much love, and been the beneficiary of too much grace to allow the darker dimensions of our humanity to define my experience of it.

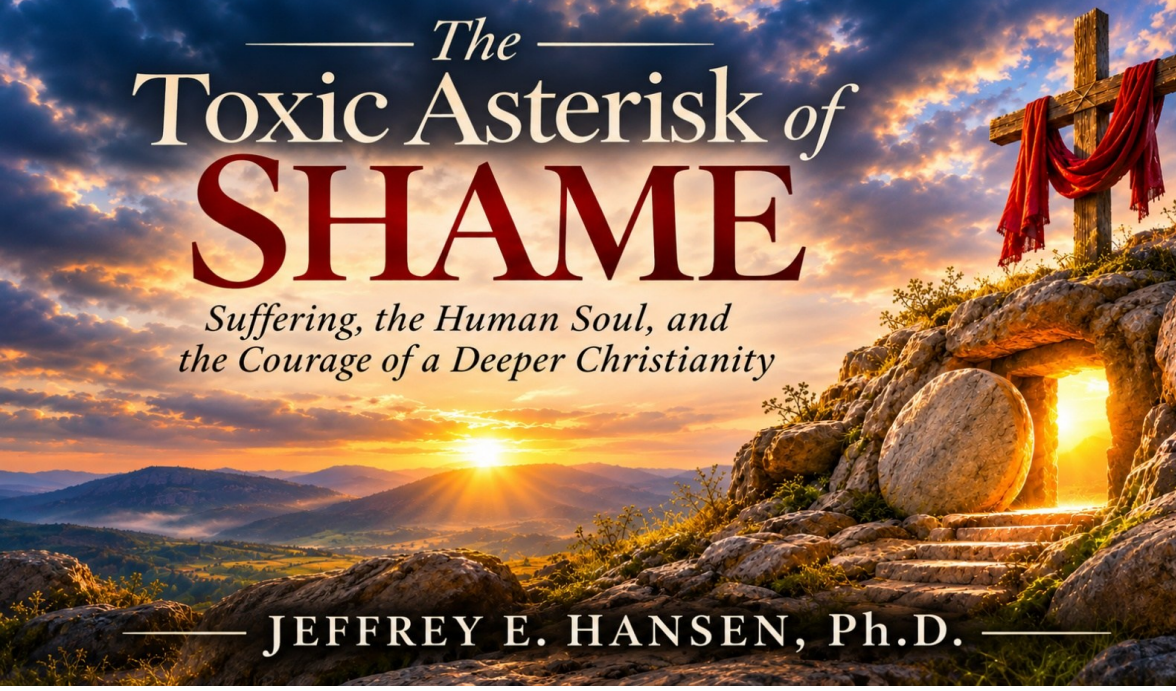
I want to explore those darker dimensions precisely because there is so much about life worth cherishing. Our children and grandchildren deserve a world in which truth matters, independent thought is valued, moral courage is cultivated, and human beings are treated with dignity and compassion.

The hard questions are worth asking. The uncomfortable conversations are worth having. And at 72, I still find the prospect of discovering what I do not yet know absolutely thrilling.

NeuroFaith® is the lens. Faith, truth, culture, and human folly are the subjects of our exploration. And my unquiet mind is apparently the vehicle that will be taking us there.

So buckle up, my dear reader. Let us be restless together. Let us wrestle, laugh, question, discover, and perhaps emerge from this adventure a little wiser than when we began.

Onward!



> *"Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2, KJV)*

Why is it that we Christians are sometimes so uncomfortable talking about the darker dimensions of human existence? We love to talk about joy, love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And my goodness, what is not to love about the fruits of the Spirit? I cherish them. I aspire to them. They are among the most beautiful expressions of our Christian faith.

But somewhere along the way, I fear we have placed a rather large asterisk beside our Christianity. There are certain things we would rather not discuss, certain emotions we would rather not acknowledge, and certain dimensions of human suffering we would rather camouflage beneath the reassuring language of our faith.

In an earlier essay, I referred to this phenomenon as *milquetoast Christianity*. Perhaps another way of describing it is the vanillaization of Christianity—a sanitized expression of faith that celebrates the

mountaintops but is decidedly uncomfortable accompanying people into the valleys.

And among the darkest of those valleys is shame.

The Courage to Enter the Darkness

Interestingly, some of our greatest psychological, philosophical, and literary thinkers were willing to venture into territory that many Christians today seem reluctant to explore.

Carl Jung (1959) understood the importance of confronting what he called the *shadow*, those aspects of ourselves that we reject, repress, conceal, or refuse to acknowledge. Jung recognized that psychological maturity required considerable courage because it demanded that we confront dimensions of ourselves that we would much prefer not to see.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1886), despite his profound differences with Christianity, understood something about the dangers of confronting the darkness within human nature. His famous metaphor of gazing into the abyss reminds us that such an encounter is neither casual nor without consequence.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, whose Christian convictions were forged through extraordinary personal suffering, ventured into the darker recesses of the human soul with remarkable psychological sophistication. In *Notes from Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*, he explored our capacity for cruelty, self-deception, humiliation, guilt, spiritual anguish, and redemption.

These men dared to go there.

Why, then, are we Christians sometimes so reluctant to do likewise? Have we somehow convinced ourselves that our faith inoculates us against the darker dimensions of human experience? That if we pray enough, believe enough, worship enough, or immerse ourselves sufficiently in Scripture, we will somehow be spared the terrible battles that can take place within our own minds?

I wish it were that simple.

The Toxicity of Shame

In my book, *The Shadow of Shame: Transformational Healing Through Faith, Neuroscience, and the Rewriting of the Soul* (Hansen, 2026), I made the argument that toxic shame is perhaps the most destructive of all human emotions.

David R. Hawkins (1995), a psychiatrist and spiritual teacher, placed shame at the very bottom of his *Map of Consciousness*, below guilt, grief, fear, and anger. His kinesiology-based scale is not a validated scientific measure, but that placement resonates profoundly with what I have witnessed over four decades of clinical practice and, perhaps more importantly, what I have experienced in my own life. Psychological research also distinguishes the destructive effects of shame from those of guilt (Dearing et al., 2005; Tangney et al., 2007).

Guilt tells us that we have done something bad. Shame tells us that we *are* something bad. Guilt concerns our behavior. Shame lays claim to our very identity. Healthy guilt can lead us toward accountability, repentance, reconciliation, and restoration. Toxic shame, on the other hand, persuades us that we are fundamentally unworthy of any of those things.

What makes shame particularly sinister is that it attacks our most fundamental human longings, to be seen, to be known, to be loved, and to belong. It convinces us that if others truly knew us, they would surely reject us. And so, we hide. We conceal the very wounds that desperately need the presence, compassion, and love of another human being.

Is it any wonder that one of the first responses of Adam and Eve in the Garden was to hide from God (Genesis 3:8)? From the earliest pages of Scripture, we encounter this extraordinary relationship between shame, fear, hiding, and disconnection.



Shame is a cruel and deceptive companion. It not only wounds us but attempts to persuade us that we are unworthy of healing. It not only drives us into isolation but convinces us that isolation is where we belong.

And therein lies its extraordinary toxicity.

The Well of Shame

Those of you who have followed my writing know that I have not been particularly reluctant to share my own struggles. I have spent much of my professional life studying trauma, addiction, and the complexities of the human mind. But there are some things that no doctoral program, clinical fellowship, textbook, or professional conference can adequately teach you.

There are some things you come to understand because you have lived them.

As I shared in the introduction to *The Shadow of Shame* (Hansen, 2026), my own descent into the depths of shame was profoundly personal. The convergence of my developmental trauma, the accumulated stressors of adult life, and a devastating event that forever altered the landscape of our family brought me to a place of extraordinary psychological and

spiritual suffering. The wounds I had carried for decades came crashing into the circumstances of my adult life. And good grief, I was a clinical psychologist with decades of experience and a deeply held Christian faith. Neither inoculated me against what was about to unfold.

I think this is an important distinction. The circumstances that finally overwhelm us are not necessarily the whole story. Sometimes they awaken wounds that have been carried for decades. What appears to others to be a sudden collapse may, in fact, be the culmination of a lifetime of suffering and adaptation. That was an essential part of my own story.



When I fell apart, my shame was so dark and so deep that even now I struggle to find the words to adequately describe it. I remember the terrible loneliness of it all, the sensation of descending deeper and deeper into a well from which I could no longer see the light. You feel so utterly alone. You become convinced that no one could possibly understand the darkness in which you find yourself. And perhaps more frighteningly, you begin to believe that if anyone truly understood you, they could not possibly love you.

That is the insidious nature of shame. It persuades us to conceal from others the very wounds that desperately need human connection to heal.

Shame nearly took my life. I also believe that shame played a profound role in the suffering and eventual loss of my beloved identical twin brother, Gregg. There is hardly a day that passes when I do not miss him.

I did not write *The Shadow of Shame* simply because I found shame to be an intellectually interesting psychological construct. I wrote it

because I know something of its darkness. I know something of its brutality. And I know something of what it can take from us.

Please Do Not Talk Me Out of My Shame

Anyone who has worked extensively with individuals suffering from addiction and trauma, and who has dared to go sufficiently deep in that work, knows that eventually you have to touch shame.

You have to touch shame.

You have to understand it, experience something of its darkness alongside the person carrying it, and resist the all-too-human temptation to immediately make it go away.

One of the most difficult lessons for clinicians, pastors, and well-intentioned Christian friends to learn is that you cannot simply talk someone out of deeply embedded shame. You cannot reason a traumatized nervous system into safety. You cannot intellectually persuade a wounded soul into believing that it is lovable when virtually everything within that person's lived experience seems to suggest otherwise.

And please, my dear Christian friends, resist the temptation to immediately reach for a Bible verse as though it were a spiritual Band-Aid.

It is not that Scripture lacks power. Quite the contrary. It is that the wounded human being sitting before you may need to experience something of the love described in that Scripture through your very presence before he or she can begin to receive its truth.

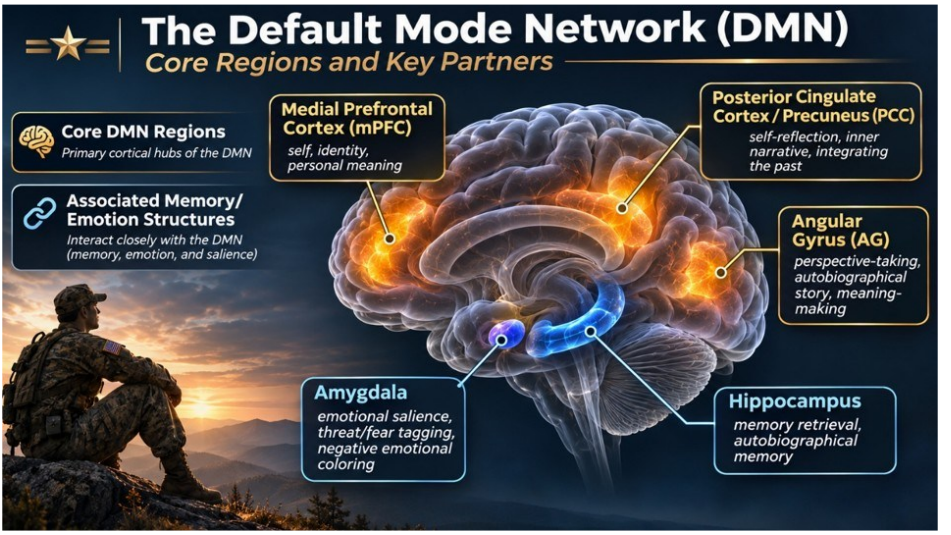
Sometimes the most profoundly Christian thing you can do is to sit with someone in the darkness without demanding that they immediately find the light.

When Shame Becomes Our Identity



Perhaps the most insidious dimension of shame is its capacity to insinuate itself into the very story we tell ourselves about who we are. What may have begun as an emotional response to trauma, rejection, humiliation, or failure gradually becomes a narrative through which we interpret our entire existence. We move from experiencing shame to identifying with it. And that is a terribly dangerous transition.

The **Default Mode Network (DMN)**, a remarkable network of interconnected brain regions involved in autobiographical memory, self-reflection, and our internal narrative, offers a window into how deeply entrenched these stories can become (Andrews-Hanna et al., 2014). When our internal narrative becomes saturated with shame, even our accomplishments, loving relationships, and expressions of faith may struggle to penetrate the darkness of our perceived identity.



Our inner critic becomes relentless. We withdraw from others or desperately seek their approval. We pursue perfectionism, professional achievement, or some other means of proving our worth. Or we reach for alcohol, drugs, pornography, or virtually anything that will temporarily silence the torment within. And then, in a particularly cruel twist, we experience shame about the very things we have employed to escape our shame. What a terrible, self-perpetuating cycle!

Those of us who work in addiction and trauma recovery must understand the extraordinary significance of this process. If we merely extinguish the addictive behavior without addressing the wounded identity beneath it, what have we ultimately accomplished? We may have taken away the anesthetic without adequately treating the wound.

And herein lies one of the most beautiful intersections of neuroscience, psychology, and Christian theology. Shame tells us that our wounds, our failures, and our darkest experiences define who we are. Grace offers us an altogether different narrative. As Paul reminds us, "*Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature*" (2 Corinthians 5:17, KJV).

The challenge of transformational healing is not simply to quiet the tormenting voice of shame, but to reclaim the identity that shame has attempted to steal from us.

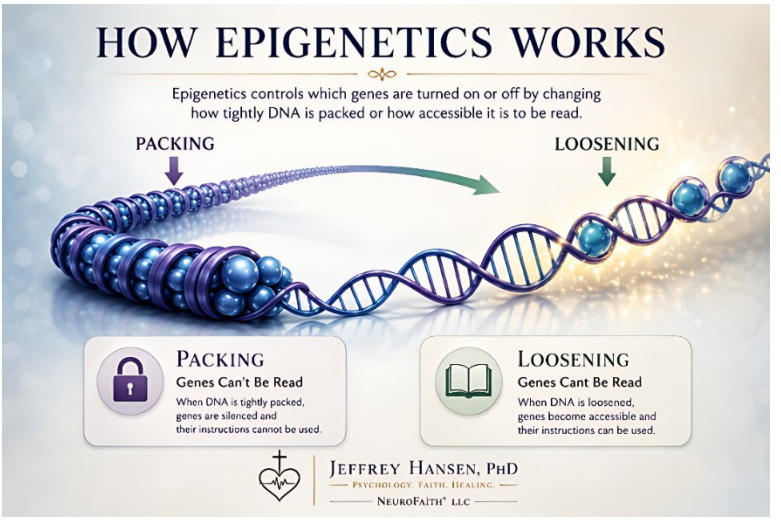
When the Body Bears the Burden of Shame

And my goodness, the body suffers too. Our own internal critic can become a recurring source of threat, setting our stress machinery in motion. The hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis and sympathetic nervous system mobilize cortisol and adrenaline. Imagine what it costs us when the voice we are trying to escape is our own (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004; Dickerson et al., 2004).



Stephen Porges's (2007) polyvagal framework offers a way of understanding what I see so often in my clinical work. We may oscillate between sympathetic activation and what Porges describes as dorsal vagal shutdown. I call it chaos in the brain and molasses in the brain. In one, the heart races and thoughts spin as the brain's alarm circuits, including the anterior cingulate, compete with our capacity to think clearly (Arnsten, 2009). In the other, life loses its color and even getting out of bed can seem an insurmountable task. In the safety of connection, associated in this framework with ventral vagal regulation, we begin to find ourselves again.

Over time, the price we pay for this relentless stress, what McEwen (1998) called allostatic load—can be enormous. Our heart, metabolism, and immune system suffer. Stress can even influence which genes are read, a process known as epigenetics, with implications for inflammation, cardiovascular and autoimmune disease (Klengel et al., 2013; Zannas et al., 2019; Song et al., 2018). Even cancer-related pathways are being studied, although stress has not been established as a direct cause of cancer (National Cancer Institute, n.d.). Good grief, is it any wonder that we become desperate for something, anything, to make the pain go away?



The God who designed our souls also designed our bodies. Shame does not respect the boundaries we have constructed between the two. Neither should our efforts to heal.

The Tyranny of the Quick Fix: When Pain Avoidance Replaces Healing

And we live in a culture more than happy to accommodate that desperation. We have opioids for physical pain, psychotropics for emotional pain, abbreviated therapies for psychological pain, and sometimes an equally abbreviated Christianity for spiritual pain. I am grateful for the relief that good medicine can offer. But the opioid crisis is a tragic reminder of what can happen when we confuse relief with healing (Dowell et al., 2022). Have we become as sophisticated in our efforts to heal suffering as we have in our efforts to silence it?

And shallow therapy? Shallow therapy can cost lives. I am not talking about brief, effective therapy. I am talking about therapy that never touches the wound. Why do so many people relapse after walking out of addiction treatment centers? There are many reasons, but how often have we taken away the anesthetic without treating the wound? Recovery takes time and continuity of care, and appropriate

medications can save lives, particularly in opioid addiction (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2018; McKay, 2021; Sordo et al., 2017). Yet we sometimes send people home to the very circumstances that wounded them and then wonder why they relapse.

That is why I am so passionate about transformational healing. We must have the courage to go deeper, at a pace our patients can bear, and attend to the whole person—body, heart, mind, and soul.

And my dear Christian friends, this same mentality has invaded the Church. We want the joy without the sorrow, the peace without the wrestling, the resurrection without the cross. I love a joyful worship service! But the Church was never intended to be merely a feel-good experience. We are called to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2) and to weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15). Have we so vanillaized Christianity that we have lost something of its very essence—the courage to enter the wounds of our fellow human beings? Medicine, psychology, and the Church all have some soul-searching to do.

The Sacred Ministry of Presence

When my world came crashing down in 2009, and again when I lost my beloved identical twin brother, Gregg, it was not the quick fixes that ministered most profoundly to my suffering. It was not a pill, a clever psychological intervention, or a theological explanation. It was those precious few human beings who had the courage to simply sit with me.



They showed up. They did not need to fix me. They did not need to talk me out of my suffering or hasten my journey through it. They could tolerate my pain without becoming so uncomfortable themselves

that they needed to make it go away. They could enter into my darkness without insisting that I immediately find the light.

I am reminded of the extraordinary passage in the Book of Job: *"So they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great"* (Job 2:13, KJV). Perhaps the most beautiful ministry they offered Job occurred before they began speaking. Once they began attempting to explain his suffering, their words became yet another source of anguish for an already devastated human soul.

How much we could learn from those seven days of silence.

We call it co-regulation in neuroscience. The quiet presence of another human being can help our nervous system rediscover safety (Porges, 2007). But in that moment, I was not thinking about neuroscience. I was experiencing something my tormented mind desperately needed: I was no longer alone.

From a spiritual perspective, I believe these moments can become extraordinary manifestations of the love of Christ. Sometimes the most powerful sermon is never spoken. Sometimes the most meaningful ministry occurs not from a pulpit, behind a therapist's desk, or through the dispensing of advice, but in the quiet and profoundly sacred space between two human beings, one suffering and the other willing to remain.

I wonder how much of our preoccupation with quick fixes reflects not merely our desire to alleviate another person's suffering, but our own inability to tolerate being in its presence. Is our urgency to fix the wounded human being sitting before us sometimes more about alleviating our own discomfort than ministering to theirs?

There were people who entered my pain when I could scarcely bear it myself. There were far too few of them, but those who did taught me something about healing that no graduate school, medical textbook, or theological treatise could adequately convey.

They did not rescue me from the well by shouting instructions from above. They climbed down into it and sat beside me.

And through their presence, I began to experience something of the presence of Christ.

Christianity Was Never Intended to Be Vanilla

When I read Scripture, I am struck by how little effort God seems to have made to sanitize the human experience.

David cried out in anguish. Job wrestled with unimaginable suffering. Jeremiah lamented. Elijah reached a point of such despair that he no longer wished to live. Paul described the terrible battle within himself in Romans 7. And Christ Himself, in the Garden of Gethsemane, expressed an overwhelming sorrow.

Even the Psalms contain cries of abandonment, anger, grief, confusion, and desperation. Psalm 88, remarkably, ends in darkness without the reassuring resolution we might expect from a contemporary Christian devotional.

"For my soul is full of troubles: and my life draweth nigh unto the grave" (Psalm 88:3, KJV).

"Lord, why castest thou off my soul? why hidest thou thy face from me?" (Psalm 88:14, KJV).

"Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness" (Psalm 88:18, KJV).

God saw fit to include that psalm in Scripture. Perhaps we ought to ponder why.

Centuries later, St. John of the Cross wrote of the *Dark Night of the Soul*, recognizing that the spiritual journey could include periods of profound desolation, apparent abandonment, and painful transformation. Christianity has a rich tradition of confronting suffering, spiritual struggle, and the darker dimensions of our existence.

We seem, in some contemporary expressions of our faith, to have misplaced much of that tradition.

Scripture does not shy away from shame itself. In Psalm 69:20, the psalmist cries, *"Reproach hath broken my heart; and I am full of heaviness,"* and searches in vain for someone to offer comfort (KJV). Is that not the terrible loneliness of the well? And Romans 8:1 declares, *"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus"* (KJV). What a profound contrast to the condemning voice of our internal critic.

Brennan Manning, in his beautiful book Ruthless Trust (2000), invites us to trust God beyond our need for certainty and reassurance. Being a Christian, in the fullest sense, is a ruthless experience—not ruthless toward ourselves or others, but ruthless in our willingness to trust God even when we cannot make sense of our suffering.

Christianity was never intended to be a sentimental journey through life. We cannot fully appreciate the resurrection if we are unwilling to contemplate the cross.

The Christ Who Entered Our Shame

Perhaps the most extraordinary dimension of our Christian faith is that we worship a God who did not remain insulated from the darker dimensions of our human existence. Christ did not merely descend into our world to speak of love, joy, peace, and kindness. He entered into the very depths of our suffering. He experienced betrayal, rejection, abandonment, humiliation, physical torment, and the extraordinary public degradation of crucifixion.



The writer of Hebrews tells us that Christ endured the cross, despising its shame (Hebrews 12:2). Think about the extraordinary significance of those words. Our Savior was not unfamiliar with shame. He endured public humiliation in its most brutal manifestation, yet He did not allow it to define His identity. The joy set before Him did not spare Him the agony of the cross. He did not circumvent the suffering to arrive at the joy; He endured the suffering and refused to grant shame the final word.

And perhaps herein lies something profoundly important about the healing power of our Christian faith. Christ offers us understanding, forgiveness, grace, and redemption not from some comfortable distance from our suffering, but as One who has entered into the very experience of human suffering itself. Hebrews 4:15–16 reminds us that we have a High Priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses and invites us to approach the throne of grace with confidence. He knows the darkness of the well because He entered into the darkness of our humanity.

As a clinical psychologist, I cherish what medicine, neuroscience, and psychotherapy can offer. But the reconciliation of the human soul with its Creator belongs to an altogether different order of healing. There is no pharmacological equivalent of grace. There is no surgical procedure for redemption. There is no psychotherapeutic substitute for the assurance that we are fully known by God and, notwithstanding the darkness He sees within us, profoundly loved. Clinical treatment and spiritual healing need not compete.

This is where Brennan Manning's notion of ruthless trust becomes so extraordinarily meaningful. It is one thing to trust God when our lives are filled with joy, our relationships are flourishing, and our prayers seem to be answered. It is quite another to trust Him when we are sitting at the bottom of the well, when our nervous system has collapsed into exhaustion, when our mind has become our tormentor, and when our soul can scarcely perceive His presence. Our identity in God does not depend upon our emotional state, the regulation of our

nervous system, or even our ability to sense His presence. That is ruthless trust: a faith forged not through the avoidance of suffering but through the extraordinary vulnerability of encountering God within it.

And when I reflect upon the depths of my own suffering, that is the Christ I need. Not merely the Christ who promises me joy, but the Christ who understands why, at times, I cannot feel it. The Christ who knows the anguish of my soul and does not withdraw His love in the face of it. That is the Christ I trust. Ruthlessly.

The Courage to Enter the Well

I sometimes wonder how many people sitting beside us in church on Sunday mornings are quietly descending into their own wells of shame. They smile, they sing, they shake our hands, and they assure us that they are doing fine. They may even be among the most accomplished and seemingly spiritually mature members of our congregations. Yet beneath that carefully constructed exterior lies an internal narrative so brutal that we would be horrified to hear it. Would they feel safe enough to tell us? Or would the prospect of disappointing us, of being judged, or of having the authenticity of their faith questioned drive them even deeper into hiding?

Have we inadvertently created Christian environments in which people experience shame about experiencing shame? Have we become so enamored with the joyful expressions of our faith that we have made it increasingly difficult for people to be honest about their suffering? God help us if we have.

Perhaps our reluctance to enter another person's darkness reflects our discomfort with our own. Jung, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky challenged us to reckon with that darkness. How equipped are we to accompany others through theirs if we cannot acknowledge our own? Perhaps the true measure of Christian maturity is our willingness to encounter the darker dimensions of humanity, in ourselves and in others, without withdrawing our love. Accountability and grace are not adversaries.

As I reflect upon my own descent into shame and the loss of my beloved twin brother, Gregg, this is no longer an academic or theological discussion for me. I cannot undo what happened to my brother. But perhaps, in speaking more openly about shame, I can help another human being find the courage to reach for help, and help another Christian find the courage to respond.

When I was at the bottom of my own well, there were those who stood at the top offering encouragement, advice, and well-intentioned words of reassurance. But it was those precious few who had the courage to climb down into that well and sit beside me who helped save my life. They were willing to enter a place that was neither comfortable nor pleasant. They could tolerate my anguish without demanding that I resolve it for their comfort. They brought something into that darkness that I could no longer find on my own—the healing power of compassionate human presence.

And so I ask you, my dear friends, do we have the courage to enter the well? Are we willing to descend from the relative comfort of our own lives and sit beside another human being in the depths of their suffering, even when we have no immediate answers, no clever explanations, and no quick solutions? Can we bear witness to another person's pain without turning away from it?



In *The Shadow of Shame*, I wrote that the opposite of shame is not pride. The opposite of shame is love. Not some sentimental, vanillaized expression of Christian love, but a fierce, courageous, uncompromising love that is not frightened by the ugliness of trauma, the messiness of addiction, the brutality of self-hatred, or the darkness of despair. A love that does not demand that people earn their place among us by getting well first.

My dear Christian brothers and sisters, perhaps we have become so enamored with the joy of our salvation that we have forgotten the extraordinary suffering through which that salvation was made possible. We celebrate the empty tomb, as we should. But let us not become so eager to get to Easter morning that we rush past Gethsemane and Golgotha.

Christ did not fast-track our redemption. He did not circumvent our suffering. He entered it. He endured the cross, despising its shame, and in doing so demonstrated that shame need not have the final word in the story of our human existence (Hebrews 12:2).

That is the Christ I encountered in the darkest chapters of my life, sometimes through the presence of those precious few human beings who had the courage to sit with me when I could scarcely bear to sit with myself. They taught me something about Christianity that no sermon, theological treatise, or psychology textbook could adequately convey. That is not a comfortable Christianity. It is not a vanillaized Christianity. It is the Christianity of extraordinary courage, radical grace, and what Brennan Manning so beautifully called *ruthless trust*.

Perhaps it is time for medicine to rediscover the wounded human being beneath the symptoms, for psychology to rediscover the courage to go deep, and for the Church to rediscover the extraordinary depths of its own Gospel.

For those of you who find yourselves at the bottom of that terrible well of shame, please know that your darkness does not diminish your worth, your suffering does not invalidate your faith, and your inability to experience joy does not diminish God's love for you. Shame may have written some of the darkest chapters of your life, but it does not possess the authority to write your final chapter.

Christ entered our darkness so that darkness would not have the final word. May we have the courage to enter the darkness of another human being's suffering, because Christ first entered ours.

And may we never again place an asterisk beside the suffering of another human soul.

Peace.

References

Andrews-Hanna, J. R., Smallwood, J., & Spreng, R. N. (2014). The default network and self-generated thought: Component processes, dynamic control, and clinical relevance. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1316(1), 29–52. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24502540/

Arnsten, A. F. T. (2009). Stress signalling pathways that impair prefrontal cortex structure and function. Nature Reviews Neuroscience, 10, 410–422. https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn2648

Dearing, R. L., Stuewig, J., & Tangney, J. P. (2005). On the importance of distinguishing shame from guilt: Relations to problematic alcohol and drug use. *Addictive Behaviors, 30*(7), 1392–1404. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16022935/

Dickerson, S. S., Gruenewald, T. L., & Kemeny, M. E. (2004). When the social self is threatened: Shame, physiology, and health. Journal of Personality, 72(6), 1191–1216. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2004.00295.x

Dickerson, S. S., & Kemeny, M. E. (2004). Acute stressors and cortisol responses: A theoretical integration and synthesis of laboratory research. Psychological Bulletin, 130(3), 355–391. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.130.3.355

Dostoevsky, F. (1864). *Notes from underground*.

Dostoevsky, F. (1866). *Crime and punishment*.

Dostoevsky, F. (1880). *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Dowell, D., Ragan, K. R., Jones, C. M., Baldwin, G. T., & Chou, R. (2022). CDC clinical practice guideline for prescribing opioids for pain—United States, 2022. *MMWR Recommendations and Reports, 71*(3), 1–95. https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.rr7103a1

Hansen, J. E. (2026). *The shadow of shame: Transformational healing through faith, neuroscience, and the rewriting of the soul*. NeuroFaith®, LLC.

Hawkins, D. R. (1995). *Power vs. force: The hidden determinants of human behavior*. Veritas Publishing.

Jung, C. G. (1959). *Aion: Researches into the phenomenology of the self*. Princeton University Press.

Klengel, T., Mehta, D., Anacker, C., Rex-Haffner, M., Pruessner, J. C., Pariante, C. M., Pace, T. W. W., Mercer, K. B., Mayberg, H. S., Bradley, B., Nemeroff, C. B., Holsboer, F., Heim, C. M., Ressler, K. J., Rein, T., & Binder, E. B. (2013). Allele-

specific FKBP5 DNA demethylation mediates gene–childhood trauma interactions. Nature Neuroscience, 16, 33–41. https://doi.org/10.1038/nn.3275

Manning, B. (2000). Ruthless trust: The ragamuffin's path to God. HarperSanFrancisco. https://books.google.com/books?id=BC_qwAEACAAJ

McEwen, B. S. (1998). Protective and damaging effects of stress mediators. New England Journal of Medicine, 338(3), 171–179. https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJM199801153380307

McKay, J. R. (2021). Impact of continuing care on recovery from substance use disorder. *Alcohol Research: Current Reviews, 41*(1), 01. https://doi.org/10.35946/arcr.v41.1.01

National Cancer Institute. (n.d.). Stress and cancer. https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/coping/feelings/stress-fact-sheet

National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2018). *Principles of drug addiction treatment: A research-based guide (3rd ed.)*. https://nida.nih.gov/sites/default/files/podat-3rdEd-508.pdf

Nietzsche, F. (1886). *Beyond good and evil*.

Porges, S. W. (2007). The polyvagal perspective. Biological Psychology, 74(2), 116–143. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsycho.2006.06.009

Song, H., Fang, F., Tomasson, G., Arnberg, F. K., Mataix-Cols, D., Fernández de la Cruz, L., Almqvist, C., Fall, K., & Valdimarsdóttir, U. A. (2018). Association of stress-related disorders with subsequent autoimmune disease. JAMA, 319(23), 2388–2400. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2018.7028

Sordo, L., Barrio, G., Bravo, M. J., Indave, B. I., Degenhardt, L., Wiessing, L., Ferri, M., & Pastor-Barriuso, R. (2017). Mortality risk during and after opioid substitution treatment: Systematic review and meta-analysis of cohort studies. *BMJ, 357*, j1550. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.j1550

St. John of the Cross. (n.d.). *Dark night of the soul*.

Tangney, J. P., Stuewig, J., & Mashek, D. J. (2007). Moral emotions and moral behavior. *Annual Review of Psychology, 58*, 345–372. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.56.091103.070145

Zannas, A. S., Jia, M., Hafner, K., Baumert, J., Wiechmann, T., Pape, J. C., Arloth, J., Ködel, M., Martinelli, S., Roitman, M., Röh, S., Haehle, A., Emeny, R. T., Iurato, S., Carrillo-Roa, T., Lahti, J., Räikkönen, K., Eriksson, J. G., Drake, A. J., … Binder, E. B. (2019). Epigenetic upregulation of FKBP5 by aging and stress contributes to NF-κB-driven inflammation and cardiovascular risk. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 116(23), 11370–11379. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31113877/



Wide Awake at 02:00 am

At two o'clock this morning, Sunday, November 22, I was wide awake. That wasn't supposed to happen. Yesterday I had the privilege of speaking at a remarkable addiction recovery conference in Cottonwood, Arizona, and it had gone beautifully. The audience was engaged, the conversations meaningful, and the experience deeply rewarding. After weeks of preparation and the considerable energy I pour into a presentation, I usually sleep like a baby. The work is done, the adrenaline settles, and I enjoy the rest. Not this morning.

My mind kept wandering back to the people I had met, the questions I had asked, and a nagging contradiction. We know so much more about addiction, trauma, the brain, and the possibilities of healing than we did a generation ago. Why does so much of that knowledge still seem absent from everyday recovery treatment? The question troubled me precisely because I had spent such a beautiful day with people whose hearts were so clearly in the right place.

By 4:14 a.m., the passion had so gripped me that I was on the old elliptical, trying to burn off a peculiar mixture of gratitude, inspiration, frustration, and discouragement. I work out six days a week, and Sunday is normally my exception. Church comes later this morning; the elliptical was never on the agenda. But there I was, pedaling before sunrise and composing sentences in my head. I was thankful for what I had seen at Steps to Recovery, encouraged by its leadership, frustrated by the shortcomings of our larger treatment system, and discouraged by how much suffering those shortcomings leave untouched. Quite a cocktail for an old psychologist on a Sunday morning.

So consider this an after-action reflection: a heartfelt tribute to a recovery community that gave me hope, and a candid challenge to a system that can and must do much better.

A Remarkable Day at Steps to Recovery

On November 21, 2026, I had the privilege of presenting ***The Wounds We Carry*** at the sixth annual *Erase the Stigma* conference hosted by Steps to Recovery Homes, a nonprofit recovery organization in Cottonwood, Arizona. My presentation grew from *The Wounds We Carry*, a book I coauthored with retired U.S. Army Colonel and psychiatrist Dr. Khris Peterson, a West Point graduate and combat veteran. The project also bears the contributions and stories of Sergeant Johnnie Griffitts, Major Salvatore Bitondo, Sergeant Jack Marion, and Dr. Stephanie Bowser. I wanted to bring those voices with me into the room, because their experiences give this work its heart. The event brought together recovery professionals, community leaders, first responders, advocates, and people whose lives have been profoundly affected by addiction. I was honored to share the program with five other notable speakers, including Erin Tawney, a regional

leader with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, whose remarks challenged the recovery community to confront shortcomings and raise its standards. I appreciated her candor. We need leaders willing to say difficult things in rooms full of people doing difficult work.

The facility was beautiful, the hospitality generous, and the atmosphere genuinely welcoming. But what I carried home was an unexpected affection and admiration for the man helping make it all happen: **Damien Browning, CEO and cofounder of Steps to Recovery Homes.** I liked Damien almost immediately. Here is someone who has every reason to feel proud of what he and his colleagues have built, yet he did not strike me as someone resting on his accomplishments. He has a larger vision for people in recovery and for the professionals who care for them. He understands the political, regulatory, and financial pressures that weigh on nonprofit treatment organizations, and still he wants to raise the standard. His participation in an August 2026 SAMHSA workshop in Washington, D.C., addressing integrity and accountability in recovery housing, reflects the national conversation in which he is engaged. But the quality I admired most was much more personal.

Damien listens. I mean really listens. He brings in accomplished people who may challenge what his organization is doing, rather than surrounding himself with people who will simply tell him how wonderful everything is. He makes room for difficult questions and seems willing to act on good answers, wherever they come from. I have worked around enough executives who mistake a title for wisdom to recognize how uncommon—and how precious—that humility can be. I found myself thinking that this is exactly the kind of leader our profession needs more of: someone who cares enough about his mission

to let others help him make it better. That takes confidence, courage, and, above all, heart.

My friend, Rage, provides a particularly meaningful example. Rage has lived through the devastation of addiction and emerged into recovery with hard-won wisdom, the courage to tell his story, and a desire to help others. He has written three books, including *Becoming the Change*, for which I had the privilege of writing the foreword. He also completed certification in NeuroFaith®, deepening his understanding of trauma, neuroscience, identity, and spirituality. Rage does not have an advanced academic degree or professional licensure in addiction treatment. But he possesses the kind of lived wisdom no university can confer, and he has done the work of continuing to learn. Damien recognizes that. He listens to Rage's feedback, respects his perspective, and, from what I understand, makes changes when the ideas are good.

I was especially encouraged to hear that Steps to Recovery does not simply usher graduates of its treatment program straight into behavioral health technician roles. Damien understands why people need time to stabilize and consolidate the gains they have made in their own recovery before taking responsibility for the recovery of others. Elsewhere I have seen the opposite: the ink is scarcely dry on a person's treatment graduation certificate before an employment agreement is being signed and that person is preparing to lead groups or support other vulnerable patients. I find that practice deeply troubling. Early recovery deserves protection, not the immediate weight of a clinical helping role for which someone may be neither personally ready nor professionally prepared. Lived experience is an extraordinary asset, but it is not a substitute for sustained stability, training, supervision, and demonstrated readiness. I applaud Damien for respecting that distinction. After my presentation, he and I discussed the possibility of

future conversations and collaboration. I found that openness genuinely encouraging. I would welcome the chance to keep exchanging ideas with someone who wants to strengthen care and is willing to listen.

Why I Couldn't Sleep

Before saying anything critical, let me make something abundantly clear: I love people who work in addiction recovery. Some of the finest human beings I have ever met devote their lives to helping others climb out of addiction. Many have battled their own demons, endured unimaginable suffering, and emerged determined to help people still trapped in darkness. They are often underpaid and overworked, yet they continue showing up. I have even greater admiration for those who summon the courage to seek recovery. These are among the bravest people I have known.

Imagine waking up with a brain that has learned to demand the very substance destroying your life. Imagine knowing another drink, pill, or injection could cost you everything, perhaps even your life, yet experiencing an overwhelming compulsion to use. Then imagine finding the courage to ask for help. People in addiction treatment are often fighting for their lives, carrying immense burdens of shame, trauma, broken relationships, and despair. They deserve the finest care we can provide.

During my presentation, I asked questions about addiction neuroscience, dopamine and reward circuitry, negative reinforcement, autonomic nervous system dysregulation, and the difference between incremental behavioral improvement and transformational healing. I was struck by how unfamiliar some participants—many working in recovery—seemed to be with these concepts. They were bright, compassionate, and interested. This is not an indictment of Steps to

Recovery. It is a larger concern I have developed through decades of clinical practice, teaching, and work in addiction treatment, particularly in Arizona: the science has moved forward, but clinical preparation has not consistently kept pace.

Judith Grisel, Ph.D., a behavioral neuroscientist and professor of psychology at Bucknell University, addresses the science powerfully in *Never Enough: The Neuroscience and Experience of Addiction* (2019). Grisel brings both rigorous research and a personal history of severe addiction and recovery to her work. She understands addiction from both sides of the microscope. Repeated substance exposure produces changes in reward, motivation, and stress regulation. Pleasure diminishes, distress intensifies, and the person who once used to feel good may eventually use primarily to stop feeling terrible. Positive reinforcement gives way, increasingly, to negative reinforcement. This is not merely a moral failure or a deficit in willpower. It is a vicious adaptation of the brain and nervous system, complicated by a person's psychological and social world.

The answer is not to belittle the workers who haven't been taught these things. It is to give them the education, supervision, and opportunities they deserve—and to expect treatment programs to build on what the science has taught us. Some centers are already doing excellent, neuroscience-informed and trauma-focused work. I applaud them. My point is that such preparation and accountability should be the expectation, not the pleasant surprise.

Incremental Improvement Is Not Transformational Healing

Much of addiction treatment depends upon approaches designed to stabilize patients, teach coping skills, recognize triggers, strengthen emotional regulation, and prevent relapse. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, motivational interviewing, and related methods can be extremely helpful. I have used these approaches throughout my professional career. They can be essential in crisis intervention, stabilization, and early recovery, and for some people they help produce deep and lasting changes as well.

Yet I believe our ambitions often stop too soon. Teaching someone to manage suffering is not necessarily the same as helping that person heal its deeper sources. Someone can stop drinking and still be tormented by the same chronic shame, negative core beliefs, dissociated emotional pain, internal conflict, and fractured sense of identity that made escape so compelling. The substance is gone, but the suffering remains.

That is the distinction I draw between **incremental** and **transformational** care. Incremental interventions can help people survive a crisis, develop better habits, and function more effectively; they are often indispensable and can themselves produce lasting change. Transformational work deliberately reaches toward the deeper patterns through which a person experiences self, others, and the world: unresolved trauma, entrenched beliefs, attachment wounds, autonomic dysregulation, and the search for meaning. We need both. But a program that stops at teaching coping skills may never reach the very pain that made escape through substances so compelling in the first place.

Trauma Is Not a Footnote

Not everyone with an addiction has a history of trauma. But trauma and substance use disorders frequently coexist, and the relationship deserves far more clinical sophistication than I sometimes see. This is especially important among individuals with recurrent relapse, severe dysregulation, and complicated psychiatric histories. PTSD can involve intrusive memories, avoidance, persistent threat sensitivity, and changes in mood and cognition. Complex PTSD, recognized in the ICD-11, includes PTSD symptoms along with enduring difficulties in emotion regulation, self-concept, and relationships, often associated with repeated or prolonged interpersonal trauma.

For some patients, the substance functions as a temporary escape from frightening memories; for others, it may quiet the more pervasive agony of feeling defective, unlovable, worthless, or unsafe in their own skin. When addiction treatment never addresses co-occurring trauma, sobriety may arrive without relief from the internal world that gave the substance such power. Contemporary research supports integrated approaches to PTSD and substance use disorders, including evidence-based trauma-focused psychotherapy when appropriate.

Every addiction organization should be trauma-informed, and organizations treating patients with significant trauma-related disorders should have access to clinicians specifically trained to recognize and treat them. A weekend course doesn't make someone a trauma specialist. Neither does having personally experienced trauma. Recovery peers, behavioral health technicians, and licensed therapists each make valuable contributions, but their roles are not interchangeable. It is especially concerning when someone newly

discharged from addiction treatment is recruited almost immediately into a BHT position, without adequate time to establish stability in their own recovery or acquire the skills that the work demands. We would never assign cardiac surgery to a compassionate cardiac laboratory technician, however experienced that technician may be. Why should we tolerate such mismatches between clinical responsibility and preparation in addiction treatment?

One Model, Not a Movement to Join

NeuroFaith® is one approach I have developed to encourage this deeper work. It draws together polyvagal-informed regulation, HeartMath® practices, Internal Family Systems, and spirituality or faith, while attending to trauma, identity, and the brain's self-referential networks. I tell my students, certified coaches, and therapists plainly: this is not a cult, and I am not running one. If you have found another thoughtful, evidence-informed transformational approach that helps your patients, use it. Learn from it. Stay with what works. I have no interest in turning a model into a brand people must pledge allegiance to. The point is not loyalty to NeuroFaith®. The point is healing.

I was encouraged by the conference discussion of faith and spirituality, including the perspectives Erin Tawney brought to the conversation. HHS leadership under Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has also expressed interest in the place of **faith and community** in health and recovery. I'm glad this dimension is receiving attention. Faith can offer belonging, meaning, forgiveness, and hope, and for many people those are not ornamental extras; they are central to restoring a life. But faith should be integrated with clinical competence and respect for each person's beliefs, not used as a substitute for treatment. And calling a program 'Christian' should raise its standards of honesty and accountability, not

lower them. A Christian sign on the building means little if Christian principles are absent from the boardroom.

Arizona's Unforgivable Betrayal

Few episodes demonstrate the consequences of financial exploitation more painfully than Arizona's sober-living fraud scandal. Fraudulent operators targeted vulnerable people, disproportionately Native Americans, recruiting them into purported recovery housing and treatment with promises of help and stability. Investigations exposed sham services, suspect billing, neglect, and harrowing accounts of people being abandoned, exploited, and sometimes prevented from freely leaving. The broader scandal involved approximately $2.8 billion in suspected fraudulent Medicaid billing. Investigative reporting documented at least 40 deaths among Native American residents of Phoenix-area sober-living homes and treatment facilities during 2022–2024. Attorneys representing affected families have alleged much larger numbers of people dead or missing, but those claims have not been independently confirmed as a comprehensive count.

These were human beings seeking help, not commodities. Their families were entitled to safety, truth, and care, not predation. The people responsible for such abuses represent an extreme, not the ordinary recovery worker. Yet the scandal exposed what can happen when financial incentives overwhelm morality, supervision, and oversight. This was not simply inadequate treatment. It was a profound betrayal.

When Profit Becomes the Clinical Director

I have come to dislike the phrase addiction treatment industry. Industry brings to mind assembly lines, efficiency, output, and the manufacture of nuts and bolts. But we do not manufacture human beings, and we

cannot restore wounded identities on a production line. Yet in some organizations the priorities look disturbingly industrial: fill the beds, maximize occupancy, increase billable contacts, expand facilities, and advertise spectacular outcomes. I have nothing against ethical financial success. Stability allows organizations to hire excellent clinicians and sustain their mission. What I oppose is profit becoming the clinical director.

Several years ago, I was recruited from my hospital position to lead clinical services at a residential addiction treatment organization in Arizona. I hoped to implement an integrated, neuroscience-informed, trauma-focused model. Instead, I repeatedly experienced conflict between commercial priorities and clinical judgment. We developed a promising framework, but developing a framework is not implementing it. Implementation demands serious training, fidelity, supervision, and accountability. After my departure, I became concerned that elements of our work continued to be promoted without the corresponding preparation necessary to deliver what the marketing suggested. A model is not a brochure. A book is not a clinical program. And a trademark is not evidence that a sophisticated treatment approach is actually being provided.

The same principle applies to astonishing recovery claims. Eighty percent success? Eighty-one percent effectiveness? Ninety percent recovery? Defined how? At discharge, after six months, after a year, or after five years? How many patients were lost to follow-up? Who verified the results? Extraordinary claims require transparent methods, not promotional arithmetic. A person seeking recovery deserves evidence, not an illusion sold as hope.

AHCCCS, Staffing, and Everyday Professionalism

Arizona's Medicaid program, AHCCCS, shapes much of the behavioral health landscape through its reimbursement arrangements. Peer workers and behavioral health technicians can be invaluable, but the system must also make it feasible to employ experienced licensed clinicians, provide high-quality trauma treatment, train and supervise staff, and evaluate meaningful long-term results. I want to see payment policies scrutinized for the incentives they create, not merely the services they reimburse. There are excellent centers already bringing neuroscience and advanced treatment into practice. Let's support that work and make rigorous training and accountability the norm instead of rewarding volume for its own sake.

And while we're talking about quality, let me address something far less complicated. Answer your damn phone. Return your emails. Respond to your messages. Give staff professional voicemail greetings that make it clear a patient has reached the right place. Make sure there is a reliable route to help after hours or in a crisis. I have seen a troubling casualness toward professional communication in some care settings, as though two-way contact were optional. It isn't when patients and families are depending on you. A person calling a recovery center may be frightened, withdrawing, or struggling to make it through another day. Professional communication is not a luxury or an administrative afterthought. It is part of patient care.

Why Steps to Recovery Gave Me Hope

My own experiences with addiction treatment in Arizona have not always been encouraging. I have encountered clinical decisions overshadowed by business priorities, underprepared personnel, and promotional claims that outpaced the care actually being delivered. I

also know there are excellent treatment centers doing serious, compassionate work. This is not an indictment of everyone in the field. It is a plea to stop accepting the mediocre because it is familiar, or the profitable because it is convenient.

That is why Steps to Recovery touched me so deeply. I arrived hoping to give something through my presentation. I left feeling I had received something in return: renewed faith in the possibility of good leadership. Damien had assembled a thoughtful conference, welcomed tough messages, honored the wisdom of people like Rage, and shown a willingness to keep learning himself. He didn't need to impress me with claims of perfection. What I admired was precisely the opposite: he seemed to understand that none of us has arrived, that every program can improve, and that people in recovery deserve leaders who are never finished learning. I left wanting to know him better and hoping our conversations might open the door to future collaboration. That possibility is energizing at this stage of my career. I would enjoy seeing where a shared commitment to better care might lead.

As I pedal away this morning, the emotion underneath all the others is hope. I want our recovery centers to bring in the best available neuroscience, the best evidence-based clinical methods, genuinely trauma-informed therapists, and the kind of staff training that makes compassion effective. I want honest outcomes, reliable communication, real supervision, and leaders willing to admit what they don't know. I also want room for faith and spirituality when patients welcome them—not as a slogan or an advertisement, but as a meaningful part of healing, identity, forgiveness, and belonging. Some programs already do this beautifully. I want many more to join them.

So, Damien, let me say this directly: thank you. Thank you for inviting me into something you have clearly poured so much of yourself into. Thank you for the beautiful setting, the warmth of your team, and the honor of presenting alongside Erin Tawney and the other gifted speakers. More than that, thank you for being approachable, for listening without defensiveness, and for believing your organization can grow even stronger. You gave this old psychologist something I didn't realize he needed that day—a fresh dose of hope. I also thank Rage, the recovery workers who keep showing up, and the courageous men and women seeking help. You are why this work matters. And Damien, I hope you know how much I admire what you're trying to build. The world of addiction recovery could use more of that spirit.

I have written a good many books, several available on Amazon, but I also give my work away because I want the knowledge to travel farther than I ever will. I tell people that I'm just an old dude riding life's conveyor belt; sooner or later it will drop me off into the next life. Before that happens, I want to throw the football back to the younger bucks. Take what I've learned over four decades. Catch it, improve on it, challenge it, and run farther with it than I ever could. That is not a surrender of what I've built; it is the whole point of building it. And if a place like Steps to Recovery can help that knowledge find its way into the hands of people who are fighting for their lives, then this rather unusual Sunday workout will have been worth every pedal stroke. These are not nuts and bolts on an assembly line. These are human beings. Let us give them our very best.

References

Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System. (2026). *Behavioral health fee schedules*. https://www.azahcccs.gov/PlansProviders/RatesAndBilling/FFS/BehavioralHealthrates.html

Grisel, J. (2019). *Never enough: The neuroscience and experience of addiction*. Doubleday. https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/557515/never-enough-by-judith-grisel/

ProPublica & Arizona Center for Investigative Reporting. (2025). *Dozens died in sober living homes as Arizona fumbled fraud response*. https://www.propublica.org/article/arizona-sober-homes-deaths-medicaid-fraud

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs & U.S. Department of Defense. (2023). *VA/DoD clinical practice guideline for management of posttraumatic stress disorder and acute stress disorder*. https://www.healthquality.va.gov/guidelines/mh/ptsd/



Ice Cream

I love ice cream. I mean, I really love ice cream. Chocolate, strawberry, butter pecan, rocky road, mint chocolate chip—you name it. I especially love mixing flavors. Throw in some hot fudge, a handful of nuts, perhaps a few strawberries, and now we're talking! But plain vanilla? Good grief. It's naked! It needs something. Anything! Vanilla ice cream is perfectly fine as a starting point, but left to itself, it's just so darn boring.

And then there's milk toast. Oh, dear Lord. Milk toast. Who in the world invented that culinary catastrophe? Apparently, somebody decided perfectly good toast wasn't miserable enough, so they soaked it in warm milk until it became a soggy, bland excuse for breakfast. People actually ate this stuff. Voluntarily! Historically, milk toast was served as a mild, easily digested food for people with delicate stomachs. That explains its purpose, I suppose, but hardly redeems the taste.

There is a distinction worth making. "Milk toast," two words, is the food. "Milquetoast," one word, is the much better word for what I'm worried about. In 1924, H. T. Webster introduced Caspar Milquetoast

in his comic strip The Timid Soul. The name borrowed from the food and came to describe a timid person reluctant to challenge anybody about anything (Harper, n.d.).

And lately I've been thinking that an awful lot of what passes for Christianity in America has become precisely that.

Milquetoast Christianity.

Bland, timid, shallow, predictable, and so determined not to offend anyone that it has lost the willingness to stand for much at all. We've taken the most transformational message in human history and, in too many places, turned it into a self-help program with a few Bible verses sprinkled on top. Worse yet, we've turned God into a vending machine. Insert a prayer, push a button, select your blessing, and get annoyed if the Almighty doesn't deliver precisely what you ordered. Apparently, the Creator of the universe has become a celestial customer-service representative.

Good grief. Behind my irreverence is a concern that has grown for years: Christianity in America is losing ground, and too much Christianity practiced by those who still claim the name is comfortable, compromised, and nearly indistinguishable from the surrounding culture. This is not an attack on my dear Christian friends. The spanking I administer to milquetoast Christianity I administer to myself. I have lived in that comfortable world, too.

Here is where this essay is going, and I make no promise of a gentle Sunday-school outing. I see a dangerous convergence: churches trading discipleship for comfort; a psychology profession at risk of mistaking labels and symptom control for healing; political movements asking for loyalty instead of honest questions; radical Islamists exploiting religious conviction to justify intimidation and state coercion; and a screen-

saturated culture cultivating reflexes faster than reflection. These are not the same problem, but they can reinforce one another. When discernment weakens, manipulation gets easier. When courage weakens, truth becomes negotiable. And when both disappear, freedom is not far behind. I intend to confront those dangers directly, drawing on Scripture, psychology, history, scholars who have challenged me, and experiences from my own life. My dear Christian friends are not targets for a theological drive-by. I am in the line of fire myself. But this is no time to whisper. The stakes include the faith and freedom we leave our children and grandchildren.

The God We Made in Our Own Image

Scripture tells us that God made mankind in His image (Genesis 1:27). Somewhere along the way, however, many of us decided to return the favor. We began making God in ours: a God who agrees with our politics, accommodates our preferences, approves of our relationships, blesses our desires, and stays out of the way when we want to do our own thing. If Scripture challenges our behavior, perhaps we have misunderstood it. Perhaps the culture has moved on. Or perhaps, and this possibility seems hardest for us to entertain, we simply don't want to obey.

A self-centered worldview makes the individual the final arbiter of truth and morality; biblical Christianity calls us to surrender to an authority beyond ourselves. These orientations are not slight variations in taste. One asks, "Lord, what would You have me do?" The other asks, "God, how can You help me do what I want?"

A God who never disagrees with us is a remarkably convenient God.

Before anybody imagines I am climbing onto a righteous soapbox, let me confess that I'm a sinner—a rather accomplished one, I'm afraid.

Anyone who knows me could supply a generous inventory of my shortcomings. But I don't want my flaws baptized as virtues or my habits affirmed merely because I have become attached to them. In my later years I am discovering more deeply the importance of surrender, of allowing Christ to transform what I would rather leave untouched. I am not where I once was, but I am certainly not where I hope to be.

And once we have fashioned a God who always agrees with us, the next temptation is predictable: we want His gifts without the inconvenience of His demands.

Grace, Cost, and Peace: The Word in the Middle

In an earlier essay I reflected on grace, cost, and peace. We love grace: forgiveness, redemption, and God's unmerited favor. We love peace: the assurance that we belong to Him even when life becomes unbearable. But there is a troublesome word sitting right in the middle: cost. We want the first and the last without wrestling honestly with the one between.

Jesus did not recruit followers into a comfort club. He called them to deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow Him (Luke 9:23). Paul described pressing toward the goal and finishing the race (Philippians 3:12–14; 2 Timothy 4:7). Neither portrays salvation as a vending-machine transaction in which we retain absolute control over our lives while collecting the benefits of faith.

We want grace without repentance, peace without obedience, and blessing without surrender.

Brennan Manning's Ruthless Trust brings the question into sharp focus. "Ruthless" is a savage-sounding word. It seems almost inappropriate beside "trust," yet Manning uses it to challenge the defenses and

illusions that keep us from radical dependence on God (Manning, 2000). Ruthless trust is not a sentimental slogan that guarantees life will become comfortable. It is a willingness to trust when convenience, certainty, and control are stripped away. I have only begun to appreciate how costly—and liberating—that surrender may be.

That appetite for comfort does not stop at the church doors. It has worked its way into my own profession, where we sometimes mistake a quieter symptom for a healed person. And when psychology starts selling relief without understanding, it can become another kind of vending-machine religion—with a prescription pad instead of a collection plate.

When Comfort Becomes the Enemy of Transformation

And lest anyone imagine I am criticizing only the Church, let me turn the spotlight on my own profession. After decades in clinical



psychology, I have become increasingly troubled by the industrial efficiency with which we can diagnose, label, and medicate human suffering before we understand the human being who is suffering. Anxious? Here is a pill. Depressed? Another pill. Can't concentrate? Let's find a category and perhaps another prescription. We have

become remarkably good at naming what hurts. But naming a wound is not the same as healing it. A diagnostic code is a map reference, not a biography. A billing category is not a theory of the soul. And a symptom checklist, however useful, is not a substitute for knowing a person.

Let me be clear about what I am challenging: not the compassionate use of medicine, but the intellectual laziness of pretending that an abbreviated biological explanation settles a complicated human story. Psychiatrist Joanna Moncrieff has argued that psychiatric drugs can be understood as producing altered mental and physiological states rather than simply correcting a known chemical deficiency (Moncrieff, 2008). An umbrella review she coauthored patently disproved the popular serotonin-deficiency explanation of depression (Moncrieff et al., 2023). Relief from a medication may be genuine and valuable; that does not retroactively validate every story told about why the suffering began. We should demand honest explanations, meaningful informed consent, careful follow-up, and clinical outcomes that matter beyond a score on a form.

When a child struggles with attention or hyperactivity, I want us asking hard questions about sleep, development, trauma, learning demands, anxiety, family life, relationships, and the school environment; not automatically treating the presenting behavior as the whole problem. Some children do meet criteria for ADHD, and some benefit from carefully selected medication and other supports. But a label identifies a pattern; it cannot tell us, by itself, what happened to this child, what this child believes about himself, or what this particular child needs to flourish. With depressed adults, I want to know about grief, shame, attachment, identity, loneliness, physical illness, faith, and those old core beliefs that can quietly govern a life. If we refuse to look beneath

the symptom, we should not be surprised when the symptom changes costumes and returns for an encore.

My conviction is that therapy should aspire to transformation, not simply the maintenance of manageable misery. Of course, we relieve distress when we can. We do not romanticize pain or withhold effective care in pursuit of some heroic ordeal. But good therapy also asks people to confront destructive patterns, test the lies they believe about themselves, take responsibility where responsibility belongs, and learn how to live differently. Sometimes the most compassionate clinical question is also the least comfortable one. Do we have the courage to ask it? And do we have the patience to walk beside a person when the answer requires more than six visits and a handout?

I fear that parts of our profession have grown more proficient at administering a system than at healing a person. We measure symptoms, populate charts, assign codes, and celebrate compliance with a treatment protocol. Those tools can serve patients. But when the tools become the mission, the person disappears behind the paperwork. We have become so determined to eliminate discomfort that we sometimes eliminate the opportunity to understand it—and so enamored of measurable improvement that we neglect the harder question of whether someone's life has truly changed.

Now put that beside milquetoast Christianity and tell me they are not cousins. One offers symptom management without deep healing; the other offers reassurance without repentance. One risks reducing a human life to a diagnosis; the other reduces discipleship to a comfortable Sunday experience. Both may keep the customer satisfied while leaving the underlying problem untouched. Jesus did not come merely to improve our spiritual customer-satisfaction scores. He came

to call us to a new life. That is a much bigger, and considerably more demanding, proposition.

The parallel ought to make both clinicians and pastors squirm a little. If my profession is unwilling to ask what lies beneath distress, and the Church is unwilling to ask what lies beneath comfortable religiosity, both can become agents of accommodation rather than transformation. What happens to a church that prizes a soothing experience above an encounter with the living Christ? Revelation supplies an answer that is not especially soothing.

The Church That Made Jesus Want to Spit

The church at Laodicea in Revelation 3:14–22 was not an assembly of strangers to religion. They were church people who imagined themselves secure, wealthy, and self-sufficient. Yet Christ described them as poor, blind, and naked in the very spiritual sense they could not perceive. They were lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, and He said He would spit them out of His mouth. That is hardly a vanilla-flavored rebuke.

I wonder how many contemporary churches might recognize themselves in the warning. We have inviting buildings, marvelous music, terrific coffee, comfortable seating, and sermons polished to avoid unnecessary offense. Nothing is intrinsically wrong with those things, but where is the call to repentance? Where is moral accountability? Where is a pastor's willingness to speak truths that may cost attendance, prestige, or donations? Jay Smith's lecture on political Islam challenges Christians precisely here: he argues that churches have become reluctant to address competing theological and political claims while their own faith becomes increasingly compartmentalized (Smith, 2026, lecture transcript).

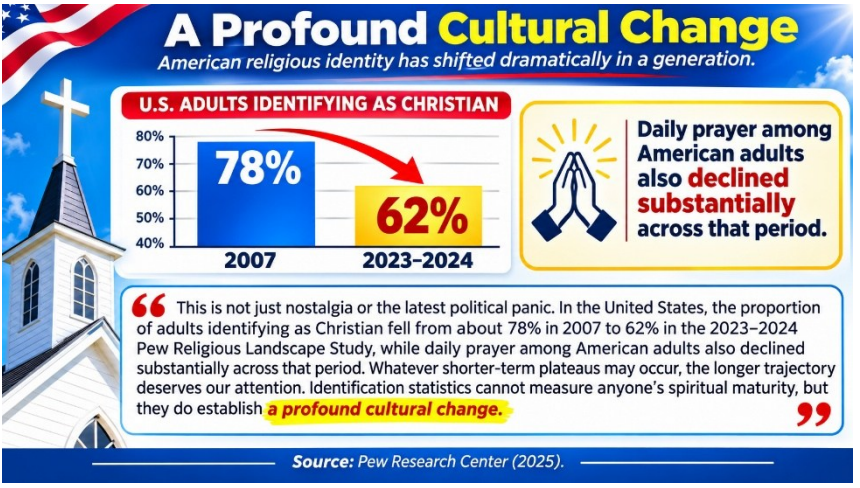
We have confused being loving with being agreeable.

I do not want to be spit out. I don't want to be lukewarm. And when I give this warning to others, I am giving it to myself first.

Before we dismiss Laodicea as somebody else's congregation, look at what is happening around us—and then ask what is happening within us.

Christianity Is Losing Ground

This is not just nostalgia or the latest political panic. In the United States, the proportion of adults identifying as Christian fell from about



78% in 2007 to 62% in the 2023–2024 Pew Religious Landscape Study, while daily prayer among American adults also declined substantially across that period (Pew Research Center, 2025). Whatever shorter-term plateaus may occur, the longer trajectory deserves our attention. Identification statistics cannot measure anyone's spiritual maturity, but they do establish a profound cultural change.

I worry less about whether someone checks the Christian box on a survey than whether Christ actually organizes his life. Does faith shape

conduct on Monday or merely attendance on Sunday? Does it inform marriages, parenting, conscience, friendships, and treatment of opponents? Or does it consist of a little religious warmth with no significant cost? We are losing our Christian inheritance when we no longer understand its teachings well enough to live them.

Statistics tell one story. The personal price of refusing to go quietly along with the crowd tells another.

The Cost Has Been Personal

I know something about the cost of speaking up. Throughout my years as a psychologist, including service within hospital systems, I have challenged decisions and professional practices I believed needed scrutiny. More recently, my professional and licensing difficulties have made the stakes especially personal. I have not always been right, and I have not always been gracious. But taking positions I believed necessary has cost me, at times a great deal. It is no small thing to risk a reputation, career, friendship, or livelihood.

I have also written about the crazy left and the crazy right. Neither side owns wisdom or foolishness. I have seen enough in my lifetime to know that conservatives can become as captive to a tribe as progressives, and Christians can become as resistant to evidence as anybody else. The question is not whether everyone agrees with me. It is whether we can think, disagree, and examine ourselves without fear of being cast out.

And now I look at my grandchildren and ask what kind of country we are leaving them—and their children, and the generations to come. The concern is no longer merely about my own comfort. I believe we are facing a struggle over our souls, our children, and our civic inheritance. That does not mean I possess every answer. It means I am no longer willing to pretend the questions are unimportant.



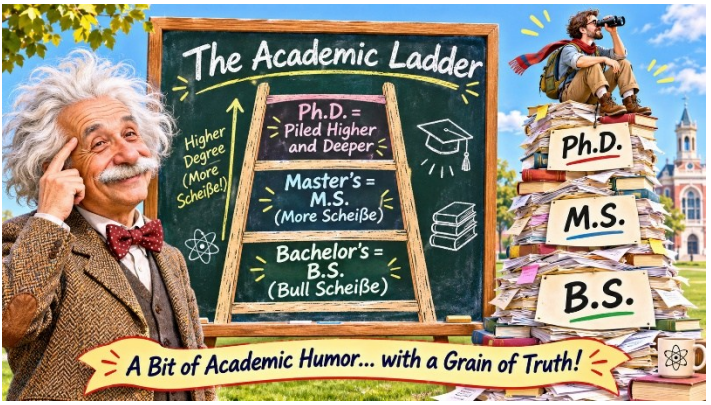
Conviction alone, however, is not a substitute for knowledge. If I am going to challenge powerful ideas, I have an obligation to study them rather than simply shout at them. My wife would probably appreciate that arrangement, too.

From Psychology to Sociology: Learning from People Who Know More

I am not an Islamic historian or an expert in Islamic theology. I am a psychologist who has spent a career examining human behavior and who has always loved sociology. I am also a systems thinker. Early in my training at UC Berkeley, Professor James C. Coyne's interactional work on depression helped me understand how individuals shape relationships and environments even as those systems shape them (Coyne, 1976). As a student and later as a clinician, I became fascinated by the movement from micro to macro: from personal psychology and

family interactions to institutions, social movements, cultures, and nations.

Now I am no Albert Einstein. I have a doctorate, but academic credentials do not guarantee wisdom. There is the old joke that a bachelor's degree is B.S.—Bull Scheiße (German for you know what); a master's degree is More Scheiße; and a Ph.D. means it has been Piled Higher and Deeper. Having spent a good deal of time in academia, I suspect there is a grain of truth in there somewhere. I like to think I have occasionally climbed atop the pile to get a better look around!



I know what I know, and I am acutely aware of what I do not. So, I seek out scholars and writers whose historical and linguistic knowledge far exceeds mine. I read their work, examine their backgrounds, inspect the evidence they cite, and ask whether they have earned my trust. Learning from an authority is not surrendering to an authority; the first enlarges thought, while the second can shut it down.

There is an enormous difference between standing on the shoulders of giants and handing them your brain.

That is why I have been reading and listening to people who have spent far more time examining these histories and doctrines than I have. I do not surrender my judgment to them; I invite them to sharpen it.

Voices Sounding the Alarm

Several writers and speakers have profoundly influenced my examination of political Islam and its historical relationship with the West. I admire their willingness to challenge comfortable narratives and risk controversy. They are not interchangeable authorities, and they do not represent the entire scholarship of Islam; their interpretations can and should be examined critically. But disagreement with their conclusions is no excuse for refusing to read their evidence.

Jay Smith, a longtime Christian apologist, distinguishes the defense of Christian claims from the more direct historical and theological critique of Islamic claims. In the lecture that inspired this essay, he examines Islam as a political as well as religious tradition, focuses on the interaction between law and state power, and urges Christians to move beyond a timid, Sunday-only faith. His framework for political influence—government, judiciary, military, and education—is a thesis worth assessing against historical evidence rather than merely cheering or rejecting on instinct (Smith, 2026, lecture transcript).

Raymond Ibrahim's *Sword and Scimitar: Fourteen Centuries of War between Islam and the West* examines major conflicts between Islamic and Christian powers, challenging readers to confront the theological motives that sometimes accompanied war and expansion (Ibrahim, 2018). The broader history also includes diplomacy, commerce, cooperation, and complex causes of religious change; still, the history of conquest and coercion cannot simply be edited out of the picture because it is unpleasant.

William J. Federer's *What Every American Needs to Know About the Qur'an: A History of Islam & the United States* brings American readers into the much longer history of encounters with Islamic powers, including the Barbary conflicts that confronted the early American republic (Federer, 2007). His work asks us to remember that religiously inflected questions of authority, commerce, and military power did not suddenly appear on September 11, 2001.

Brigitte Gabriel's *They Must Be Stopped* argues for confronting radical Islamist movements with greater clarity (Gabriel, 2008). Her childhood experience of war in Lebanon gives her writing an experiential intensity different from that of an academic historian. Her political positions are frequently contested, but her insistence that the human consequences of extremist violence be taken seriously is important to understand.

Craig Considine, a sociologist whose earlier work emphasized Christian–Muslim understanding, examines what he describes as the convergence of Marxist-influenced movements and Islamism in *When Marx Meets Islam* (Considine, 2026). I find his intellectual trajectory particularly interesting: he approaches an ideological partnership from a background of interfaith scholarship rather than from a uniformly polemical career. The coalition he critiques deserves scrutiny because groups can cooperate against common opponents even while envisioning sharply different futures.

These individuals are not infallible. Neither am I. But I admire people willing to argue in public, face counterarguments, and put their reputations on the line. That is preferable to the bland reassurance that everybody must be right as long as nobody is offended.

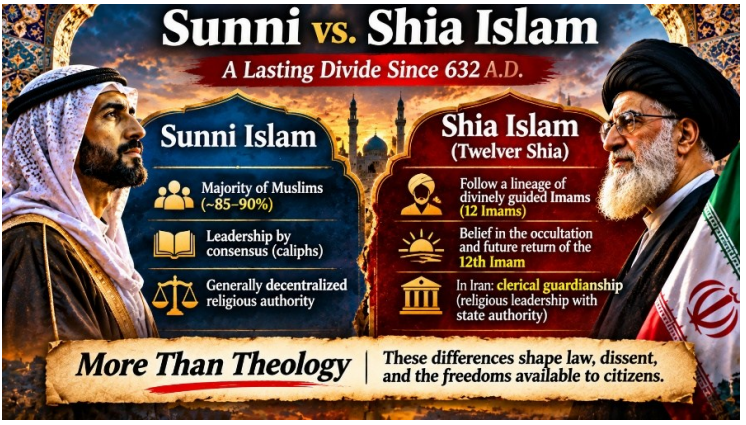
The writings are not merely an academic exercise. At their center lies a question of human liberty: can a person disagree, convert, criticize, or leave a religion without fear of punishment?

Islam, Religious Law, and the Difference Between Invitation and Coercion

My friendship with Muslim people and my opposition to religious coercion are not contradictory. I will not pretend otherwise to avoid an awkward conversation. I reject any Islamist movement that seeks to enforce religious conformity by intimidation, imprisonment, or violence. I also reject the lazy idea that criticizing a religious doctrine or an authoritarian regime amounts to hating every person who belongs to that faith. People deserve dignity. Claims deserve examination. Governments deserve accountability. If we cannot manage all three thoughts at once, perhaps we ought to put down the phone and practice thinking again.

The term Sharia refers broadly to the divine path in Islamic thought, while fiqh refers to jurists' human interpretation of it. Different Muslim communities disagree about its applications, especially in civil and criminal law. Some people practice Islamic religious duties voluntarily; others advocate state systems in which religious law governs all citizens, including those who dissent. The distinction is consequential. Christian canon law generally functions inside a church's institutional jurisdiction; in certain states, interpretations of Sharia are embedded in public law with coercive state authority. That is an important legal distinction, not an accusation against every Muslim (Pew Research Center, 2013).

Sunni and Shia traditions also differ. The original divide centered on



succession after Muhammad's death in 632, with traditions developing different accounts of legitimate leadership. The majority of Muslims are Sunni. Twelver Shia Islam, dominant in Iran, holds a distinctive doctrine of the Imams, including belief in the occultation and eventual return of the twelfth Imam. Iran's post-1979 political system also developed a doctrine of clerical guardianship in which religious leadership possesses substantial state authority. These are not merely abstract theological disagreements; in specific settings they shape law, dissent, and the freedoms available to citizens.

The Middle East once contained many flourishing Christian communities. Over many centuries, conquests, conversion, migration, demographic changes, political pressure, and at times coercion transformed that religious map. It is important to study the whole history rather than pretending every change followed one identical strategy. But it is equally important to acknowledge that some modern governments impose severe penalties for religious dissent, blasphemy, or conversion.

I know the human stakes through a friendship I have cherished for decades. One of my oldest and dearest friends came from a country in the Middle East. We attended school together in Switzerland, and we

have maintained a close relationship throughout our lives. He has described the danger that can accompany religious conversion and leaving Islam, including fears connected with family and community. I will not identify him or his country of origin. His safety matters far more than making my story more dramatic. Yet his experience has made religious freedom personal to me: these are not merely doctrines in a dusty book, but questions that touch lives and families.

I do not want a society in which the state, a cleric, or a mob can force someone to profess a faith or fear violence for changing it. Christianity has its own historical failures of persecution, and we should admit them without hesitation. But Jesus' invitation to follow Him was an invitation. Eternal life is offered as a gift, not imposed by the sword. Christians should persuade, serve, testify, and love—not compel conversion through violence.

My friend's experience makes the question personal. Iran shows how catastrophic the consequences can become when ideology acquires the machinery of the state—and when otherwise intelligent allies help it get there.

The Unholy Alliance and the Lessons of Iran

One of Jay Smith's most provocative warnings concerns the alliance of convenience between certain left-wing movements and Islamist organizations. Think about the contradiction. Some secular activists demand absolute freedom from religious authority at home while treating movements abroad that punish religious dissent as natural political partners. How does that make sense? Shared enemies can produce temporary alliances; they cannot guarantee shared values. An authoritarian movement does not become a champion of liberty

because its latest slogan sounds fashionable on a university campus. (Smith, 2026).

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 ought to haunt anyone tempted by that bargain. The coalition against Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi included Islamists, secular nationalists, Marxists, and other opponents of the monarchy. Many believed they were fighting for a freer Iran. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his allies prevailed. Then the revolutionary government turned on political rivals, including people who had helped it succeed. The Tudeh communist party, which had supported the Islamic Republic, was banned in 1983; its leaders were arrested and imprisoned. The revolution had eaten its allies, and it had barely finshed setting the table (Moghadam, 1987; Encyclopaedia Iranica, n.d.).



And this was not simply political hardball. Under Khomeini, Iran established revolutionary tribunals, prisons, and instruments of ideological enforcement. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps emerged as a principal defender of the new order. Political opponents were tortured, imprisoned, and killed. Historian Ervand Abrahamian documents thousands of political executions in the early 1980s. In 1988, on Khomeini's orders, Iranian authorities summarily executed thousands more prisoners. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International describe those killings as grave crimes against humanity (Abrahamian, 1999; Amnesty International, 2018; Human Rights

Watch, 2022). The precise total across those years remains disputed. The depravity does not.

What do we call educated people who willingly help an intolerant movement gain power, assuming that their own freedoms will somehow be preserved? History has an unflattering expression: useful idiots. It is deliberately provocative, and it should be. The point is not that every progressive or every Muslim shares these ambitions. The point is that political naivety becomes dangerous when we excuse the coercion of allies simply because they oppose someone we dislike. Those Iranian leftists were not merely outmaneuvered in a seminar debate. Some were arrested, tortured, or executed. That is what the price of ideological blindness can look like.

Here is a question for the modern activist who romanticizes any revolutionary movement as long as it despises the same people you despise: when your alliance wins, will you still be allowed to criticize its leaders, reject its religion, organize your own party, and walk away alive? Ask the surviving Iranian dissidents how that gamble worked out. A protest slogan is not a constitutional safeguard. And a useful idiot does not cease to be useful merely because he has a graduate degree.

Jay Smith's lecture includes a warning about decisions made over the next thirty years shaping Islamic institutions in the United States for the next three hundred. That is his projection, not an established demographic forecast (Smith, 2026, lecture transcript). But it raises a fair question about institutional foundations: what we build, neglect, teach, and tolerate now can influence generations. I ask the same question of Christian churches. What kind of faith are we transmitting to our grandchildren?

The atrocities committed in the Hamas-led attack of October 7, 2023, must also be condemned without euphemism. Approximately 1,200

people were killed and 251 were taken hostage. Innocent Israelis were murdered, and the taking of hostages was indefensible. The suffering and deaths of Palestinian civilians in the war must likewise matter to our conscience. Genuine moral consistency refuses to excuse the deliberate killing of civilians because the victims belong to the "wrong" side. Isaiah 5:20 warns against calling evil good and good evil. The warning applies regardless of tribe or uniform.

None of this is an argument for shutting down questions or demanding blind allegiance to my side. Quite the reverse. The antidote to authoritarianism is the moral and intellectual courage to question even our own tribe. Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood that surrendering judgment is not a harmless personality quirk.

Bonhoeffer: The Stupidity of Intelligent People

Years ago, I became deeply interested in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and more recently I wrote The Stupidity of Intelligent People about his warning concerning the surrender of independent judgment. I want to bring that argument into this essay because it belongs at the center of what is happening to our thinking, our politics, and our churches. Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian who resisted Nazi interference in the Church, participated in resistance networks, and was executed in April 1945. In his wartime reflection *"After Ten Years,"* he explored how destructive power could make apparently intelligent people strikingly resistant to reason (Bonhoeffer, 2010).

His point was not that stupidity is low intelligence. One can have a magnificent intellect and still surrender one's judgment in exchange for belonging, approval, and protection. When a movement's slogans become more important than examining reality, a person may grow more certain while becoming less capable of independent inquiry. The

tragedy is not lack of cognitive horsepower, but the unwillingness to use it when the group demands loyalty.

I know this at a personal level, too. In my earlier essay I described friendships that once accommodated political disagreement, laughter, and genuine curiosity. Over time, some conversations began to feel less like exchanges of ideas and more like tests of ideological belonging. Asking a sincere question could be treated as betrayal. I have been disappointed by that tendency in some progressive circles, and I have seen its counterpart on the right, where conspiracy, personality worship, and reflexive defense of favored leaders can equally replace evidence.



Different uniform. Same damn stupidity.

Bonhoeffer confronted a murderous totalitarian regime, not an ordinary election or a disagreement around the Thanksgiving table. Yet the psychological warning remains painfully relevant: when people surrender their independent judgment to the power of a crowd, intelligence is no safeguard. We may cheer the very forces that would silence us. Different uniforms, different circumstances—and the same human temptation to stop thinking.

And the cost of thinking is not merely intellectual. It can be friendship, belonging, professional opportunity, and reputation. Bonhoeffer understood that moral courage is not merely a position we hold in private. It involves responsibility for our actions when the price is real. His life, and finally his death, make me ask a question I cannot easily put down: what am I willing to pay for my convictions?

Bonhoeffer had propaganda, fear, and mass conformity to contend with. We have added an ingenious little rectangle that can deliver a fresh outrage before we finish the previous one. Progress, apparently. We carry an entire propaganda delivery system in our pockets—and we pay the monthly bill ourselves.

The Screen, the Fragmented Mind, and the Loss of Reflection

To this old psychological vulnerability, we have added an astonishingly powerful modern amplifier: the smartphone and the social-media feed. Our attention is recruited, interrupted, and recruited again by headlines, clips, outrage, notifications, and slogans. We skim a thousand claims and examine almost none. We can mistake familiarity for knowledge because we have seen a phrase fifty times, and we can mistake intensity for truth because the person saying it sounds absolutely furious. The algorithm does not ask whether an idea is wise, morally serious, or even accurate. It is built to keep us engaged. Apparently, our attention has become a commodity, and our outrage comes with excellent profit margins.

Working memory and attentional control are finite. Under stress, high arousal can interfere with prefrontal processes that support reflection, inhibition, and perspective-taking (Arnsten, 2009). Research on media multitasking raises concerns about distractibility and cognitive control,

though individual findings and causal interpretations remain contested (Ophir et al., 2009). The point does not require claiming that every smartphone has permanently damaged every brain. We need only look at the habits we repeatedly practice: react first, share second, inspect the evidence sometime next week—if there is time between notifications. We have built a marvelous environment for reaction and then wonder why patient discernment feels increasingly foreign.



Put this beside the watered-down church, the symptom-managing clinic, and the political movement that demands loyalty before examination. The pattern leaps off the page. The clinic says, 'Here is a label; let's move on.' The church says, 'Here is a comforting message; let's not make anyone uneasy.' The feed says, 'Here is your next righteous outrage; don't bother reading the whole story.' A catchy clip becomes an argument. An accusation becomes proof. A fashionable slogan becomes a moral identity. Before long, intelligent people are certain of everything and have carefully examined almost nothing. Bonhoeffer's warning is no museum artifact. The crowd he feared now fits conveniently in our pockets.

This is why the digital problem belongs in an essay about milquetoast Christianity. A faith that cannot tolerate sustained attention, difficult questions, silence, self-examination, and the discomfort of disagreement will not withstand much pressure. Neither will a profession, a political movement, or a civilization. We are not simply distracted; we are being tempted to exchange the work of discernment for the pleasant sensation of already knowing. It is intellectual milk toast: easy to swallow, difficult to live on.

Standing Atop My Own Pile of Bullshit

Standing Atop My Own Pile of Bullshit

Before anyone imagines that I have appointed myself the intellectual guardian of Western civilization, allow me to return to that wonderful old academic joke. A bachelor's degree is B.S.—Bull Scheiße; a master's degree is More Scheiße; and a Ph.D. means it has been Piled Higher and Deeper. Having spent a substantial portion of my life in academia, I suspect there is considerably more truth in that observation than some of my distinguished colleagues would care to acknowledge. Academic credentials are wonderful things, but they hardly guarantee wisdom. Sometimes they simply give us more sophisticated ways to defend our own stupidity.

But perhaps, after all these years, I have finally managed to climb atop my own enormous pile of academic bullshit and see a little farther over the horizon. Not because I am particularly brilliant or somehow immune to the intellectual blindness that afflicts the rest of humanity. Good grief! I've been a psychologist far too long to entertain that fantasy. Rather, I would like to believe that experience, history, faith, and the intellectual courage of others have helped me recognize dangers I might once have overlooked.

And frankly, **I wish I were wrong about much of what I am seeing.**

I wish I were wrong about the growing conformity within our institutions, the willingness of my profession to substitute symptom management for transformational healing, and a Church increasingly tempted to exchange costly discipleship for comfortable Christianity. I wish I were wrong about a digital culture that rewards outrage over reflection and political movements willing to overlook authoritarianism when it serves their immediate ideological interests. Most of all, I wish I were wrong about how easily intelligent, educated, well-intentioned people can become instruments of movements whose ultimate objectives they scarcely understand.

But history offers too many examples of what happens when we refuse to examine uncomfortable realities.

That is why I return to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I am no Bonhoeffer, nor would I presume to compete with his theological brilliance or extraordinary courage. But his life and writings have profoundly influenced how I understand the vulnerability of intelligent people to collective moral blindness. Bonhoeffer witnessed the rise of National Socialism, the accommodation of much of Germany's institutional Church, and the terrible consequences of surrendering conscience to political power. He understood that moral catastrophe does not always begin with overt wickedness. Sometimes it begins with the desire to belong, the reluctance to challenge authority, and the comforting assumption that surely things cannot become as bad as the alarmists suggest.

Bonhoeffer refused that comfort, and he paid with his life.

I have also been challenged by Jay Smith, Craig Considine, Brigitte Gabriel, William J. Federer, and Raymond Ibrahim, whose work raises troubling questions about political Islamism, religious authority, coercion, and the historical relationship between Islamic movements and Western societies. I do not regard these men and women as infallible authorities, but their warnings have pushed me to examine evidence, ask difficult questions, and consider the consequences of

dismissing uncomfortable ideas simply because they challenge fashionable assumptions. Their concerns are not identical to those Bonhoeffer confronted, but his example reminds me that warnings about authoritarian power deserve examination rather than automatic dismissal.

The Iranian Revolution provides a horrifying illustration. Secular intellectuals, Marxists, and political reformers helped overthrow the Shah, only to discover that Khomeini's revolutionary government had no intention of preserving their political freedoms. Former allies were imprisoned, tortured, and executed. They helped empower a movement that ultimately turned against them.

An alliance made in hell. Terms and conditions apply.

History is littered with similar tragedies. Under Stalin and Mao, millions died as ideological objectives eclipsed human dignity. Under authoritarian theocracies and violent extremist movements, dissenters have been imprisoned, persecuted, and murdered. Different historical circumstances, different political and religious justifications, but one recurring moral catastrophe: when ideology becomes supreme, human beings become expendable.

When ideology becomes more important than humanity, life becomes cheap.

And the frightening part is that such catastrophes have never required a society composed entirely of fools. Educated people rationalized. Professionals accommodated. Religious institutions compromised. Ordinary citizens looked away. Many convinced themselves they were acting for the greater good.

Bonhoeffer understood that intelligence is no guarantee against such blindness. Neither is a doctorate, a prestigious title, a political affiliation, or a Sunday morning pew.

Which brings me back to the uncomfortable thread running through this entire essay. A Church that substitutes reassurance for repentance, a clinical profession that confuses labels with healing, a digital culture that rewards reaction over reflection, and political movements that demand loyalty before examination can all reinforce the same human weakness: **the willingness to surrender discernment for comfort, approval, or belonging.**

Different uniforms. Same damn stupidity.

And where is the Church in all of this?

Are we preparing Christians to think deeply, recognize deception, resist conformity, protect the vulnerable, and stand courageously for truth? Or have we become so preoccupied with being agreeable that we have forgotten how to be discerning? Have we confused meekness with cowardice, compassion with capitulation, and Christian love with the obligation never to offend?

Christ did not call us to become spiritual ostriches, burying our heads in the sand while congratulating ourselves on being wonderfully nice people.

He warned us against deception (Matthew 24:4), instructed us to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16), and commanded us to remain watchful. In Mark 13:37, His words are unmistakable: "What I say to you, I say to everyone: Watch!"

Paul's instruction to put on the whole armor of God (Ephesians 6:10–18) is equally compelling. Truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, the word of God, and prayer are instruments of spiritual steadfastness, not invitations to hatred or violence. Christian courage demands that we love people while refusing to surrender truth, that we challenge destructive ideas without abandoning human dignity, and that we remain faithful even when the cost becomes personal.

I return here to Brennan Manning's *Ruthless Trust*. The more I reflect upon that title, the more deeply it challenges me. Ruthless trust is not cruelty toward others; it is the radical surrender of our pride, illusions, self-sufficiency, and desperate attachment to comfort. It means allowing Christ to confront and transform those parts of ourselves we would prefer to leave undisturbed. Following Him was never meant to be a pleasant religious hobby. It is a lifelong surrender, and sometimes the most difficult battle is not with the world around us but with the man looking back from the mirror.

And that brings me to what troubles my heart most.

What kind of world are we leaving our children and grandchildren?

Will they inherit a society that still values liberty, conscience, truth, and the dignity of every human being? Will they inherit institutions courageous enough to correct themselves and a Church substantial enough to sustain them when following Christ becomes genuinely costly? Will we teach them to think critically, resist manipulation, and challenge injustice without surrendering compassion?

Or will we leave them the consequences of our distractions, compromises, intellectual laziness, and unwillingness to confront what was happening right before our eyes?

I cannot escape the possibility that one of my grandchildren may someday look me in the eye and ask, "Grandpa, you knew about these things. You studied history. You spent your life helping people. Why didn't your generation do more?"

What would I say? That we were too busy? Too comfortable? Too afraid of being unpopular? That we trusted the experts without asking questions, followed the crowd because it felt safer, and spent our evenings scrolling through our phones while the foundations of our freedom quietly eroded?

God help us if those become our answers.

We cannot promise our children a world without suffering, nor can we guarantee that every warning we raise will prove correct. But surely we owe them something better than the consequences of our indifference. We owe them the example of men and women willing to examine evidence, acknowledge mistakes, defend human dignity, and stand for what is right even when doing so costs us something.

I can tolerate being mistaken. But I cannot make peace with being willfully blind.

And to my dear Christian friends, I say all of this as a fellow traveler, not as some righteous judge standing above the rest of humanity. I have been timid. I have compromised. I have chosen comfort when courage was required. I have sometimes confused intellectual understanding with spiritual maturity, and I am still learning what it means to surrender my life fully to Christ.

I am standing atop my pile of academic bullshit, not above my fellow human beings.

But from this vantage point, I see enough to be concerned, enough to ask difficult questions, and enough to refuse the comfortable temptation to look away. I wish I were wrong about some of these dangers. I genuinely do. Yet I would rather raise a warning that invites serious examination than remain silent simply because speaking might make someone uncomfortable.

And despite everything I have written, **I remain hopeful.** Not because I believe humanity can engineer a perfect society, or because another political movement, professional organization, or technological innovation will rescue us from ourselves. My hope rests in Christ, who calls us beyond the very fears, compromises, and selfishness that so often hold us captive.

I want the ruthless trust Manning described, the courage Bonhoeffer demonstrated, and the discernment Jesus commanded. I want a faith that transforms me rather than merely reassures me, and I want my

children and grandchildren to recognize that faith in how I live, not simply in what I write.

Now, as anyone who has survived this essay knows, I love ice cream. Give me rocky road, chocolate, butter pecan, hot fudge, and enough toppings to make my cardiologist nervous. I have no intention of surrendering that particular pleasure without a serious theological argument and perhaps a second opinion.

But when it comes to Christianity, I am finished settling for the spiritual equivalent of soggy toast.

Jesus warned the Church in Laodicea about being lukewarm (Revelation 3:15–16). His words are uncomfortable because they confront the temptation to mistake religious familiarity for genuine commitment. And they challenge me personally.

I do not want to be milquetoast. I do not want to be lukewarm. And I do not want Christ to spit me out.

I want to follow Him, even when it costs me something.

So here is my plea, to myself first and then to my fellow Christians: **For the love of God, wake the hell up!**

Let us recover the courage to think deeply, the humility to acknowledge when we are wrong, the conviction to confront evil without becoming consumed by it, and the faith to follow Christ even when the world pressures us to do otherwise. Let us teach our children not merely what to believe, but how to examine what they are told, how to recognize manipulation, and how to remain compassionate without surrendering their convictions.

And let us remember that the future is not written solely by those who threaten our freedoms. It is also shaped by those who possess the courage to defend them.

Our children are watching. Our grandchildren will inherit the consequences of what we do—or fail to do. And Christ has never called us to be comfortable spectators.

The hour is late. The stakes are enormous. And the time for milquetoast Christianity is over.

References

Abrahamian, E. (1999). *Tortured confessions: Prisons and public recantations in modern Iran*. University of California Press. https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/public/book/tortured-confessions-prisons-and-public-recantations-in-modern-iran.html

Amnesty International. (2018). *Blood-soaked secrets: Why Iran's 1988 prison massacres are ongoing crimes against humanity*. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2018/10/blood-soaked-secrets/

Arnsten, A. F. T. (2009). Stress signalling pathways that impair prefrontal cortex structure and function. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience, 10*, 410–422. https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn2648

Bonhoeffer, D. (2010). *Letters and papers from prison* (J. W. de Gruchy, Ed.; Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 8). Fortress Press. https://www.fortresspress.com/store/product/9780800697037/Letters-and-Papers-from-Prison

Considine, C. (2026). *When Marx meets Islam: Navigating radical ideologies in defense of the West*. Pitchstone Publishing. https://www.pitchstonebooks.com/catalog/when-marx-meets-islam

Coyne, J. C. (1976). Toward an interactional description of depression. *Psychiatry, 39*(1), 28–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1976.11023874

Encyclopaedia Iranica. (n.d.). *Hostage crisis*. https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hostage-crisis/

Federer, W. J. (2007). *What every American needs to know about the Qur'an: A history of Islam & the United States*. Amerisearch. https://openlibrary.org/search?q=William+Federer+What+Every+American+Needs+to+Know+About+the+Quran

Gabriel, B. (2008). *They must be stopped: Why we must defeat radical Islam and how we can do it*. St. Martin's Press. https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780312383633/theymustbestopped

Harper, D. (n.d.). Milquetoast. *Online Etymology Dictionary*. https://www.etymonline.com/word/milquetoast

Human Rights Watch. (2022, June 8). *Iran: 1988 mass executions evident crimes against humanity*. https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/08/iran-1988-mass-executions-evident-crimes-against-humanity

Ibrahim, R. (2018). *Sword and scimitar: Fourteen centuries of war between Islam and the West*. Da Capo Press. https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/raymond-ibrahim/sword-and-scimitar/9780306825552/

Manning, B. (2000). *Ruthless trust: The ragamuffin's path to God*. HarperSanFrancisco. https://openlibrary.org/search?q=Brennan+Manning+Ruthless+Trust

Moghadam, V. M. (1987). Socialism or anti-imperialism? The left and revolution in Iran. *New Left Review, 166*, 5–28. https://newleftreview.org/issues/i166/articles/val-moghadam-socialism-or-anti-imperialism-the-left-and-revolution-in-iran

Moncrieff, J. (2008). *The myth of the chemical cure: A critique of psychiatric drug treatment*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-58944-5

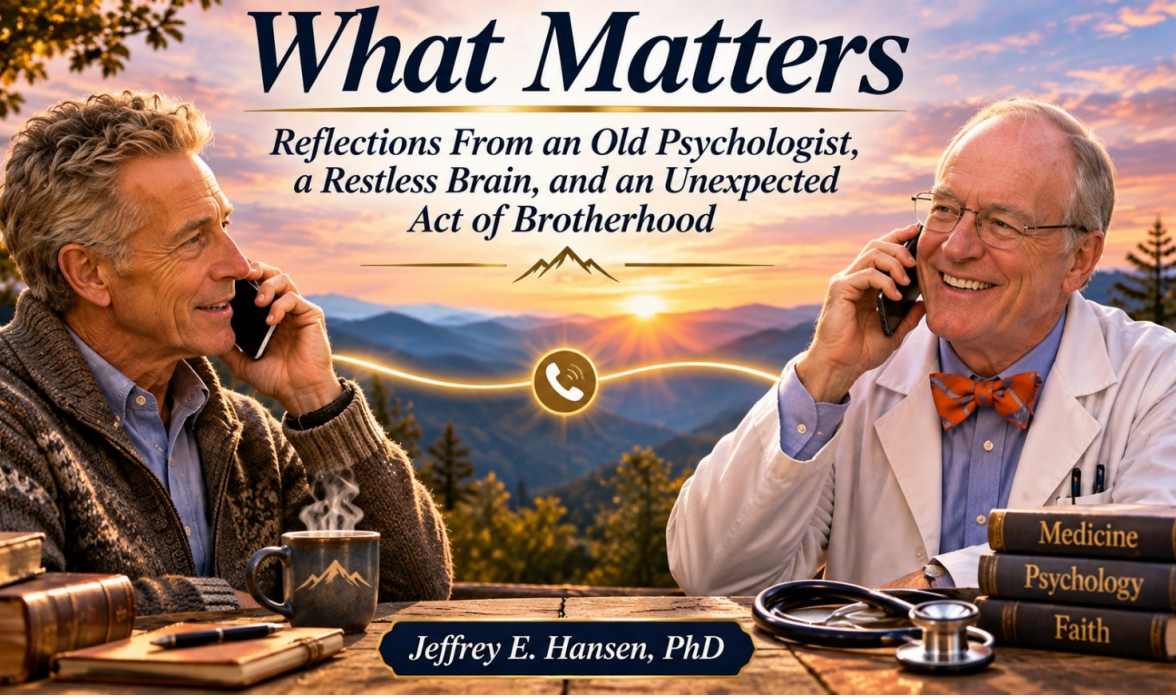
Moncrieff, J., Cooper, R. E., Stockmann, T., Amendola, S., Hengartner, M. P., & Horowitz, M. A. (2023). The serotonin theory of depression: A systematic umbrella review of the evidence. *Molecular Psychiatry, 28*, 3243–3256. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41380-022-01661-0

Ophir, E., Nass, C., & Wagner, A. D. (2009). Cognitive control in media multitaskers. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 106*(37), 15583–15587. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0903620106

Pew Research Center. (2013). *The world's Muslims: Religion, politics and society*. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-overview/

Pew Research Center. (2025). *Religious Landscape Study*. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/

Smith, J. (2026). *Political Islam in America* [Unpublished lecture transcript supplied by the author]. https://www.youtube.com/live/Cjfz8E4ODBw

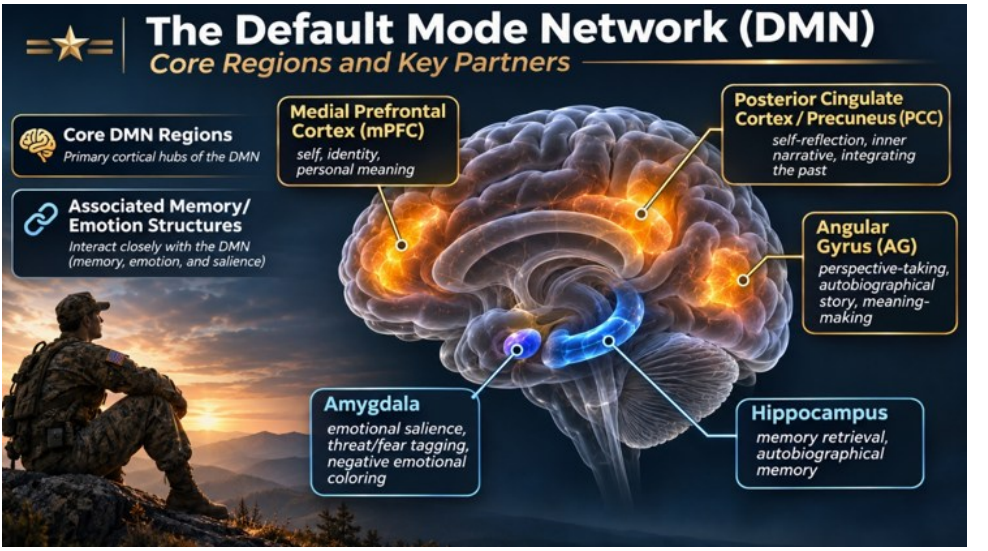


2:37 in the Morning

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?**

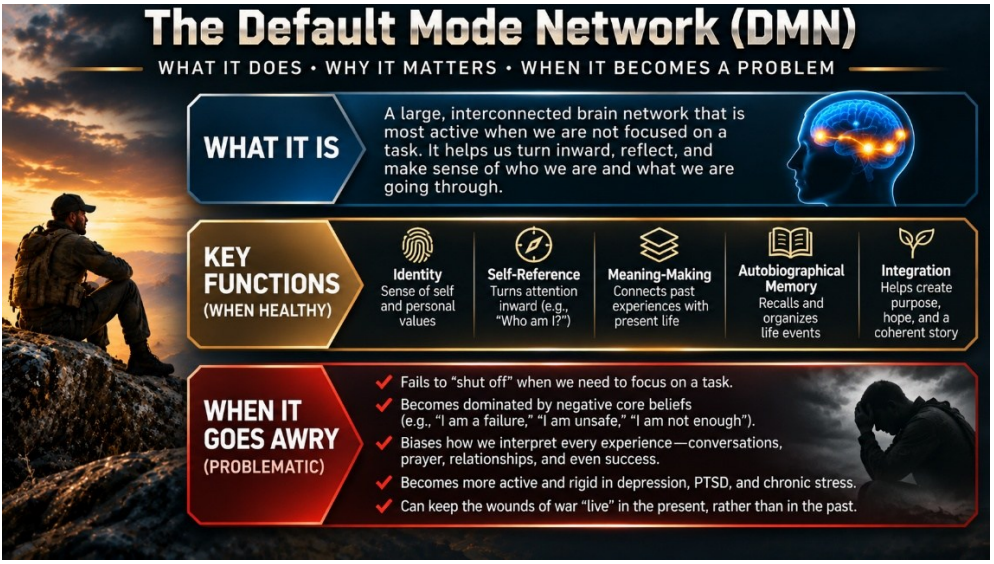
For those unfamiliar with this remarkable neurological network, the DMN is an interconnected system of brain regions involved in autobiographical memory, self-referential thinking, identity, and our capacity to construct meaning from experience (Buckner et al., 2008;

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.

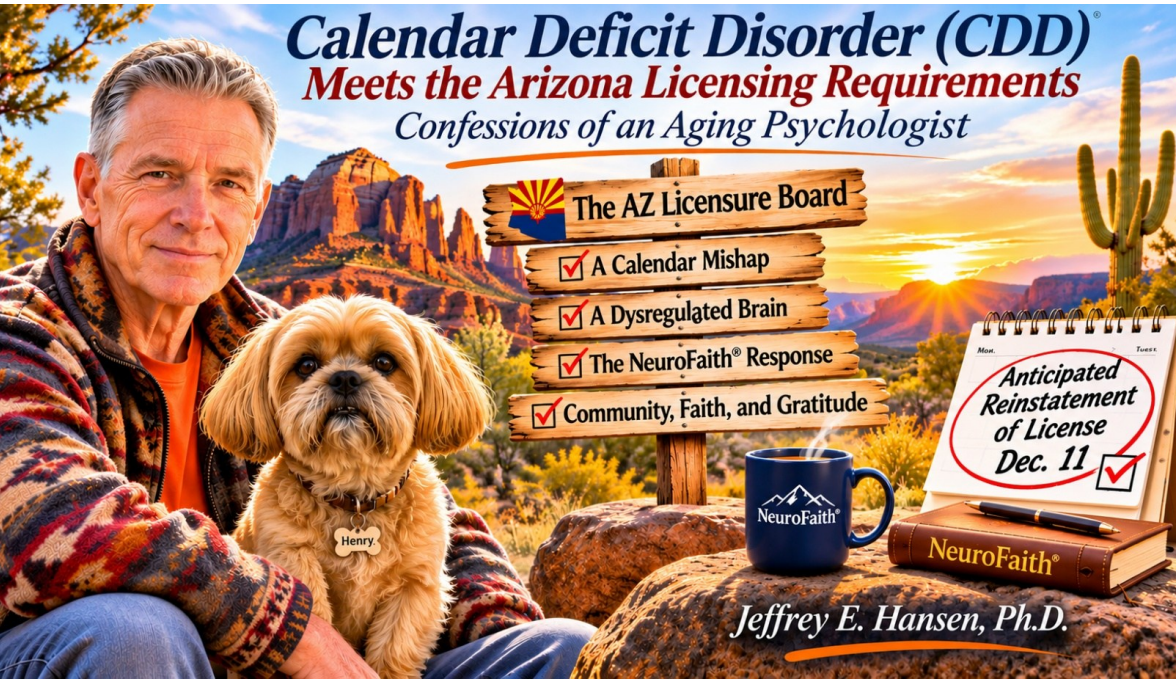
References

Andrews-Hanna, J. R., Smallwood, J., & Spreng, R. N. (2014). The default network and self-generated thought: Component processes, dynamic control, and clinical relevance. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1316(1), 29–52. https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.12360

Buckner, R. L., Andrews-Hanna, J. R., & Schacter, D. L. (2008). The brain's default network: Anatomy, function, and relevance to disease. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1124(1), 1–38. https://doi.org/10.1196/annals.1440.011

Menon, V. (2023). 20 years of the default mode network: A review and synthesis. Neuron, 111(16), 2469–2487. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2023.04.023

Thayer, J. F., Hansen, A. L., Saus-Rose, E., & Johnsen, B. H. (2009). Heart rate variability, prefrontal neural function, and cognitive performance: The neurovisceral integration perspective on self-regulation, adaptation, and health. Annals of Behavioral Medicine, 37(2), 141–153. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12160-009-9101-z



Friday the 13th and the Great Defrocking

It was Friday, November 13, 2026. I am not particularly superstitious, but if the universe wanted to remind a 72-year-old psychologist that he was not quite as administratively competent as he imagined, Friday the 13th was an inspired choice. I had two patients scheduled that morning and was going about the ordinary business of helping people navigate life when an email from Psychology Today caught my eye. It concerned my professional license information. I assumed it was about Washington, where I had renewed my license but had not yet updated my profile. No big deal. Right?

Wrong. I hold psychology licenses in Washington and Arizona. Washington renews mine annually on October 31, my birthday. Halloween. Trick or treat! Arizona renews every two years, and in the increasingly cluttered filing cabinets of my brain I had confidently filed the next renewal under 2027. Unfortunately, Arizona had filed it under 2026. My license had expired almost two weeks earlier. Oops. The discovery was no small matter: I had to stop seeing Arizona patients immediately.

I began thinking of myself as professionally defrocked. Traditionally, defrocking involves removing a clergyman from his office and the garments that signify it. Psychologists have their own ecclesiastical apparel: a license. Mine was still perfectly respectable in Washington, where I remained licensed and in good standing, but no longer authorized practice in Arizona. So I was properly dressed in Washington and professionally naked in Arizona. Geography had become unexpectedly important to my wardrobe.

I assumed the fix would be uncomplicated: paperwork, a fee, perhaps a well-earned administrative scolding. In Washington, provisions exist for late renewal. Arizona, I discovered, had a more elaborate program in mind. I entered the board's online reinstatement system, uploaded continuing education through CE Broker, and completed the Arizona jurisprudence course. Its content mattered, but taking it while trying to resurrect my license was not my idea of an enjoyable Friday. I suspect somewhere in the course there was a lesson about renewing on time. To add to the fun, the completed course did not readily upload because I was already past the deadline. Apparently, even the computer felt compelled to reprimand me.

Then came the news that review could take two to three months. That caught my attention. At my age, retirement income provides a financial base, so losing practice income would sting without putting Leah and me on a steady diet of canned beans. But the interruption to my patients was another matter. Therapeutic relationships involve trust, momentum, and people who have already carried more than their share of hardship. Having to stop seeing them was the consequence that bothered me most.

The reinstatement application then presented its defining question: Had I provided services between expiration and reporting? Yes. Before

discovering the lapse, I had seen nine patients, seven once and two twice, for eleven encounters. I had believed my license remained active. Still, the form asked a plain question, and I knew the answer. I also knew that clicking "No" might have made my life much easier. Who would know? Probably no one. But I would know, and it would be a lie.

I clicked "Yes." I would rather explain an uncomfortable truth to a licensing board than explain a convenient falsehood to my own conscience. Integrity can be a royal pain in the backside, but it is worth keeping. That decision complicated the process, and I accepted that. The Arizona license governed my authority to practice, not the sum of who I was. My brain, however, had some opinions about that distinction.



At that point I also arrived at a diagnosis for my condition: Calendar Deficit Disorder, or CDD. Not to be confused with a shortage of calories, a problem I certainly do not have the luxury of claiming. CDD is a devastating impairment in the ability to distinguish this year from next year when the distinction actually matters. Its chief symptoms include misplaced confidence, selective blindness to renewal dates, and the sudden discovery that an otherwise functioning adult can be defeated by a twelve-month grid. I am preparing a submission for inclusion in the DSM-6. Surely the profession should recognize a condition that can render a perfectly competent psychologist temporarily incapable of practicing in Arizona while leaving him fully credentialed in Washington.

According to the entirely fictitious Merrick Manual, the disorder is chronic, progressive, and incurable. Treatment is strictly remedial: multiple calendar alerts, an attentive spouse, a responsible office assistant, and perhaps a large sign taped to the bathroom mirror reading, "CHECK YOUR LICENSE, YOU IDIOT." Prognosis improves with humility, but there is no known cure for the aging psychologist who remains convinced he has another year. I am, of course, kidding about the diagnosis. But the predicament taught me something serious about the value of humor: it allowed me to own what happened without turning an embarrassing oversight into the final verdict on my life.

When the Body Started Keeping Score

Over the weekend, as I contemplated weeks or possibly months of waiting, I thought of psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk's book The Body Keeps the Score (van der Kolk, 2014). I have spent much of my career studying trauma and the interplay of emotion, stress physiology, and physical symptoms. Stress is not confined to thought. It affects arousal, muscle tension, sleep, and the way pain is processed. I knew all that. What I had not anticipated was my own body's enthusiasm for demonstrating it.

I have an old back injury from my Army years, along with occasional sciatica and another nerve problem affecting the front of one leg. They are real physical conditions, usually quite manageable; the sciatica rarely visits. Yet suddenly my back hurt, the sciatica returned, and the other nerve pain decided it would be rude to miss the reunion. Sleep grew restless as well. Every old vulnerability seemed to have received an invitation, and not one had the decency to decline. Well, Bessel, my body apparently keeps meticulous records, and it had chosen this particular weekend for an audit.



The timing was striking. Sustained uncertainty can heighten muscular tension, amplify existing pain, and disturb the sleep that helps us recover. The pain was real, and so was the context in which it flared. I recognized the pattern I have discussed with patients for years: mind and body are not rival explanations of suffering. They are in constant conversation, sometimes rather loudly.

Then came the humiliating evidence on my walks. We have three dogs, none of whom had been informed about my lumbar difficulties. I noticed my pace slowing, and later, while walking with Leah, actually heard myself ask her to slow down. This from a former gymnast, an Army veteran, and a fellow who still spends a good deal of time in the gym. I half expected the dogs to look back with pity and suggest a recliner. The psychologist in me found the whole experience fascinating. The patient in me would have preferred considerably less back pain.

The deeper lesson was that knowing the neuroscience does not exempt us from having a nervous system. My prefrontal cortex could accurately assess our finances, my professional history, and the steps already

taken. But threat circuits are not impressed by résumés. They respond to uncertainty, interrupted purpose, and the prospect of losing control. And that brought the next member of this traveling circus into view.

My Default Mode Network Formed a Committee

Enter the default mode network, or DMN, the brain's remarkable meaning-making machinery (Buckner et al., 2008). Its major hubs include the medial prefrontal cortex, posterior cingulate cortex and precuneus, and angular gyrus, working with medial temporal regions such as the hippocampal formation. Together these interconnected systems contribute to autobiographical memory, self-reflection, imagining the future, and constructing the story of who we are. The DMN is not the villain. It lets us revisit a cherished memory, consider our purpose, imagine tomorrow, or contemplate the people we love. Most of the time, my internal storyteller is a welcome companion.

But give that storyteller enough uncertainty and it can turn into a rather grim novelist. What if the board takes months? What about my patients? Will this follow me? What does it say about a psychologist who cannot keep track of his own renewal? Research has also linked patterns of DMN activity with rumination (Hamilton et al., 2011). A useful effort to make meaning can become rumination: the same unwelcome possibilities revisited again and again, with each rehearsal feeling a little more convincing. I could feel my thinking shift from "Here is a problem to solve" toward "Here is a verdict on who I am." That was the moment to challenge the story.

A deadline was missed; my character and competence had not vanished with the date on a license.

Then my inner critic arrived. In the Internal Family Systems model developed by Richard Schwartz, we speak of parts, including protective

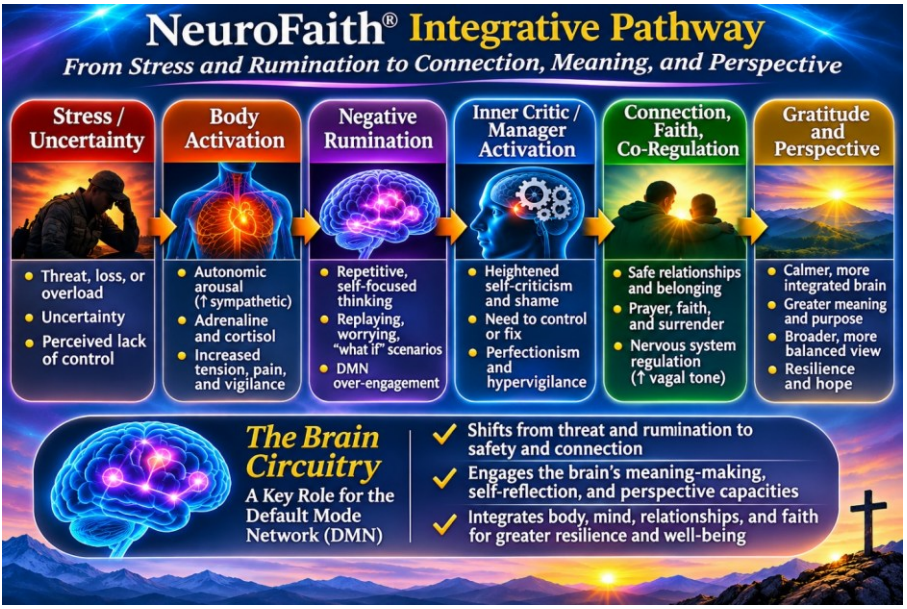
managers (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020) that try to keep us safe through vigilance, planning, control, perfectionism, and sometimes criticism. Mine had an especially fine line of commentary: Really, Jeff? Forty years teaching executive functioning and you cannot manage a renewal date? The critic can help us own a mistake, but after that it is often just kicking a man who is already down.



The neuroscience and the psychological model gave me two useful lenses on the same experience. The DMN kept spinning self-referential stories; my critical and managerial parts supplied the urgency and emotional color. Soon they had formed a committee. It met around the clock, required no refreshments, and produced absolutely nothing useful. By Monday morning, after poor sleep and a weekend of physical complaints, my manager wanted action. Send an email. Make a call. Try another office. Perhaps the next message will relieve this dreadful uncertainty. Responsible advocacy was appropriate; compulsively trying to manage away every uncomfortable feeling was something else.

I recognized the temptation. I did not have to believe every scenario, obey every inner accusation, or place another call simply because

discomfort demanded one. I could thank the committee for its concern and decline to let it run the institution. Somebody had to be the adult in the room. At 72, I suppose it was finally my turn.



Connection, Faith, and a Surprising Abundance of Gratitude

The antidote was not another email. It was connection. One of the central convictions of NeuroFaith® is that human beings are relational creatures: we develop through connection, we can be wounded in relationships, and we often heal in the presence of safe, loving others. Polyvagal-informed work gives me a helpful language for this, particularly co-regulation and the capacity for social engagement associated with a ventral vagal state (Porges, 2007). Research on the social regulation of threat offers another reason to take connection seriously (Coan et al., 2006). A steady voice, genuine concern, prayerful presence, and the reassurance of being known can help quiet the alarm inside us. My nervous system did not need another committee meeting. It needed my people.

So, I told my inner circle what had happened. I asked colleagues, friends, and family, many of them people of deep Christian faith, to pray for me. I did not dress up the story or pretend to have it all under control. They responded with kindness, wise perspective, humor, and an astonishing generosity of spirit. Even the patients whose care had been interrupted were gracious and understanding. Their compassion touched me deeply precisely because they had every reason to be disappointed. They offered me a reminder I will not forget: being loved does not require us to be flawless.

And I want to say something directly to those people. To my colleagues who have walked alongside me, to my dear friends and family who prayed and encouraged me, and to my patients who met a difficult disruption with extraordinary grace: thank you. This essay is for you. It is certainly one old psychologist's attempt to make sense of his own craziness, but it is also my way of acknowledging what you gave me. You did not magically renew my license or erase the paperwork. You gave me something better. You reminded me that I was not alone, that the years of relationship mattered more than the embarrassment of the moment, and that a person can be accountable without being reduced to his worst calendar entry.

Faith brought that lesson home. I have spent years exploring the intersection of neuroscience, psychology, and Christianity, but there is a considerable difference between teaching trust and actually having to practice it. My DMN wanted an answer to every "what if." My inner critic wanted perfection. My manager wanted control. God was inviting me to something quieter and harder: trust. I had done what I could do. I had told the truth, completed the requirements, and asked for help. The rest was not mine to control. And regardless of the outcome, He had me.

That realization did not excuse the consequences. There would be about four weeks without clinical income, and patients had endured an interruption I regretted. But it interrupted the much less useful suffering I was creating by mentally rehearsing catastrophe. My faith

gave me a way to correct the negative stories of my DMN. My identity is not finally established by a licensing board, a résumé, or the embarrassing work of an aging calendar. It rests in the God who knows me and loves me. Apparently, He even forgives an old psychologist for being an idiot occasionally. I am deeply grateful for that provision.

The board's subsequent correspondence gave me further reason for confidence. The language was "when your license is reinstated," not "if," and I understand my December 11 appearance as the remaining formality. I am confident that chapter is heading toward resolution. But the most important outcome has already occurred. My back and my worried thoughts had reminded me that I am human; my inner circle reminded me that I am loved; and my faith reminded me whose I am.

And before closing, I want to express my particular gratitude to Krishna Poe, Projects Specialist II with the Arizona Board of Psychologist Examiners. Now, I could easily have viewed Ms. Poe as an adversary, the person standing between me and the reinstatement of my license. But I chose to see her differently. Her meticulous attention to detail, careful examination of my continuing education records, and thorough review of every requirement reflected a remarkable commitment to her responsibilities. That eagle-eyed lady apparently doesn't miss a thing! And while I may not have appreciated every detail she uncovered, I certainly appreciate the professionalism and diligence she brought to her work. I chose to see her not as a foe, but as a friend doing her job exceptionally well. For that, Ms. Poe, you have my sincere gratitude. And perhaps there is another lesson here: sometimes the people we initially perceive as obstacles are simply people faithfully carrying out their responsibilities. They deserve our respect, too.

So, the word I want to leave with is gratitude. Gratitude for colleagues who supported me without flattery, for friends and family who prayed with such faithfulness, for patients whose kindness humbled me, and for a God who stayed close when my own mind was making a terrible racket. Gratitude that the NeuroFaith® principles I teach were not

merely ideas on a slide, but lived realities. Gratitude that the body could sound its alarm without getting the final word. Gratitude that I could laugh, learn, take responsibility, and rest in grace.



I have come to believe that humor is one of the most useful ways to recover perspective. It does not minimize a patient's disrupted care, magically restore lost income, or excuse my responsibility. It simply allows me to see the whole picture rather than stare so intently at one miserable corner of it. Psychologists have long studied humor as a form of coping and cognitive reframing (Martin, 2007). In my own case, being able to laugh at my supposed Calendar Deficit Disorder loosened the grip of the inner critic and made room for something better: gratitude. The situation was serious. I did not have to be solemn about myself every minute of the day.

And if the Lord has another lesson in humility planned for me, I have only one small request: perhaps next time He could put it on my calendar.

References

Buckner, R. L., Andrews-Hanna, J. R., & Schacter, D. L. (2008). The brain's default network: Anatomy, function, and relevance to disease. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1124, 1–38. https://doi.org/10.1196/annals.1440.011

Coan, J. A., Schaefer, H. S., & Davidson, R. J. (2006). Lending a hand: Social regulation of the neural response to threat. Psychological Science, 17(12), 1032–1039. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01832.x

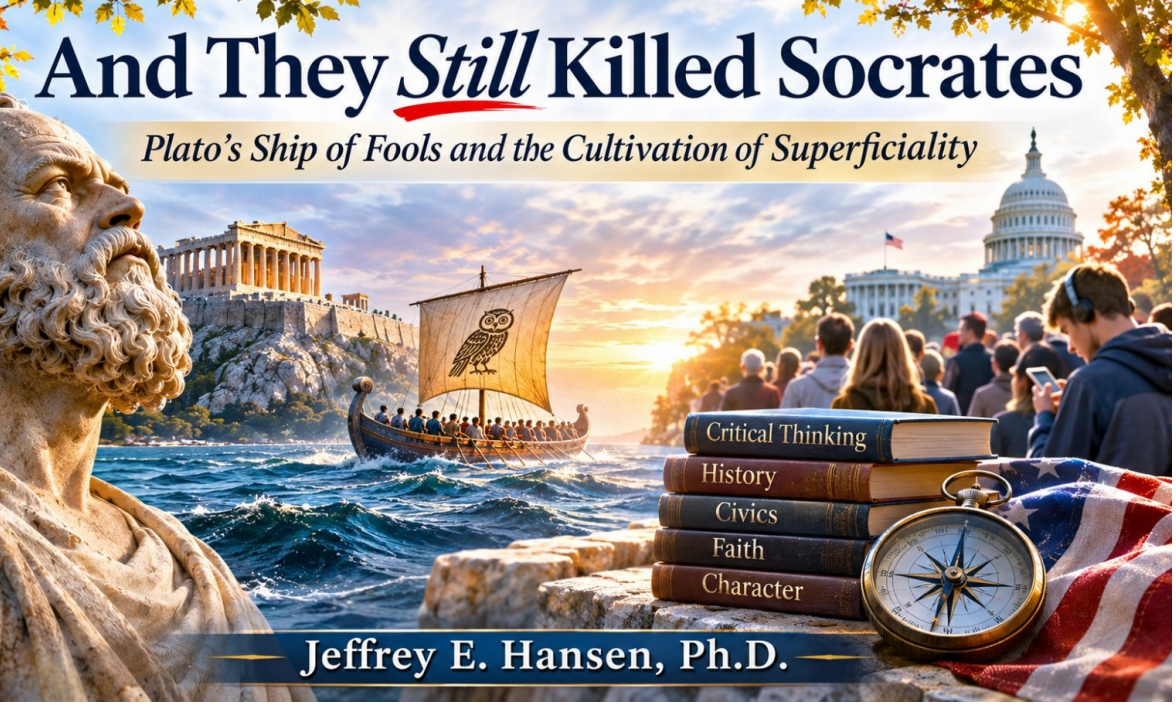
Hamilton, J. P., Furman, D. J., Chang, C., Thomason, M. E., Dennis, E., & Gotlib, I. H. (2011). Default-mode and task-positive network activity in major depressive disorder: Implications for adaptive and maladaptive rumination. Biological Psychiatry, 70(4), 327–333. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsych.2011.02.003

Martin, R. A. (2007). The psychology of humor: An integrative approach. Elsevier Academic Press.

Porges, S. W. (2007). The polyvagal perspective. Biological Psychology, 74(2), 116–143. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsycho.2006.06.009

Schwartz, R. C., & Sweezy, M. (2020). Internal family systems therapy (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma. Viking.



The Musings of a Restless Psychologist

There I go again. It is well before sunrise, at an hour when most rational human beings are still enjoying the benefits of restorative sleep, and this old psychologist is pondering the follies of humankind. One might reasonably question the wisdom of a man contemplating the intellectual shortcomings of civilization who has not yet mastered the simple art of sleeping until a civilized hour. The irony is not lost on me.

This morning I stumbled upon a particularly compelling YouTube presentation, *Why Democracy Rewards Idiots: Plato Saw It Coming 2,400 Years Ago*. I owe its creator a debt of gratitude for articulating so eloquently something that has been troubling me for some time. As I listened, I became increasingly fascinated by the observations of Plato and increasingly disturbed by their relevance to our world today.

Good grief, how little we seem to have learned. We have split the atom, put human beings on the moon, transplanted human organs, and developed artificial intelligence. We carry in our pockets devices that give us access to much of the accumulated knowledge of civilization.

Yet how far have we progressed in intellectual humility, critical thinking, moral courage, and our susceptibility to manipulation?

My conjecture as a psychologist is that we may have actually made matters worse. By no means am I attempting to solve the woes of the world in one essay. I am examining one small but consequential slice of the human condition as I wrestle with a rather perplexing question: How in the world did we get here?

Are We Still Aboard Plato's Ship of Fools?

In *The Republic*, Plato describes a ship whose sailors quarrel over who should assume command despite possessing little understanding of navigation. Their energies are devoted to persuading the shipowner to give them control. Meanwhile, the genuine navigator, who has studied the stars, winds, seasons, and intricacies of seamanship, is dismissed as a useless stargazer. The very man equipped to navigate the ship is the man least appreciated by its crew (Plato, *Republic*, VI, 488a–489a).

Plato had good reason to be troubled. He lived through the devastating defeat of Athens in 404 BCE, the temporary overthrow of its democracy, and its restoration. In 399 BCE, that restored democracy condemned his mentor, Socrates, to death on charges of impiety and corrupting the youth. Socrates had made a rather uncomfortable habit of challenging assumptions, asking difficult questions, and exposing the limitations of people's understanding.

Consider the irony. Athens produced some of the greatest philosophical minds in recorded history. It had a remarkable tradition of public discourse and philosophical inquiry. It did not have smartphones interrupting its citizens' thoughts or algorithms competing for their attention throughout the day.

And they still killed Socrates.

The Seduction of the Confident Amateur

Plato was deeply concerned about the sophists, teachers of rhetoric whose persuasive abilities could be used to win arguments rather than pursue truth. His concern was not that they lacked intelligence. It was that the appearance of wisdom could be substituted for wisdom itself.

Some 2,400 years later, psychologists Justin Kruger and David Dunning (1999) demonstrated that people with limited competence in certain domains can have difficulty recognizing the extent of their own shortcomings. The confident amateur may not know enough to appreciate what he does not know. Conversely, expertise often brings an appreciation of complexity and the limitations of one's understanding. What a perverse situation when the humility of the knowledgeable navigator is interpreted as weakness and the certainty of the amateur as competence!

I see this in my own profession. After decades of study and clinical practice, I continue to find certain clinical questions extraordinarily complex. Yet I encounter colleagues who speak about those same matters with an almost breathtaking certainty. Good grief, where is your intellectual curiosity? Where is your willingness to entertain the possibility that you might be wrong?

The skills required to get elected are not necessarily those required to govern. Charisma, eloquence, good looks, and the ability to reduce complex matters to memorable slogans are useful campaign attributes. But they tell us little by themselves about whether the individual understands the intricacies of governing a nation.

Good Grief, We Are Choosing the Captain by His Face!

In 2005, Princeton psychologist Alexander Todorov and his colleagues published a remarkable study in *Science*. Participants made judgments

of competence based solely on photographs of political candidates. Those judgments correctly predicted nearly 69% of the outcomes of the 2004 United States Senate races (Todorov et al., 2005).

It gets even better. In 2009, Swiss researchers presented children with photographs of unfamiliar French political candidates and asked whom they would choose to captain their imaginary boat. The children's choices predicted election outcomes about as accurately as those of adults, roughly seven times out of ten (Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009). What would Plato make of that?

Consider also the famous 1960 Kennedy–Nixon debate. The familiar story that radio listeners favored Nixon while television viewers favored Kennedy has been challenged historically. Nevertheless, experimental research confirms that television images can influence our assessments of political candidates (Druckman, 2003).

Consider the contemporary progressive political figures Zohran Mamdani, Abdul El-Sayed, and James Talarico. Listen to them speak and examine their proposals, not simply the appeal of their delivery. How much of what you know about them comes from sustained, substantive inquiry and how much comes from electronically packaged impressions? I would ask precisely the same question of those enamored with Donald Trump or any other figure on the political right.

Charisma is not character. Eloquence is not wisdom. Confidence is not competence. And popularity is not proof of truth.

An Ancient Brain in an Increasingly Complex World

The human brain is remarkably equipped to recognize patterns, assess danger, form impressions of others, and respond rapidly to immediate threats. Throughout human history these capacities have served us well. But consider the demands we now place upon that same brain:

international economics, geopolitical alliances, complex medical research, artificial intelligence, constitutional governance, and extraordinarily difficult ethical questions.

Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky pioneered research into the mental shortcuts, or heuristics, that help us make judgments but can also produce predictable errors (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Kahneman (2011) subsequently popularized a distinction between two modes of cognitive processing, commonly called System 1 and System 2. System 1 is fast, intuitive, automatic, and relatively effortless. System 2 is slower, analytical, and demanding of sustained attention. We need both. But when a decision demands a careful examination of evidence, our initial impressions are a particularly poor substitute for deliberation.

My concern is that our world increasingly demands System 2 thinking while our culture increasingly rewards System 1 thinking. Worse yet, we can employ considerable intellectual horsepower rationalizing conclusions we have already reached emotionally. Intelligence does not guarantee rationality, and rationality does not guarantee wisdom.

The Industrialization of Superficiality

Plato's sophists had the public square. Today's political communicators have an extraordinary technological apparatus capable of delivering emotionally compelling messages to millions of people in seconds. We are no longer necessarily evaluating the politician. We are evaluating carefully curated electronic fragments of the politician: a charming smile, a clever retort, an articulate response, a compassionate gesture. From those fragments we construct an impression of the entire individual. And then we convince ourselves that we know the person!

Daniel Hallin (1992) found that the average political sound bite on American network evening news declined from 43 seconds in 1968 to

nine seconds in 1988. That was before the smartphone! More recent research has documented increasingly rapid turnover in collective attention (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2019), while a meta-analysis of reading research found a comprehension advantage for printed texts, particularly informational material read under time constraints (Delgado et al., 2018).

What cognitive habits are we cultivating through hours of scrolling, rapid attentional switching, and immediate emotional appraisal? Where are we developing the intellectual stamina to read a substantive article, contemplate competing arguments, and wrestle with ambiguity? We exercise our bodies to develop strength. Why do we imagine that intellectual endurance requires any less intentional effort?

My colleague Dr. Andrew Doan and I have addressed problematic digital media use in our professional work, and psychiatrist Dr. Victoria Dunckley (2015) has described a proposed clinical construct she calls Electronic Screen Syndrome. I sometimes wonder what genius decided to call that device a smartphone. Perhaps we ought to call it the dumbing-down phone.

Technology can be an extraordinary instrument of learning. But when its dominant use is feeding us electronic morsels and interrupting sustained thought, it can become an instrument of superficiality. My conjecture is that we have created an environment that amplifies the very vulnerabilities Plato identified. We have industrialized superficiality.

Doxa, Epistēmē, and the Seductive Appeal of Simplicity

Plato distinguished between *doxa*, opinion or belief, and *epistēmē*, knowledge. How have we become so adept at acquiring the former

while growing so impatient with the work required to acquire the latter?

How in the world did we get to a point where something as singular as the price of gasoline might become the defining consideration in a person's choice of national leadership? Yes, gasoline prices matter. The financial struggles of families are real. Yet even gasoline prices reflect an extraordinarily complex interplay of international markets, energy policy, geopolitical events, refining capacity, and supply and demand. How tempting to reduce all that to a slogan, identify a villain, and move on.

Psychologists have identified an illusion of explanatory depth: we frequently believe we understand things considerably better than we do. In a particularly relevant experiment, people asked to explain how political policies actually worked, rather than merely state why they supported them, often revised their assessments of their own understanding (Fernbach et al., 2013).

We crave simplicity. We crave coherence. We crave certainty. And when the facts do not fit our preferred narrative, motivated reasoning can lead us to scrutinize unwelcome evidence more harshly than evidence supporting our convictions (Kunda, 1990). Good grief, the world is complex. Wishing it were otherwise does not make it so.

Ideological Conviction Without Intellectual Inquiry

To my progressive friends who find socialism or communism particularly appealing, how many of you have actually read Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto*? How many have studied Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot, and Fidel Castro? Have you examined how their ideas were implemented and what happened to the people living under those regimes? Have you wrestled

with the historical record of repression, imprisonment, mass killing, and the destruction of lives and careers?

Do you understand the distinctions between democratic socialism, communism, fascism, and totalitarianism, or are these little more than slogans you have absorbed from your preferred electronic sources? If you embrace an ideology, do the hard work of understanding its history, its promises, its limitations, and its consequences. My conservative friends, the same challenge applies to you. Can you articulate the strongest arguments against your own convictions, or do you simply retreat into the comforting embrace of your preferred commentators?

I am not telling anyone how to vote. Vote your conscience. But for God's sake, inform that conscience through a thoughtful appreciation of the complexity of the issues before us.

To My Colleagues: We Must Do Better

As a pediatric psychologist, I have been particularly troubled by the reduction of complex questions in pediatric gender medicine to emotionally charged slogans. To my colleagues, I ask: Have you critically examined the breadth of the outcome research? Have you studied developmental trajectories, desistance, persistence, psychiatric comorbidities, family dynamics, and the limitations of the evidence? Have you examined research that challenges your preferred approach? Do you distinguish among social transition, psychological support, puberty suppression, and other medical interventions?

How many of us have heard the question, "Would you rather have a living daughter or a dead son?" I find that false dichotomy appalling. Children experiencing gender-related distress deserve compassion and careful assessment, and families deserve an honest discussion of benefits, risks, uncertainties, and alternatives—not a terrifying

ultimatum. Recent systematic reviews have identified major limitations in the evidence for social transition and puberty suppression (Hall et al., 2024; Taylor et al., 2024). Limitations in the evidence do not establish that every intervention is ineffective or harmful, but they demand intellectual honesty.

We are psychologists and physicians, for God's sake. We must do the outcome research, read beyond the studies that reinforce our convictions, and remain willing to revise our conclusions. Expertise does not exempt us from intellectual humility. It should demand it.

When Silence Meets Cowardice

In my earlier essay, *When Silence Meets Cowardice*, I reflected upon painful experiences during my tenure at Madigan Army Medical Center. After I spoke publicly about the complexities of pediatric gender medicine, including the issues I sought to raise about pornography, my professional licensure was targeted and false allegations of defrauding the government were made against me. Those allegations have since been acknowledged as false.

There were colleagues who came to my defense, and for that I remain grateful. Yet some did so very tepidly, crafting statements in ways that minimized their own professional risk. I understand the human psychology underlying such behavior. Understanding it does not diminish the pain of experiencing it.

Organizational silence thrives when people perceive that speaking up is dangerous (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). What happens to science when professional security becomes more important than scientific inquiry? What happens to a profession when its members are reluctant to defend a colleague for fear of what it might cost them?

Jack Nicholson's character in *A Few Good Men* famously exclaimed, "You can't handle the truth!" I would go a step further. Sometimes we simply do not want to know the truth. It might inconvenience us, threaten our belonging, jeopardize our careers, or demand that we acknowledge our own ignorance.

It takes courage to articulate complexity when others demand simplicity. You might be hated. You might be vilified. You might be punished. I certainly have been. Yet there is something profoundly reassuring about knowing that you stepped into the wind rather than turning your back to it. I am no political genius, nor do I have this world figured out. But I am not afraid to dive into the deep end of the intellectual pool.

The pursuit of truth requires intellectual humility. The defense of truth requires moral courage. And, dare I suggest, the latter is in rather short supply these days.

Trading Freedom for the Illusion of Security

Plato warned that a democracy might descend into tyranny when people weary of disorder entrust their freedom to a leader promising security. The fall of the Roman Republic offers another illustration of the dangers of political instability, factionalism, and the concentration of power. Erich Fromm (1941), in *Escape from Freedom*, explored the psychological burdens of freedom and the temptation to relinquish autonomy in exchange for security and relief from responsibility.

How tragic that the very security we seek can come at the expense of the freedom we cherish. Freedom demands that we tolerate uncertainty, exercise judgment, and assume responsibility for our decisions. There is no simple way around that obligation.

The Athenians killed Socrates. Some 2,400 years later, an individual attempted to assassinate Donald Trump. The events are historically different, but they remind us that political violence has not disappeared with technological progress. This is not an endorsement of Trump. I have my own concerns about him. This is not about Trump. It is about us.

We face consequential decisions about artificial intelligence, national security, economic stability, education, religious freedom, and the future of our constitutional republic. As a grandfather, I am acutely aware that the consequences of those decisions will outlive me.

Plato's Diagnosis, but Not Plato's Prescription

Plato proposed that philosopher-kings, rigorously educated in the pursuit of wisdom, should govern. I understand his thinking. But that is not a world in which I want to live. Intellectual expertise does not guarantee moral character, and concentrating power among an intellectual elite presents enormous dangers of its own.

The answer is not to disenfranchise the masses. The answer is to educate them. Rather than abandoning democratic governance, let us cultivate the intellectual and moral capacities necessary to sustain it. And that means some of us need a rather substantial wake-up call.

Educators, Wake the Hell Up!

Extricate ideological indoctrination, from whichever political direction it comes, from our educational institutions and get back to teaching. Teach our children how to think rather than what to think. Teach history honestly, its achievements and its atrocities. Selectively rewriting history to accommodate an ideology is just intellectual dumbassery.

Restore substantive civic education. Teach how our constitutional republic functions, why checks and balances matter, how laws are made, how economic systems operate, and how policies can have unintended consequences. Have students defend competing positions using evidence. Teach them to identify fallacies, assess sources, and distinguish an argument from an assertion. Research demonstrates that critical thinking can be taught, particularly through dialogue, authentic problems, and mentoring (Abrami et al., 2015).

Get smartphones out of classrooms and remove unnecessary electronic distractions. Get back to substantive reading, writing, discussion, and reflection. The objective of education should not be ideological replication but intellectual independence. That requires educators who are secure enough to tolerate students arriving at conclusions different from their own.

Parents, Wake the Hell Up!

During my three decades as a pediatric psychologist, I frequently asked families a seemingly simple question: What are your family's core values? It was remarkable how often they struggled to answer. It was not that they necessarily lacked values. They had simply never taken the time to articulate them together.

One of my favorite therapeutic exercises was to have families create their own coat of arms, incorporating the values they identified as important. It was a beautiful thing to witness. It facilitated meaningful conversation, fostered a sense of pride in who they were, and gave them a shared vocabulary for navigating life. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) similarly emphasizes identifying meaningful values and translating those values into committed action (Hayes et al., 2006).

Put down your own damned smartphone. Sit down with your children. Eat together. Read together. Talk about faith, history, morality, and the difficult questions of life. Encourage your children to challenge your assumptions, and be sufficiently humble to listen when they do. Give them something no electronic device can adequately replicate: genuine human connection.

For God's sake, start being parents. Do not abdicate that sacred responsibility to an electronic device or an educational institution.

Journalists, Start Being Journalists!

What a radical concept it would be to restore fairness and objectivity to journalism. Report the facts. Distinguish news from opinion. Stop cropping interviews in ways that distort what was communicated. Make full interviews available rather than feeding viewers the fragments that best accommodate your preferred narrative. And I direct that criticism toward both the political left and the political right.

How about substantive presidential debates in which every candidate is expected to participate? Ask equally challenging questions, allow sufficient time to develop answers, and press candidates to explain the trade-offs and unintended consequences of their proposals. Make the entire debate readily available. I do not want another rehearsed thirty-second sound bite. I want to hear the complexity of the candidate's thinking. Does the person seeking to captain the ship understand anything about navigation?

Churches, You Are Not Getting a Pass Either!

To my beloved Christian churches, wake the hell up! Enough of the vanilla, milquetoast sermons that leave us comfortable but relatively unchallenged. Christianity was never intended to be an exercise in

psychological comfort. Scripture should penetrate our defenses, expose our hypocrisy, and transform how we think and live.

This is one of the reasons I appreciate pastors like Jack Hibbs and my own pastor, Whitney Walters. Whitney challenges me to examine what the Bible actually says and to live differently as a consequence. His sermons are not spiritually sanitized. Hebrews 4:12 describes the Word of God as sharper than a double-edged sword, penetrating to the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and discerning the intentions of the heart. That is not a particularly comfortable image, nor should it be.

Proverbs 18:17 reminds us that the first person to present a case may appear correct until another comes forward to examine it. What a remarkably pertinent lesson in intellectual humility. Our churches should be places where we develop discernment and moral courage, not places where we retreat from difficult questions.

Navigate Around the Damned Storm

On November 1, 2026, a Learjet 60 plunged into the ground near Greenacres, Florida, killing all nine people aboard. Investigators recovered pieces of the left elevator miles from the crash site, evidence that critical components separated before impact. Severe weather is a major focus of the investigation (National Transportation Safety Board [NTSB], 2026; ABC News, 2026). Nine precious souls. Nine lives extinguished in a catastrophic descent.

I do not know what decisions were made in that cockpit, and the investigators must determine what happened. But the tragedy brought me back to Plato's ship and a fundamental principle of navigation: when the direct route is dangerous, take the longer route. Go around the

damned storm. It may cost you time, fuel, and inconvenience. The alternative may cost you your life.

Why should navigating the future of a nation be any different? We have become enamored with expediency, convenience, and intellectual shortcuts. But the storm does not care how confidently you deny its existence. Reality does not accommodate our desire for simplicity.

Epistēmē Over Doxa: Can We Make the Shift?

Can we favor knowledge over opinion, tolerate complexity, and summon the courage to confront uncomfortable truths? I believe we can. But unlike Plato, I would entrust that responsibility not merely to a better captain but to a better-educated, more discerning crew.

As a youngster, I hated homework. Good grief, how I hated homework! But I did it anyway. And after decades of professional practice, teaching, and study, this old psychologist is still doing his homework. The older I get, the more I realize how much I do not know.

My grandchildren and yours will inherit the ship we are navigating today. For their sake, I pray that we learn to navigate it wisely.

For God's sake, do your homework. There are precious lives aboard this vessel.

Playfair Display

Abrami, P. C., Bernard, R. M., Borokhovski, E., Waddington, D. I., Wade, C. A., & Persson, T. (2015). Strategies for teaching students to think critically: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research, 85*(2), 275–314. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654314551063

ABC News. (2026, November 3). Parents and 2 young children among victims of Learjet crash in Florida, family says. https://abcnews.com/US/learjet-breaking-crashed-florida-ntsb/story?id=137781527

Antonakis, J., & Dalgas, O. (2009). Predicting elections: Child's play! *Science, 323*(5918), 1183. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1167748

Delgado, P., Vargas, C., Ackerman, R., & Salmerón, L. (2018). Don't throw away your printed books: A meta-analysis on the effects of reading media on reading comprehension. *Educational Research Review, 25*, 23–38. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2018.09.003

Druckman, J. N. (2003). The power of television images: The first Kennedy–Nixon debate revisited. *The Journal of Politics, 65*(2), 559–571. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2508.t01-1-00015

Dunckley, V. L. (2015). *Reset your child's brain*. New World Library. https://drdunckley.com/reset-your-childs-brain/

Fernbach, P. M., Rogers, T., Fox, C. R., & Sloman, S. A. (2013). Political extremism is supported by an illusion of understanding. *Psychological Science, 24*(6), 939–946. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612464058

Fromm, E. (1941). *Escape from freedom*. Farrar & Rinehart.

Hall, R., Taylor, J., Hewitt, C. E., Heathcote, C., Jarvis, S. W., Langton, T., & Fraser, L. (2024). Impact of social transition in relation to gender for children and adolescents: A systematic review. *Archives of Disease in Childhood, 109*(Suppl. 2), s12–s18. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38594055/

Hallin, D. C. (1992). Sound bite news: Television coverage of elections, 1968–1988. *Journal of Communication, 42*(2), 5–24. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1992.tb00775.x

Hayes, S. C., Luoma, J. B., Bond, F. W., Masuda, A., & Lillis, J. (2006). Acceptance and commitment therapy: Model, processes and outcomes. *Behaviour Research and Therapy, 44*(1), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2005.06.006

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Kruger, J., & Dunning, D. (1999). Unskilled and unaware of it: How difficulties in recognizing one's own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 77*(6), 1121–1134. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.77.6.1121

Kunda, Z. (1990). The case for motivated reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin, 108*(3), 480–498. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.108.3.480

Lorenz-Spreen, P., Mønsted, B. M., Hövel, P., & Lehmann, S. (2019). Accelerating dynamics of collective attention. *Nature Communications, 10*, Article 1759. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-019-09311-w

Morrison, E. W., & Milliken, F. J. (2000). Organizational silence: A barrier to change and development in a pluralistic world. *Academy of Management Review, 25*(4), 706–725. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2000.3707697

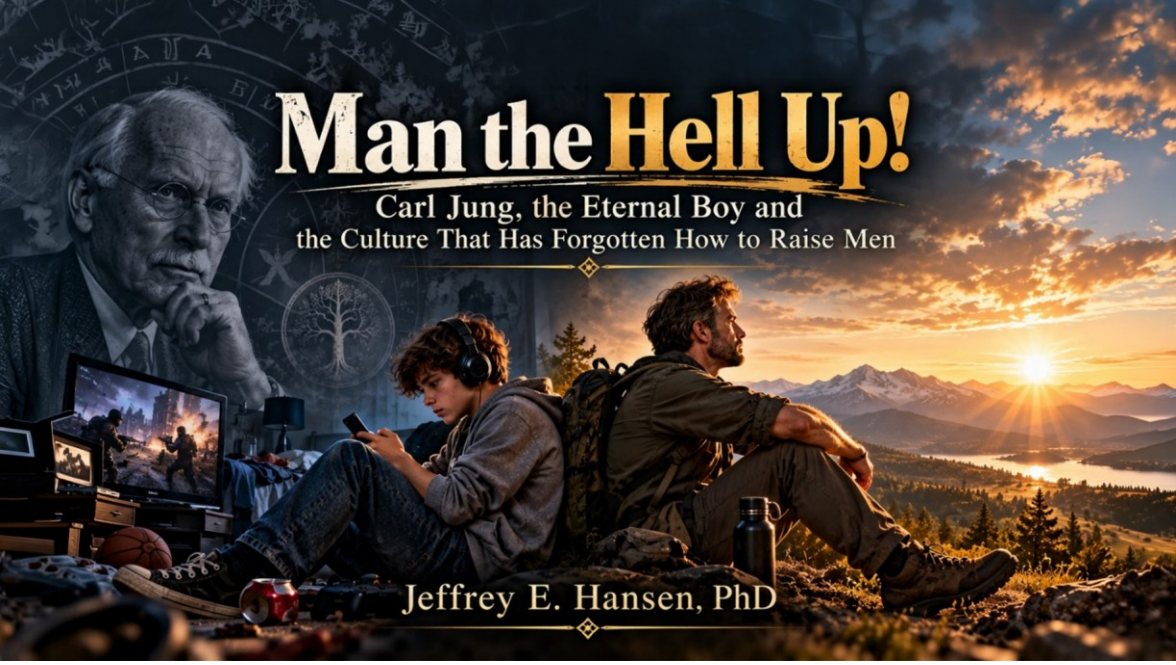
National Transportation Safety Board. (2026). *Learjet 60 accident near Greenacres, Florida* (Investigation ERA27MA026). https://www.ntsb.gov/investigations/Pages/ERA27MA026.aspx

Plato. (ca. 375 BCE). *The Republic* (B. Jowett, Trans.; Books V, VI, VIII). https://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html

Taylor, J., Mitchell, A., Hall, R., Heathcote, C., Langton, T., Fraser, L., & Hewitt, C. E. (2024). Interventions to suppress puberty in adolescents experiencing gender dysphoria or incongruence: A systematic review. *Archives of Disease in Childhood, 109*(Suppl. 2), s33–s47. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38594047/

Todorov, A., Mandisodza, A. N., Goren, A., & Hall, C. C. (2005). Inferences of competence from faces predict election outcomes. *Science, 308*(5728), 1623–1626. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1110589

Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1974). Judgment under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases. *Science, 185*(4157), 1124–1131. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.185.4157.1124



Houston, We Have a Problem

Gentlemen, I believe we have a problem. I am talking about the man-boy: a male who has reached adulthood chronologically but has not quite made the psychological journey from boyhood to manhood. He may be thirty, forty, or fifty, yet struggle with responsibility, commitment, independence, perseverance, and the capacity to love without expecting someone else to manage his life. This is not a diagnosis or a claim that an entire generation is failing. It is a pattern I have encountered in clinical practice, and one I believe deserves attention.

I have listened to young women ask some variation of the same exasperated question: "Dr. Hansen, where are all the men?" They are not asking where the males have gone. There are plenty of those. They are looking for someone emotionally available, capable of commitment, willing to shoulder responsibility, and prepared to build a life together. Where are these elusive creatures? Well, I suspect a few are still downstairs in Mom's basement, playing video games until three in the morning, entertaining themselves with pornography, and wondering

why the world has not recognized their extraordinary potential. Forgive my sarcasm. Sometimes humor helps us approach uncomfortable subjects.

Living with parents or enjoying video games does not establish immaturity. Economic pressures, illness, and trauma complicate independence. But when avoidance becomes a lifestyle, entertainment substitutes for purpose, and adult obligations are continually postponed, we ought to ask why. One of my favorite psychological thinkers was exploring this question generations before anyone dreamed of a PlayStation.

Carl Jung: One of My Clinical Psychology Brethren

I have always had a special affection for Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961). Technically, Jung was a Swiss psychiatrist, trained as a physician, but I have long suspected he was really one of my clinical psychology brethren who wandered into the wrong profession. Forgive me, my psychiatry colleagues. I could not resist. Jung was an extraordinary thinker whose writings have shaped my own thinking. He was interested in the whole person: unconscious conflicts, childhood wounds, identity, meaning, mythology, spirituality, and what it takes to become psychologically whole.

Jung began as a close collaborator of Sigmund Freud, who regarded him as a promising successor. Their eventual separation reflected profound disagreements about the psyche. Freud emphasized unconscious drives, sexuality, and childhood conflict; Jung developed a broader account involving archetypes, symbolic life, and a movement toward psychological integration. I have always found Jung's perspective more compelling. People are not simply collections of symptoms or prisoners of their past. They are also searching for meaning and struggling to

become themselves. His writings on archetypes and the collective unconscious remain influential in analytical psychology (Jung, 1959).

Jung's idea of individuation—the lifelong movement toward a more differentiated, integrated self—speaks to the heart of my clinical philosophy. Healing involves more than reducing symptoms or improving scores on an inventory. It involves discovering identity, accepting responsibility, finding meaning, and developing the capacity to love. That resonates with my NeuroFaith® approach, even though Jung's spiritual ideas and my Christian convictions are not identical. And more than six decades after his death, his ideas still make me wonder: Good heavens, Carl, what would you make of us now?

And perhaps this is where I should confess another reason for my affection for Jung. He asked questions that our profession sometimes treats as peripheral: Who am I? What gives my life meaning? What am I here to contribute, and what sort of person am I becoming? I have never been particularly enamored with our dependence on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, now in its DSM-5-TR edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Yes, I have used diagnostic classifications throughout my career, and they serve practical purposes. But a diagnosis describes a pattern of difficulties; it does not necessarily explain the person, much less provide a coherent account of that person's identity or purpose. We can become remarkably efficient at attaching labels to distress while remaining strangely incurious about the life in which that distress occurs. If I sound a little irreverent toward one of our profession's sacred books, well, I have been accused of worse.

And while I am irritating a few colleagues, I might as well mention our enthusiasm for manualized therapies. Cognitive behavioral therapy and

dialectical behavior therapy offer genuinely valuable tools for changing unhelpful patterns, managing emotion, and tolerating distress. I have drawn on such approaches myself. Some applications also have meaningful longer-term evidence, so I would not dismiss them as merely short-term fixes. But their success at improving symptoms or teaching skills does not automatically answer the larger questions of identity, belonging, responsibility, faith, and meaning. Those questions may be addressed within good CBT or DBT work, especially when a thoughtful clinician makes room for them; my concern is what happens when treatment is reduced to a checklist of techniques. We may help a man regulate his emotions without ever asking what kind of man he intends to become. Jung would have wanted to keep that larger question on the table. And that is precisely why his account of the eternal boy speaks so forcefully to me.

The Puer Aeternus: The Eternal Boy

The Latin is wonderfully descriptive: puer means boy, and aeternus means eternal. The puer aeternus, or eternal boy, is an archetypal figure that Jungian psychology uses to examine arrested psychological maturation. Jung explored related archetypal themes, and his student and colleague Marie-Louise von Franz examined the pattern extensively in The Problem of the Puer Aeternus (von Franz, 2000).

The eternal boy may be intelligent, charming, creative, sensitive, and full of plans. His difficulty is not a lack of potential but an unwillingness to exchange possibility for commitment. He loves imagining achievement more than enduring the ordinary work required to achieve it. He may want marriage but recoil from its daily sacrifices, dream of fatherhood but avoid its obligations, or continually search for the next opportunity when the present one demands perseverance. He wants to fly indefinitely without learning to land. The puer aeternus is not a

DSM diagnosis, but it offers a vivid language for a recognizable clinical and human struggle.

Mommy's Little Boy: When Love Becomes a Prison

Some developmental difficulties emerge not from obvious cruelty but from relationships overflowing with affection. Consider the devoted mother who anticipates every need, rescues her son from discomfort, and cannot bear to see him struggle. Children absolutely need warmth and protection. The trouble begins when a mother's need to remain indispensable becomes more important than her son's need to grow. Perhaps she is lonely or carries unresolved wounds; perhaps her marriage is emotionally distant. Without intending harm, she begins relying on her son for reassurance, companionship, or meaning that ought not be his responsibility.

The boy learns that independence makes Mom unhappy. Assertiveness begins to feel selfish; separation feels like abandonment. He may leave home, marry, and build a career while remaining psychologically tethered to her approval. Contemporary research distinguishes supportive parenting from psychological control, which can intrude upon a young person's developing autonomy (Barber et al., 2005). That distinction matters. A loving mother is not the problem; emotional enmeshment and guilt-based control are. There may be self-serving needs in this dynamic without any justification for casually diagnosing the mother with narcissistic personality disorder.

The tragedy is that she may believe she has given her son everything, while withholding something indispensable: the freedom to become himself. A mother should hope her son loves her for life. She should not need him to remain a little boy to feel loved.

Dad, Where Were You?

And where was Dad? It would be unfair and clinically shortsighted to place this developmental burden on mothers alone. Some fathers are absent because of circumstances beyond their control. Others are physically present but psychologically unavailable: earning a paycheck, occupying a recliner, and missing the everyday opportunities to demonstrate mature manhood. Boys benefit from seeing how responsible adults handle frustration, honor commitments, apologize, treat women, manage fear, and persist when life is hard. Research on father involvement supports its importance for multiple aspects of children's development, while recognizing that family relationships and circumstances vary (Sarkadi et al., 2008).

A father need not be perfect, and a boy without an involved biological father is not doomed. Grandfathers, coaches, pastors, mentors, and other dependable adults can model integrity and responsibility. The point is not that boys require a flawless masculine superhero. They need someone who shows up, sets boundaries, offers affection, and allows them to encounter manageable challenges without immediately swooping in to rescue them. The goal is not to raise a son who forever needs his parents to decide for him; it is to raise a son who can make sound decisions because of what they taught him.

What About Testosterone? Is Biology Following Behavior?

Now let me throw another log on the fire: testosterone. As a clinical psychologist fascinated by the relationship between mind and body, I wonder whether some modern habits are shaping not only men's psychological functioning but their endocrine health. Travison and colleagues (2007) reported an age-independent decline in serum testosterone in a studied population of American men over time. That finding does not establish a universal decline or identify a single cause,

but it raises legitimate questions about health, environment, and lifestyle.

Testosterone is not a laboratory test of manhood. Courage, responsibility, tenderness, and character cannot be read from a hormone panel. There are many medical causes of low testosterone, and no credible evidence that failing to act "manly" directly causes testosterone deficiency. Yet the broader biological question is intriguing. Obesity and metabolic dysfunction are associated with lower testosterone, and some related hormonal changes can improve with weight loss (Grossmann, 2020). In a small experimental study, one week of sleep restriction was associated with a reduction in daytime testosterone in healthy young men (Leproult & Van Cauter, 2011).

Think about how much of contemporary life is spent sitting: at work, in a car, at a desk, before a television. Physical exertion and challenge increasingly have to be scheduled rather than naturally encountered. My conjecture is not that competition or assertiveness magically boosts testosterone. It is that patterns of sleep, movement, metabolic health, social experience, and behavior interact with physiology, and that an increasingly sedentary lifestyle may have consequences we are still working to understand. The relationship between biology and behavior is reciprocal, although the particular causal pathways deserve careful research.

Within NeuroFaith®, I emphasize Movement as Medicine because the mind and body are not separate enterprises. We were not designed to develop strength by avoiding every challenge that requires it. Gentlemen, while researchers continue sorting out the endocrinology, perhaps we can at least get off the couch and take a walk. Our muscles and our minds might appreciate it.

From Eternal Boy to Mature Man: The Puer and the Senex

Jungian psychology places the puer alongside the senex, the elder or old man, whose constructive qualities include discipline, structure, patience, wisdom, and responsibility. The senex is not simply an elderly fellow with gray hair and a good retirement account. A young man can develop those qualities, and an old man can spend his entire life avoiding them. Neither archetypal pattern is wholly good or bad: the shadow side of the senex is rigidity and control, just as the shadow side of the puer is endless possibility without commitment. The youthful spirit contributes imagination, playfulness, curiosity, and adventure. I hope never to lose mine. I still love motorcycles, laughter, and occasionally doing something that causes my wife to wonder whether I will ever grow up.

But vitality needs judgment. Freedom needs discipline. Affection needs dependability. A mature man does not have to kill the boy within him; he has to stop letting that boy run the entire show. He can be tender without being helpless, assertive without being cruel, and adventurous without abandoning those who count on him. That is not the death of boyhood. It is the boy finally becoming a man. And, gentlemen, there is a world of difference.

Have We Raised a Generation of Spineless Christians?

I realize that heading may make a few church folks squirm. Perhaps it should. I am not talking about the man who cries at his daughter's wedding, prays with his children, listens carefully to his wife, or admits when he is afraid. I admire those men. I am talking about the fellow who confuses being Christian with being perpetually agreeable, who avoids necessary confrontation, and who calls his reluctance to act "gentleness." Somewhere along the way, have we begun to teach boys that goodness requires the surrender of courage? I worry that parts of

the Christian world have embraced a picture of manhood so harmless, so carefully polished, that we have forgotten what conviction looks like when it costs us something.

Consider David. He confronted Goliath when others stood paralyzed by fear, yet this same warrior gave us psalms of grief, repentance, longing, and worship. I sometimes wonder whether we have become so determined to raise gentle Christian men that we have inadvertently raised a few who would rather negotiate with Goliath than pick up a stone. Good heavens, gentlemen, David must be rolling his eyes. His strength did not make tenderness impossible, and his tenderness did not make him weak. Or consider Jesus, who wept with the grieving, welcomed children, and showed compassion to the marginalized, yet also confronted hypocrisy and refused to abandon His calling in the face of suffering. I cannot reconcile either example with the idea that Christian masculinity means becoming a pleasant, conflict-avoidant bystander. Biblical courage is not bullying; it is the willingness to act rightly when doing so is frightening or costly.

This discussion also touches an influential idea in psychology. Sandra Bem (1974) described psychological androgyny as the capacity to possess traits conventionally labeled masculine and feminine, such as assertiveness and tenderness. Her argument was not that biological differences vanish or that everyone must become identical. I appreciate the insight that a mature person can embody both sets of strengths. But I question a cultural tendency, sometimes echoed in church life, to treat distinctly masculine responsibility as embarrassing or suspect. In my understanding of Christian family life, husbands are called to sacrificial love, not domination; Ephesians 5:25 sets the standard at giving oneself for another. Women are no less courageous or capable of protection, but I believe fathers and husbands should take seriously

their responsibility to lead through service, defend the vulnerable, and remain steady when life turns ugly.

The problem is not that we have taught men to be sensitive. The problem is that sensitivity without backbone can become another refuge for the eternal boy. A man can learn every polite phrase, speak fluently about feelings, and still disappear when his family needs him to take responsibility. I want men who can comfort a frightened child and confront a bully; who can apologize when wrong and stand firm when right; who can pray with tenderness and act with conviction. The Christian church should be helping boys grow into that kind of integrated manhood. Jung might have called it part of the difficult work of becoming whole. I would simply call it growing up.

Parents, It Is Time to Wake Up

Parents, our task is not simply to keep children happy and comfortable. It is to prepare them to live competently and courageously when we are no longer standing beside them. Secure attachment and emotional attunement are foundations, not substitutes, for growing autonomy. We should offer affection and safety while also providing age-appropriate responsibility, opportunities to solve problems, and manageable experiences of frustration. Parental psychological control is not the same as guidance or love (Barber et al., 2005).

Our children are not here to complete us, repair our marriages, or reassure us that we matter. They are separate human beings entrusted to our care. I say that as a psychologist, a father, and a grandfather who knows parenting is never as easy as the textbooks make it sound. We all make mistakes, sometimes recognizing them only after our children are grown. But we can still change how we show up: encouraging responsibility instead of dependency, celebrating independence instead

of interpreting it as rejection, and modeling the maturity we hope to see. Have we become so determined to protect children from the discomfort of growing up that we inadvertently protect them from growing up at all? That question ought to make every parent, including this one, squirm a little.

Manhood Is Earned, Not Bestowed

I have spent decades helping people understand wounds from childhood, relationships, trauma, and the disappointments of being human. I know that avoidance and immaturity are not always born of laziness. Sometimes they reflect fear, insecure attachment, or skills that were never taught. Those histories deserve compassion. But compassion and accountability are not enemies. Understanding why we struggle does not absolve us of the work of growing.

That conviction is personal. My son Gregg, a Marine who served in Iraq, has taught me much about courage, duty, and the cost of carrying both. I have also been privileged to co-author two books with remarkable colleagues: *When Duty Called*, which tells stories of courage, trauma, and redemption among those who served, and *The Wounds We Carry*, which explores the wounds borne by active duty service members, veterans, and first responders—and the paths toward healing. In the latter work, I had the honor of writing alongside Kris A. Peterson, MD; Johnnie Griffitts; Salvatore Bitondo, LICSW; Stephanie Bowser, PsyD; and Jack Marion. I name them here deliberately: these men and women have earned my respect, and their contributions deserve to be seen. Those books are not arguments for swagger or emotional armor. They are reminders that courage and vulnerability can live in the same man (Hansen & Griffitts, 2026; Hansen et al., 2026).

Some men need therapy, mentorship, spiritual guidance, healthier boundaries, or help learning emotional regulation. Some need to stop escaping into entertainment and begin honoring commitments. I am not calling for a caricature of masculinity in which men suppress emotion, dominate others, or confuse intimidation with strength. I am calling for men strong enough to be gentle, courageous enough to be vulnerable, disciplined enough to be dependable, and secure enough to love without possessing.

Perhaps that is why Jung continues to speak to me. He understood that becoming whole requires more than explaining the past. It requires confronting who we are and moving toward who we can become. For those of us who are Christians, that journey also involves grace, forgiveness, humility, and service to purposes larger than personal comfort. To the man who recognizes himself in these pages: your past may explain some of your struggles, but it need not dictate your future. There is still time to grow. Nobody else, however, can do that work for you. So, with affection, conviction, and a little exasperation, allow this old psychologist one final plea: **Men, for heaven's sake, wake up, and man the hell up!**

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2022). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed., text rev.). https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425787

Barber, B. K., Stolz, H. E., Olsen, J. A., Collins, W. A., & Burchinal, M. (2005). Parental support, psychological control, and behavioral control: Assessing relevance across time, culture, and method. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 70(4), 1–147. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5834.2005.00365.x

Bem, S. L. (1974). The measurement of psychological androgyny. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 42(2), 155–162. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0036215

Grossmann, M. (2020). Late-onset hypogonadism: Metabolic impact. Andrology, 8(6), 1519–1529. https://doi.org/10.1111/andr.12705

Hansen, J. E. (2026). When silence becomes cowardice: The man I decided to become. NeuroFaith®. https://www.neurofaith.net/_files/ugd/a32a22_11b7e3fd3c9144b2a3793534b32f36af.pdf

Hansen, J. E., & Griffitts, J. (2026). *When duty called: Warriors' stories of courage, trauma, and redemption.*

Hansen, J. E., Peterson, K. A., Griffitts, J., Bitondo, S., Bowser, S., & Marion, J. (2026). *The wounds we carry.*

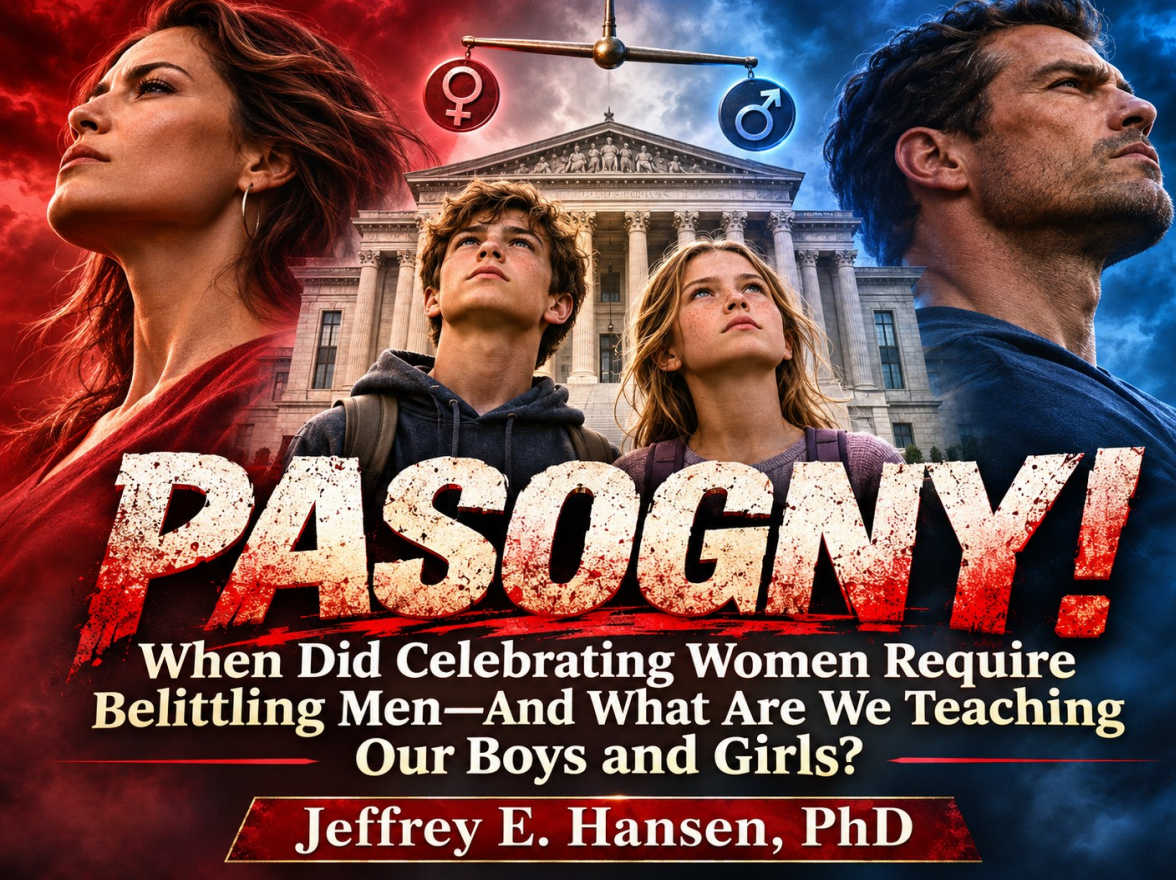
Jung, C. G. (1959). The archetypes and the collective unconscious (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.; Vol. 9, Part 1). Pantheon Books.

Leproult, R., & Van Cauter, E. (2011). Effect of 1 week of sleep restriction on testosterone levels in young healthy men. JAMA, 305(21), 2173–2174. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2011.710

Sarkadi, A., Kristiansson, R., Oberklaid, F., & Bremberg, S. (2008). Fathers' involvement and children's developmental outcomes: A systematic review of longitudinal studies. Acta Paediatrica, 97(2), 153–158. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1651-2227.2007.00572.x

Travison, T. G., Araujo, A. B., O'Donnell, A. B., Kupelian, V., & McKinlay, J. B. (2007). A population-level decline in serum testosterone levels in American men. The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism, 92(1), 196–202. https://doi.org/10.1210/jc.2006-1375

von Franz, M.-L. (2000). The problem of the puer aeternus (3rd ed., D. Sharp, Ed.). Inner City Books.



My Confession

I have a confession to make. I love strong women. Always have. And I am not talking about women who can bench-press 200 pounds, although God bless them, too. I am talking about women who know who they are, stand on their convictions, refuse to be pushed around, and understand that their dignity is not something another human being gets to grant or take away.

In fact, I suppose that makes me a bit of a feminist. There. I said it. Somebody alert my conservative friends. I may have to turn in my membership card.

I have long admired Helen Reddy, whose magnificent 1972 anthem, "I Am Woman," became a rallying cry for women who had spent generations being told to sit down, be quiet, and know their place (National Film and Sound Archive of Australia [NFSA], n.d.). I have

used that song many times in therapy with women who had been beaten down, belittled, abused, and made to believe they were somehow less than the extraordinary human beings God created them to be. Watching a woman rediscover her dignity, her voice, and her strength is one of the great privileges of my professional life.

So let me establish something right out of the gate. I have no interest in returning women to an imaginary golden age when their opinions were optional and their aspirations ended at the kitchen door. Women have helped build this nation, raise its children, lead its institutions, heal its wounded, and hold families together through hardships that would buckle the knees of many of us men.

But somewhere along the way, I believe something went sideways. In our admirable determination to elevate women, we sometimes seem to have decided that men needed to be knocked down a few floors. And I, for one, am getting a little tired of riding that elevator.

We have a perfectly respectable word for contempt directed toward women: misogyny. We even have a word for contempt directed toward men: misandry. But frankly, misandry sounds like something you might contract from drinking contaminated water. It does not have nearly enough punch for what I am trying to describe.

So, I am inventing my own word: PASOGNY. P-A-S-O-G-N-Y.

There. I claim it. I want it entered into the dictionary, appropriately credited, and perhaps announced at a ceremony where somebody gives me a medal. If my progressive colleagues can introduce new terminology into our cultural conversations, surely one cranky old psychologist from Arizona can contribute a word of his own. What are they going to do—arrest me for unauthorized vocabulary?

Before somebody starts writing an angry letter to my licensing board, let me explain. Pasogny, as I am using it, describes the habit of diminishing, ridiculing, stereotyping, or treating men with contempt simply because they are men. It is the assumption that masculinity itself is a problem requiring correction rather than an aspect of human life deserving understanding, responsibility, and respect. And I believe we have tolerated far too much of it.

Look at the television sitcom. How often is Dad the village idiot? He cannot operate the washing machine, cannot prepare dinner without setting something on fire, cannot understand his children, and would probably starve to death if his wife went away for three days. Meanwhile, Mom is the brilliant, organized, emotionally sophisticated adult who somehow manages to keep this oversized adolescent alive. I love strong, capable women. I am simply wondering when the price of admission became portraying the man as a household appliance with a pulse.

And I can laugh at a good joke. Lord knows we men provide plenty of material. We occasionally forget to put the toilet seat down. We sometimes act before thinking, speak before reflecting, and spend an astonishing amount of emotional energy yelling at grown men chasing a ball around a field. Some of us can watch a heartbreaking movie without shedding a tear, then practically require grief counseling when our football team loses in overtime. I get it. We are imperfect creatures. Sometimes spectacularly so.

But imperfection is not inferiority. Being the occasional object of good-natured humor is very different from becoming the perpetual object of contempt.

Consider what men have contributed to this country. The skyscrapers, steel mills, railroads, automobile factories, bridges, electrical grids,

mines, and highways that helped build modern America. Generations of men labored in dangerous conditions, suffered injuries, lost their lives, and worked themselves into exhaustion to provide for families and communities. Women contributed enormously to these achievements, too, frequently without receiving the recognition they deserved. That history must be told fully. But acknowledging women's contributions does not require erasing men's. There is room in the history books for both.

There is something deeply unsettling about asking people to apologize for qualities that, when properly directed, can make them valuable: courage, protectiveness, competitiveness, endurance, strength, initiative, and the willingness to shoulder enormous responsibility. Those qualities can become destructive when corrupted by arrogance, aggression, or selfishness. But the answer to destructive masculinity is not the destruction of masculinity. It is the cultivation of honorable masculinity.

Men need accountability. Absolutely. Some of us need a swift metaphorical kick in the backside. Some need to listen more, speak less, become more emotionally available, and learn that admitting pain is not surrendering our manhood. But correction and contempt are two entirely different things.

John Gottman's research on intimate relationships identifies contempt as a particularly destructive conflict pattern: ridicule and moral superiority poison the relationship in ways that a specific, respectful complaint need not (Wilde, 2026). Contempt does not merely say, "You did something wrong." It says, "You are beneath me." As a psychologist, I have watched shame become one of contempt's most effective delivery systems. Correct someone while preserving dignity, and you create room for growth. Humiliate someone, and you may produce

defensiveness, withdrawal, resentment, or a desperate need to prove worth. Men do not become better husbands, fathers, brothers, or citizens simply because we make them ashamed of being men.

And What in God's Name Are We Teaching Our Boys and Girls?

That brings me to what may be my greatest concern, especially as a psychologist who has spent decades working with children, adolescents, and families. What are we teaching our boys—and, for that matter, our girls—about the worth of being male or female?

I am alarmed by messages that encourage boys to regard their masculinity as inherently suspect and, particularly for white boys, to regard their sex and race as an inherited moral liability. If an adult tells a young boy that he begins life owing an apology for who he is, I have a question: What conceivable developmental good are we expecting from that? A child has enough to figure out without being handed somebody else's ancestral guilt at recess.

I refuse to accept inherited shame as a healthy developmental objective.

Historical injustice deserves honest teaching. Racism deserves condemnation. Sexism deserves condemnation. Children should learn the truth about discrimination, exploitation, and the ways societies have mistreated people. But a child should not be made personally guilty for injustices he did not commit; neither should any child be excused from moral responsibility by virtue of belonging to a historically disadvantaged group. We can teach history without assigning hereditary guilt. We can demand justice without manufacturing shame.

Adolescence is a period of identity formation, social comparison, increasing independence, and heightened sensitivity to peers. Kingsman

(2023), examining boys' experiences of a school-based rite-of-passage program, explored how social environments influence masculine identity. The OECD (2026) likewise reviewed the role that gender expectations play in adolescents' behavior and well-being. This is precisely why I care about what adults communicate to children: their identities are taking shape, and adult contempt is not a harmless educational tool.

And then ideology walks through the schoolhouse door wearing a lab coat and demanding to be called science. I see echoes of neo-Marxist conflict thinking in narratives that sort children into oppressors and oppressed before they have learned to understand themselves as individuals. That is my critique of those narratives, not a laboratory finding. You can teach injustice without training a child to see every relationship as a power struggle. You can teach history without putting a moral ankle bracelet on an eight-year-old. The child is a person, not a mascot for somebody's political theory.

Children are not miniature political manifestos. They are children. For heaven's sake, let them become people before we ask them to carry the weight of every adult argument in America.

Let boys enjoy being boys. Let girls enjoy being girls. Let them run, build, nurture, compete, create, climb, argue, make mistakes, and discover their own strengths. A spirited boy is not a disorder. A strong-willed girl is not an ideological problem. They are human beings, wonderfully varied within each sex. The OECD (2026) documents how gender expectations shape adolescent experiences; that is all the more reason to defend children's dignity rather than handing them a script about what they must feel ashamed of.

That leads to another difficult contemporary question: how children understand biological sex, gender, and their developing sense of self.

My Christian convictions begin with Genesis 1:27, which describes humanity as created in God's image, male and female. I regard both as blessings, neither as an embarrassment or a condition requiring apology. I want children to grow up able to appreciate their bodies and development without being taught that an ordinary variation in interests or temperament makes their sex somehow wrong. A boy who loves music or dance is not less of a boy; a girl who loves motorcycles or engineering is not less of a girl.

When a child experiences genuine distress about sex or gender, my response as a clinician is not ridicule, rejection, or an ideological sales pitch. It is to listen carefully, consider the whole child and family, and take development seriously. Heathcote et al. (2024) found that the available evidence on psychosocial interventions was limited and generally low quality. That is a challenge to clinical certainty, not a reason to surrender clinical judgment. We owe children attention, not slogans.

I want parents, educators, and clinicians to teach children that their worth cannot be reduced to a political category, a stereotype, or another person's grievance. Boys and girls need adults who can teach responsibility without shame, offer guidance without coercion, and communicate dignity without making someone else the villain.

Let Boys Be Boys. Let Girls Be Girls. And Let Them Grow Up.

Here is where I want to be unmistakably clear. I am not demanding that boys march in formation toward football practice or that girls arrive from the maternity ward clutching a doll. I am saying that being male or female is not a defect requiring correction, and that a child's interests do not need to become a referendum on the child's sex. I

cannot believe I have to write this sentence, but apparently the cultural committee has misplaced the obvious.

I want boys to be comfortable in their bodies and unashamed of becoming men. I want girls to be comfortable in theirs and unashamed of becoming women. I want us to stop treating healthy masculine qualities as embarrassing artifacts from an unenlightened century. Strength, courage, initiative, competitive energy, protectiveness, and the willingness to shoulder responsibility deserve formation, not blanket condemnation. These qualities are not the exclusive property of men, of course. But neither should a boy be taught that he must distance himself from them to earn approval.

And let us not confuse biological sex with a personality questionnaire. A boy who prefers dolls to football has not necessarily made an announcement about his gender identity. A girl who would rather dismantle the lawnmower than hold a tea party has not declared war on femininity. She may simply want to know how the damn thing works. Give her the wrench. I want children free to develop without either the old-fashioned pressure to conform to stereotypes or the newer temptation to interpret every departure from a stereotype as evidence of a different identity.

Here is the research I believe deserves much more attention. Singh et al. (2021) followed 139 boys referred for childhood gender-identity concerns and classified 122—87.8%—as desisters at follow-up. The original referral group included boys who did not meet full diagnostic criteria, an important detail when interpreting the result. But do not miss the finding while arguing over the footnotes: for most boys in this historical cohort, childhood gender-identity concerns did not persist into the follow-up years. That should get the attention of every adult tempted to treat early uncertainty as a settled destination.

Steensma et al. (2013) likewise documented substantial desistance in a follow-up of 127 children referred for gender dysphoria, while finding that more intense childhood dysphoria was associated with persistence. Children do not all follow one developmental trajectory. That is precisely my point. Childhood is a process, not a verdict. Why should adult certainty outrun the child's own maturation?

These were observational follow-up studies, not randomized trials comparing therapeutic approaches; they cannot, by themselves, establish that waiting caused desistance. But they absolutely establish a serious reason to protect developmental time. Hall et al. (2024) found that research on social transition in childhood and adolescence was too limited to yield confident conclusions about benefits or harms, while Heathcote et al. (2024) found similar limitations in the evidence on psychosocial interventions. My clinical conclusion is forceful: when the evidence is uncertain and the child is still developing, comprehensive assessment and patience must not be treated as cowardice. They are part of responsible care.

I made this argument at greater length in my book, Transgender Confusion Amidst the Search for Identity (Hansen, 2024). I have spent decades sitting across from young people who are desperately trying to make sense of themselves. I have no interest in turning their anguish into an ideological trophy. A child asking a difficult question deserves a clinician who listens long enough to understand the question—not someone racing to hand over an answer because the answer is fashionable.

What troubles me is the adult impulse to arrive with a permanent conclusion before childhood has had a chance to unfold. A boy who loves dance is still entitled to be a boy. A girl who repairs motorcycles is still entitled to be a girl. A child with persistent gender distress is

entitled to careful, humane, individualized care. None of these children needs somebody waving a political banner over the examination table. Development is not a fire alarm. And childhood is not a deadline.

Here is my plea: stop making children apologize for being male or female. Stop treating ordinary differences in interests as a diagnosis. Stop assigning inherited guilt. Stop substituting ideology for the patient, sometimes messy business of growing up. Let boys be boys. Let girls be girls. And let every child be an individual, deserving of respect and capable of becoming more than any adult's label.

Bringing the Pendulum Home

The biblical vision that moves me is not male above female or female above male. It is the shared dignity of human beings made in God's image (Genesis 1:27). Paul urges Timothy to treat older men as fathers, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with purity (1 Timothy 5:1–2). Peter calls husbands to honor their wives as fellow heirs of grace (1 Peter 3:7). Honor is not rationed by sex. Human dignity is not a competition.

Men, I am speaking to you. Treat the women in your lives with honor. Cherish them. Listen to them. Stand beside them when courage is required, and celebrate their accomplishments without believing that their success diminishes yours. Strength does not require domination, and tenderness does not require weakness.

But women, I am speaking to you as well. Extend us the same grace. Respect the men who are trying, the men who shoulder responsibilities and carry burdens they sometimes struggle to put into words. Correct us when correction is warranted; challenge us when we have lost our way. But please do not confuse belittlement with empowerment or contempt with strength.

Many men would willingly risk their lives for the women and children they love. They would run into burning buildings, stand between danger and their families, and surrender comforts to provide for someone else. Those sacrifices deserve recognition, just as women's innumerable sacrifices deserve recognition. A man should not have to surrender his dignity to demonstrate devotion. Neither should a woman.

For generations, women had legitimate reasons to demand that the cultural pendulum move toward fairness, opportunity, and recognition. Sometimes correcting an injustice requires a powerful push. But a pendulum that swings from one injustice to another has not discovered justice. It has merely changed direction.

I am not interested in winning a gender war. I am interested in ending one. But I am even less interested in watching our sons and daughters inherit it, beautifully packaged with a school-approved vocabulary list and a certificate of participation.

I want boys who can grow into honorable men without apologizing for being male. I want girls who can grow into strong women without believing that men are their natural adversaries. I want children to understand that their race, sex, and family history do not predetermine their moral character. Their conduct matters. Their choices matter. Their responsibility to others matters. I want fathers honored rather than caricatured, mothers cherished rather than taken for granted, and marriages built on friendship instead of competition.

Teach children to respect their dignity without stealing someone else's. Teach differences without manufacturing enemies. Teach history without inherited guilt. Teach confidence without arrogance and humility without humiliation. If we must pass something on, let it be courage, compassion, accountability, forgiveness, and the capacity to love people who are not exactly like us.

So, my male brethren, stand tall. Not above women. Not against women. Beside them. Be the kind of men who deserve respect. Keep your word, protect the vulnerable, love your wives, be present for your children, and admit when you are wrong. Learn to apologize without behaving as though somebody has demanded you surrender your testicles at the courthouse. And, yes, put the toilet seat down once in a while. I have examined the engineering. It is a remarkably simple mechanism.

To the women in our lives: we love you, admire you, and need you. We know your achievements have never required our humiliation, and ours have never required yours. Correct us when we deserve it. We will try to do the same with grace. But let us stop mistaking ridicule for progress and contempt for empowerment. Maybe the real revolution is not about which sex finally wins. Maybe it is about remembering that we were never supposed to be enemies in the first place.

And now I have a second confession. The longer I write this essay, the more I adore my outrageous little word. PASOGNY! I can hardly say it without smiling. It sounds simultaneously like a medical diagnosis, a Supreme Court case, and something you ought to have removed before it spreads. I can already picture the letter from a furious professor: "Dear Dr. Hansen, your word lacks proper authorization." Excellent. Put me on the dictionary committee. I will bring the coffee, although at seventy-two I recommend decaf. The last thing this debate needs is a caffeinated psychologist with a new noun.

Yet I want to end where I began: with love, not contempt. I want strong women and honorable men. I want boys who look forward to manhood and girls who can embrace womanhood, without either being taught to despise the other. I want parents who can correct without crushing, teachers who can inform without indoctrinating, and clinicians who

remember that children need care more than crusades. I want our sons and daughters to inherit courage instead of shame, gratitude instead of grievance, and the conviction that another person's dignity never subtracts from their own. And so, yes, I hope PASOGNY becomes a wildly popular word. I want dictionaries fighting over it. I want footnotes, pronunciation guides, perhaps even a modest commemorative plaque. But I pray the condition itself becomes increasingly rare. Let the word flourish and the contempt die. That would be the kind of revolution worth having—and the kind of inheritance worth leaving. It is time to bring the pendulum home.

References

Hall, R., Taylor, J., Hewitt, C. E., Heathcote, C., Jarvis, S. W., Langton, T., & Fraser, L. (2024). Impact of social transition in relation to gender for children and adolescents: A systematic review. Archives of Disease in Childhood, 109(Suppl. 2), s12–s18. https://doi.org/10.1136/archdischild-2023-326112

Hansen, J. E. (2024). Transgender confusion amidst the search for identity. [Publisher information to be confirmed for final bibliography.]

Heathcote, C., Taylor, J., Hall, R., Jarvis, S. W., Langton, T., Hewitt, C. E., & Fraser, L. (2024). Psychosocial support interventions for children and adolescents experiencing gender dysphoria or incongruence: A systematic review. Archives of Disease in Childhood, 109(Suppl. 2), s19–s32. https://doi.org/10.1136/archdischild-2023-326347

Kingsman, J. (2023). Negotiating masculine identities: Adolescent boys' experiences of a school-based rites of passage program and its potential for gender transformation. International Journal of Educational Research, 122, Article 102257. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2023.102257

National Film and Sound Archive of Australia. (n.d.). I am woman (1972). https://aso.gov.au/titles/music/i-am-woman/

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2026). Enhancing adolescent social and emotional well-being (OECD Papers on Well-being and Inequalities, No. 40). OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/00ebd3dd-en

Singh, D., Bradley, S. J., & Zucker, K. J. (2021). A follow-up study of boys with gender identity disorder. Frontiers in Psychiatry, 12, Article 632784. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2021.632784

Steensma, T. D., McGuire, J. K., Kreukels, B. P. C., Beekman, A. J., & Cohen-Kettenis, P. T. (2013). Factors associated with desistence and persistence of childhood gender dysphoria: A quantitative follow-up study. Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 52(6), 582–590. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2013.03.016

Wilde, E. (2026). The four horsemen: Criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. The Gottman Institute. https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-four-horsemen-recognizing-criticism-contempt-defensiveness-and-stonewalling-/efefeeferences



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 peculiar questions that occasionally lodge themselves in my restless brain: Why yellow? Where in the world did that expression come from? Before long, my curiosity about a rather colorful expression became a reflection on courage, sacrifice, and the responsibilities we sometimes prefer to leave to someone else.

But the word coward stayed with me. I see cowardice on the sidewalk, in our professional institutions, in positions of leadership, and, perhaps most painfully, among those of us who profess to be Christians. It is not always the dramatic sort of cowardice we associate with abandoning one's post on a battlefield. More often, it is the quiet, socially respectable decision to look the other way.

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, a man I deeply respect who has held positions of considerable responsibility and has himself stepped

forward when doing so carried consequences. His counsel deserves my attention.

And he has a point. I can be hyperbolic. Occasionally my intensity gets a little ahead of my vocabulary, and sometimes my vocabulary gets a little ahead of my Christian sensibilities! Strong convictions do not excuse careless language. Nor am I positioning myself above the crowd. Good grief, have I made mistakes! But there are things I cannot leave unsaid. 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. Interestingly, I still have that textbook.

The account I read was horrifying. Thirty-eight people had reportedly witnessed or heard a young woman being attacked without coming to her assistance. I remember thinking, how in the world could anybody do that? How could you know another human being was being harmed and simply stand by? Then the question turned inward: What kind of man do I want to become? 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.

An important historical correction belongs here. Manning et al. (2007) examined the historical record and found that the familiar account of thirty-eight inactive witnesses was inaccurate. Some neighbors did respond, including Sophie Farrar, who rushed to Kitty's side. The exact number of witnesses remains uncertain. If we profess to be seekers of truth, we must be willing to correct even those accounts that have

profoundly influenced our lives. The correction changes how we should describe that tragedy; it does not change the commitment it awakened in me.

The case helped inspire the pioneering research of John Darley and Bibb Latané (1968) on diffusion of responsibility. In their experiments, participants who believed other people were also aware of an emergency were less likely to respond promptly than those who believed they alone were aware of it. Our perceived personal responsibility can diminish when we believe others are available to act.

Consider how readily that phenomenon can manifest itself in our neighborhoods, workplaces, churches, and governmental organizations. How often do you recognize something wrong and assume someone else will address it? Perhaps someone with greater authority, fewer professional vulnerabilities, or a little more courage will step forward. But what if everyone else is thinking precisely the same thing?

Cowardice on the Sidewalk

You need not be a military officer, a physician, or a psychologist to encounter a moment that tests your willingness to stand up for another human being. Just yesterday, while walking down the street, I witnessed a motorist honking impatiently at an older person. I finally said something to him. What are you doing? For heaven's sake, give the person a little grace!

On another occasion, I was walking down a sidewalk when I encountered a couple who appeared to be homeless. The man was smashing his partner's cell phone, stomping on it. I had no idea what was going on with him, but I was sufficiently disturbed by his behavior that I confronted him and told him to knock it off. I could not simply walk past it as though it were none of my business.

I am not suggesting that getting in the face of an aggressive stranger is always the wisest course of action. Sometimes the courageous response is to call for assistance, enlist other people, or help the person being threatened get to safety. What troubles me is how easily we can mistake doing nothing for exercising good judgment. There is a difference between choosing a sensible way to help and choosing not to help at all.

How often do we see someone being humiliated, bullied, or treated with extraordinary rudeness and decide that saying something would be too uncomfortable? You do not need to deliver an impassioned speech. Sometimes a simple "That is not okay" is sufficient. Common decency should not require an act of heroism, but apparently it sometimes requires more courage than we are willing to muster.

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 professional deficits that needed attention, and my responsibility was to help him address them. Our supervisory relationship had a clearly understood purpose: 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 regarding its purpose. I cannot quietly turn that relationship into an effort to gather evidence against him."

Well, that certainly did not enhance my popularity! Comments began reaching my rater that I was not playing ball with the system. Meanwhile, the deputy commander and chief of psychiatry began assigning Captain Joe tasks that, in my judgment, were designed to ensure his failure. I considered myself a reasonably 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 eventually had enough and took my concerns to the Inspector General. I was subsequently called to testify, and the chief of psychiatry ultimately lost his position.

Was there a price attached to speaking? You bet there was. The deputy commander had considerable influence over my career. I had no idea what my refusal might do to my evaluations or my future. The stress was enormous. Moral courage sounds rather noble when we discuss it in the abstract. It feels considerably different when the person sitting across the desk has the authority to derail your career.

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. Cooperating would have been easier, but it would also have required me to put my name behind something I could not honestly support. That decision contributed to a less-than-top-tier Officer Evaluation Report (OER), making promotion to lieutenant colonel less likely.

During my later work with the Department of Defense, a soldier and mother whom I treated was facing a court-martial over allegations that, based on my clinical findings, I believed were unfounded. In my judgment, her command had already decided to pursue her removal because of an aspect of her personal identity, and evidence that challenged its position was unwelcome.

My own leadership preferred that we stay out of these disputes, keep seeing patients, and stay in our lane. 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 involves 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 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.

I rather liked the nickname. Apparently, however, being a maverick is not a particularly effective career advancement strategy! The promotion mattered. But so did the people whose futures were on the line. Some might say I fell on my sword. I would say I maintained my integrity.

The Remarkable Psychology of Looking the Other Way

What fascinates and disturbs me as a psychologist is the extraordinary capacity human beings possess to accommodate behavior that violates their professed values. Albert Bandura (1999) described a phenomenon known as moral disengagement. We can suspend our usual moral restraints by rationalizing harmful conduct, minimizing its consequences, displacing responsibility onto authority figures, or diffusing responsibility among members of a group.

I was simply following orders. It was not my decision. I have a family to support. Someone else will address it. I cannot afford to jeopardize my career.

The rationalizations can be remarkably sophisticated. The underlying decision, however, may be remarkably simple: we have chosen to protect ourselves. And therein lies the danger. We can compromise our moral integrity without ever having to confront ourselves as morally compromised individuals.

The more frequently we justify looking away, the easier it may become to do so again. Eventually, we may convince ourselves that our reluctance to act reflects professional maturity, political astuteness, diplomacy, or organizational loyalty. Good grief, we can even become rather proud of our ability to navigate the system! But what exactly have we become proficient at navigating, and what have we sacrificed along the way?

Professional Cowardice: Polished, Credentialed, and Well Compensated

Some of the most disappointing manifestations of cowardice I have encountered have been among highly educated professionals. During my tenure at Madigan Army Medical Center, I spoke publicly and

testified about my concerns regarding the overmedicalization of children experiencing gender distress and the complexities of early affirmation. There were demands that my professional license be taken away. False allegations of defrauding the government were subsequently made against me, allegations that have since been acknowledged as false.

Were there colleagues who came to my defense? Yes, and I remain grateful to them. But some did so very tepidly. I read statements so carefully constructed that I came away wondering whether their authors were more concerned about stating the truth or about minimizing their own professional exposure. I did not need anyone to embellish the facts on my behalf. I needed people to state them plainly.

And even now, as I attempt to obtain the remaining documentation necessary to bring closure to this chapter of my life, I continue to encounter incomplete responses, reluctance, and documents that have yet to be provided. Good grief, how much courage should it take to produce a document or make an unequivocally truthful statement? After years of dealing with the consequences, I have very little patience left for this kind of institutional timidity.

Morrison and Milliken (2000) described organizational silence, a condition in which employees collectively withhold information about organizational problems because speaking is perceived as dangerous or futile. Their framework helps explain how institutional environments can reward conformity and self-preservation at the expense of candid communication. But an explanation is not an absolution.

What a horribly dysfunctional organization we create when the people identifying problems become more problematic to leadership than the problems they identify. An institution that punishes its truth-tellers should not be surprised when it eventually runs out of them.

To my professional colleagues, what in the hell are those impressive credentials worth if, when your integrity is actually tested, you retreat into carefully constructed ambiguity? You can possess a doctorate, an impressive military rank, a prestigious academic appointment, and a beautifully framed professional code of ethics. None of those things confers moral courage. A professional code of ethics that you are unwilling to defend when doing so becomes personally costly is little more than expensive wall decoration.

And to those of you occupying positions of leadership, what kind of institutional culture are you cultivating? Do you welcome information that challenges your decisions, or have you surrounded yourself with people who have become extraordinarily proficient at telling you what you want to hear? Who ultimately pays the price for that silence? Often, it is the very patients, soldiers, children, and families your institution was established to serve.

Christian Cowardice: When Faith Becomes an Accessory

To my beloved Christian brothers and sisters, you are not getting a pass from this old psychologist either. Some of the biggest cowards I have encountered have been people who profess Christianity. That is particularly painful to me because I am a Christian, and I expect more of us.

How readily we can speak about biblical truth on Sunday morning and then become remarkably silent on Monday when standing up for another person threatens our comfort, reputation, or professional standing. We can be quick to offer a sympathetic word in private and remarkably reluctant to offer a truthful word in public when it might actually make a difference.

What exactly are we professing? Christ confronted hypocrisy, challenged religious authority, and defended those whom others were prepared to condemn. The early apostles understood that their convictions could cost them their freedom and even their lives. And we are worried about ticking somebody off? Good grief!

James 4:17 speaks directly to the responsibility to act: knowing the good we ought to do and failing to do it is itself a sin. We tend to focus on the wrong things we have done. What about the good things we knew we should have done and did not?

Churches, wake the hell up! Give us something more than vanilla, milquetoast sermons that allow us to leave on Sunday morning feeling good about ourselves without confronting how we actually live. Teach us what moral courage looks like when it is inconvenient. Challenge us to stand beside someone being mistreated, even when doing so puts us at odds with people whose approval we cherish.

And fellow Christians, do not confuse graciousness with moral timidity. Speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) does not mean rendering the truth so innocuous that nobody is challenged by it. Love without the willingness to act when someone needs us is a rather impoverished expression of love. That admonition applies to me every bit as much as it does to you.

When Silence Becomes Cowardice

Cowardice can sit comfortably in an air-conditioned office, wear an expensive suit, attend a church service, or walk right past someone being mistreated. It does not always announce itself with trembling knees. Sometimes it announces itself with an impressive explanation of why this is not the appropriate time to get involved.

Knowing what is right and possessing the courage to do what is right are two very different psychological accomplishments. Hannah et al. (2011) proposed a framework for understanding the capacities that help translate moral understanding into action. These include moral ownership, or accepting personal responsibility; moral efficacy, or confidence in our capacity to act ethically; and moral courage, or the willingness to act despite the risks involved.

You can possess a sophisticated understanding of ethics and still fail miserably when called upon to exercise it. Courage is not the absence of fear. I have experienced enormous stress in some of the situations I have described. Courage is deciding that something matters more than that fear.

Courage also requires judgment. Being loud, confrontational, or obnoxious does not automatically make you courageous. Feeling certain does not automatically make you right. There are legitimate reasons to listen, examine evidence, protect confidentiality, and choose an effective course of action. But there are also moments when we know enough. We recognize the dishonesty, see the person being harmed, and understand that cooperating or remaining silent 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. Sometimes the necessary response is to refuse an order, decline to sign a document, offer testimony, speak up in a meeting, or simply stand beside someone whom others have decided to abandon. And let us not confuse loyalty with obedience. Your participation in something

dishonorable does not become honorable simply because someone of higher rank 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. Those who know me well would probably find such an effort rather entertaining.

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

Convictions are easy to profess when everyone around us applauds them. The test comes when those convictions threaten our comfort, income, standing, or the approval of someone whose favor we would like to keep. Then we discover whether our convictions 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 become, and what are you willing to endure to become him?

Outer Wounds, Inner Peace

Speaking may cost you. You may lose opportunities, friendships, or the approval of an institution you served faithfully. 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. There is something profoundly reassuring about knowing you stepped into the wind when it would have been considerably easier to turn your back to it.

As I look back, was it worth it? Yes. Thank God that young man in a social psychology classroom understood something important, and thank God that understanding stayed with him. My friend was right to remind me to choose my words carefully. I can honor his counsel without relinquishing the commitment I made all those years ago.

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.

References

Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 3*(3), 193–209. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0303_3

Darley, J. M., & Latané, B. (1968). Bystander intervention in emergencies: Diffusion of responsibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 8*(4), 377–383. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0025589

Hannah, S. T., Avolio, B. J., & May, D. R. (2011). Moral maturation and moral conation: A capacity approach to explaining moral thought and action. *Academy of Management Review, 36*(4), 663–685. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2010.0128

Manning, R., Levine, M., & Collins, A. (2007). The Kitty Genovese murder and the social psychology of helping: The parable of the 38 witnesses. *American Psychologist, 62*(6), 555–562. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.6.555

Morrison, E. W., & Milliken, F. J. (2000). Organizational silence: A barrier to change and development in a pluralistic world. *Academy of Management Review, 25*(4), 706–725. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2000.3707697



A Line Was Crossed

For years now, there has been a slow and unmistakable encroachment into one of the most protected and sacred spaces in our culture, the therapy room. It did not happen all at once, and that is precisely why it was so easy to miss at first. It came gradually, almost quietly, advancing inch by inch. First as guidance. Then as regulation. And eventually as something far more concerning, far more intrusive, the attempt to control what therapists are allowed to say, what questions they are permitted to ask, and which directions of inquiry are deemed acceptable or unacceptable by forces outside the room.

And that is where the line was crossed.

On March 31, 2026, in **Chiles v. Salazar, the Supreme Court of the United States** stepped in and drew a line that should never have been crossed in the first place. In an 8 to 1 decision, the Court made it unmistakably clear that the government does not have the authority to dictate the content of therapy based on preferred viewpoints. That is

not regulation. That is not benign oversight. That is overreach, and it is precisely the kind of overreach the Constitution exists to restrain. This ruling did not merely resolve a legal question. It restored something that had been under increasing pressure, something foundational, something that cannot be compromised without doing harm to the very people therapy is meant to serve. It restored the integrity of the therapeutic relationship.

How We Got Here

To understand the weight of that decision, you have to understand what was happening in Colorado. Under the stated goal of protecting minors, the state enacted a law that reached directly into the therapy room and began defining what licensed clinicians could and could not explore in conversations related to identity, particularly gender identity. On its surface, it sounded protective, even compassionate. It was framed in the language of care. But in practice, it functioned as a constraint on clinical judgment. It replaced the nuance of individualized care with a predetermined boundary around what was considered acceptable exploration. It substituted the lived, relational, moment to moment discernment of a trained clinician with a rigid, externally imposed framework.

It did not trust the therapist.

It did not trust the patient.

It trusted the state.

The named respondent, Patty Salazar, served as the Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies, an administrative position responsible for oversight across a wide range of professions. It is a role rooted in policy, compliance, and enforcement. It is not a role

grounded in psychotherapy. It is not shaped by years of sitting with patients, working through trauma, identity confusion, developmental struggles, attachment wounds, and the deeply human process of meaning making. And yet, through that office, the state assumed the authority to define what constitutes appropriate therapeutic conversation.

That should give every clinician, every parent, and every citizen pause.



Because if that authority stands, the therapy room ceases to be a place of exploration and becomes a place of compliance.

When Regulation Becomes Control

Because the question in this case was never simply about protecting patients. Ethical clinicians are already bound, rigorously and rightly, to protect those they serve. We are accountable to ethical codes, licensing boards, professional standards, and most importantly, to the well-being of the human being sitting across from us. The real question was whether the state could go further, whether it could begin to prescribe

how therapy must unfold, what must be affirmed, what may not be questioned, and which avenues of exploration are effectively closed off, regardless of the patient's own stated goals, experiences, and internal conflicts.

When that occurs, something essential begins to erode. The therapeutic space narrows, not because of clinical judgment, but because of externally imposed limits on what may be explored and understood. At that point, therapy no longer functions as a process of discovery grounded in the patient's experience. It becomes, in effect, a state directed dialogue, shaped less by the needs of the individual and more by predetermined boundaries of acceptable thought.

That is a profound shift, and a dangerous one.

Why We Stepped Forward

This case drew national attention because many of us recognized what was at stake and chose not to remain silent. I had the privilege, and I would say the responsibility, of contributing to an amicus curiae brief, titled Amicus Curiae Brief of Medical Professionals in Support of Petitioner, alongside colleagues who are not abstract voices, but seasoned professionals with deep expertise across medicine, endocrinology, pediatrics, and clinical care. Among those who stood together in this brief were the distinguished and widely respected Michelle A. Cretella, M.D., Executive Director of the American College of Pediatricians; Michael K. Laidlaw, M.D., an endocrinologist and expert in hormone physiology; Quentin L. Van Meter, M.D., a pediatric endocrinologist and former president of the American College of Pediatricians; André Van Mol, M.D., a board-certified family physician and co-chair of the American College of Pediatricians' Committee on Adolescent Sexuality; and Maria Keffler, an author and public speaker

focused on parental rights and child advocacy. Alongside them, I contributed as a clinical psychologist, grounded in decades of work with adolescents, trauma, identity formation, and the layered psychological realities that unfold in the therapy room. These are not theoretical voices. These are clinicians, physicians, and professionals who have spent their lives working with real patients, real families, and real suffering. These are individuals who carry responsibility, not just opinion. And we stepped forward together, not because it was easy, but because it was necessary.

Because there are moments when silence becomes complicity.

And this was one of those moments.

The Critical Distortion

At the heart of our concern was a growing and deeply problematic conflation, one that has been repeated often enough that it has begun to take on the appearance of truth. Historically, what has been called conversion therapy referred to coercive attempts to change sexual orientation. These practices were often ethically indefensible and, in many cases, harmful. They have been widely rejected, and rightly so.

There is little disagreement on that point within the profession. In recent years, however, the meaning of that term has expanded in ways that collapse fundamentally different forms of therapy into a single category.

Exploratory therapy, which is careful, patient directed, and grounded in ethical clinical practice, has increasingly been drawn into that same label. In doing so, an important distinction has been lost. This concern has been articulated clearly by **Debra Soh, Ph.D.,** a sexologist and former academic researcher whose work has been published in peer

reviewed scientific journals, including research conducted at institutions such as York University. Though generally regarded as politically liberal leaning, she has been notably willing to challenge ideological overreach from within her own side. In her book *The End of Gender*, she describes how the term conversion therapy has been inflated through conflation, expanding beyond its original meaning in ways that erase critical distinctions. What follows is not simply imprecision, but a critical distortion of meaning that reshapes the conversation, misrepresents the nature of therapeutic work, and obscures the ethical boundaries that actually matter.

This is not a minor semantic issue. It is a meaningful mischaracterization that carries real consequences for both clinicians and patients. When a patient says, *"I do not want to move in a certain direction, but I need to understand why I feel this way,"* the ethical response is not to shut that down. It is not to redirect them toward a predetermined outcome or to foreclose exploration before it has even begun.

The ethical response is to engage the question fully and thoughtfully. It is to explore developmental history, trauma, relational patterns, identity formation, and the broader psychological landscape in which that experience has emerged. It is to remain grounded in the patient's stated goals while bringing clinical skill, curiosity, and care to the process.

That is not coercion. It is appropriate and responsible clinical care.

That is therapy.

What the Court Restored

The Court recognized this issue for what it truly is. It affirmed that therapy is, at its core, speech, deeply personal, exploratory, and meaning-making speech that unfolds in the context of trust and professional responsibility. To regulate that kind of speech based on viewpoint is not simply a matter of policy or preference; it crosses into unconstitutional territory by restricting the very process through which individuals come to understand themselves. In doing so, the Court drew an important line, one that protects not only clinicians, but the integrity of the therapeutic relationship itself.

For those of us who have spent our lives engaged in this work, the implications are both immediate and profound. Therapy is not a scripted exchange or a predetermined outcome. It is a process of discovery, often nonlinear and at times uncomfortable, where patients are given the space to examine their thoughts, emotions, beliefs, and experiences without coercion or constraint.

When a patient sits down and says, ***"Help me understand myself,"*** they are not asking for direction imposed from the outside. They are asking for guidance in making sense of their own internal world, and that requires freedom, freedom to explore, to question, and to arrive at meaning in a way that is authentic to them. This ruling restores and reinforces that freedom. It allows clinicians to practice ethically and responsibly, grounded in their training and professional judgment, without the fear that certain lines of inquiry are off-limits simply because they challenge prevailing viewpoints. It safeguards the therapeutic space as one where truth can be pursued, not prescribed, and where the goal is not ideological conformity, but genuine understanding and healing.

A Final Word

There is one final point that must be said, and it needs to be said without hesitation. What has unfolded in recent years is not merely a shift in clinical thinking. It reflects a bending of language, a collapsing of essential distinctions, and a movement away from the disciplined clarity that our profession depends on. When that clarity is lost, the consequences are not abstract. They are borne by patients.

We cannot afford that.

Words must mean what they mean if our work is to remain grounded and ethical. A practice rooted in coercion cannot be equated with a process rooted in exploration, and a framework built on predetermined outcomes cannot be confused with one grounded in patient autonomy.

When a patient enters the room seeking to understand their own internal experience, the ethical obligation is not to narrow that path, but to walk it with them carefully and thoughtfully, without imposing conclusions that are not their own. That is not coercion.

That is therapy.

Therapy is not a tool of the state, nor is it a vehicle for ideology. It is a disciplined, relational, deeply human process that requires humility, restraint, and the courage to sit with complexity. It calls the clinician to respond to the individual in front of them, not to an abstract framework, not to a cultural mandate, and not to pressures that originate outside the room. When that freedom is constrained, even subtly, the work itself is compromised.



This moment also calls for reflection among the institutions that shape the field. The American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Endocrine Society, and others hold immense influence, and with that influence comes responsibility, to precision, to science, and to truth. When those anchors drift, the consequences do not remain theoretical. They show up in the therapy room, and they show up in the lives of patients.

To my colleagues, both those who have stepped forward and those who are watching carefully, this is a moment that requires clarity and courage. There is risk in being visible, and there is risk in attaching your name to positions that will be challenged, scrutinized, and at times opposed. But there is also responsibility, responsibility to the profession, responsibility to the science, and above all, responsibility to our patients. Some things are worth that risk. We do not step forward because it is comfortable. We step forward because it is necessary, because truth requires it, because our profession depends on it, and because our patients deserve it.

And we must be willing to say plainly what is true. A rock is a rock. A tree is a tree. Exploratory therapy is not coercion. Inquiry is not harm. Listening is not abuse. The therapy room belongs where it has always belonged, in the space between clinician and patient, grounded in trust, guided by ethics, and oriented toward truth, not the state, not ideology.

Truth.

And that is not something we will surrender.



Some Things Were Worth Keeping

All right, let's get something out of the way right at the beginning. I'm getting old. There, I've said it. At 72, I figure I've earned the right to be a little nostalgic, occasionally sentimental, and perhaps even downright maudlin about the good old days. I can almost hear some of my younger colleagues rolling their eyes already. Fair enough. I've probably earned that, too. And yes, I realize that whenever someone my age begins a sentence with "Back in my day," there's a reasonable chance that a lecture is about to follow. Bear with me. I promise there is a point to all this.

Not everything about the old days was good. We had our share of foolishness, blind spots, and traditions that deserved to be challenged or abandoned. Some things needed to go, and good riddance. But other things were worth keeping, including the ordinary courtesies that communicated respect, consideration, and the simple recognition that another human being mattered. Somewhere in our enthusiastic rush

toward technological progress, I wonder whether we misplaced a few of those treasures.

We live in an age of extraordinary accessibility. Our phones are rarely beyond arm's reach, messages arrive around the clock, and we can communicate with nearly anyone, anywhere, almost instantly. Yet I increasingly encounter people who feel unseen, emotionally disconnected, and uncertain whether the people in their lives are genuinely available to them. We have become extraordinarily sophisticated at reaching one another while sometimes seeming remarkably reluctant to actually connect.

I rather like technology. I use it constantly, and I appreciate being able to communicate with my children, collaborate with colleagues, and maintain friendships across considerable distances. But convenience and connection are not synonyms. An electronic interface can transmit information with remarkable efficiency while communicating almost nothing about the warmth, interest, or emotional presence of the person on the other end.

And that distinction, I believe, is more important than we may realize.

The Neuroscience of Connection

One of the most fascinating developments in neuroscience has been our growing understanding of just how profoundly relationships shape the human brain. We tend to imagine ourselves as independent individuals, each equipped with a brain that manages our thoughts, emotions, and behavior. But human beings do not develop in isolation, nor do our nervous systems operate independently of the relationships in which we live.

Psychiatrist Daniel Siegel's work in interpersonal neurobiology has helped illuminate the intricate relationship among brain, body, mind, and interpersonal experience (Siegel, 2012). From infancy onward, our emotional lives are shaped through interactions with other people. A frightened baby settles in the arms of a familiar caregiver. A distressed child becomes calmer when a parent listens and responds with warmth. Adults continue to experience similar processes, although we may be less willing to acknowledge how deeply we need one another.

In a particularly fascinating study, Coan and colleagues (2006) demonstrated that holding the hand of a trusted spouse was associated with reduced neural responses to anticipated threat. The physical danger had not changed, yet the presence of someone trusted influenced how the brain responded to it. That finding captures something I have observed throughout my clinical career: another human being does not always have to solve our problem to help us experience it differently.

Social neuroscientist John Cacioppo devoted much of his distinguished career to studying loneliness and its implications for human health. His work helped clarify an important distinction: loneliness is not simply the absence of people, but the subjective experience of insufficient meaningful connection (Cacioppo et al., 2015). We can live alone and feel deeply connected, or we can be surrounded by colleagues, family members, and hundreds of digital contacts while experiencing profound loneliness.

The health implications are sobering. A major meta-analysis involving approximately 3.4 million participants found that loneliness and social isolation were associated with increased mortality risk (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). These findings do not establish that loneliness directly

causes particular illnesses, but they underscore that social connection is not some sentimental luxury. It belongs in any serious discussion of human health and well-being.

What fascinates me is the contradiction between what we are discovering scientifically and what we sometimes practice culturally. We now possess extraordinary knowledge about attachment, emotional regulation, relational safety, and the therapeutic alliance. Yet it seems increasingly possible to move through an entire day surrounded by communication while experiencing remarkably little personal encounter.

As a psychologist, I find that paradox difficult to ignore.

What the Nervous System Remembers



Much of my clinical work has involved helping people understand how earlier experiences shape their present emotional lives. Through NeuroFaith®, I integrate polyvagal-informed therapy, HeartMath® and

neurocardiology, Internal Family Systems, and spirituality or faith. These are distinct perspectives with differing levels of research support, and NeuroFaith® is certainly not the only integrative approach to deeper transformational healing. But the model reflects a conviction that has grown stronger throughout my career: we cannot adequately understand psychological suffering without considering the relationship among bodily responses, emotional defenses, core beliefs, and the ways people experience themselves in relationship to others.

Consider someone who grew up feeling unwanted or emotionally abandoned. As an adult, that person may intellectually understand that a spouse or close friend loves them, yet an unanswered telephone call or an ambiguous text message can activate an old and painful expectation: *I don't matter. I'm being rejected. Something is wrong with me.*

The rational mind may recognize that the other person is probably busy, but the body has already begun preparing for abandonment. Breathing changes, anxiety rises, and a familiar emotional narrative takes hold. The immediate situation may be relatively insignificant, but it has touched something much older.

This is one reason I distinguish between incremental and transformational therapeutic change. Coping strategies can help people manage distress, often quite effectively, but when suffering is organized around deeply established negative beliefs about the self, meaningful healing may require helping those beliefs and emotional expectations change. A relationship marked by consistency, appropriate boundaries, and genuine responsiveness can provide experiences that challenge old assumptions about being unwanted, unsafe, or unworthy of care.

None of this means that people must remain constantly available to one another or that an unanswered message constitutes emotional abandonment. Such an expectation would be unrealistic and psychologically unhealthy. But it does suggest that the quality of our everyday interactions can carry emotional significance far beyond the literal words exchanged.

Our nervous systems are exquisitely sensitive to the difference between feeling received and feeling dismissed. Technology has not eliminated that sensitivity. It has simply given us new ways to encounter it.

When Communication Loses Its Humanity

Perhaps this is why I find some of our changing communication habits so curious. I call someone's telephone and hear nothing but a recorded sequence of numbers, leaving me uncertain whether I've even reached the correct person. I send a thoughtful professional email and occasionally receive no acknowledgment whatsoever. I participate in group discussions where people have supposedly gathered around a shared purpose, only to discover that getting an actual exchange of ideas underway can feel like trying to start a conversation with the furniture.

And yes, I confess that this sometimes drives me nuts.

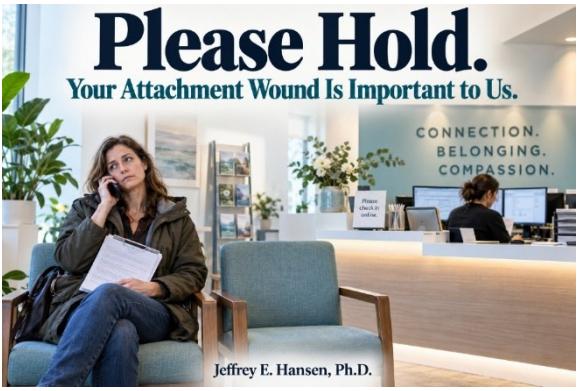
I appreciate that people are busy. I certainly am, and I have undoubtedly overlooked calls and messages myself. Nobody owes us unlimited access to their time or attention. Healthy boundaries matter, particularly in a world where electronic communication can intrude upon nearly every waking hour. But I do wonder whether the convenience of digital communication has made it easier to avoid some of the ordinary relational responsibilities we once took for granted.

This becomes especially interesting among those of us in the helping professions. We teach attachment theory, discuss emotional attunement, and emphasize the therapeutic importance of feeling understood and valued. Then we occasionally communicate with our own colleagues with all the interpersonal warmth of a parking meter. There is something wonderfully absurd about that contradiction, although I'm not sure it's entirely funny.

My concern is not that electronic communication is inherently shallow. Research has long demonstrated that meaningful relationships can develop through computer-mediated interaction (Walther, 1996). Technology can sustain friendships, bridge enormous distances, and provide connection that might otherwise be impossible. The question is whether we are using these remarkable tools to deepen our relationships or gradually allowing them to become substitutes for relationships themselves.

There is a difference between exchanging messages and experiencing another person's presence, and I worry that we sometimes forget it.

Please Hold. Your Attachment Wound Is Important to Us.



This gets under my skin in behavioral health care, particularly in the substance use treatment community where I have spent considerable time. People arrive after years of neglect, betrayal, and relationships in which needing something made them a nuisance. Some have finally scraped together enough hope to ask for help. Then they enter a program that advertises connection, belonging, and compassionate care, and discover that getting someone to return a call requires the persistence of a bill collector.

We assess their attachment wounds. We document their fear of abandonment. We explain how repeated experiences of emotional unavailability shaped their expectations of others. Then we fail to follow through on something we promised. Well, hell. The patient has supplied the history, and we are apparently volunteering to help with the sequel.

I have worked alongside wonderful people in these settings. I have also watched administrative machinery swallow enough of their time and attention to make genuine engagement feel like an extracurricular activity. Everybody is busy. Everybody is charting. Somewhere, a dashboard is turning green. Meanwhile, a frightened person is sitting in the lobby wondering whether coming here was a mistake. But the record will show that services were delivered.

I understand boundaries. I have spent forty years trying to maintain them, occasionally while answering a question that arrived just as I was reaching for the doorknob. Nobody owes patients unlimited availability. But if I say I will call, I ought to call. If I cannot, somebody ought to explain. We do not need to become surrogate parents or hand out our personal numbers like party favors. We do need to notice when

our behavior starts resembling the indifference we are being paid to help people recover from.

The research on therapeutic relationships gives us good reason to take connection seriously (Norcross & Lambert, 2018). I have seen its importance in moments that would look thoroughly unimpressive in a training video. A patient stops mid-sentence, looks at me, and says, "You actually get it." Sometimes that moment follows a thoughtful intervention. Sometimes I have simply managed to keep my mouth shut long enough to hear something important. A humbling return on four decades of professional education.

What bothers me is the distance between the language and the experience. Put "We treat you like family" on a website, and I immediately want to know which family we are talking about. Some of our patients have already survived one. They need people who mean what they say, make room for difficult conversations, and follow through often enough for trust to become a reasonable risk. Before paying somebody to refresh the compassionate branding, I would call the program, leave a message, and see whether the compassion knows how to work a telephone.

And Then There Are Our Kids – and They Are Watching US

Being a pediatric psychologist at heart, I cannot leave this essay without turning to the people I have spent decades treating and care so deeply about: our children and adolescents. Those reading this who know me, knew I would get around to the kids eventually. Spend enough years sitting on the floor with children and trying to persuade teenagers that you are worth talking to, and they tend to follow you into whatever you write.

I find myself wondering what we are teaching them about connection. They are growing up with the ability to reach almost anyone instantly, yet calling someone, leaving a voicemail, or having an uncomfortable conversation can feel like an unreasonable expedition into the wilderness. I have known teenagers whose kindness and relational maturity would put plenty of adults to shame. But I have also met young people who can maintain twelve text exchanges at once and look at a ringing telephone as though it has just threatened their lives.



Before we get too pleased with ourselves, however, we might examine who taught them. Children watch how we speak to one another, whether we listen, and what happens when a notification arrives in the middle of their sentence. We can deliver a magnificent lecture about courtesy while checking our messages, but I would not expect a standing ovation. Teenagers have a particularly irritating gift for noticing when the sermon and the demonstration have wandered off in different directions. They have a **superpower for hypocrisy detection** in us.

Texting certainly has its place in family life. "Practice ends at five." "Please pick up milk." "Where are you?" followed by the timeless parental sequel, "I can see that you read this." It helps us manage busy

lives and send affection across an ordinary day. But a family can become remarkably efficient at coordinating transportation while gradually losing track of how anyone is actually doing. Everybody gets delivered to the correct location. Whether anybody feels known when they arrive is another question.

There is something precious about hearing your child's voice. Parents learn the hesitation before an answer, the unusual flatness, the effort required to make "I'm fine" sound convincing. A familiar voice can prompt us to ask another question or stay on the line a little longer. Our children need to hear us, too: the pleasure in our greeting, the reassurance that we have time, the warmth that can be difficult to squeeze into a hurried message. Sometimes a conversation begins with absolutely nothing important and takes ten minutes to find what needed saying.

So yes, I think we should teach children how to use the telephone for an actual conversation. Radical stuff. A friendly voicemail greeting, returning a call, introducing yourself, and recognizing when something deserves more than a text are reasonable things to learn. If I am paying for the phone, I also think I can expect a call from home to be answered when circumstances permit or returned within a reasonable time. School, work, driving, and a life of their own all deserve consideration. I simply question the arrangement in which the device works beautifully for everyone on earth except the people financing it.

What matters most is helping our children become comfortable with the ordinary vulnerability of conversation. Apologizing while someone can hear the sincerity in your voice. Disagreeing and staying present long enough to work something through. Listening without immediately preparing your defense. Telling someone you love them

and allowing the words a moment to land. Those things can feel awkward, especially while learning them. That is a good reason to practice at home, where an imperfect attempt can be met with patience rather than a performance review.

And we owe them that same willingness. Sometimes our children will want to talk when we are tired, distracted, or halfway through something we would dearly love to finish. We will miss opportunities. I certainly have. But we can put the phone down, turn back, and say, "I'm sorry. Tell me again." They get to watch us repair the very thing we hope they will learn to repair.

After all these years, I still love the moment when a child or teenager realizes an adult is interested in what they have to say. The rehearsed answer gives way to something more honest, and the conversation finally gets somewhere. I would like our children to have plenty of those moments at home. Eventually, the phone we bought them will be obsolete. Knowing how to reach another person, and how to let someone reach them, will still come in handy.

The Older I Get, the Less Patience I Have for Empty Water Troughs

There's something wonderfully liberating about turning 72. For one thing, you can say almost anything and people aren't entirely sure whether you're dispensing wisdom or just becoming a cranky old man. I've decided there's a certain advantage in keeping them guessing.

But aging does bring a rather fascinating change in perspective. Time, which once seemed to stretch endlessly ahead, begins looking a bit more like a limited-edition commodity. I don't find that depressing. Quite the opposite. It has made me considerably more selective about how I

spend it, whom I spend it with, and how much nonsense I'm willing to entertain along the way. And believe me, I've entertained plenty.

After decades in military service, medicine, psychology, private practice, and more committees and professional collaborations than any reasonable human being should endure, I've discovered something rather remarkable: impressive credentials do not necessarily produce impressive human beings. I've known people with enough letters behind their names to exhaust the alphabet who couldn't manage the simple courtesy of returning a phone call. Conversely, I've known people without a single professional credential whose warmth, integrity, and faithfulness could teach the rest of us a graduate seminar in being human.

I've also learned that some relationships are wonderfully reciprocal, while others seem to require the emotional equivalent of jump-starting a dead battery every time you want to connect. You initiate the conversation, send the message, follow up, encourage, organize, and occasionally wonder whether the other person is still alive. Eventually, even a reasonably enthusiastic fellow begins to suspect he's doing all the rowing while everyone else is enjoying the scenery.

And that's where an old rural image comes to mind. If you keep walking up to the same water trough and finding nothing worth drinking, perhaps the problem isn't that you haven't waited long enough. Perhaps it's time to find another trough.



I'm not interested in drinking from that water trough anymore, because there ain't no good water in it. Now, I say that with a grin, not a grudge. I've been on both sides of that equation, and I'm sure I've disappointed my share of people along the way. Nor do I expect friends or colleagues to be perpetually available. Good grief, I wouldn't want to be perpetually available myself. There are motorcycles to ride, dogs to love, books to write, and a beautiful bride with whom I'd much rather spend an evening than chase down another unanswered email.

What I want more of these days is wonderfully uncomplicated: people who enjoy one another, who can argue without becoming enemies, laugh at themselves, challenge each other to grow, and occasionally call for no other reason than to hear a familiar voice. Relationships that don't require elaborate maintenance schedules or the intervention of a search-and-rescue team.

Perhaps growing older isn't so much about learning to let go as it is about becoming clearer on what deserves to be held close. I've been blessed with some extraordinary people in my life, and I would rather give them the best of what remains of mine than keep knocking on doors where nobody seems particularly interested in answering.

Besides, at 72, I've got better things to do than spend another afternoon trying to teach a water trough how to hold water.

The Presence That Matters



I don't miss rotary phones. By the time you finished dialing somebody with three nines in their number, you had reconsidered the friendship. Nor do I believe earlier generations had perfected human relationships. We managed to ignore one another quite successfully before anybody invented airplane mode.

What I value is the pleasure of reaching someone who is glad to hear from you. A colleague who follows up. A friend who calls without needing anything. A conversation that wanders somewhere interesting because neither person is trying to dispose of it. Sometimes you solve a problem. Sometimes you laugh at something you probably shouldn't. Sometimes you discover what has been bothering you halfway through telling somebody about your otherwise perfectly ordinary day.

I enjoy the convenience of these devices as much as anybody. But I have spent enough time chasing communication to appreciate the people with whom it comes easily. We make the effort, forgive the occasional

lapse, and pick up where we left off. Nobody needs to issue a tracking number.

I have no idea what technology will offer us twenty years from now. I hope it's wonderful. In the meantime, if you call and I can answer, I'd like you to hear that I'm pleased it's you. We might even have a conversation neither of us planned.

Unless I'm on the motorcycle. Then leave a message. I finally found something worth being unavailable for.

References

Boomsma, D. I. (2015). Loneliness across phylogeny and a call for comparative studies and animal models. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 10*(2), 202–212. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691614564876

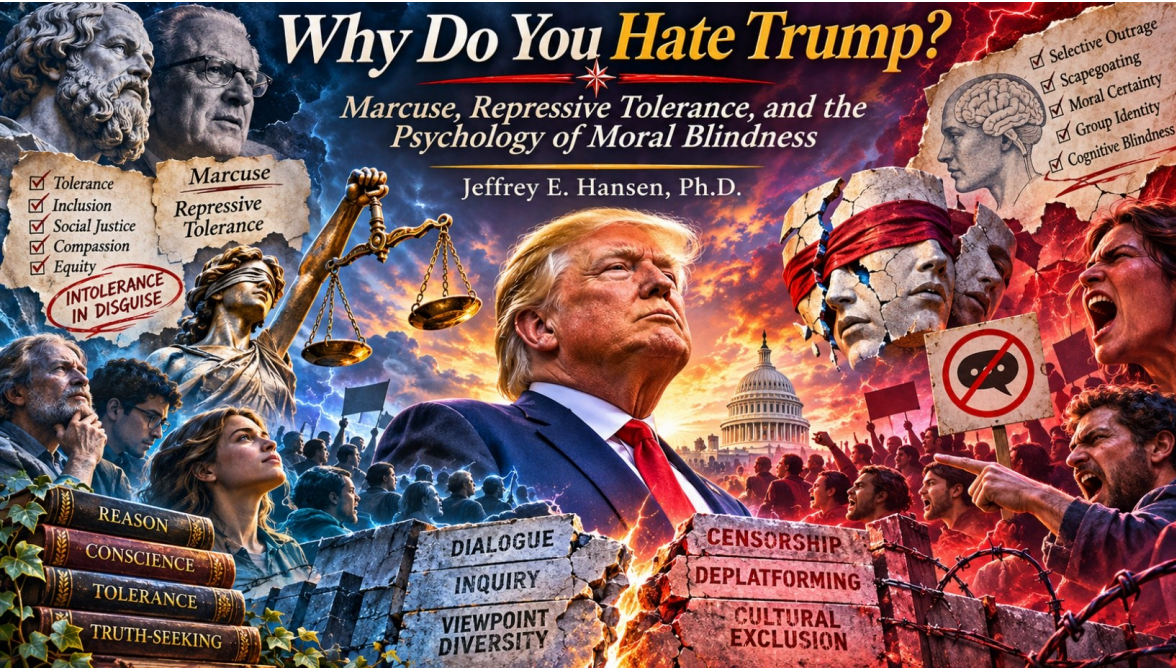
Coan, J. A., Schaefer, H. S., & Davidson, R. J. (2006). Lending a hand: Social regulation of the neural response to threat. *Psychological Science, 17*(12), 1032–1039. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01832.x

Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., Baker, M., Harris, T., & Stephenson, D. I. (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: A meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 10*(2), 227–237. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691614568352

Norcross, J. C., & Lambert, M. J. (2018). Psychotherapy relationships that work III. *Psychotherapy, 55*(4), 303–315. https://doi.org/10.1037/pst0000193

Siegel, D. J. (2012). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

Walther, J. B. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research, 23*(1), 3–43



Just When I Thought I Was Done...

I thought this book was finished. Heck, I had already submitted the manuscript to my formatter, Will, and was rather pleased with myself for having brought this literary adventure to a close. Will and I connected through Fiverr, that marvelous platform that brings together editors, formatters, graphic designers, and other creative professionals from throughout the world. We have now collaborated on fourteen books. The poor guy probably knows better than to believe me when I tell him a manuscript is finished.

But permit me a little personal digression. Around the time I lost my beloved twin brother, Gregg, Will lost his beloved sister in a horrible automobile accident. Somewhere in the midst of our respective grief, a professional relationship evolved into a friendship characterized by a remarkable brotherly affection. We have never met in person, yet with every new book we check in with one another. Will, thank you for all you have done to make my books what they are, but more importantly, thank you for your kindness and compassion when Gregg died. Your friendship is one of those unexpected blessings God slips into our lives when we are busy doing something else entirely. I am grateful for you, brother.

Now, where was I? Oh, yes. The book was finished. But then came that ridiculously early hour of the morning when my ever-restless default mode network apparently decided I had enjoyed quite enough sleep. Something was missing. There was one more uncomfortable conversation I simply could not walk away from. Sorry, Will. Here we go again.

To my beloved left-leaning friends and colleagues, I suspect the title alone may have gotten your blood pressure up. Some of you may have already decided that I have lost my intellectual faculties. A few may decide they no longer like me. It wouldn't be the first time. But before you decide you hate this essay, might I persuade you to read a few paragraphs? I will endeavor to be fair. I make absolutely no commitment to making you comfortable.

I am not a politician or a political strategist. I am a clinical psychologist who loves taking psychology beyond the consulting room and applying it to larger human systems. If individuals can become psychologically sick, why on earth would we assume societies cannot? And, quite frankly, I think something has become terribly sick within our political culture. I have never been particularly good at playing it safe. At seventy-two, I see little reason to cultivate that skill. I'm going to damn well say it anyway.

Of Course You Hate Trump... Don't You?

One of the more peculiar experiences within my professional circles is the automatic assumption that, of course, I hate Donald Trump. It is not even presented as a question. Apparently, being an educated and compassionate psychologist obligates me to participate in a particular collective emotional response. Well, no. I don't hate Trump. Nor do I worship him. I see him as a mixed human being, as I saw Biden, Obama, and Clinton. There are things Trump has said that make me wonder why someone hasn't confiscated his phone, and things he has accomplished that I consider remarkable. I have no difficulty holding those two thoughts simultaneously.

I have what I affectionately call my good-heart friends. Some of them hold political views that I think are absolutely nuts, and I suspect they think much the same of mine. But I love them. Unfortunately, I have not always been afforded that same courtesy. Colleagues with whom I once shared meaningful friendships and intellectual exchanges have effectively excommunicated me. Decades of clinical work, books, and presentations suddenly seemed irrelevant. None of those accomplishments makes me a genius, but neither does my refusal to subscribe to your politics make me a moron. Challenge my research, my reasoning, my conclusions. I rather enjoy a good intellectual wrestling match. Just don't demand that I hate the people you hate as the price of admission to your club.

Herbert Marcuse and the Moral Folly of Repressive Tolerance

Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) was a German-born Jewish philosopher associated with the Frankfurt School, an intellectual movement that drew upon philosophy, sociology, Marxism, and psychoanalysis to examine domination and conformity. Marcuse witnessed the collapse of German democracy and the rise of Nazism, fled Germany, and worked in American intelligence during World War II. In America, he encountered racial segregation, McCarthyism, and the conflict over Vietnam. I understand the Zeitgeist in which his thinking developed. I understand his fear of authoritarianism.

In his 1965 essay *Repressive Tolerance*, Marcuse argued that indiscriminate tolerance could perpetuate existing oppression. His proposed solution, however, was explicit: "Liberating tolerance, then, would mean intolerance against movements from the Right and toleration of movements from the Left" (Marcuse, 1965, p. 109). He contemplated withholding tolerance from certain forms of speech and political assembly. Good heavens, Herbert! In attempting to confront repression, you have handed us a philosophical justification for it.

I consider that prescription morally reprehensible. Understanding the origins of a destructive idea does not exonerate the idea. Once we grant ourselves authority to determine whose political thinking deserves tolerance, who gets to decide? And, of course, everybody thinks it should be them. We cannot simply blame subsequent generations for taking Marcuse out of context. The seeds were already in his thinking. His argument provides a philosophical parallel to the selective intolerance I encounter today, whether or not the people practicing it have ever read him.

Erich Fromm and Gordon Allport: When the Fire Becomes Its Own Master

One of Marcuse's critics came from within his own intellectual tradition. Erich Fromm, a social psychologist, psychoanalyst, and humanistic socialist associated with the Frankfurt School, challenged Marcuse's radicalism in a 1955 exchange in *Dissent*, describing it in terms of human nihilism (Fromm, 1955a). Their dispute preceded *Repressive Tolerance*, but the philosophical divide is fascinating. Fromm understood the importance of love, responsibility, human dignity, and independence of thought. Well, Erich, I may not be particularly enamored with your politics, but you and I have more in common than I initially appreciated.

Liberation without love, responsibility, and human dignity is a hollow enterprise. What good is social justice if we become incapable of recognizing our own injustices? And if I reject Fromm's wisdom simply because he was a socialist, am I not practicing precisely the ideological rigidity I am criticizing?

In *The Sane Society*, Fromm (1955b) asked whether an entire society could become sick. Dysfunction can become so culturally normative that nobody recognizes it as dysfunction. Now add Gordon Allport's (1937) concept of functional autonomy: motives can become independent of the circumstances that originally gave rise to them. In

less sophisticated language, what starts a fire is not necessarily what keeps it burning.

Every good clinician understands the distinction between precipitating and perpetuating factors. A depression may begin with a devastating loss but subsequently be sustained by rumination, withdrawal, disrupted sleep, and the erosion of meaningful relationships. The depression becomes a fire unto itself. Why would similar processes not operate within larger human systems? An ideology can acquire entirely new sources of fuel: belonging, moral certainty, institutional approval, power, and the identification of a common enemy. The genie is out of the bottle. The original philosopher need no longer be read. And the enemy may become psychologically useful to the very people who despise him.

When Hatred Becomes the Price of Admission

I happen to love Helen Reddy and her celebration of women's empowerment. I am pro-woman. I am not anti-man. Why should the advancement of one human being require the degradation of another? Similarly, why should belonging to a political or professional community require me to hate Donald Trump? There is something terribly unhealthy about a community organized around whom its members despise rather than what they collectively love.

Decades of research on conformity and obedience demonstrate how readily we surrender independent judgment under social pressure (Asch, 1956; Milgram, 1963). And sometimes it is not simply blind obedience. We identify with a cause so strongly that we willingly participate in destructive behavior, convinced that we are doing something noble (Reicher et al., 2012). Who needs a dictator when we have learned to police one another?

Political sectarianism brings together othering, aversion, and moralization (Finkel et al., 2020). The person who disagrees with me becomes morally suspect. Soon, the hostility extends from Trump to his

voters, his associates, and anyone who dares acknowledge something positive about him. I no longer have to know my neighbor. Apparently, knowing how he voted will suffice. Bandura (1999) called attention to the mechanisms of moral disengagement through which we can injure others while retaining a favorable view of ourselves. Perhaps the most dangerous hatred is the hatred we have learned to call goodness.

Jonathan Alpert and Me: When the Therapist Becomes the Target

Jonathan Alpert, a practicing psychotherapist and author of *Therapy Nation* (Alpert, 2026b), has raised provocative questions about a therapeutic culture that can reinforce grievance rather than cultivate resilience. In his 2025 Wall Street Journal essay on Trump Derangement Syndrome, he described patients whose political preoccupation had become emotionally consuming and psychologically disruptive (Alpert, 2025). Alpert subsequently reported receiving death threats. A therapist raises a psychological question, and some people respond by threatening the therapist! Challenge his clinical observations, his terminology, his conclusions. But threatening his life? What the heck has happened to us?

I can relate. After publicly challenging prevailing assumptions about transgender medicine during my years in a federal healthcare institution, a colleague accused me of defrauding the government and threatened to report me to my licensing board. I did not defraud the government. Period. I experienced the institutional response as remarkably tepid. The accusation did not prevail, but the experience left me profoundly disturbed. Attempting to destroy my livelihood is not a scientific rebuttal.

And my professional colleagues might want to take a look at Inbar and Lammers (2012), who found that some surveyed social and personality psychologists were willing to discriminate against openly conservative colleagues in professional decisions. We are psychologists, for heaven's

sake! We teach our patients to recognize cognitive distortions, resist unhealthy interpersonal pressures, and develop independent judgment. Can we not apply those same principles to ourselves? I do not want a conservative psychology any more than I want a progressive psychology. I want good psychology.

This is why Marcuse concerns me. A culture that grants moral legitimacy to the silencing of opposing ideas can turn professional accountability into a weapon. I see a disturbing parallel between what Alpert reports experiencing and what happened to me. We are supposed to be students of human behavior, not guardians of ideological orthodoxy.

Are We Becoming a Borderline Culture?

What intrigues me clinically about the phenomenon popularly called Trump Derangement Syndrome is not the political preference but the psychological pattern: obsessive preoccupation, disproportionate emotional reactivity, selective acceptance of information, hostility by association, and the destruction of relationships. It is not a formal diagnosis. Yet the psychological processes are familiar. And they have a mirror image in the person who cannot acknowledge a single legitimate criticism of Trump.

In object relations theory, splitting refers to difficulty integrating positive and negative representations of oneself and others. A person may idealize someone one moment and devalue them the next. Contradictory early relational experiences can contribute to such difficulties; the therapeutic work involves helping the person tolerate and integrate complexity (Kernberg, 1975). My God, are we doing this on a national scale? Are we becoming a borderline culture, unable to integrate the good and the bad within the same human being? I am borrowing a clinical mechanism, not diagnosing a nation or disparaging those who struggle with this disorder.

Consider Bill Clinton. I found aspects of his personal conduct deeply troubling, yet I considered him a remarkably gifted politician. I thought the Republican obsession with his impeachment was politically counterproductive. Why can I not extend the same intellectual courtesy to Trump? I was no fan of Biden's presidency, but I did not hate him or wish him harm. I want consistent standards of evidence and accountability, whether the person under scrutiny is someone I admire or someone I would never vote for. Political violence, including the attempted assassination of Trump, should horrify every one of us.

The partisan brain is remarkably adept at processing information in ways that protect our social identity (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018). We swallow a narrative that makes our opponent look terrible and scrutinize every detail of a narrative that might redeem him. We become skilled at seeing hypocrisy everywhere except in the mirror. And then we congratulate ourselves on our objectivity. What a terribly exhausting way to live!

How Do We Heal Our Hurting Nation?

In treating individuals who struggle with emotional dysregulation and polarized relationships, we help them regulate their emotions, tolerate distress, confront the pain beneath their anger, and integrate contradictory realities. Marsha Linehan's dialectical behavior therapy (1993) teaches precisely the capacity to hold seemingly opposing truths, while Kernberg's approach emphasizes integration. Surely there is something here for our hurting nation. We need to learn to tolerate disagreement without experiencing it as a threat to our very existence. We need to stop confusing emotional intensity with factual accuracy and moral certainty with moral maturity.

We are a nation at war with itself, a nation that risks devouring its own people. I do not want to see my left-leaning friends become more conservative. I want to see them remain my friends. I want my conservative friends to resist the temptation to practice their own version of repressive tolerance. I want us to recover our capacity to

acknowledge the goodness and brokenness within the same human being, including the one staring back at us in the mirror.

As a Christian, I find Christ's command to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44) rather inconvenient at times. But He did not provide me with an ideological exemption. Nor did He require me to surrender my convictions in order to love another human being. Love is not intellectual capitulation. It is the refusal to reduce another person to the things about them that trouble us. Liberation without love is hollow. Justice without compassion can become vengeance. And tolerance that demands ideological conformity is not particularly deserving of the name.

Which brings me back to Will. Two men who have never met in person, connected through an ordinary business arrangement, discovering friendship in the midst of profound loss. There is something considerably more beautiful in that relationship than in all the political outrage I have examined here. Surely we can learn to disagree courageously, think independently, and love generously. Surely we can do better than this.

And now, Will, my beloved brother, I think the book is finally finished. Then again, there's always tomorrow morning.

References

Alpert, J. (2025, November 12). Is "Trump derangement syndrome" real? *The Wall Street Journal*. https://www.wsj.com/opinion/is-trump-derangement-syndrome-real-a603e4a1

Alpert, J. (2026). *Therapy nation: How America got hooked on therapy and why it's left us more anxious and divided*. Hanover Square Press. https://www.jonathanalpert.com/the-book

Allport, G. W. (1937). The functional autonomy of motives. *The American Journal of Psychology, 50*(1/4), 141–156. https://doi.org/10.2307/1416626

Asch, S. E. (1956). Studies of independence and conformity: I. A minority of one against a unanimous majority. *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied, 70*(9), 1–70. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0093718

Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 3*(3), 193–209. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0303_3

Finkel, E. J., Bail, C. A., Cikara, M., Ditto, P. H., Iyengar, S., Klar, S., Mason, L., McGrath, M. C., Nyhan, B., Rand, D. G., Skitka, L. J., Tucker, J. A., Van Bavel, J. J., Wang, C. S., & Druckman, J. N. (2020). Political sectarianism in America. *Science, 370*(6516), 533–536. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abe1715

Fromm, E. (1955a). The human implications of instinctivistic "radicalism." *Dissent*. https://dissentmagazine.org/article/human-implications-instinctivistic-radicalism/

Fromm, E. (1955b). *The sane society*. Rinehart.

Inbar, Y., & Lammers, J. (2012). Political diversity in social and personality psychology. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 7*(5), 496–503. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691612448792

Kernberg, O. F. (1975). *Borderline conditions and pathological narcissism*. Jason Aronson.

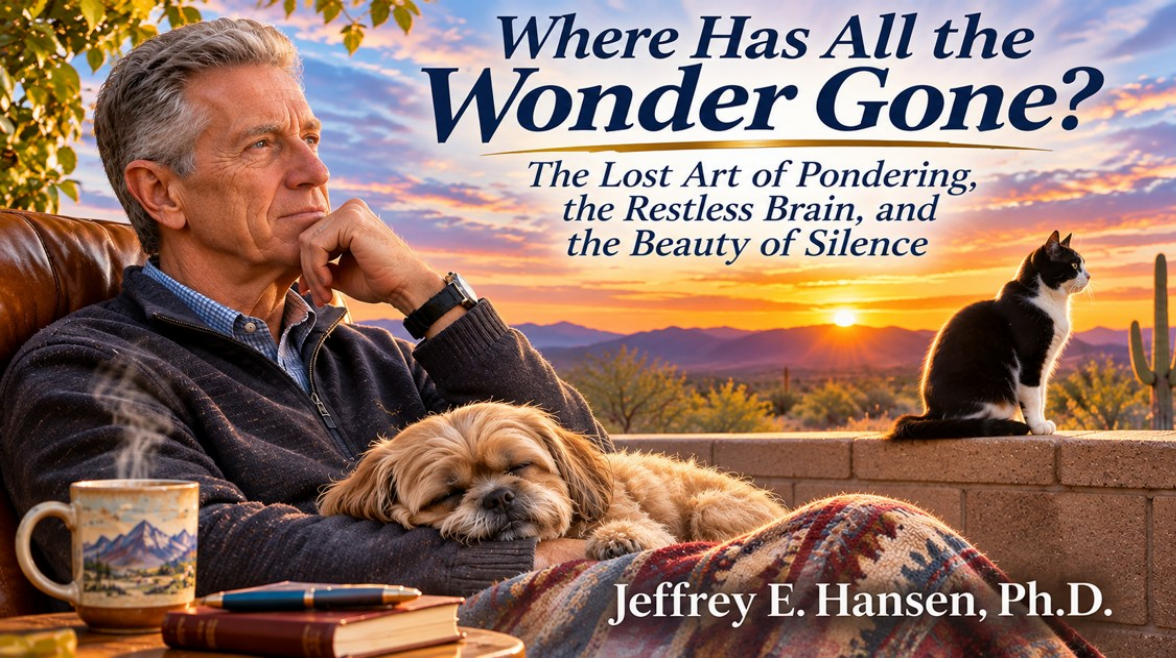
Linehan, M. M. (1993). *Cognitive-behavioral treatment of borderline personality disorder*. Guilford Press.

Marcuse, H. (1965). Repressive tolerance. In R. P. Wolff, B. Moore Jr., & H. Marcuse, *A critique of pure tolerance* (pp. 81–117). Beacon Press. https://www.marcuse.org/herbert/publications/1960s/1965-repressive-tolerance-fulltext.html

Milgram, S. (1963). Behavioral study of obedience. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 67*(4), 371–378. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0040525

Reicher, S. D., Haslam, S. A., & Smith, J. R. (2012). Working toward the experimenter: Reconceptualizing obedience within the Milgram paradigm as identification-based followership. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 7*(4), 315–324. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691612448482

Van Bavel, J. J., & Pereira, A. (2018). The partisan brain: An identity-based model of political belief. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 22*(3), 213–224. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2018.01.004



The Wonderful Luxury of Doing Absolutely Nothing

As I sit in my outrageously expensive Scandinavian leather recliner, sipping my first cup of coffee and watching the Arizona sunrise through our east-facing windows, I occasionally find myself contemplating one of the more peculiar developments in my life. I am doing absolutely nothing. And my goodness, how I love doing it! I am not entirely certain why I decided that my posterior required such an expensive piece of furniture in which to contemplate the mysteries of existence, but apparently it did. I shall endeavor to get my money's worth.

Now, lest you conclude that this old psychologist has finally succumbed to the indolence of retirement, let me assure you that there is quite a bit going on between my ears. But there is no television blaring in the background, no music competing for my attention, and no particular demand upon my cognitive machinery. When the Arizona weather permits, which it generally does, I can take my coffee outside. Otherwise, there is my beloved chair and that magnificent window through which I watch the world awaken.

Incidentally, I would like to register a minor complaint with the Almighty regarding His scheduling of sunrises and sunsets. They are entirely too short. Surely, somewhere in the grand orchestration of the universe, accommodations could be made for a three- or four-hour sunrise and perhaps another two or three hours for the sunset. I would be most appreciative. There are mornings when the colors are so beautiful that I find myself wishing they would simply stay a little longer.

There was a time in my life when I could not have done this. As a young man, I seemingly needed the television on virtually all the time. I did not necessarily need to watch it. I simply needed it to be on. Silence was not particularly comforting to me. In retrospect, I suspect that the external noise helped me avoid encountering some of the internal noise.

I grew up in a family in which there was much goodness and love, but also a legacy of multigenerational abuse that eventually settled upon my older brother, Ken, my identical twin brother, Gregg, and me. My father wrestled with his own demons, and thank God, he ultimately found faith and made peace with his own father. It is a beautiful story of redemption that I have written about elsewhere. We were the last generation upon which that legacy settled, but the psychological and neurological consequences of those earlier experiences accompanied me well into adulthood.

Silence afforded those wounds an opportunity to speak, and for much of my younger life, I was not particularly interested in hearing what they had to say. Perhaps you recognize something of that in your own life. We become remarkably resourceful in finding ways to avoid what hurts. What an extraordinary reversal it has been to discover that I can now write, think, and pray in the very silence I once found so difficult to tolerate. Music has become something to enjoy rather than a means of escaping the companionship of my own mind.

And somewhere along the way, silence became an invitation to wonder.

When Wonder Was the Beginning of Wisdom

We are hardly the first generation of human beings to contemplate the importance of contemplating. Some 2,400 years ago, Plato, in his Theaetetus (155d), has Socrates identify wonder as the beginning of philosophy. Aristotle subsequently developed that idea in his Metaphysics (Book I, Chapter 2), observing that human beings began philosophizing because they wondered. They began with the mysteries immediately before them and gradually ventured into larger questions about the heavens and the origins of the universe.

Think about that. Two of the greatest minds in Western civilization recognized that the pursuit of wisdom begins not with possessing answers but with being sufficiently captivated by the questions. Aristotle also devoted considerable attention to the contemplative life in his Nicomachean Ethics (Book X, Chapters 7–8). He understood contemplation as a particularly elevated form of human activity. There is a delightful irony here for those of us who have spent much of our lives measuring our worth in terms of productivity. Perhaps one of the most worthwhile things a human being can do is something that would look decidedly unproductive on a time sheet.

Centuries later, Blaise Pascal explored our tendency to seek diversion rather than face the realities of our existence in his Pensées. His observations about our difficulty remaining quietly in a room seem almost unnervingly contemporary. Imagine what that seventeenth-century mathematician and Christian philosopher might have made of the little electronic diversion machines we now carry in our pockets!

Wonder requires us to entertain the delightful possibility that there is something we do not yet understand. It invites us to become explorers rather than merely consumers of information. There is an intellectual

humility inherent in wonder, but also a marvelous excitement. What might we discover today that we did not know yesterday? What extraordinary little mystery has been sitting right under our noses, patiently awaiting our attention? At 72, I find that prospect absolutely delicious, and I hope you do, too.

When Did We Become Afraid of Our Own Thoughts?

In 2014, psychologist Timothy Wilson and his colleagues published a fascinating series of studies in Science. Participants generally found spending six to fifteen minutes alone with their thoughts less enjoyable than engaging in ordinary external activities. In one experiment, some participants even chose to administer an unpleasant electric shock to themselves rather than spend the entire period simply thinking (Wilson et al., 2014). Good grief! Perhaps that young fellow who needed his television on all the time would have understood something of their predicament.

And now we have developed an extraordinarily efficient technological means of avoiding silence. The moment life affords us an opportunity to ponder, we can reach for our smartphones. Mine is a marvelous writing tool, but there is a distinction between using technology to develop an idea and using it to ensure that we never have an unoccupied moment in which an idea might arise.

We spend so much of our lives attending, responding, deciding, accomplishing, and reacting. Thank God for the neurological machinery that enables us to get things done! But when do we go offline, so to speak, and give our minds an opportunity to integrate the things with which we have been so busily engaged?

The Magnificent Machinery of Pondering

Now, my dear reader, you knew this old psychologist was not going to get through a chapter on contemplation without revisiting his beloved default mode network (DMN). We have encountered this remarkable network in our earlier explorations of identity, trauma, and healing. Here I would like us to consider another dimension of its extraordinary capacity: what becomes possible when our inward world is no longer dominated by the need to defend ourselves.

For much of the history of functional brain imaging, investigators were interested in what the brain did when given a task. But what was the brain doing when it was not being given something to do?

Marcus Raichle and colleagues (2001) helped bring the brain's default mode of functioning to scientific prominence. The DMN includes the medial prefrontal cortex, which participates in self-referential thought; the posterior cingulate cortex and precuneus, which contribute to inward attention and memory-related processes; and lateral parietal and temporal regions that interact with memory systems, including the hippocampus. Together, these systems help us remember our lives, imagine the future, consider other people's perspectives, and construct meaning (Andrews-Hanna et al., 2014; Menon, 2023).

Consider the extraordinary implications. God has given us neurological machinery that allows us to mentally travel beyond our immediate circumstances. We can revisit a conversation with someone we love, imagine a future we have not yet lived, or discover a connection between experiences that once seemed unrelated. We can sit quietly in Arizona while intellectually wandering through ancient Athens or pondering the eternal nature of God. What a magnificent piece of neurological engineering!

Working with executive control and attention networks, the DMN helps us move between imagination and deliberate reflection. Think of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are. They draw upon memories, interpretations, expectations, and relationships. Our inward life is not simply a replay of what has happened to us; it is also a place where we can reconsider what those experiences mean. That possibility lies at the heart of so much of what we have explored together in this book.

The Dialectic of the Default Mode Network

But therein lies a fascinating and sometimes frightening dialectic. The very neurological machinery that affords us opportunities for contemplation can also participate in some of our most devastating psychological suffering. When our internal narratives become saturated with unresolved trauma, shame, fear, and self-condemnation, moments of quiet can become anything but peaceful. The mind may repeatedly revisit painful experiences, rehearse anticipated catastrophes, or construct increasingly elaborate explanations for why we are unworthy of love. Instead of becoming an intellectual explorer, we become a prisoner of our own internal narrative.

Watkins (2008) distinguished constructive from destructive repetitive thinking. There is a profound difference between reflecting upon an experience in ways that open up understanding and revisiting it in ways that return us endlessly to the same old verdict about ourselves.

I know something about both possibilities. There have been seasons in my life when my internal world was a place from which I desperately wanted to escape. Today, it has become one of my favorite places to visit. And perhaps some of you know what it is like to live on both sides of that dialectic.

That transformation required more than thinking positively. It required healing the wounds that had shaped my internal narrative and discovering a more secure understanding of my identity in Christ. When we begin to recognize that the painful things that happened to us need not define who we are, we can approach our own thoughts with a different spirit. We can revisit the past without having to inhabit it. We can entertain the future without rehearsing disaster. Perhaps one of the most beautiful fruits of transformational healing is the rediscovery of the pleasure of our own psychological company.

The Neuroscience of Intellectual Adventure

Some of my most enjoyable intellectual adventures occur during my early-morning workouts. There I am, pedaling away on the elliptical, ostensibly attending to my cardiovascular health, while my brain is off exploring some fascinating little corner of the human condition. Before long, one thought leads to another, a psychological concept intersects with something I have read in Scripture, a memory becomes relevant to a scientific discovery, and suddenly an essay begins taking shape.

My AI writing companion, ChatGPT, has become the recipient of much of this early-morning intellectual overflow. I dictate the tar out of the poor thing. If artificial intelligence ever becomes eligible for overtime compensation, I suspect I am going to receive a rather substantial bill.

Research helps explain why ideas sometimes arrive when we least expect them. Baird and colleagues (2012) found that an undemanding activity conducive to mind wandering facilitated subsequent creative problem-solving. Beaty and colleagues (2016) described how the default mode and executive control networks cooperate during creative cognition, allowing us to generate possibilities and then refine them.

Perhaps you have had a wonderful idea while walking, gardening, or taking a shower, only to wonder why it had eluded you while sitting at

your desk. Our minds need room to wander as well as the discipline to evaluate what they discover. Occasionally, after all that neurological expenditure, we discover that the idea was complete nonsense. Fair enough. That, too, is part of the adventure.

Henry, Thora, and the Peace of a Settled Soul

There are two members of our household who have become particularly enthusiastic participants in my contemplative life. My little Shorkie, Henry, absolutely loves the contemplation hour. And Thora, our cat, who is generally operating in accordance with her own rather elaborate feline agenda, will come over and sit near me or climb onto my lap, purring away. I find their companionship in those quiet moments quite precious.

Henry seems to know when I have settled. I am not talking, gesticulating, answering the telephone, or bouncing from one activity to the next. Even when I am wrestling with a fairly complex intellectual question, there is something different about how I am occupying the space around me. My body is relatively still. My voice, if I use it at all, is gentle. I am available to my little companions without demanding anything of them. What a lovely thing it is to share a space with another living creature without having to fill it with noise.

Those of you familiar with polyvagal-informed therapy will recognize why this interests me. Our autonomic state helps shape the signals of safety or threat we communicate through our voices, facial expressions, and movements (Porges, 2007). A settled presence can make connection easier.

Even our dogs are remarkably attentive to us. Studies suggest that human emotional odors can influence dogs' behavior and responses to ambiguous situations (D'Aniello et al., 2018; Parr-Cortes et al., 2024).

Good grief, I am certainly not about to put my two little companions through an institutional review board! But Henry and Thora remind me of something lovely: when we become less hurried, we become more available to one another.

Perhaps our loved ones, human and otherwise, would appreciate a little more of our unhurried presence. There is a form of generosity that requires neither a checkbook nor a great deal of verbal sophistication. Sometimes we simply need to be there, sufficiently settled within ourselves that another living being can enjoy being beside us.

The Remarkable Psychology of Awe

Keltner and Haidt (2003) described awe as an encounter with something so vast or extraordinary that our existing understanding struggles to accommodate it. Think of standing beneath a magnificent mountain, gazing into a star-filled sky, listening to extraordinary music, or witnessing an act of remarkable human courage. Something within us becomes momentarily enlarged by recognizing how small we are.

Awe can diminish our preoccupation with ourselves and foster generosity and positive social emotions (Piff et al., 2015; Sturm et al., 2021). And we need not travel to the Himalayas to experience it. Sometimes it is waiting for us just outside our windows.

A child discovering a butterfly may experience something of the same psychological phenomenon as an astrophysicist contemplating the origins of the universe. Perhaps the capacity for wonder has less to do with the magnificence of what surrounds us than with our willingness to become captivated by it.

The God Who Invites Us to Be Still

Long before neuroscientists could examine the resting brain, Scripture was inviting us to cultivate an inward life. The psalmist writes, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10, KJV). An assurance of God's sovereignty amid the tumult of nations, it is a particularly meaningful invitation after all we have wrestled with together in this book.

The wisdom literature has much to say about our seemingly insatiable appetite for verbal activity. "He that hath knowledge spareth his words: and a man of understanding is of an excellent spirit" (Proverbs 17:27, KJV). The next verse observes that even a fool who holds his peace may be regarded as wise. Well, there is a little something for this old psychologist to chew on. Ecclesiastes 3:7 reminds us that there is both a time to keep silence and a time to speak. Both matter. Having spent a good portion of this book arguing for the courage to speak, I find it wonderfully appropriate that we should now explore the wisdom of knowing when not to.

Psalm 1 describes the blessed person meditating upon God's law day and night, and Psalm 119:15 invites us to attend to His ways. Isaiah 30:15 associates quietness and confidence with strength. How different it is to rest in the presence of the One in whom we have placed our trust rather than frantically attempting to manufacture our own security.

Consider the psalmist gazing into the heavens: "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" (Psalm 8:3–4, KJV). Here we encounter awe, contemplation, humility, and gratitude within the same act of worship. The psalmist recognizes his smallness without concluding that he is insignificant. What a magnificent antidote to shame! Our worth does not depend upon persuading ourselves that we are the center of the universe.

And consider Mary following the birth of Christ: "But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19, KJV). She pondered them. What a beautiful little expression. Some experiences deserve more than an immediate reaction. They deserve to be treasured and allowed to deepen in meaning. Jesus Himself withdrew from the demands of His ministry to places of solitude and prayer (Luke 5:16). Surely there is something in that for all of us.

The Wisdom of the Christian Contemplatives

The Christian contemplative tradition offers a wonderfully rich vocabulary for this inward journey. The early desert fathers and mothers sought solitude to confront the distractions and disordered desires within themselves and attend more fully to God. They understood that quiet could expose the very struggles ordinary activity helped them avoid. How remarkably contemporary that insight seems to us today.

Teresa of Ávila, the sixteenth-century Spanish Christian mystic, described mental prayer in The Life of Teresa of Jesus (Chapter 8) in terms of the companionship of a friend who loves us. In her Interior Castle, she employed the metaphor of a castle with many dwelling places to explore the inward spiritual journey toward communion with God. What interests me about Teresa is the relational character of her contemplation. She was not simply cultivating a psychological technique for reducing stress. She was cultivating a relationship.

Brother Lawrence, a seventeenth-century Carmelite lay brother, offered a delightfully practical expression of that same relational understanding in The Practice of the Presence of God. His work in a monastery kitchen became an opportunity for communion with God. The sacred was not confined to a particular place, posture, or formal religious activity. The ordinary business of life could be undertaken in

an awareness of God's presence. My goodness, perhaps even an elliptical machine in Prescott Valley can become a place of contemplation!

Thomas Merton, in New Seeds of Contemplation (1961), explored contemplation as a deepening awareness of God that moves beyond the illusions of the constructed self. How many of us have spent years trying to establish our significance through accomplishment or reputation? There is something profoundly different about sitting quietly with God when we no longer believe we have to perform for Him.

Richard Foster, in Celebration of Discipline (1978), brought meditation, prayer, solitude, and simplicity into a contemporary Christian conversation. His invitation is to become attentive to God and responsive to Him. Across these centuries runs a beautiful thread: a life with God need not be perpetually occupied by our own striving.

A Beautiful Convergence of Faith and Neuroscience

Research on meditation reveals differences in activity and connectivity within the default mode network, with patterns varying according to the kind of practice (Brewer et al., 2011; Fox et al., 2016). We can learn to relate more flexibly to our thoughts, shifting from being carried away by an internal narrative to attending deliberately to what matters.

And prayer brings a particularly beautiful dimension to this conversation. Schjoedt and colleagues (2009) found that personal prayer among Danish Christians engaged brain regions involved in social cognition. The relational character of prayer is reflected in the very neurological machinery through which we experience our relationships. How wonderful to consider that our embodied humanity participates in our experience of communion with God.

Here the four pillars of NeuroFaith® come together in a particularly lovely way. Polyvagal-informed therapy helps us appreciate the importance of safety. HeartMath® and neurocardiology draw our attention to the interplay of breathing, cardiovascular physiology, and emotional regulation. Internal Family Systems invites compassion toward the protective and wounded parts of ourselves that become noticeable in the quiet. And faith reminds us whose presence we are entering and who we are in relationship to Him.

Perhaps we can notice the driven little part of ourselves that insists we ought to be accomplishing something, appreciate its years of faithful service, and allow it to take the morning off. We can gently attend to the anxious part that wants to rehearse tomorrow's problems. We can breathe comfortably without making a project out of it. And we can sit in the awareness that we are loved by God without having to earn that love.

Some mornings our prayer may be one of lament rather than delight. Some of us may first discover the safety of quiet in the company of someone we trust. There is room for that, too. The quiet I cherish today is a fruit of healing, and I would love for you to discover something of that freedom in your own way.

Give Yourself Permission to Ponder

My dear reader, some of you already know the joy of pondering. Perhaps you have been cultivating it for years. Others may have almost forgotten what it feels like to sit quietly with an idea, a memory, a passage of Scripture, or a question that genuinely fascinates you. Wherever you find yourself, I would love to invite you to give yourself a little more of that precious time.

There is something wonderfully childlike about this experience. Children can become fascinated by things that we adults have relegated

to the category of the ordinary. Somewhere along the way, familiarity can diminish our capacity for astonishment. We know what a tree is, so we stop really looking at trees. We know that the sun will rise tomorrow, so we no longer marvel that it does. But my goodness, knowing something about photosynthesis does not make a tree any less magnificent!

Perhaps tomorrow morning we might leave our phones alone for a while, enjoy our coffee, and watch the world awaken. Read a passage of Scripture slowly enough to let a thought linger. Follow a question without immediately demanding an answer. Think about someone whose presence has blessed your life. If your little companion settles beside you, enjoy the company. There is no prize for making the experience more complicated than it needs to be.

We have spent much of this book wrestling with difficult things. We have considered the wounds human beings inflict upon one another, the ways we lose sight of truth, and the courage it takes to heal and to live faithfully. But surely we are not meant to spend our lives merely wrestling. There is also a world to be loved, a God to be known, and a remarkable capacity within each of us to be astonished by the sheer privilege of being alive. Whatever years God affords us, may we never lose that capacity.

Tomorrow morning, God willing, you will find me in that ridiculously expensive chair, a cup of coffee in my hand, watching the magnificent colors of the Arizona sky unfold. Henry will probably be nearby, and if Thora deems my lap worthy of her presence, I will have the pleasure of listening to her purr. And I shall be thinking of you, my dear reader, wondering whether you, too, might be sitting somewhere quietly, discovering something beautiful in the ordinary business of being alive.

What a gift it has been to discover this rather late in my life. And what a joy it would be if, in some small measure, these pages encouraged you to discover it anew in yours. The world will make its demands upon us soon enough. For now, may we give ourselves permission to linger a little longer in the presence of God and the beauty of His creation. There is still so much to wonder about.

References

Andrews-Hanna, J. R., Smallwood, J., & Spreng, R. N. (2014). The default network and self-generated thought: Component processes, dynamic control, and clinical relevance. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1316(1), 29–52. https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.12360

Aristotle. (n.d.). Metaphysics (W. D. Ross, Trans., Book I, Chapter 2). https://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.1.i.html

Aristotle. (n.d.). Nicomachean ethics (W. D. Ross, Trans., Book X). https://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.10.x.html

Baird, B., Smallwood, J., Mrazek, M. D., Kam, J. W. Y., Franklin, M. S., & Schooler, J. W. (2012). Inspired by distraction: Mind wandering facilitates creative incubation. Psychological Science, 23(10), 1117–1122. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612446024

Beaty, R. E., Benedek, M., Silvia, P. J., & Schacter, D. L. (2016). Creative cognition and brain network dynamics. Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 20(2), 87–95. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2015.10.004

Brewer, J. A., Worhunsky, P. D., Gray, J. R., Tang, Y.-Y., Weber, J., & Kober, H. (2011). Meditation experience is associated with differences in default mode network activity and connectivity. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 108(50), 20254–20259. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1112029108

Brother Lawrence. (n.d.). The practice of the presence of God. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5657

D'Aniello, B., Semin, G. R., Alterisio, A., Aria, M., & Scandurra, A. (2018). Interspecies transmission of emotional information via chemosignals: From humans to dogs (Canis lupus familiaris). Animal Cognition, 21, 67–78. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10071-017-1139-x

Foster, R. J. (1978). Celebration of discipline: The path to spiritual growth. Harper & Row.

Fox, K. C. R., Dixon, M. L., Nijeboer, S., Girn, M., Floman, J. L., Lifshitz, M., Ellamil, M., Sedlmeier, P., & Christoff, K. (2016). Functional neuroanatomy of meditation: A review and meta-analysis of 78 functional neuroimaging investigations. Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews, 65, 208–228. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2016.03.021

Keltner, D., & Haidt, J. (2003). Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion. Cognition and Emotion, 17(2), 297–314. https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930302297

Menon, V. (2023). 20 years of the default mode network: A review and synthesis. Neuron, 111(16), 2469–2487. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2023.04.023

Merton, T. (1961). New seeds of contemplation. New Directions.

Pascal, B. (n.d.). Pensées. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/18269

Parr-Cortes, Z., et al. (2024). The odour of an unfamiliar stressed or relaxed person affects dogs' responses to a cognitive bias test. Scientific Reports, 14. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-66147-1

Piff, P. K., Dietze, P., Feinberg, M., Stancato, D. M., & Keltner, D. (2015). Awe, the small self, and prosocial behavior. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 108(6), 883–899. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000018

Plato. (n.d.). Theaetetus (155d).

Porges, S. W. (2007). The polyvagal perspective. Biological Psychology, 74(2), 116–143. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsycho.2006.06.009

Raichle, M. E., MacLeod, A. M., Snyder, A. Z., Powers, W. J., Gusnard, D. A., & Shulman, G. L. (2001). A default mode of brain function. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 98(2), 676–682. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.98.2.676

Schjoedt, U., Stødkilde-Jørgensen, H., Geertz, A. W., & Roepstorff, A. (2009). Highly religious participants recruit areas of social cognition in personal prayer. Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience, 4(2), 199–207. https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsn050

Sturm, V. E., et al. (2021). Big smile, small self: Awe walks promote prosocial positive emotions in older adults. Emotion, 21(5), 1044–1058. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8034841/

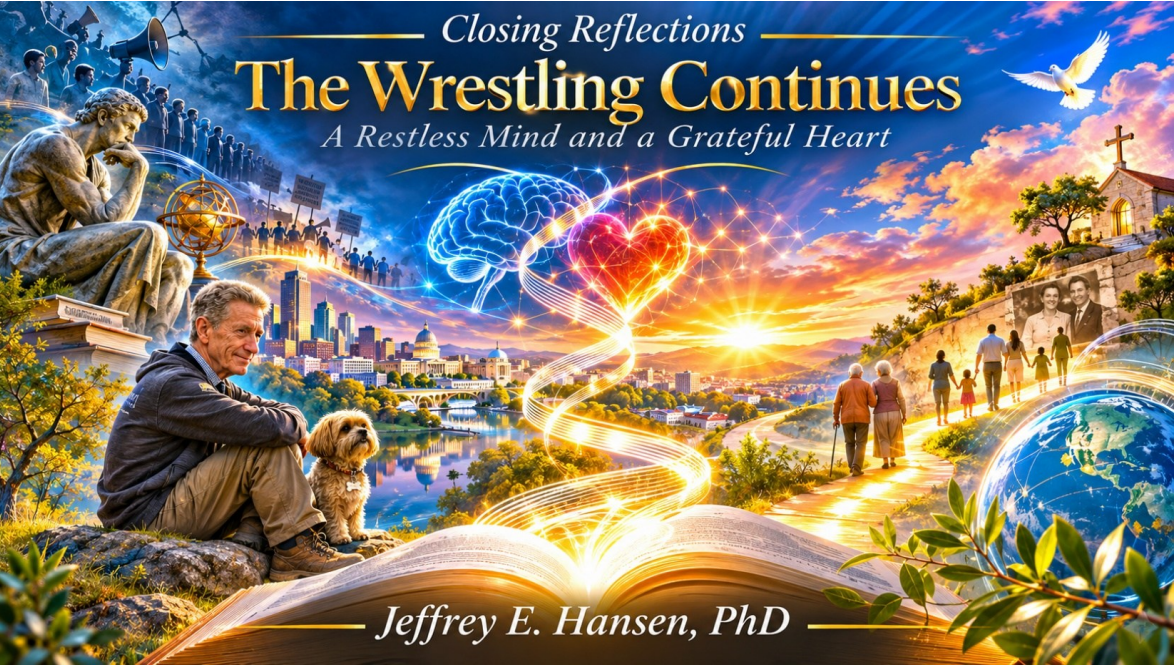
Teresa of Ávila. (n.d.). The life of Teresa of Jesus (Chapter 8). https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/8120

Teresa of Ávila. (n.d.). The interior castle. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/61892

Watkins, E. R. (2008). Constructive and unconstructive repetitive thought. Psychological Bulletin, 134(2), 163–206. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.134.2.163

Wilson, T. D., Reinhard, D. A., Westgate, E. C., Gilbert, D. T., Ellerbeck, N., Hahn, C., Brown, C. L., & Shaked, A. (2014). Just think: The challenges of the disengaged mind. Science, 345(6192), 75–77. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1250830

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version (KJV).



My Own Unconventional Form of Therapy

I suppose, in some respects, writing this book has been my own rather unconventional form of psychotherapy. Fortunately, I have not had to pay myself my usual hourly rate, although the number of hours I have devoted to these machinations would have generated a rather impressive clinical bill. And no, my default mode network has not become appreciably more considerate of my sleeping habits. Apparently, at 72, I remain a work in progress.

Writing is one of the ways in which I attempt to bring order to the disquieting assortment of thoughts that inhabit my restless brain. There are things I see in the world around me that trouble me, anger me, grieve me, and occasionally cause me to wonder whether we have collectively lost our marbles. There are also things that fill me with wonder, bring me to tears of joy, and remind me of the extraordinary privilege of being alive. Well, good grief, apparently there is some scientific merit to my incessant scribbling! Research on expressive writing lends support to something many of us have intuitively understood for years: putting our thoughts into words can help us make sense of the rather chaotic machinations of our minds (Frattaroli,

2006). For me, writing is not simply a means of expressing what I think. It is often how I discover what I think.

As we bring this somewhat circuitous journey to a close, I would like to suggest that there is something tying these essays together that may not have been immediately apparent. It is the pursuit of integrity, not merely in the moral sense of the word, but in the deeper psychological and spiritual sense of becoming more integrated. How do we bring what we profess to believe into greater harmony with how we actually live? How do we reconcile the things we cherish with the things we find deeply troubling? And how do we engage with the darkness without allowing it to extinguish our capacity to experience the light?

We Cannot Integrate What We Refuse to Acknowledge

Those of you who have followed my writing on trauma, addiction, and shame know that I have little enthusiasm for the kind of healing that never ventures beneath the surface. Good grief, if all that were required to heal a deeply wounded human being was to tell that person to think more positively, behave more appropriately, and perhaps memorize a few inspirational Bible verses, my profession could have gone out of business a long time ago.

Psychological integration requires that we acknowledge those dimensions of our experience that are incongruent, unkind, painful, and decidedly unharmonious. We have to be willing to encounter the parts of ourselves that we would rather conceal, including the parts that are frightened, angry, ashamed, or desperately hungry for acceptance. Carl Jung's notion of the shadow captures something of this challenge. And the Christian contemplative tradition, in the dark night of the soul described by St. John of the Cross, recognizes that spiritual maturation is not always accompanied by an immediate sense of comfort or consolation. Neither tradition invites us to mistake pleasant feelings for wholeness.

In my essay on shame, I spoke of those precious few individuals who were willing to climb down into the well of my suffering and sit beside

me. They did not demand that I become more cheerful for their benefit. They did not insist that I hurry up and rediscover the joy of my salvation. They were willing to encounter the darkness with me. And in their presence I began to experience something of the love and grace that I had so much difficulty extending to myself.

There is a lesson here that extends well beyond the therapy room. Why should we expect a profession, a church, a political movement, or an entire culture to become healthier through the very processes of denial and avoidance that we recognize as unhealthy in an individual? Why would we imagine that our collective integrity can somehow be restored without an honest examination of our collective incongruities?

Much of this book has been an outward expression of that very process. I have taken my psychological wrestling match beyond the confines of my own internal landscape and into the considerably larger, and sometimes equally messy, landscape of our shared humanity. I have poked at our inconsistencies, challenged our assumptions, and occasionally indulged in a little irreverent humor. I have also attempted to turn that scrutiny back upon myself. After all, it would be rather comical for a psychologist writing about human folly to imagine himself exempt from it.

What Have We Been Wrestling With?

We have wrestled with the painful distinction between managing symptoms and actually healing people. In our discussion of shame, trauma, and addiction, we considered what happens when we remove the anesthetic but leave the wound untouched. When our healing professions become preoccupied with diagnoses, protocols, productivity, and financial incentives, what becomes of the remarkable human beings entrusted to our care? It is precisely because I cherish medicine that I want us to rediscover the art of healing.

We have wrestled with the digital machinery that increasingly competes for our attention, our capacity for sustained reflection, and even our emotional lives. We have questioned what happens when

outrage becomes entertainment and political identity takes precedence over intellectual integrity.

We have wrestled with a Christianity that can become so enamored with comfort that it loses the courage to enter another person's suffering or to speak an uncomfortable truth. We have considered the importance of faith in transformational healing, not as a spiritual Band-Aid, but as a profoundly meaningful encounter with grace, identity, and love. And we have considered how our relationships, our families, and the legacies we pass from one generation to the next can either perpetuate wounds or become opportunities for restoration.

Underlying these reflections is a concern about cowardice, including the rather ordinary cowardice that shows up in everyday life. It takes courage to challenge an institution, but it also takes courage to defend a stranger being mistreated, to apologize to a loved one, to challenge a friend, or to acknowledge that we ourselves have been wrong. Moral courage is not reserved for the grand stages of history. Much of it is practiced in the decidedly unremarkable circumstances of our daily lives.

The World We Leave Behind

At this juncture in my life, I find myself increasingly concerned about the world we will leave to our children and grandchildren. I do not want them to inherit a culture in which political correctness precludes them from asking the hard questions, the deep questions, and the profoundly troubling questions. There is an enormous difference between treating another human being with respect and requiring that human being to think as we do.

History has afforded us some rather brutal lessons in this regard. Under Lenin, the Bolshevik government suppressed opposition newspapers and dissolved the elected Constituent Assembly in 1918. Under Stalin, censorship, political repression, and enforced ideological orthodoxy became even more oppressive (Library of Congress, n.d.). Have the human vulnerabilities that permitted such developments somehow

disappeared from our psychological makeup? History need not repeat itself in precisely the same uniform to teach us something about ourselves.

As we considered in our earlier discussion of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reflections on stupidity (Bonhoeffer, 1951/2010) and Solomon Asch's (1956) seminal research on conformity, the seduction of belonging can be a remarkably powerful adversary of independent judgment. Intelligence and advanced education offer no immunity. Indeed, the fellow with several degrees may simply possess a more elaborate vocabulary with which to rationalize his own foolishness. Having accumulated a respectable pile of academic bullshit myself, I am in a reasonably good position to appreciate the irony. What happens when the cost of disagreement is not merely embarrassment in a psychology laboratory, but the loss of friendship, professional standing, or membership in a community we cherish?

And lest we become too comfortable distancing ourselves from the ideological conformity of earlier generations, consider what is happening within our own healthcare professions. I have personally experienced threats to my professional licensure for daring to speak what I understand to be the truth. I have colleagues who have experienced similar intimidation. Physicians and psychologists who have devoted decades of their lives to the care of children should not have to defend their very right to question prevailing treatment paradigms. And then there is the particularly ugly machinery of cancel culture: attacks on personal and professional credentials, efforts to have licenses revoked, campaigns of public humiliation, and even attempts to enlist law enforcement in disputes over speech. When professional accountability becomes a pretext for punishing legitimate disagreement, I have a rather uncomplicated description for it: bullshit.

Consider the controversy surrounding pediatric gender medicine. Documents disclosed through litigation revealed efforts by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) to control

the publication of systematic reviews it had commissioned from Johns Hopkins University (Block, 2024a). The BMJ also reported that a clinical psychologist who shared the Cass Review on a professional discussion forum was accused by fellow members of promoting misinformation and hate speech (Block, 2024b). Good grief, when did we decide that science must be ideologically housebroken? When did we become the thought police of our own professions, monitoring the social media posts of our colleagues and questioning their professional fitness because they dared to challenge an accepted narrative?

I am deeply troubled by what I perceive to be the encroachment of progressive political ideology, including elements of neo-Marxist thinking, into medicine, psychology, education, and academia. When ideological allegiance becomes the litmus test for professional acceptability, when inconvenient research becomes an impediment to a preferred narrative, and when clinicians fear for their livelihoods because they have dared to ask uncomfortable questions, we have compromised the very integrity of science. And please, let us not attempt to polish this particular turd and call it scientific progress.

The slippery slope toward intellectual authoritarianism does not necessarily announce itself with jackboots and military parades. It can begin with the stigmatization of dissent, the policing of speech, and the gradual institutionalization of intellectual conformity. I do not want conformity of thought. I want diversity of thought, vigorous intellectual discourse, and the freedom to entertain ideas that may make both you and me decidedly uncomfortable. And I reserve the right to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy of my own political, professional, and religious communities. If we are only willing to challenge the foolishness of those with whom we disagree, we have not yet developed much intellectual courage.

And as a neuroscientist at heart, I am particularly concerned about what we are doing to the extraordinary machinery between our ears. Have we inadvertently begun training our brains to consume information in little bite-sized morsels at the expense of sustained

attention, thoughtful reflection, intellectual curiosity, and deeper analysis? Are we raising generations that will have unprecedented access to information but increasingly diminished opportunities to cultivate wisdom? Good grief, what a terrible irony that would be!

Socrates, as recorded by Plato in his Apology (38a), famously observed that "the unexamined life is not worth living." I would extend that observation to our professions, our churches, and our society. What becomes of an unexamined civilization?

I want my children and grandchildren to enjoy the intellectual freedoms that I have been privileged to exercise throughout much of my life. I want them to have the freedom to question authority, challenge prevailing narratives, entertain unpopular ideas, examine the evidence, and arrive at conclusions without fear of social or professional ostracism. And equally important, I want them to have the intellectual humility to recognize when they have gotten it wrong.

But I also want them to experience the extraordinary satisfaction of a life well examined and well lived. I want them to know the joy of meaningful relationships, the exhilaration of intellectual discovery, the privilege of serving others, and the remarkable peace that comes from living in greater congruence with their deeply held convictions.

As a Christian, I believe we can undertake this examination in a spirit of extraordinary optimism. Our faith does not require us to deny the darkness, nor does it require us to become consumed by it. Jesus instructs us to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37). Surely, loving God with our minds requires that we actually exercise them! As Paul reminds us, "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21, KJV). What a remarkable invitation to intellectual and spiritual discernment!

For whatever years God affords me, I intend to continue exercising that freedom. I regard it not merely as an intellectual right, but as a responsibility to the people and institutions I love.

Which brings me to a rather peculiar little word: satitude.

Satitude: The Remarkable Capacity to Hold Both

Some time ago, I wrote an essay about satitude, my attempt to capture the simultaneous experience of sadness and gratitude. I find the concept increasingly meaningful as I grow older, perhaps because life has afforded me more opportunities to experience both, often in extraordinary proximity to one another.

The loss of my beloved identical twin brother, Gregg, remains one of the most profound sorrows of my life. Yet the sadness I experience in his absence exists alongside an extraordinary gratitude for the years we shared. I need not relinquish one in order to experience the other. To deny the sadness would be to deny something of the depth of that love; to deny the gratitude would be to overlook the extraordinary gift of having had that love in the first place.

Interestingly, psychological research supports the coexistence of seemingly opposing emotions. Larsen et al. (2001) demonstrated that happiness and sadness can coexist in bittersweet circumstances. Our emotional lives are considerably more sophisticated than a simple continuum upon which the presence of one feeling requires the disappearance of another.

And what a liberating realization that is! I do not have to wait until my grief has subsided to appreciate what I have been given. I do not have to wait until our culture has regained its sanity, our institutions have rediscovered their integrity, or our churches have rediscovered their courage before I permit myself to experience joy. Given the apparent rate at which some of those changes are occurring, I might otherwise be waiting a very long time.

But neither do I have to pretend that everything is fine simply because I am grateful. Gratitude that demands the suppression of legitimate sorrow is not the kind of gratitude I am talking about. Nor is gratitude an excuse to tolerate abuse, injustice, or professional wrongdoing. We

can appreciate what is good while remaining committed to changing what is not. We can be deeply disappointed in certain aspects of humanity and still be deeply in love with humanity itself.

Paul expressed this extraordinary paradox nearly two millennia ago: "As sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10, KJV). He did not suggest that sorrow was a failure of faith or that rejoicing required its absence. Both could inhabit the same life. Indeed, I wonder whether our capacity to embrace that paradox is one of the more beautiful manifestations of psychological and spiritual maturity.

The Neuroscience of a Grateful Heart

Now, you knew this old psychologist was not going to get through the conclusion without introducing a little neuroscience, did you? Gratitude is not merely a pleasant disposition. Our hearts and bodies participate in the experience of appreciation.

As we have seen throughout these essays, chronic threat exacts a physiological price, what McEwen (1998) called allostatic load. Good grief, how much time do we spend preparing our bodies for battle, even when the battlefield is a news feed or a conversation we are rehearsing in our heads? In the polyvagal framework we have explored, ventral vagal regulation helps us understand how experiences of safety and connection can settle the heart (Porges, 2007).

Consider an intriguing pilot study: eight weeks of gratitude journaling in individuals with early-stage heart failure were associated with reduced inflammatory biomarkers and stronger parasympathetic heart rate variability responses during a gratitude task (Redwine et al., 2016). A meta-analysis also found improvements in psychological well-being and symptoms of anxiety and depression following gratitude interventions (Diniz et al., 2023). Think about that. What we attend to may have implications that reach well beyond our mood.

As we discussed earlier, chronic stress reaches even into the machinery of cellular aging, with research linking it to shorter telomeres (Epel et

al., 2004). Gratitude offers us an opportunity to interrupt the relentless cycle of stress and cultivate recovery.

The God who designed our souls also designed our bodies. I would no sooner reduce gratitude to a technique for improving heart rate variability than reduce the joy of embracing someone I love to the release of oxytocin. Understanding the physiology need not diminish the wonder.

Gratitude Is Not Spiritual Denial

Christianity offers us something considerably richer than a mandate to be cheerful. Jesus Himself wept at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:35). He experienced profound anguish in Gethsemane, asking His Father if the cup might pass from Him (Matthew 26:38–39). And yet, facing His own suffering, He gave thanks as He broke bread with His disciples (Luke 22:19). Think about that. The presence of anguish did not make thanksgiving impossible.

The Psalms, likewise, give us permission to be extraordinarily honest with God. Psalm 13 begins, "How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever?" and concludes with a declaration of trust in God's mercy. The psalmist did not have to clean up his emotional life before approaching his Creator. He brought his anguish and his trust into the same conversation.

Paul writes, "In every thing give thanks" (1 Thessalonians 5:18, KJV). I find the distinction between being thankful in our circumstances and being thankful for every circumstance particularly meaningful. I do not celebrate the tragedies that have befallen those I love. I do not thank God for the brutality inflicted upon the traumatized individuals with whom I have worked. But I can be thankful for the people who have stood beside them, for the possibility of restoration, and for the assurance that suffering need not have the final word.

And when Paul encourages us to bring our requests before God with thanksgiving, he speaks of a peace that surpasses understanding and

guards our hearts and minds (Philippians 4:6–7). What a beautiful invitation to bring the entirety of our experience into relationship with God. As I have written elsewhere, the security of our identity in Christ does not depend upon the emotional state in which we happen to find ourselves on any given morning.

Gratitude is an antidote to the bitterness that can so easily accompany our wrestling. It helps us remember why discernment matters. What are we protecting? What do we cherish? Whom do we love? If we lose sight of these things, our defense of truth can gradually become an exercise in hostility rather than an expression of love.

The Things for Which I Am Grateful

At this stage of my life, I find myself increasingly mindful of how extraordinarily blessed I have been. I am grateful for my wife, Leah, who has shared this rather unpredictable journey with a man whose brain seems to have misplaced its off switch. I am grateful for my children and grandchildren, for the family relationships that have enriched my life, and for the privilege of having shared so much of my life with my twin brother. I am grateful for friendships that have survived the vicissitudes of life, and for those unexpected acts of brotherhood that arrive at precisely the moment we need them.

I am grateful for the remarkable privilege of having been a psychologist. For decades, human beings have permitted me to enter some of the most vulnerable chambers of their lives. I have witnessed extraordinary courage in people who would never describe themselves as courageous. I have seen the wounded discover their worth, the ashamed begin to reclaim their identity, and those who had nearly relinquished hope discover that another chapter was possible. They have taught me far more than I could ever have offered in return.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have worn the uniform of my country and for the men and women with whom I have served. I am grateful for those veterans who continue to serve their communities long after taking off that uniform. And I am grateful that, even in the

latter chapters of my own life, there are still opportunities to be useful, to learn from others, and to contribute something meaningful to the lives of the people around me.

I am grateful for the wonderfully ordinary things, too: the first cup of coffee in the quiet of the morning, the companionship of my dogs, the freedom of a motorcycle ride, the beauty of the mountains, a good laugh, a fascinating conversation, and the remarkable pleasure of discovering that there is still something new to learn. How easily we can overlook these gifts while waiting for something sufficiently extraordinary to warrant our gratitude!

And above all, I am grateful for the grace of God. Not because my life has been spared suffering, nor because I have managed to navigate it with exemplary wisdom. Good grief, there are chapters of my life that would put a rather substantial dent in that hypothesis. I am grateful because my failures have not disqualified me from His love, because my brokenness has not been beyond the reach of His grace, and because the story of my life is still being written.

The Wrestling Continues

My dear reader, I do not expect you to have agreed with everything I have written in these pages. Indeed, I hope some of these essays have challenged you sufficiently to send you back to the literature, back to Scripture, or into an uncomfortable conversation with yourself. I hope you have occasionally laughed with me, perhaps occasionally at me, and that you have found something worth pondering long after you have put the book down.

Perhaps we should all take a little inspiration from the French sculptor Auguste Rodin. His magnificent sculpture, *The Thinker*, conceived in 1880, originally depicted Dante looking down upon the circles of hell from above *The Gates of Hell* (Musée Rodin, n.d.). What intrigues me about this sculpture is the remarkable physical intensity of the man. His entire being appears engaged in the labor of thought. Good grief, even his toes seem to be wrestling!

Rodin was onto something. We need to become thinkers again. We need to reclaim the art of contemplation, the intellectual discipline of wrestling with difficult questions, and the courage to venture into uncomfortable territory. We need to become less frightened of what we might discover and considerably more concerned about what we might fail to discover through our unwillingness to think.

But let us not spend so much of our lives contemplating the gates of hell that we forget to appreciate the extraordinary beauty of God's creation. Let us wrestle deeply, love passionately, think independently, and live gratefully. Surely, there is room in the human soul for all of these things.

But please, do not allow the disquieting realities of our world to rob you of the extraordinary gift of living in it. Give yourself permission to grieve, to be angry when anger is warranted, and to rejoice without waiting for the world to put itself right.

I do not want to become so grateful that I cease to be discerning, nor so discerning that I cease to be grateful. I do not want to squander my remaining years being consumed by the things I oppose at the expense of the things I love. I want to live with sufficient courage to stand against what I believe is wrong, sufficient grace to love those with whom I disagree, and sufficient humility to recognize when the person in need of correction is me.

Perhaps that is the integration for which I have been wrestling all along. Not the elimination of every incongruity or the achievement of some magnificent state of psychological and spiritual equilibrium, but the capacity to live honestly in the midst of life's complexities while remaining open to its goodness. To hold sorrow and gratitude, conviction and compassion, courage and humility, all within the same rather imperfect human heart.

I began this book by inviting you to wrestle with me. As we conclude, I would invite you to continue wrestling, but to do so with a grateful heart.

I am not restless because I have lost hope. I am restless because I have not. And by the grace of God, I intend to remain both restless and grateful for whatever time I have left on this rather remarkable planet.

And the wrestling continues.

Peace.

References

Asch, S. E. (1956). Studies of independence and conformity: I. A minority of one against a unanimous majority. *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied, 70*(9), 1–70. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0093718

Block, J. (2024a). Dispute arises over World Professional Association for Transgender Health's involvement in WHO's trans health guideline. *BMJ, 387*, q2227. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.q2227

Block, J. (2024b). Gender medicine in the US: How the Cass review failed to land. *BMJ, 385*, q1141. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.q1141

Bonhoeffer, D. (2010). *Letters and papers from prison* (J. W. de Gruchy, Ed.; Vol. 8). Fortress Press. (Original work published 1951). https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.13609930

Diniz, G., et al. (2023). The effects of gratitude interventions: A systematic review and meta-analysis. Einstein (São Paulo), 21, eRW0371. https://doi.org/10.31744/einstein_journal/2023RW0371

Epel, E. S., Blackburn, E. H., Lin, J., Dhabhar, F. S., Adler, N. E., Morrow, J. D., & Cawthon, R. M. (2004). Accelerated telomere shortening in response to life stress. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 101(49), 17312–17315. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0407162101

Frattaroli, J. (2006). Experimental disclosure and its moderators: A meta-analysis. Psychological Bulletin, 132(6), 823–865. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.132.6.823

Larsen, J. T., McGraw, A. P., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2001). Can people feel happy and sad at the same time? Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 81(4), 684–696. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.81.4.684

Library of Congress. (n.d.). Internal workings of the Soviet Union. Revelations from the Russian Archives. https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/intn.html

McEwen, B. S. (1998). Protective and damaging effects of stress mediators. New England Journal of Medicine, 338(3), 171–179. https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJM199801153380307

Musée Rodin. (n.d.). *The thinker*. https://www.musee-rodin.fr/en/musee/collections/oeuvres/penseur-meudon

Porges, S. W. (2007). The polyvagal perspective. Biological Psychology, 74(2), 116–143. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsycho.2006.06.009

Redwine, L. S., Henry, B. L., Pung, M. A., Wilson, K., Chinh, K., Knight, B., Jain, S., Rutledge, T., Greenberg, B., Maisel, A., & Mills, P. J. (2016). Pilot randomized study of a gratitude journaling intervention on heart rate variability and inflammatory biomarkers in patients with stage B heart failure. Psychosomatic Medicine, 78(6), 667–676. https://doi.org/10.1097/PSY.0000000000000316

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version (KJV).

The Man Behind the Machinations

Meet the Restless Psychologist

Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist, author, educator, national speaker, military veteran, Christian, and incurably curious student of the human condition. At 72, his enthusiasm for intellectual discovery shows little evidence of subsiding, much to the occasional annoyance of his beloved wife, Leah, and his own need for sleep.



His professional journey spans four decades. With subspecialty training in pediatric psychology, Dr. Hansen served ten years as a United States Army psychologist, attaining the rank of Major. His subsequent career included private practice, nearly another decade within the Department of Defense, and three years as clinical director of an addiction recovery center. His clinical interests center on developmental trauma, addiction, shame, identity, and transformational healing.

But the good doctor is hardly a stranger to the darker dimensions of human existence. His own journey through developmental trauma, personal tragedy, psychological brokenness, and the devastating loss of his beloved identical twin brother, Gregg, has taught him things no doctoral program could have adequately conveyed.

He has also weathered attacks upon his character and professional integrity, experiences that strengthened his commitment to truth, intellectual independence, and moral courage. Never particularly adept at coloring within institutional lines, he earned the affectionate and occasionally less-than-affectionate designation of *Maverick*.

Out of his personal journey of brokenness and restoration emerged NeuroFaith®, an integration of neuroscience, polyvagal-informed therapy, neurocardiology, Internal Family Systems, and Christian faith. As he affectionately describes it, it was the recipe that saved Jeff Hansen's life.

Today, through NeuroFaith®, Jeff devotes his energies to consultation, writing, teaching, and speaking to audiences across the country. His intellectual pursuits extend beyond the therapy room into philosophy, social psychology, theology, politics, and the fascinating dynamics of our collective humanity.

Among his greatest blessings are his beautiful wife, Leah, his children, and his beloved granddaughter, Hallie. He takes particular pride in his son, Gregg, a United States Marine veteran who served a combat tour in Iraq, and his daughter, Ashley, whose passion for fitness and comprehensive Pilates reflects her fascination with the science of movement, resilience, and healing.

When not writing, exercising, or stirring up a little intellectual controversy, he can often be found exploring the magnificent Arizona landscape on his beloved BMW motorcycle, enjoying his three little canine companions, Henry, Hazel, and Summer, or pondering the sunrise over a cup of coffee.

He remains profoundly grateful for God's grace, exhilarated by the prospect of discovering what he does not yet know, and comfortable acknowledging that he remains a work in progress.

Retirement, apparently, has done little to settle his restless mind. And by the grace of God, he has no particular intention of settling it anytime soon.

The wrestling continues.