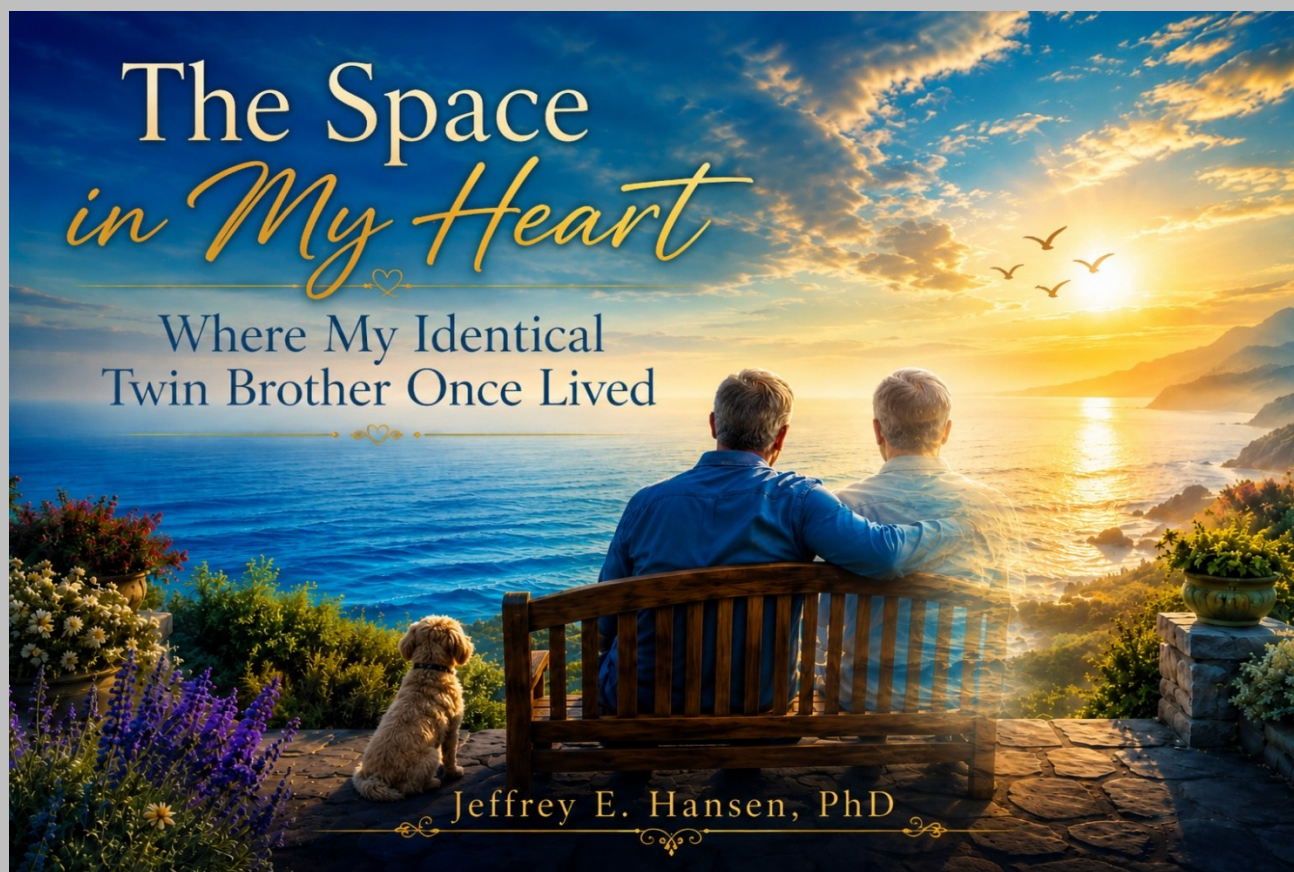




A Note from My Heart

*This essay began as a chapter I was writing for my book, *The Shadow of Shame*. In the opening pages of that book, I made a promise that before our journey was over, I would return to the story of my identical twin brother, Gregg—and, to some extent, to my own.*

But as I began to write this chapter, it rang so loudly in my heart that I knew I wanted to share it separately as well.

This is a deeply personal story about two identical twin brothers who carried many of the same wounds, learned many of the same ways of surviving, and yet ultimately traveled very different paths. It is also a story of toxic shame, achievement, tragedy, neuroscience, faith, and redemption.

I share it not so that you will feel sorry for either of us, but because perhaps something in our story may speak to something in yours.

And so, dear reader, as promised, I return to my brother—and, to some extent, to me.

The Wounds We Shared

Gregg and I both suffered from toxic shame as a result of our father's emotional and physical mistreatment. We learned the same core wounds: We were not safe. We were not good enough.

And so we adapted.

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Our manager systems went into hyperdrive. We developed rigid, fixed, and unrelenting routines built around performance and achievement. We became overachievers, not simply because we were bright or ambitious, but because achievement became a way to feel safe. It became a way to be seen, a way to earn approval, perhaps even a way to convince ourselves, for a little while, that we were good enough after all.

For both of us, this really took hold in the fourth grade, when our family moved from the small coastal town of Point Reyes, California, back to Fort Collins, Colorado, where our father was pursuing a second doctorate, this time in pathology. The schools in Colorado were far more academically advanced than what we had experienced before, and suddenly our insecurities were exposed. We responded the way we had learned to respond: We worked harder. We achieved more. We demanded more of ourselves.

But the achievement came with tremendous emotional turmoil.

When Achievement Became Survival

By junior high, the compulsivity had intensified. We had to get straight A's. And we did. Nothing but straight A's. Not one B on a report card.

But perfection is a cruel master.

Even when the report card showed all A's, a single assignment that fell short of perfection could set us off into a state of intense anxiety. Our worth had become tied to achievement because achievement was how we were recognized by our father and by others. We had learned, deeply and dangerously, that what we accomplished determined whether we were worthy of being seen.

This continued into high school, where both of us achieved at very high levels. But somewhere along the way, a slight divergence began.

Where Our Paths Began to Diverge

Gregg was always the more naturally gifted of the two of us academically. He received the highest scholastic awards, particularly in mathematics, and he was an exceptional gymnast. He was named Athlete of the Year for our entire district, an extraordinary honor recognizing him not merely among gymnasts but among athletes across all sports.

I was, perhaps, second fiddle to Gregg in some of those areas, though I achieved considerably in my own right. But somewhere along the way, I began choosing relationship a little more often than achievement.

And I now believe that decision was the beginning of what saved me.

Gregg continued to soar. The United States Air Force Academy wanted him so badly that they flew him out for recruitment even without a congressional nomination, drawn not only by his extraordinary academic prowess but also by his excellence in gymnastics. He was exceptional in both worlds: a gifted scholar and a gifted athlete.

Later, he entered medical school. But by then, depression had begun nipping at his heels, and eventually he withdrew.

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Still, he kept going. He trained as a mechanical engineer and later became a highly successful high-end builder in California. When the financial crisis struck, he closed that business and reinvented himself yet again, creating a successful career in forensic accounting.

He kept achieving. He kept performing. He kept moving.

But the wounds underneath had never healed.

The Wounds Beneath the Achievement

As Gregg entered midlife and then his later years, depression came and went, even as he continued to achieve. But the toxic shame remained. And by his mid-to-late sixties, those old wounds had grown louder and more merciless.

Erik Erikson described this stage of life as a confrontation between generativity and stagnation, a time when we begin to look back upon what we have done with the life we were given. But when Gregg looked back, his inner critic allowed him to see almost nothing good.

Despite all he had accomplished, it was never enough. Despite his brilliance, it was never enough. Despite the lives he had touched, the businesses he had built, and the obstacles he had overcome, it was never enough.

Because shame does not grade on accomplishment.

The inner critic that had driven him for so many years eventually turned mercilessly against him. Gregg fell into a deep well of despair and lost his will to endure. Later, he stopped eating. He became profoundly anhedonic, losing interest in nearly everything that had once given life meaning or pleasure. He became anorexic. And eventually, my identical twin brother died alone on the other side of the country.

I have had to live with that.

And I always will.

The Space in My Heart Where Gregg Once Lived

But those words hardly begin to capture the agony of what it means to live without Gregg.

He was not simply my brother. He was my identical twin, my best friend, my closest confidant, and my forever encourager. For 68 years, there was a person on this earth who had been there from the very beginning. Before either of us could speak, before memory itself, there was Gregg and there was me. We began this life together.

And then, suddenly, there was only me.

I miss the conversations that never really ended. Gregg and I could begin talking one day, leave a thought unfinished, and pick it up the next as if no time had passed. There were stories that needed no explanation, memories that belonged only to us, jokes that no one else could fully understand and that somehow became funnier simply because the other one was laughing.

Now those conversations remain unfinished.

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The jokes we shared are still inside me, but there is no Gregg on the other end to laugh with me. There are memories I still carry, but the only other person who stood inside those memories with me is gone.

And that is one of the loneliest parts of grief that I know.

So much of my life that only Gregg had access to is now mine alone to hold. There were parts of me he knew simply because he had been there. I did not have to explain the childhood. I did not have to explain our father. I did not have to explain Point Reyes or Fort Collins, the straight A's, the fear of not being good enough, the striving, the laughter, the dreams, or all the countless ordinary moments that somehow become sacred only after the person who shared them with you is gone.

He knew.

And now I am the only one left to remember so much of it.

There are still times when something happens and my first instinct is to tell Gregg. A thought crosses my mind, something makes me laugh, something hurts, something wonderful happens, and somewhere inside me there remains that almost automatic movement toward my brother.

And then I remember. He is not there. There is now an empty space in my heart where Gregg once lived, a space no one else can ever occupy.

There is an agony in that which I do not know how to fully put into words. I am a psychologist. I have spent a lifetime studying human suffering, grief, trauma, resilience, and the mysterious ways in which we heal. But there are some losses that cannot be reduced to clinical language. There are some absences that cannot be resolved, only carried.

I carry Gregg. I carry his voice. His laughter. His encouragement. His brilliance. His wounds. His unfinished conversations. I carry the jokes that now have only one person left to remember why they were so funny.

And perhaps most painfully, I carry the part of myself that existed only when I was with him. I will forever mourn my brother. I will forever hear him in my heart. And my heart will always cry for him. But I would rather carry the pain of having loved Gregg than live a life in which I had never known what it was to have him as my brother, my identical twin, my best friend, my closest confidant, and my forever encourager.

He was here.

He mattered.

He was loved.

And he is missed beyond anything these words can ever fully say.

And Then There Was Me

But if I am going to tell you the truth about Gregg, I must also tell you more of the truth about me. My own journey was not simply a story of resilience or an easy turn toward faith. I, too, experienced my own tragedy. Mine came earlier, triggered by so many internal and external events that the resilience I

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had relied upon for so long was no longer strong enough to carry me. The ways I had learned to survive were failing. My nervous system was overwhelmed.

My values had to be reconsidered because I began to understand that our negative core beliefs are often tightly intertwined with our deepest values, with what we believe gives us worth, identity, and significance.

And I had valued performance. I had valued achievement, external accolades, big houses, beautiful properties, professional recognition, and all the other things I genuinely enjoyed and had worked hard to attain. There was nothing inherently wrong with those things. But somewhere along the way, I had allowed too much of my identity to become attached to them.

Beneath the accomplishments still lived the old core wound:

You are not good enough.

And so, I had to begin again.

Learning to Settle

My first step was not theological or intellectual. It was physiological.

I had to learn how to settle my autonomic nervous system, which had carried so much for so long. For years, I had lived largely in chronic sympathetic and HPA-axis activation, punctuated by occasional periods of dorsal vagal shutdown. I knew surprisingly little, experientially, about what it meant to live from a ventral vagal state of safety, connection, openness, and peace.

I had to learn to settle. I had to learn to listen to my body rather than constantly drive it. I had to understand that the nervous system I had once relied upon to push me toward achievement was also exhausted from years of trying to protect me.

My work with neurobiology helped me understand what was happening inside me, and slowly I began to discover that living was not the same thing as performing.

Life was not meant to be lived from a performative mindset, forever trying to silence a negative core belief by achieving enough to finally become worthy.

Because no achievement can heal the wound that says, I am not enough.

When Neuroscience Met Faith

For me, the deepest healing came when neuroscience and faith began to converge. I came to understand, not merely intellectually but in my heart, that my worth did not come from what I had achieved, what I owned, what degrees followed my name, or how others regarded me.

It came down to something that may sound almost too simple. Jesus loves me. Not because I performed well. Not because I earned it. Not because I achieved enough. Simply because I am His.

I came to understand that I was made for relationship with Jesus. I was made to define myself not by the relentless verdict of my inner critic, but by His love for me. I was adopted into His family. I was loved and valued so profoundly that God sent His Son to die for me.

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These were truths I had known intellectually for years. But knowing something in your head is not the same as experiencing it in your heart, your body, and your nervous system.

And slowly, I began to find the peace Scripture had promised: “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” I found that peace. Not perfectly. Not without struggle. Not as a permanent state in which I never again feel anxiety, grief, or pain. But I found it deeply enough to know that it is real.

And why would I not want to share that with others? Why would I not want to share it with you, dear reader?

Because your life can go either way. I do not necessarily mean that you will lose your physical life as my brother did. But shame can steal something else from you. It can steal your joy. It can steal your peace. It can convince you to spend a lifetime performing for a worth that was never meant to be earned in the first place.

It can leave you living a life of defeat, which is precisely where the enemy wants you.

But that is not what God wants for you.

It Is Never Too Late

I know that somewhere along the way, Gregg made a decision to receive Jesus. And I can only trust and pray that this decision mattered eternally. Although he did not find the peace in this life that I so desperately wish he had known, I hold on to the hope that he has found that peace now.

And I look forward to seeing him again.

But there is another part of this story that matters deeply to me. My father, the same father whose own wounds led him to emotionally and physically mistreat his sons, found Christ in the last lap of his life.

And so did my grandfather.

These were two men who had carried wounds of their own and who, for much of their lives, had lived with deep differences between them. But in those final chapters, something beautiful happened. They found Christ, and they beautifully reconciled their differences.

That does not erase what happened. It does not undo the wounds or change the past. Grace does not require us to pretend that harm never occurred. But it reminds me of something I believe with all my heart:

It is never too late.

It is never too late for grace. Never too late for reconciliation. Never too late for a wounded heart to turn toward Christ. God works in His own time, and if we remain open to Him, no life is beyond redemption. No story has to end where it began.

My father and grandfather taught me that.

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The father who once caused such pain was himself a wounded man. And his story, too, was still being written. So was my grandfather's. And in the last lap of their lives, grace entered the story in a way that allowed two wounded men to find Christ and find their way back to one another.

What a Reunion That Will Be

And so, yes, I hold on to the hope that one day, in God's time, I will see Gregg again. And I hope Dad and Grandpa will be there too, waiting at the gates of heaven. What a reunion that will be. No more shame. No more fear. No more wounds passed from one generation to the next. No more inner critics whispering that we were never good enough.

Only grace. Only forgiveness. Only love.

And I do not believe that God caused these tragedies. I do not believe that.

I believe God allows tragedy to occur and natural consequences to unfold. But I also believe that God lets no pain go unused, if we allow Him to redeem it. I do not want my pain to have been in vain. I do not want my loss to have been in vain. Nor do I want Gregg's pain, his life, or his loss to go untold.

I share our story not so that you will feel sorry for either one of us. I share it in the hope that perhaps it may touch your heart, help you make a choice a little differently, or invite you to lean more deeply into what I have written from my heart to yours in the pages of this book.

From My Heart to Yours

My prayer is that these pages will somehow write their love upon your soul. That they will point you toward healing of the body, healing of the mind, healing of the heart, and healing of the soul. And ultimately, that they will turn your heart toward Christ.

That is my prayer for you, dear brother or sister who has walked with me through these pages.

And perhaps, in that way, neither Gregg's pain nor mine will have been in vain.