

When My Own Lecture Started Talking Back



Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

The Professor Gets Schooled

One of the unexpected privileges of growing older is discovering that, every once in a while, life has a way of reminding you that you're not nearly as clever as you thought you were.

I've spent much of my professional life teaching, and I genuinely love it. Whether I was teaching young Army psychologists, physicians, treatment teams, graduate students, or now clinicians working through the NeuroFaith® certification program, there has always been something deeply satisfying about taking a complicated idea, wrestling with it until it becomes clear in my own mind, and then watching someone else suddenly understand not simply the subject, but themselves. Good teaching doesn't merely transfer information. At its best, it changes the way we understand our own story.

That morning I was teaching the third major module of the NeuroFaith® model, the section devoted to Internal Family Systems. The first two modules focus primarily on understanding what trauma does to the body. Modern neuroscience has shown us something both obvious and revolutionary: trauma is not simply something we remember. It becomes something we carry. It shapes our autonomic nervous system, influences our perception of safety and danger, quietly writes narratives about who we are, and often continues affecting our lives long after the original

events have passed. Before we can help people change behavior, I believe we first have to appreciate what trauma has already done to the brain, the body, and ultimately the soul.

That naturally leads into **Internal Family Systems, or IFS**, which has become one of my favorite



psychological theories. I appreciate it because of its remarkable compassion. Rather than asking, "What's wrong with you?" it asks, "How did you learn to survive?" According to IFS, we all develop protective parts. **Managers** work hard to keep life organized, productive, responsible, and under control. They build, they plan, they anticipate, and they quietly whisper that if we can simply stay one step ahead of life, perhaps we won't

have to revisit the deeper pain beneath it all.

When that strategy begins failing and emotional pain starts breaking through anyway, **firefighters** rush in, doing whatever they can to extinguish the distress as quickly as possible. Beneath both are the exiles, the wounded places carrying shame, fear, rejection, abandonment, grief, and painful conclusions about ourselves that often originated decades earlier.



One of the reasons I love this model is that it refuses to shame our defenses. It doesn't portray managers as villains or firefighters as failures. Instead, it asks us to appreciate that every one of those parts arose for a reason. Long before they became problematic, they were protective. They helped us survive. As both a psychologist and a Christian, I find that perspective refreshingly humble. It invites curiosity before judgment and compassion before condemnation.

That was the lesson I was teaching. Then, somewhere in the middle of the lecture, the lecture quietly turned around and started teaching me. For just a fleeting second, I caught myself thinking, *Boy...that's almost hypocrisy.*

I immediately smiled. "No," I thought. "That's not the right word."

Hypocrisy wasn't what was happening. I believed every word I was saying. What I was experiencing was one of those rare moments when the truth you've been teaching everyone else

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quietly folds its arms, looks you in the eye, and says, "All right, Jeff. We've talked enough about everybody else. Let's talk about you."

If you've never lived in Arizona, you may not appreciate how much static electricity builds up in the dry desert air. You're walking across the carpet, minding your own business, when you casually reach for a doorknob. Then, without warning, you get hit with a jolt that seems completely disproportionate to the innocent act of opening a door. It gets your attention in a hurry.

That's exactly what happened to me that morning. Only the shock didn't hit my finger. It landed squarely in my soul.

As I was talking about manager systems, I paused for a moment and looked across my man cave



office toward the bookshelf. Sitting there were thirteen or fourteen books I'd written over the years. Looking at them has never filled me with pride nearly as much as gratitude. Writing has always been one of the deepest satisfactions of my professional life. Every one of those books represents years of reading, thinking, praying, deleting chapters I thought were brilliant until I reread them the next morning, rewriting them, and hoping that somewhere, somehow, another human being might find a little hope in their pages.

I stood there looking at that bookshelf. Then, completely out of nowhere, a thought entered my mind. *"Jeff...what the hell are you doing?"*

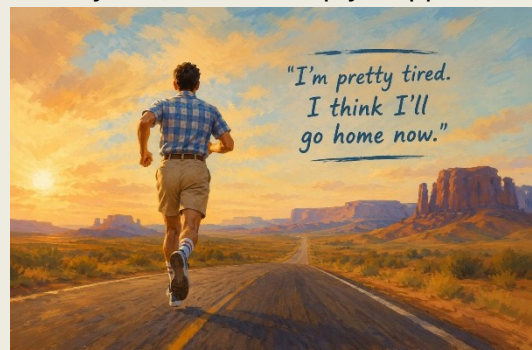
The question surprised me because it wasn't condemning. It wasn't even particularly critical. It was almost curious, as though some wiser part of me had quietly decided that after all these years it was finally time to ask the obvious question.

Almost immediately, another image floated into my mind.

Forrest Gump.

sToward the end of the movie, after running across America for years, Forrest simply stopped, looked around, and said, *"I'm pretty tired. I think I'll go home now."*

I've laughed at that scene for years. Standing there that morning, I wasn't laughing. I found myself wondering whether I'd been running for so long that I'd forgotten to ask why I was still running. Then another thought



quietly entered the room. What if one of my own manager systems had been faithfully driving much of my life? Not because it was unhealthy. Not because it was broken.

Quite the opposite. Because it had served me extraordinarily well. Apparently, my manager had decided to attend class that morning. He just neglected to tell the instructor.

Looking Back Through the Bookshelf

Standing there in front of that bookshelf, I began mentally walking back through my own life, and almost immediately a pattern emerged that I had never fully appreciated before. Every significant wound seemed to awaken exactly the same faithful response. My manager never spent much time asking why life wasn't fair. He simply rolled up his sleeves and quietly went back to work. Looking back now, I realize he wasn't trying to erase the pain. He was helping me survive it until I was finally strong enough to carry it.

I think that strategy began much earlier than I ever recognized. Growing up, there were wounds I simply didn't have the maturity to understand. I learned early that competence felt safer than vulnerability, that achievement quieted anxieties I couldn't yet name, and that if I stayed productive enough, perhaps I wouldn't have to spend quite so much time with the deeper ache underneath. Looking back now, I don't criticize that young boy. Quite the opposite. I have enormous compassion for him. He was doing the best he could with the tools he had, and one of those tools turned out to be an extraordinarily faithful manager who quietly devoted himself to building a meaningful life.

Years later, when false allegations from a colleague at Madigan Army Medical Center who apparently had disdain for me because I challenged progressive ideology that unnecessarily medicalized children threatened not only my career but my identity, that same manager quietly showed up for work again. Those allegations were ultimately resolved, but resolution doesn't erase the experience of living through them. For a season I genuinely wondered whether decades of work, reputation, and calling might disappear under accusations that carried consequences severe enough to alter the entire trajectory of my life. Looking back now, I don't remember my manager panicking. I remember him quietly saying, *"All right...let's keep going."*

Then Gregg died.

There are some losses that change your schedule, and there are others that quietly change the architecture of your soul. Losing my identical twin brother belonged to the second category. We had shared a womb, a childhood, dreams, disappointments, victories, failures, and a lifetime of memories that no one else on earth could ever fully



understand. When he died, something inside me was permanently altered.

Grief is a strange companion. Sometimes it announces itself loudly. More often it quietly moves into the house and begins rearranging the furniture while you're trying to convince yourself everything still looks the same. You continue functioning. You continue serving. You continue living. Yet nothing feels quite as it once did.

Once again, there he was.

My faithful manager.

He didn't pretend Gregg hadn't died. He simply kept encouraging me to keep serving, keep teaching, keep writing, and keep loving until I was finally able to carry the grief instead of merely surviving it.

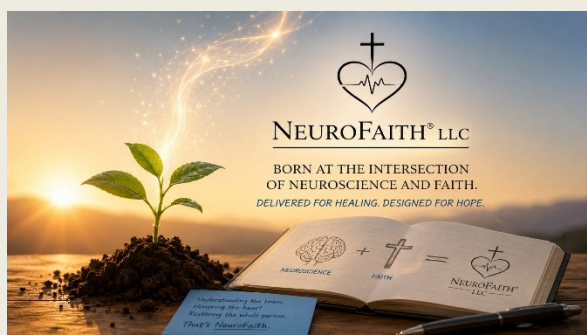
Looking back now, I don't think he was trying to help me avoid my pain. I think he was carrying me through it until I was finally strong enough to carry it myself. There is a profound difference between avoiding pain and surviving it. Only now, years later, do I appreciate how faithfully that part of me had been doing exactly that for most of my life.

The Autobiography of a Manager

Then came another chapter that is impossible to leave out of this story.

Closing in on retiring from Madigan and the Defense Health Agency, Tim invited me to join what I genuinely believed would become the final major chapter of my professional life. He recruited me because of decades spent treating trauma, addiction, military families, children, and because of a professional reputation that had been built over an entire career. I walked into that season with tremendous hope. I honestly believed I had found a place where everything I had learned over four decades could be poured into something that would outlive me. I poured my heart and soul into that work.

It was during those years that NeuroFaith® itself was born.



It wasn't born in a marketing meeting or a branding session. It emerged from thousands of clinical hours and decades of integrating neuroscience, attachment theory, Internal Family Systems, neurocardiology, trauma psychology, and my Christian faith into one coherent understanding of healing. I wasn't trying to invent a program. I was simply trying to make sense of what I had been observing for most of

my professional life. NeuroFaith® became the natural expression of that journey, and I gave it freely because I sincerely believed we were building something together.

Looking back now, one of the deepest disappointments wasn't simply that the relationship eventually unraveled. It was the painful realization that the model seemed to remain valuable while Tim's actions made it apparent that I no longer was. Whether that perception is entirely accurate is almost beside the point. It was my experience, and it wounded me deeply. I found myself with the growing impression that NeuroFaith® had become useful for branding and organizational identity while the relationship with the person who had created it had become increasingly expendable.

Perhaps there are perspectives I still don't understand. I genuinely hope there are. This chapter isn't about assigning motives or settling old scores. It isn't about bitterness. It's about honestly naming one of the deepest disappointments of my professional life. I had invested not only my experience but also a considerable portion of my heart into that work. Watching that vision slowly fracture left me devastated.

Looking back, I still cannot honestly tell you where resignation ended and being pushed toward the door began. Some days I think I resigned because I could no longer remain true to my convictions in that environment. Other days I think the decision had largely been made for me before I finally acknowledged it. The truth probably lives somewhere between those realities, but what I know with absolute certainty is what the experience did to me.

It broke my heart.

Yet one of the remarkable realities of following Christ is that pain and love can occupy the same heart at the same time. I would be dishonest if I said this chapter no longer hurts. It does. But I would be equally dishonest if I said that the hurt had extinguished my love for Tim. It hasn't. I continue to pray for him often, asking God to bless him, his family, and the work that lies ahead of him. I also pray that God would grant both of us wisdom, humility, and clarity, and that, in His time, we might each see this chapter more fully through His eyes than through our own.

Perhaps that is one of the clearest expressions of the heart behind NeuroFaith®. Healing does not ask us to choose between truth and grace. In Christ they walk together, and that has become one of the deepest convictions of my life.

If NeuroFaith® means anything, it must first be lived before it is taught. My hope is that whenever we look back on this chapter, we will do so with greater wisdom, greater humility, and greater grace than either of us has today.

Three years earlier I had walked away from the security of Madigan believing I was investing the final great chapter of my professional life into something profoundly meaningful. Suddenly, at seventy-one years of age, I found myself standing back at the starting line wondering what had

just happened. It wasn't simply the loss of a position. It was the loss of a vision that I genuinely believed God had placed before me.

And then my manager quietly did what he had always done. He put me back to work.

Looking back now, I almost have to smile because any thoughtful psychologist would probably have encouraged me to slow down, spend more time grieving, take long walks with Leah, and simply allow my heart to catch up with reality. My manager apparently skipped that lecture. His treatment plan was considerably more direct. He quietly leaned over and whispered, "Let's write."

So, I did.

One book became two. Two became three. Before long I had written five books in an astonishingly short period of time. At the time I thought I was simply being productive. Looking back now, I understand something much deeper. Those books were never simply projects. They were the visible evidence of one faithful protector quietly carrying me through another season of profound disappointment until I was finally strong enough to sit with the disappointment itself.

That's when I looked back across the room at the bookshelf and realized I wasn't looking at my bibliography. I was looking at the autobiography of one remarkably faithful manager.

So...Now What?

And that's where I've been living ever since that morning.

I wish I could tell you that standing in front of that bookshelf suddenly answered every question. It didn't. If anything, it raised far more questions than it answered. Perhaps that's one of the great ironies of growing older. The longer we live, the less interested we become in pretending we have everything figured out. Instead, we become more interested in honestly understanding the life we've actually lived.

So where does all of this leave me?

Honestly, I don't know.

Part of me keeps returning to Forrest Gump. After all those years of running, he simply stopped, looked around, and said, "I'm pretty tired. I think I'll go home now." I understand that scene very differently than I once did. I don't hear resignation in his voice. I hear contentment. I hear a man recognizing that one season has ended and another is about to begin.

The problem is that I don't yet know what "going home" means for me.

This by no measure means that I am finished with NeuroFaith®. I still believe in the model every bit as deeply as I ever have. I still love teaching it. I still believe it can help people understand trauma, addiction, shame, resilience, and healing. What I'm questioning isn't NeuroFaith®. What I'm questioning is whether I still need to build it with the same relentless intensity that has characterized so much of my life.

There is a profound difference between building something because God is inviting you to build it and building something because a faithful old manager has spent fifty years believing that productivity is the safest place to live. Those aren't necessarily the same thing, and if I'm honest, I'm no longer entirely certain which one has been driving me.

Leah and I have practical decisions to make. We have enough to live on; we have been blessed but remaining here and enjoying the kind of retirement we once envisioned probably requires some additional income. That's simply reality. Stewardship matters. Providing for your family matters. Yet I know my manager well enough to recognize that he loves practical arguments. He can quietly take a perfectly legitimate financial concern and transform it into one more reason to keep running. That's why this season has been so difficult. I'm not simply trying to decide where we should live or how much I should work. I'm trying to discern whether I'm responding to today's calling or yesterday's wounds.

Those are very different questions. This isn't an essay asking anyone to feel sorry for me.

Quite the opposite. I have an extraordinarily rich life. I have a wife whom I adore, wonderful children, a precious granddaughter, friendships that have sustained me through some of life's darkest seasons, meaningful work that has allowed me to serve thousands of people, and a faith that has never abandoned me. By every measure that truly matters, I have been blessed beyond anything I deserve.

But gratitude doesn't exempt any of us from grief. It doesn't exempt us from disappointment, betrayal, or seasons when life unfolds very differently than we imagined. Every family has its story. Every life contains both extraordinary beauty and genuine heartbreak. I'm simply trying to understand mine.

Perhaps that's one of the gifts of growing older. You stop trying to present a polished version of yourself and become more interested in making sense of the life you've actually lived. Looking back now, I don't want to fire my manager.

Frankly, he deserves much better than that.

He carried me through childhood when I had neither the maturity nor the language to understand what was happening around me. He quietly sustained me through the allegations at Madigan, a season that could easily have destroyed a career I had spent decades building. He helped me survive the loss of Gregg, carrying me through grief until I could finally begin carrying the grief

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myself. Then, after one of the deepest professional disappointments of my life, he simply did what he had always done. He quietly sat beside me and suggested that we build something, write something, and keep moving until the heart could catch up with the circumstances.

The more I reflect on it, the more grateful I become. I owe that faithful part of me far more gratitude than criticism. Without him, I doubt I would have written the books that now sit on my bookshelf. I doubt I would have built the practices, served the people, or persevered through the seasons that, at the time, felt almost unbearable. He wasn't my enemy. He was one of God's instruments of preservation. The question, then, isn't whether he belongs in my life.

The real question is whether he still belongs in the driver's seat.

Knowing him, he probably isn't thrilled that I'm even asking the question. In fact, he's almost certainly reading this chapter over my shoulder wondering whether we couldn't squeeze in another book before breakfast tomorrow morning. Managers are persistent that way.

Mine certainly is. Maybe that's why my own lecture had to talk back. It wasn't correcting me. It was inviting me. Inviting me to trust that perhaps faithfulness at seventy-one doesn't have to look exactly like faithfulness at thirty-five. Perhaps God isn't asking me to stop serving. Perhaps He's simply asking me to serve from a different place. Instead of running quite so hard, perhaps He's inviting me to walk more slowly, listen more carefully, love more deeply, and trust Him more completely than I ever have before.

I still don't know exactly where this chapter of my life is heading. I don't know whether Leah and I will remain here or begin somewhere entirely new. I don't know what NeuroFaith® will ultimately become, and despite my manager's energetic lobbying, I don't even know how many more books remain to be written.

What I do know is this. The God who faithfully carried a frightened little boy, guided a young Army psychologist, sustained a grieving brother, protected a devastated clinician, and patiently walked beside an aging psychologist standing in front of a bookshelf has never once asked me to know the entire road ahead. He has simply asked me to trust the One who does.

Perhaps that was the lesson my own lecture had been trying to teach me all along.

And perhaps, for the first time in a very long time, I'm finally beginning to listen.

