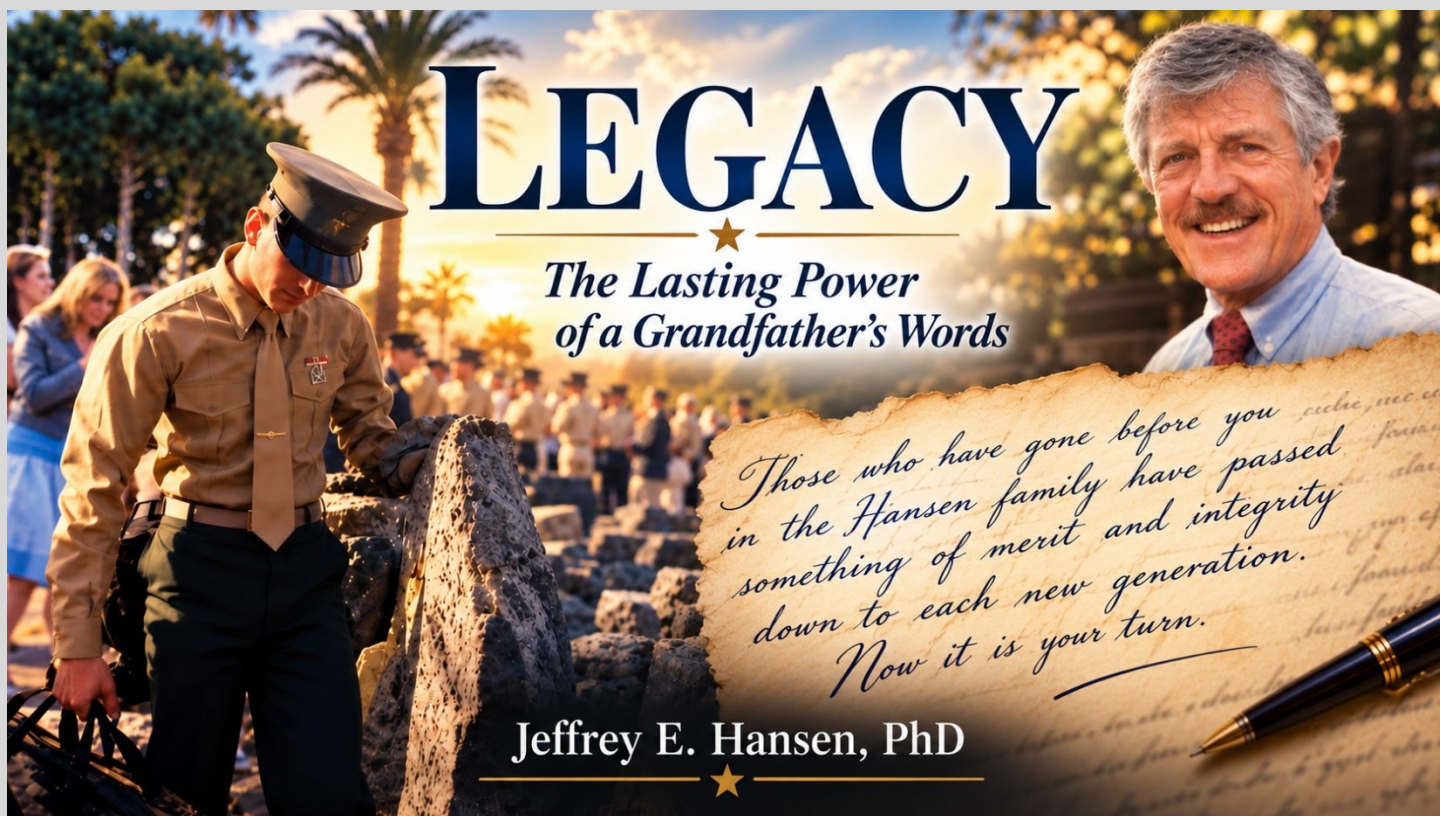




From Grandfather to Grandson: What We Inherit, What We Heal, and What We Pass Along

It was 4:15 this morning when I woke up. Some people would call that an ungodly hour. Me? I consider it God's hour. There is something sacred about four in the morning. The world is quiet. The distractions have not yet begun their daily assault. Even our three little dogs—Henry, Summer, and Hazel, affectionately known in our household as the three littles—are still sound asleep. And I am almost embarrassed to admit where they sleep. Almost. They sleep in our bed. All three of them. There, I said it. And actually, I am quite happy to admit it.

But sometime around three this morning, a word had already begun making its way through my mind: legacy. Just one word. But what a word. And almost immediately, I began thinking about my father.

My dad was a complicated man. Aren't we all? He was a man of considerable accomplishment, intellect, determination, and conviction. He was also a man who carried scars, some inflicted by his own father, who had inherited his own wounds from the generation before him. There was a current of harshness, sometimes outright abuse, that ran through the Hansen family for generations. It did not begin with my father. And to his credit, it diminished with each successive generation until my generation made a deliberate decision: It stops here. And it did. That does not mean we escaped without scars. We did not. But there is a profound difference between carrying a wound and passing it along.

Our ancestors were hardworking Swedish immigrants who settled into the unforgiving agricultural life of Nebraska. These were men who knew physical hardship, economic uncertainty, the Great Depression, and the relentless demands of keeping a family alive. Their philosophy was straightforward: life is tough, so you had better be tougher. And if you wanted your sons to survive a tough world, you made them tough. We have a name for some of those methods today. We call them abuse. I suspect those men would have been bewildered by the accusation. They were doing what they believed fathers were supposed to do, using the tools they themselves had inherited. That does not excuse the harm. But it helps us understand it.

My father was much more than the injuries he carried or the mistakes he made. He was the first in his family to graduate from college. His father had only an eighth-grade education, but Dad went on to earn a doctorate in veterinary medicine and later pursued, though did not complete, a second doctorate in pathology. From an eighth-grade education to veterinary medicine and advanced pathology studies in a single generation: no small accomplishment.

And here is something important: my father never told me to pursue an education. He did not need to. He lived it. His example, not his spoken words, settled somewhere deep in my heart. I watched a man who valued learning and believed there was always more to understand. Bandura’s (1977) work on observational learning helps explain why this matters: we learn not only through instruction, but by watching significant people in our lives. Sometimes what we pass along most profoundly is what we never explicitly teach.

The Year That Gave and the Year That Took

The year 2006 occupies a peculiar place in my family’s history. It was a year of extraordinary pride and devastating loss. My son Gregg had enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. I can still remember attending his boot camp graduation. I have experienced many proud moments in my life, but I am not sure any surpass that one. I watched my son go into boot camp a boy and emerge a man. There he stood in his Marine Corps uniform, having earned something no one could simply give him. He had been tested, pushed, challenged, and transformed.

My father was there. Three generations of Hansen men stood together to celebrate a rite of passage that meant far more than a military graduation. My father saw his grandson become a Marine. I saw my son become a Marine. And Gregg knew that his father and grandfather had come to witness it. We did not know then how precious that moment would become.

Only weeks later, my father was struck by a truck and died during surgery. His death was sudden, violent, and devastating. There was no leisurely goodbye, no opportunity to gather the family and say everything that needed to be said. One moment he was part of our lives. The next, he was gone.

But he left something behind: a letter, dated December 20, 2006, addressed to his grandson as he prepared to return to Marine Combat Training. It captures something of the man I knew, the man I struggled to understand, and the man I loved. And little did my father know, as he wrote those words, that approximately a year later his grandson would find himself in combat in Fallujah, Iraq, one of the most dangerous places imaginable for a young Marine. I cannot help but wonder how often my father's words accompanied Gregg into that unforgiving world. I like to believe they had settled somewhere deep in his soul, giving him an added measure of confidence, courage, and the quiet assurance that he was loved, that he belonged, and that someone believed in the man he was becoming.

My father could not go into battle with his grandson. But perhaps, in a way neither of them could have anticipated, his words did.

I want to share that letter in its entirety.

A Grandfather's Letter

December 20, 2006

Dear Gregory,

Just this evening I was thinking about your going back to the base for more training. You might have some thoughts about that! I know I would. Looking back on life it is easy to remember times that were hard. We all paid a price for growth, gain and what we call success. If we don't, we end up without much of anything worthwhile. Your Dad paid a price for you and the rest of his immediate family. Ask yourself what your life would be like without what your Mom and Dad did and what they sacrificed for you.

Those who have gone before you in the Hansen family have passed something of merit and integrity down to each new generation.

Now it is your turn. The USMC has passed something on to you as

well, in 13 short weeks. I am proud that you are on your current path. With a well-lived life comes challenge and trial. You will gain in proportion to your dedication, faith, and patriotism. You are fortunate to have been born to wonderful parents who love you dearly and who give you a badge worth protecting. Wear your responsibility well and live each day to its fullest.

I am proud to be your Grandfather, and you are uniquely my only Grandson. You are the only one there to carry the Hansen name on to your children and you will be a credit to all those who have gone before you. Have a great New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. Wish I could be there with you.

With much love,

Gramps

Legacy: The Gift of Knowing Who You Are

When I read my father's letter to Gregg, I see something far more important than a grandfather offering advice. I see a man giving another man a message about his identity: You belong. You matter. You come from something. You have something worth protecting. You have a purpose. And I am proud of you. My father was placing his hands, figuratively speaking, on his grandson's shoulders and telling him who he was.

We tend to think of identity as intellectual—a collection of beliefs we can articulate when someone asks who we are. But identity runs deeper. It is experienced in our hearts, our bodies, our relationships, and our brains. It is a felt sense of who we are and whether we belong. When identity is grounded in love, acceptance, and purpose, it can become a remarkable source of resilience. When shaped by humiliation, rejection, or abuse, it can become a source of suffering that follows us for decades.

Identity Begins With Belonging

Before a child can tell you who he is, he is already learning something about himself through those who care for him. Am I safe? Am I wanted? Do I matter? Will someone come when I am

frightened? Bowlby (1988) described how repeated caregiving experiences help children develop internal working models of themselves and others. These early expectations are important, but not destiny: later relationships and experiences can deepen, challenge, and revise them.

A boy needs to know that his father sees him—not merely his report card, athletic performance, or mistakes, but him. John Eldredge (2001), in *Wild at Heart*, describes the longing many boys and men have for a father’s affirmation. His book is pastoral rather than experimental neuroscience, but the question resonates with my clinical experience: Does my father believe in me? Does he see something worthwhile in me? When that affirmation is absent, some boys and men spend years chasing substitutes—achievement, approval, belonging in the wrong crowd, even a willingness to diminish themselves to be accepted. This is not inevitable, and mothers, mentors, and other loving adults can provide transformative affirmation. But the longing is real.

Let me be clear: none of this diminishes mothers. Mothers shape the identities of daughters and sons in profound and sometimes different ways, and fathers do the same. Their contributions overlap, interact, and cannot be reduced to a tidy formula. Children need the presence and love of reliable people, and every family has its own story. My focus here is on a grandfather’s particular gift to his grandson.

Identity Must Be Felt: The Autonomic Nervous System

A child can hear “I love you” a thousand times, but if those words are consistently paired with intimidation or emotional abandonment, his body may learn another lesson. Love must become more than a sentence; it must become an experience. In polyvagal-informed language, we often describe the connected, socially engaged state as ventral vagal, and contrast it with sympathetic mobilization under threat and more immobilized defensive responses (Porges, 2011). Some specific anatomical and evolutionary claims of polyvagal theory are debated, but the clinical importance of perceived safety, supportive connection, and physiological regulation remains compelling.

We are not meant to spend our lives trapped in defense. We need the capacity to mobilize when danger is real, certainly. But we also need the experience of enough safety to rest, learn, love, repair, and grow. A grandfather’s affirmation is not merely information delivered to a grandson’s ears. It can become part of the boy’s lived experience of security, belonging, and confidence. I cannot tell you precisely what happened in Gregg’s nervous system when he read that letter. But I know what my father intended to communicate: You are loved, you are seen, and you belong.

The Heart Has Something to Say, Too

As far back as 1865, French physiologist Claude Bernard was exploring the remarkable connection between the heart and brain. More than a century later, Thayer and Lane (2009) returned to that legacy through their model of neurovisceral integration, examining how emotional regulation, the autonomic nervous system, and cardiovascular functioning are interconnected. What fascinates me is that love, affirmation, and belonging are not merely ideas we think about. They are experiences we feel. They touch the whole person—and, over time, can become part of the identity we carry into the world.

The heart and brain communicate continuously through autonomic and other physiological pathways. Heart rate variability, or HRV, describes variation between successive heartbeats and can provide a window into aspects of autonomic regulation. Thayer and Lane (2009) describe the integration of central networks involved in emotional and cognitive regulation with cardiac autonomic control. HRV is influenced by many factors and cannot by itself measure love, faith, or security. Still, the broader point is extraordinary: our emotional and relational lives are embodied. When someone we love embraces us, affirms us, or looks us in the eye and communicates that we matter, we often feel it in our breathing, our chest, and the release of tension. Identity is not just thought. It is lived.

The Default Mode Network: The Story We Tell Ourselves About Ourselves

One of the most fascinating discoveries in contemporary neuroscience is the default mode network, or DMN, a distributed system involved in internally directed thought, autobiographical memory, self-reflection, and imagining possible futures (Buckner et al., 2008; Menon, 2023). Among its important components are the medial prefrontal cortex, posterior cingulate cortex, precuneus, and connections with medial temporal memory systems. These regions do not constitute a single warehouse where identity is stored; rather, they contribute to the ongoing process of remembering our lives, evaluating ourselves, and anticipating what may come next.

Who am I? What has happened to me? What does it mean? What can I expect from the future? These questions can become a blessing that keeps blessing or a curse that keeps cursing. A child repeatedly told that he is worthless may carry that belief into friendships, job interviews, marriage, prayer, and every unfamiliar encounter. Trauma can affect self-related processing and autobiographical experience, including networks associated with the DMN (Lanius et al., 2020). The wound is no longer merely something that happened to me; it becomes something I believe is true about me. That belief can color the whole world.

But the story can change. New experiences, therapy, loving relationships, reflection, and faith can help us revise the meanings we attach to our past. My father’s letter gave Gregg a very

different story to carry: You come from people who sacrificed. You have inherited integrity. You are loved. You have responsibilities. You have a future. My father did not know the language of the DMN, but he knew how to bless a grandson with an identity worth embracing.

The Identity God Declares

And here is where my heart goes most deeply. Before our earthly fathers or grandfathers say a word, God has already spoken about our worth. We are made in His image (Genesis 1:26–27). Through Christ, we are invited to become children of God (John 1:12), and Paul tells believers that we are children and heirs with Christ (Romans 8:16–17). Ephesians 1:18 speaks of the riches of God’s glorious inheritance in His holy people. And Romans 5:8 reminds us that Christ died for us while we were still sinners. What a declaration of love! We matter so profoundly to God that He gave everything to bring us into relationship with Him.

I do not want that reduced to a psychological technique. God is not limited by our theories, brain scans, or measurements. His declaration of who we are is spiritual truth, and it is healing beyond what any laboratory can fully capture. Yet understanding the neuroscience helps me appreciate the depth at which identity, love, and belonging are experienced. Faith can be known in the soul, believed in the mind, and felt throughout our embodied lives. To be able to say, and deeply know, “I am loved; I belong; I have been called,” is an extraordinary gift.

And then God gives earthly fathers, mothers, grandfathers, and other significant people the privilege of echoing that affirmation. Not creating our ultimate worth, but helping us recognize and experience it. My father’s letter was one such echo.

Meaning and Purpose: What We Do With the Gift

Identity answers, Who am I? Purpose asks, What am I going to do with the life I have been given? Park (2010) describes how people use beliefs, values, and goals to make sense of experience, especially when life challenges their understanding of the world. When a young man knows that his worth does not depend on being impressive enough, he can pursue meaningful goals without turning every achievement into a desperate attempt to earn belonging. He can strive because something matters, not because he is terrified of being nobody.

My father wrote about sacrifice, dedication, faith, patriotism, and responsibility. Then came five words that still move me: “Now it is your turn.” He was not merely describing a family obligation. He was inviting Gregg into a meaningful life. Identity first. Purpose follows.

The Greatest Gift My Father Left Behind

As I sit in this early morning quiet, I keep returning to that letter. My father was complicated. He carried wounds and made mistakes. He also loved his family, valued education, and believed deeply in integrity and responsibility. I could spend pages on his shortcomings and just as many on his accomplishments, but neither would fully capture the man. That letter comes closer. He gave Gregg something no money, credential, or possession could equal: a message about who he was, where he belonged, and what he might become.

Understanding the neuroscience does not make that moment less sacred. It helps me appreciate its depth. Words of affirmation can shape the stories we carry about ourselves; consistent love and presence can help us experience safety; meaning and purpose can help organize a life. But none of this requires a grandfather to know the names of brain networks or the physiology of heart rate variability. He simply needs to show up, love well, and speak words that bless rather than wound.

So fathers, grandfathers, and men who have the privilege of influencing the next generation: never forget the power of your words. Never underestimate the importance of showing up. A word of affirmation may settle into a young person's identity and continue blessing him long after you are gone. A cruel word, repeated often enough, may become a burden he spends years trying to put down. Legacy goes both ways. We can pass along courage, faith, belonging, and purpose, or we can pass along shame, fear, and the old injuries we never chose to heal. We are not powerless in that choice.

And to the mothers and grandmothers who are reading this: the same invitation belongs to you. Your love and presence matter profoundly to sons and daughters alike. This particular story is about the men in my family, but the work of blessing a child with identity and belonging is never confined to men alone.

I am so grateful my father showed up for Gregg. He stood beside us at that Marine Corps graduation, and he gave his grandson words that can never be taken away. Only weeks later, he was gone, but the blessing remained. I believe Gregg's life will never be quite the same because his grandfather took the time to tell him who he was and what he meant to him.

Stephen Arterburn, in *Healing Is a Choice*, reminds us that the choices we make reach beyond ourselves (Arterburn, 2005). I think of it this way: our actions, for good or for harm, ripple through eternity. Every word that affirms a child, every embrace, every moment a father or grandfather chooses to show up can become a blessing that continues through generations. And the opposite is also true. Harsh words, indifference, and love withheld can leave a legacy of pain. We do not always choose what we inherited, but we can consciously choose what we pass along. My father chose to speak blessing into Gregg's life. I am so thankful he did.

Legacy – The Lasting Power of a Grandfather’s Words
-Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

That is the beauty and the responsibility of legacy. We do not simply leave something behind. We place something within the hearts of those who come after us. And sometimes, by God’s grace, the blessing keeps speaking long after our own voices have fallen silent.

Thanks, Dad. I am still learning from you. And I suspect Gregg is, too.

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