

The Friendship I Never Saw Coming

Four friends. Shared history. Laughter, faith, and gratitude.



When Friendship Finds You

There are friendships you go looking for, and then there are friendships that seem to find you. They arrive without much fanfare and grow almost unnoticed until, somewhere along the trails and chapter rails of life, you look around and realize that these people have quietly become part of your story.

That is something like what happened with Marc and Sherri.

Curiously enough, it began with our wives. And their dogs.

Leah and Sherri were both involved in PAAATS (a hospital pet therapy visitation program) with their Shelties, and Marc and I came along as the husbands. Spouses of those actively involved in the program were often included in the wonderful social events surrounding PATS, perhaps most memorably the Christmas gatherings. So while Leah and Sherri and their Shelties had legitimate reasons for being there, Marc and I were essentially the bring-along spouses.

And that is where we began to know one another.

Looking back, there is something wonderfully funny about it. Marc and I behaved remarkably like the dogs that had brought us together in the first place. Dogs meeting for the first time size each other up. They posture. They circle. They prance around a little. They assume various poses intended to communicate confidence and authority. They establish who they are and where they stand. They may even mark their territory.

Men, apparently, are not that different.

Thankfully, Marc and I stopped short of that last part. But otherwise, the parallels are a little uncomfortable.

The Friendship I Never Saw Coming
-Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

We sized each other up. We sparred a little. We displayed our professional credentials and identities, because apparently that is what two accomplished men do before granting one another permission to discuss anything remotely personal. Who are you? What do you do? Where have you been? What have you accomplished? A little banter. A little professional posturing. Perhaps the occasional subtle raising of the leg, metaphorically speaking. We were marking territory, just more politely than the Shelties.

And then something interesting began to happen. Slowly, and only in snippets at first, the personal began slipping through. A piece of family. A story from the past. Something about a career that did not fit neatly onto a resume. A belief. A struggle. Something that mattered. A bit of humor. The posturing began to matter less. The person began to matter more.

Those little glimpses gradually filled in the spaces between the credentials, and I found myself increasingly interested in the man behind them. There was considerably more to Marc than the professional identity he carried into those early conversations, just as I hope he gradually discovered there was a little more to me.

That is how the friendship really began. Not with some grand moment of connection, but almost sideways. Our wives and their Shelties brought us into the same room. Christmas gatherings gave us somewhere to stand around and talk. The professional sparring gave us something safe to do while we were still circling and sniffing each other out.

Metaphorically, Marc. Metaphorically.

Meanwhile, Leah and Sherri had their own relationship, and over time the connections crossed and deepened. The dogs were part of it. Our professions were part of it. Our families, shared beliefs, conversations, humor, and eventually the accumulated history of simply knowing one another became part of it. The four of us kept showing up in one another's lives, and somewhere along the way, without any of us really noticing when it happened, we stopped merely knowing one another. We became friends.

An Unlikely Road

And as those professional conversations gradually gave way to the personal, I began learning more about Marc's history. The more I learned, the more interested I became, because his road into medicine was anything but conventional.

Marc did not get there in anything resembling the normal way. His story began when he enlisted in the Army sometime in the 1970s. Somewhere along that journey, he found his way into a remarkable program I had never even heard of, one in which enlisted soldiers were given an opportunity to pursue advanced education.

And somehow Marc got in.

Knowing him as I do now, the "somehow" probably is not much of a mystery. He has always possessed that interesting combination of intelligence, confidence, curiosity, and sheer presence that tends to get a person through doors that are not particularly easy to open.

The Friendship I Never Saw Coming
-Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

Eventually, as I understand his story, Marc faced a choice. He could continue toward a PhD and a life more centered in research, or he could become a physician. Marc chose medicine.

He became a doctor of osteopathic medicine, a DO, which seems particularly fitting. He brought together two qualities that do not always coexist comfortably: the mind of a researcher and a genuinely holistic understanding of healing. Science mattered enormously to him, but so did the whole human being attached to the laboratory values. That combination would take him a very long way.

His military career itself became something of an improbable story. Marc had a gap in his military service, something that ordinarily can be the kiss of death for an officer hoping to reach the senior ranks. Military careers tend to reward a fairly precise progression, and once you step away from that track, getting back onto it, much less reaching the upper end of it, can be exceedingly difficult. Marc somehow managed it.

He completed Command and General Staff College and eventually was selected for promotion to O-6, colonel. Think about that trajectory for a moment. An enlisted soldier finds his way into an unusual educational program, becomes a physician, has a break in military service, comes back, completes Command and General Staff College, and ultimately pins on colonel. That is hardly the standard career path. But then, Marc has never struck me as terribly interested in standard career paths.

Retirement apparently did not slow him down much either. After leaving military service, Marc continued in academic medicine and now serves in senior medical leadership as interim dean of a medical school. It is hardly a ceremonial assignment. He is helping the school find its footing and making difficult decisions about direction, staffing, personnel, and all the other realities that come with leadership. These are decisions that inevitably make some people happy and others considerably less so.

And this brings us to a certain quality Marc possesses. He has a look. Those who know him will immediately understand what I mean.

Combine that look with the confidence, the demeanor, the distinguished military and medical career, and his ability to sit quietly while everyone else gradually realizes that Marc has probably already figured out where the conversation is going, and an affectionate title has emerged: **the Godfather**.

It fits him almost disturbingly well. Not, I should hasten to add, because anyone has disappeared after a faculty meeting. At least not that I know of.



Our Shangri-La

Marc and Sherri know Westport well. For Leah and me, this little Washington fishing town has historically been our Shangri-La. We actually owned a condo here at one point, and through the years we have found ourselves returning again and again.

There are places that become part of the geography of your life, and Westport is one of those places for us. Its trails have become almost like chapter rails, carrying us from one season of life into another. We come here partly to escape, certainly, but perhaps even more importantly, we come here to find something again.

Peace.

There is a peace offered by the ocean that I have never been particularly good at putting into words. Perhaps it cannot really be explained. It can only be experienced in the beauty and gentleness of the water one moment and then, almost in the same breath, in its extraordinary power and majesty.

The Pacific can whisper to you and remind you how small you are almost simultaneously. You walk those trails with someone you love, listen to the surf, smell the salt air, and look toward a horizon that seems to have no end. Somehow the noise inside your head grows quieter. Things rearrange themselves. What seemed terribly important becomes less so, and what actually matters becomes a little clearer. For Leah and me, Westport has done that for years. And now it has given us another chapter with Marc and Sherri.

Five Dice and a Personality Assessment

Somehow, and I suspect our wives had something to do with it, Marc and I found ourselves sitting across from each other playing Yahtzee. What began as an innocent game quickly turned into something considerably more revealing. I am a clinical psychologist, after all, so naturally I began conducting what I considered to be a highly sophisticated personality assessment of everyone at the table.

Forget the MMPI. Forget the Rorschach. If you really want to understand another human being, apparently you hand that person five dice, put a Yahtzee scorecard on the table, and watch what happens.

And then there was Sherri.

It became immediately apparent that Sherri was not simply participating in the game. Sherri was directing operations. There was a proper way to roll the dice. There was a proper place to put your points. There were strategic considerations that apparently needed to be addressed, and Sherri was prepared to address them. She watched the board, watched the dice, watched us, and offered guidance with the confidence of someone who knew perfectly well that the rest of us would benefit enormously if we would simply listen to her.

Marc, I noticed, seemed to understand this. I did not.

Sherri would tell me how I should roll the dice or where I ought to put my points, and the truly infuriating part was that I knew she was probably right. But something deep inside me immediately rose up in protest: How dare you tell me how to roll my dice? So naturally, I would not do it.

There I sat, a clinical psychologist with decades of experience, knowingly making an inferior strategic decision because another human being had suggested the superior one. Sherri would look at me with that combination of certainty and mild disbelief reserved for people who have been given perfectly good advice and are determined not to take it. Marc knew better.

The Friendship I Never Saw Coming *-Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.*

Watching Sherri at that table, though, I began to see something much larger than a Yahtzee game. There was leadership in her. Real leadership. She watches. She observes. She anticipates. She sees the pitfalls. She warns. She encourages. And when necessary, she directs.

It was not difficult to imagine that this formidable woman had been doing some version of that throughout Marc's life. Behind that remarkable journey from enlisted soldier to physician, through a gap in military service and eventually to O-6, and now into senior academic medical leadership, there has been Sherri. Not somewhere invisibly in the background, but beside him. Watching. Encouraging. Warning him about the potholes. Helping him see what he might otherwise have missed. Probably occasionally telling him where to put his points.

And Marc, apparently, learned to listen.

Then the game itself became ridiculous. Marc rolled one Yahtzee, then another, and finally a third. Three Yahtzees in one game. Marc finished with 396 points. I finished with 115.

For those unfamiliar with the finer points of competitive Yahtzee, let me translate: I was not beaten. I was medically evacuated.

My clinical assessment of Marc deteriorated rapidly. There were possible narcissistic traits, excessive gloating, suspiciously good fortune, deficient empathy toward a suffering opponent, and a troubling absence of remorse. Naturally, none of these conclusions had anything whatsoever to do with the fact that I was being slaughtered.

And then there was the inconvenient fact that I had repeatedly ignored Sherri's excellent advice. I prefer not to dwell on that.

The Woman Beside Me



But later, I found myself thinking about Sherri and Marc, and a curious parallel began to emerge. I know another woman like that. Leah.

For much of my life, Leah has been doing many of the same things I saw Sherri doing at that Yahtzee table. Watching. Observing. Guiding. Encouraging. Seeing pitfalls before I saw them and sometimes warning me about dangers I was absolutely convinced did not exist.

I scratched my head thinking about that. Perhaps I could have been a little less stubborn.

I have listened to a great deal of Leah's counsel over the years. But there have also been some big things where I did not listen soon enough. Sometimes I was convinced that I knew where I was going. Sometimes I needed to learn things for myself. And sometimes you pay a price for that.

I think Marc understood some of this earlier than I did. I may be a little slower on the uptake. I am still learning. Still observing. Still taking it in.

That is one of the beautiful things about being close to another couple you love and admire. Sometimes you see a little of yourselves in them. Not because the marriages are identical. They are not. Not because the personalities are the same. Heaven knows they are not. But because you recognize certain dynamics, certain gifts, certain struggles, and certain truths.

And they teach you. Not by prying into your life. Not by lecturing you. Not even necessarily by saying anything directly. They teach you by the essence of who they are.

Still Learning How to Live

Perhaps that is especially meaningful at this stage of life because none of us is finished. We still have decisions to make. We are still wandering through the complicated tapestry of children and family and all the concerns that come with loving them. We still face career decisions, although now some of those decisions are really about how to wind careers down rather than how to build them up. We are trying to understand what retirement means and what this next chapter is supposed to look like.

Marc and I share another characteristic that may not always have been entirely healthy. We are workaholics.

Work has given both of us enormous purpose. We have been blessed to do things that mattered to us, to serve people, to lead, to build, to teach, and to contribute. There is nothing wrong with dedication. There is something beautiful about being committed to meaningful work. But there comes a time when perhaps the definition of dedication needs to change.

Marc and I have both been blessed by strong women who love us, who have stood beside us, encouraged us, tolerated our obsessions, warned us about the potholes, and occasionally tried to remind us that there is a world beyond work. Maybe now the challenge is to become just as committed to that world.

Maybe the next great work is not another position, another project, another accomplishment, or another hill to climb. Maybe it is learning to slow down enough to enjoy the fruits of the labor that came before: to walk with our wives, to sit by the ocean, to spend time with our children and families, to laugh with friends, to play a ridiculous game of Yahtzee and not particularly care who wins.

Although 396 to 115 remains suspicious.

Perhaps Marc and I have somewhat different visions of how to slow down. We are still figuring that out. But increasingly I find myself wanting to move some of that fierce commitment I have given to work throughout my life and give it even more intentionally to the woman who has walked beside me through it. To become less obsessed with work and more beautifully obsessed with life with Leah.

There are worse goals for an old psychologist.

Growing Together

And this is where my gratitude for Marc and Sherri becomes something much deeper than gratitude for a wonderful few days at the beach.

The Friendship I Never Saw Coming
-Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

I am thankful for what has been. I am thankful for what is. And I am deeply thankful for what I believe is still ahead.

We have shared laughter and stories. We have accumulated history. We share many common beliefs and values, and we have enough differences to keep things interesting. Thank goodness for those differences. Friendship would be terribly dull if all we did was nod at one another.

We still have challenges ahead. We will face decisions involving our children and families. We will continue navigating the strange transition from careers that have consumed enormous portions of our lives into whatever retirement ultimately becomes. There will be victories. There will undoubtedly be losses. There will be things none of us can see coming. But we will keep growing. And, God willing, we will keep growing together.

Our shared faith may be the strongest bond beneath all the others. Careers change. Geography changes. Children grow. Bodies age. Plans get revised. But faith gives us a common foundation underneath all of it, a shared understanding that our lives are not simply a random collection of accomplishments and disappointments, but part of something larger than ourselves.

Perhaps that is also how I have come to understand friendship. Some people enter your life and pass through it. Others stay. And a precious few become teachers without ever intending to teach you. They show you something about marriage, loyalty, laughter, perseverance, faith, aging, and even yourself simply by allowing you to walk beside them for a while.

Marc and Sherri have been that kind of gift to Leah and me.

So when I remember this chapter at Westport, I will certainly remember the Godfather sitting across from me with three Yahtzees and his utterly obscene 396-to-115 victory. I will remember Sherri directing operations and trying unsuccessfully to prevent me from making foolish decisions with my own dice. I will remember Leah watching the whole circus unfold, probably recognizing a pattern she has witnessed for decades.

And I will laugh.

But underneath the laughter will be something much more important: gratitude.



Gratitude for Marc and Sherri. Gratitude for Leah. Gratitude for the shared stories and shared history, for our common beliefs and our differences, for lessons learned and lessons we are still learning, and for the privilege of reaching this stage of life with people beside us whom we genuinely love and admire.

The Pacific will keep rolling onto the shore at Westport. The trails will still be there. The chapter rails will carry us forward. And the four of us will continue moving into whatever comes next, hopefully a little wiser, perhaps a little slower, and still capable of laughing at ourselves along

The Friendship I Never Saw Coming
-Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

the way.

I never saw this friendship coming. Perhaps that is part of what makes it so extraordinary.

Because among the greatest gifts God gives us are people who somehow find their way into our story, walk beside us long enough to become part of our history, teach us without trying to teach us, and eventually become part of our hearts.

Marc and Sherri are that kind of gift. And Leah and I are profoundly thankful for them.