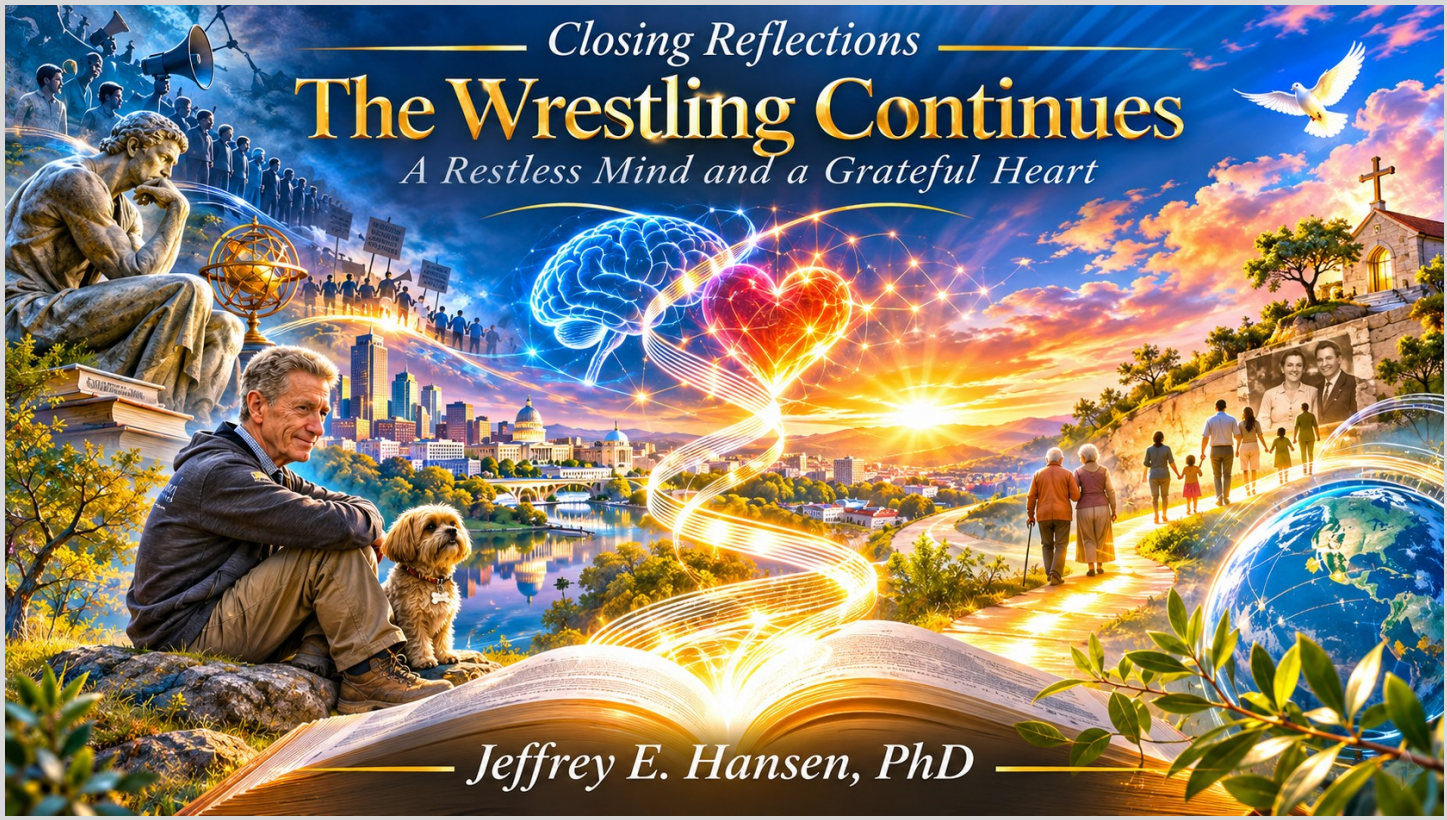

My Own Unconventional Form of Therapy

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).