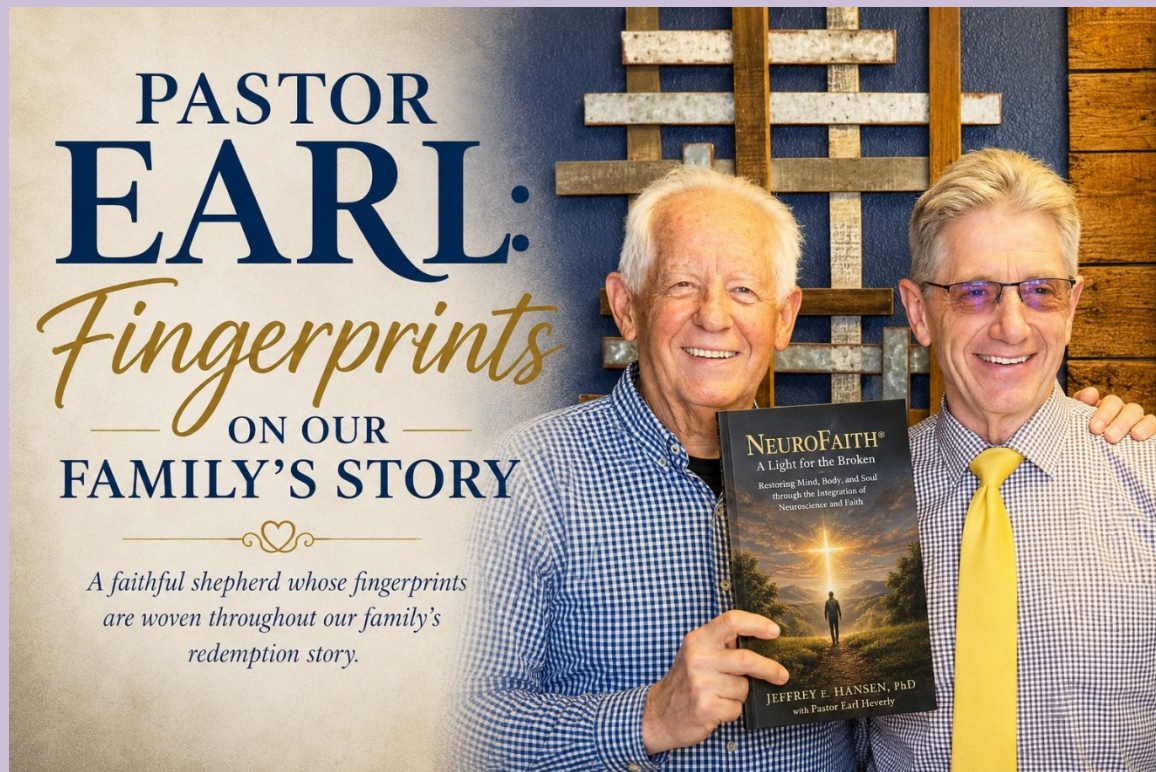




A Shepherd Enters Our Family

There are certain people whose influence becomes so deeply woven into the fabric of your life that, after enough years have passed, it becomes difficult to imagine your story without them. Their presence extends beyond friendship. They become part of the family narrative itself. Their fingerprints can be found on moments both large and small, often in places they would never claim credit for and perhaps never even recognize themselves. When I think about Pastor Earl Heverly, that is exactly what comes to mind.

For nearly five decades, Earl has been part of our family's journey. He has been a pastor, a mentor, a friend, a confidant, a co-author, and at times a much-needed source of wisdom when life became complicated. Yet none of those titles fully capture what he has meant to us. If I had to describe him in a single word, I would call him a shepherd. Not because he stood behind a pulpit, but because he spent much of his life doing what shepherds do. He watched over people. He guided them. He challenged them. He comforted them when life became painful. Most importantly, he remained present.

I first came to know Earl through my father-in-law, Butch Uhrhan. To understand the significance of that relationship, you first have to understand something about the generation from which Butch came. These were men shaped by hardship. They lived through the Great Depression. They answered the call after Pearl Harbor. They fought wars, raised families, built communities, and generally carried their burdens without much discussion. Emotional transparency was not exactly their strong suit. If they suffered, they suffered quietly. If they

hurt, they rarely spoke about it.

Butch was very much a product of that generation.

Following Pearl Harbor, he entered military service and spent much of the war years in Hawaii during one of the most uncertain periods in our nation's history. Like many veterans of World War II, he returned home carrying wounds that were not always visible. Some came from war. Others came from life itself. Over the years, those wounds became part of who he was. They shaped him, hardened him in certain ways, and perhaps isolated parts of his heart that few people ever reached.

Yet somehow Earl found a pathway into those places.

He did not accomplish it through force or persuasion. He did not accomplish it through clever theology or emotional appeals. He accomplished it through friendship. Through patience. Through years of faithfully showing up. He listened. He cared. He invested. He walked alongside Butch in a way that allowed trust to grow naturally over time.

Looking back now, I realize how much that relationship mattered. Earl helped Butch deepen his faith and draw closer to Christ. More importantly, he helped him find peace. By the time Butch left this world, he knew where he was going. He knew whose hands would receive him. He possessed a confidence that had little to do with certainty about life and everything to do with certainty about God.

That is no small gift.

The older I get, the more I realize there are many accomplishments in life that eventually fade. Careers end. Titles disappear. Recognition comes and goes. But helping another human being find peace with God before they leave this earth is one of those rare things that echoes into eternity.

Our family has never forgotten what Earl meant to Butch.

Truth, Grace, and a Spiritual Sucker Punch

As Leah and I began building our own life together, Earl naturally became part of our story as well. During our years stationed in Germany, he and Nancy came to visit us, and some of my favorite memories from that era involve the four of us exploring the countryside around Kaiserslautern. We were all younger then, filled with energy and perhaps a little too much confidence in our physical abilities.

I remember taking Earl hiking through the forests and hills surrounding our area. Earl was an accomplished tennis player and in excellent shape. I was in pretty good condition myself.

Somewhere during one of those hikes, what began as a pleasant afternoon outdoors gradually evolved into a subtle competition between two men who were both convinced they had a little more left in the tank than they actually did. By the end of the day, we were exhausted and laughing at ourselves.

Those memories still make me smile. What remains with me even more, however, are the conversations.

One of the things I have always admired about Earl is his remarkable ability to tell the truth without making a person feel diminished. Over the years I have often joked that he is the only man on earth who can deliver a spiritual sucker punch directly to my gut and somehow leave me thanking him afterward. There is a great deal of truth in that statement.

At one point Leah and I found ourselves wrestling with a significant decision involving another overseas assignment. I desperately wanted to return to Germany. Leah did not. Looking back, I can see that much of my thinking at the time was driven by my own desires. I had convinced myself that what I wanted was somehow synonymous with what was best.

Earl saw through that almost immediately.

What made his correction so powerful was not merely that he was right. It was the manner in which he approached it. There was no condemnation. No arrogance. No attempt to establish superiority. Instead, there was a quiet willingness to speak truth while remaining firmly rooted in love.

He challenged me to examine my motives. He forced me to consider Leah's needs more carefully. He helped me recognize the selfishness I had failed to see in myself. The conversation was not particularly comfortable, but it was profoundly necessary.

That experience would become a pattern throughout our friendship.

Whenever impatience gained ground in my life, Earl would call me back to waiting on the Lord. Whenever resentment threatened to take root, he would point me toward forgiveness. Whenever ego began whispering its familiar lies, he would remind me that humility remains the better path. When I became too confident in my own understanding, he would gently redirect me toward the mind of Christ.

What gave those conversations such power was the authenticity behind them. Earl never asked others to pursue a standard he was unwilling to pursue himself. The man behind the pulpit and the man sitting across from you at a coffee shop were exactly the same person.

That kind of integrity is rare.

Walking with the Wounded

If there is one quality that defines Earl's life and ministry more than any other, it is his willingness to remain present in the lives of hurting people long after others have grown weary. Most people are willing to help when a crisis first appears. They bring meals. They offer encouragement. They make phone calls. They pray. Those things matter.

What becomes much harder is remaining engaged when suffering stretches from weeks into months and from months into years. Long-term pain tests everyone involved. It tests the person carrying the burden. It also tests those who are trying to walk beside them. That reality brings me to Leah's brother Craig.

Craig endured more hardship than most people will ever fully understand. Trauma left deep wounds that shaped much of his journey. There were seasons of discouragement, confusion, loss, and emotional pain that seemed to stretch endlessly before him. Like many people who struggle with profound wounds, he often found himself walking a lonely road.

The reality is that chronic suffering has a way of exhausting those who care. People begin with good intentions. They genuinely want to help. But as time passes and solutions remain elusive, many slowly drift away. Not because they are bad people. Not because they stop caring. They simply do not know how to continue.

Earl did.

Year after year, he remained part of Craig's life. He listened when there were no answers. He encouraged when progress seemed painfully slow. He prayed when circumstances appeared hopeless. Most importantly, he continually reminded Craig that he was loved by God and that his life mattered.

What strikes me now is that Earl never treated Craig as a problem that needed solving. He treated him as a person who deserved love.

That distinction changed everything.

When Craig passed away recently, our family grieved deeply. Yet alongside that grief was a sense of peace because despite all he endured, Craig never lost his faith. Through all the disappointments, struggles, and setbacks, he continued trusting Christ.

He knew where he was going. He died with hope.

Pastor Earl deserves much of the credit for helping him preserve that hope through some extraordinarily difficult years. When many people would have quietly stepped away, Earl remained present.

That was not merely friendship. That was ministry.

Through the Valley of Grief

The same faithful presence emerged once again when my twin brother Gregg died.

Even now, I struggle to fully describe what that loss felt like. The death of a twin carries a unique kind of sorrow because that person has been present from the very beginning of your story. Every stage of life contains shared memories, shared experiences, and shared history. There has never been a version of life that did not somehow include them.

Then suddenly there is. When Gregg died, it felt as though a piece of my own history had been torn away. During that painful season, Earl did what he has always done.

He showed up.

Not with simplistic explanations. Not with easy answers. Not with theological clichés designed to make grief disappear. He simply entered the pain alongside me.

He listened. He prayed. He allowed me to wrestle with the loss while gently reminding me that God's purposes are often larger than our understanding. More than once he helped bring me back to perspective when my emotions threatened to outrun my faith. More than once he reminded me that some wounds are healed not through striving but through surrender.

Looking back now, I realize that many of the lessons Earl has taught me over the years can be distilled into a simple truth. He has consistently called me back to Christ.

When I wanted certainty, he called me to trust.

When I wanted immediate answers, he called me to patience.

When resentment felt justified, he called me to forgiveness.

When ego demanded control, he called me to humility.

When fear threatened to dominate my thinking, he reminded me to walk by faith.

Again and again, he has redirected my attention away from myself and toward the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

That has been one of the greatest gifts of his friendship.

Fingerprints of Grace

Years later, after Leah and I relocated to Arizona, Earl and I entered a new season together. As NeuroFaith® began to emerge and my writing expanded, what had long been a friendship became a creative partnership as well. Conversations evolved into collaboration. Collaboration

eventually became co-authorship. Together we have now written five books.

I am grateful for those books. I am proud of those books.

Yet when I think about Earl, the books themselves are not what come to mind first.

What comes to mind is a faithful shepherd whose influence is woven throughout our family's story. I think about Butch finding peace with God. I think about Craig holding onto faith through years of suffering. I think about Leah and the countless ways Earl encouraged and supported our family. I think about my own journey through grief, loss, mistakes, growth, and spiritual formation.

The older I get, the more convinced I become that some of the most important work God accomplishes in this world is done quietly. It happens through faithful friendships. Through difficult truths spoken in love. Through prayers offered when no one else is watching. Through decades of showing up for people when life becomes difficult.

As I sit here writing these words, I realize that Pastor Earl's story cannot really be separated from our family's story. His influence is simply too deeply embedded. His fingerprints can be found throughout the lives of people he never sought to impress and never attempted to control. Instead, he pointed them toward Christ and trusted God to do the rest.

When people ask me what makes a great pastor, I suppose I could talk about preaching, leadership, theology, or vision. All of those things matter. But when I think about Pastor Earl, something much simpler comes to mind. I think about a man who spent nearly fifty years faithfully walking alongside people he loved. I think about a man who consistently chose presence over prominence. I think about a shepherd who understood that sometimes the most Christlike thing a person can do is simply stay long enough to watch God do what only God can do.

Pastor Earl's fingerprints are written all over our family's redemption story.

And I thank God for every one of them.