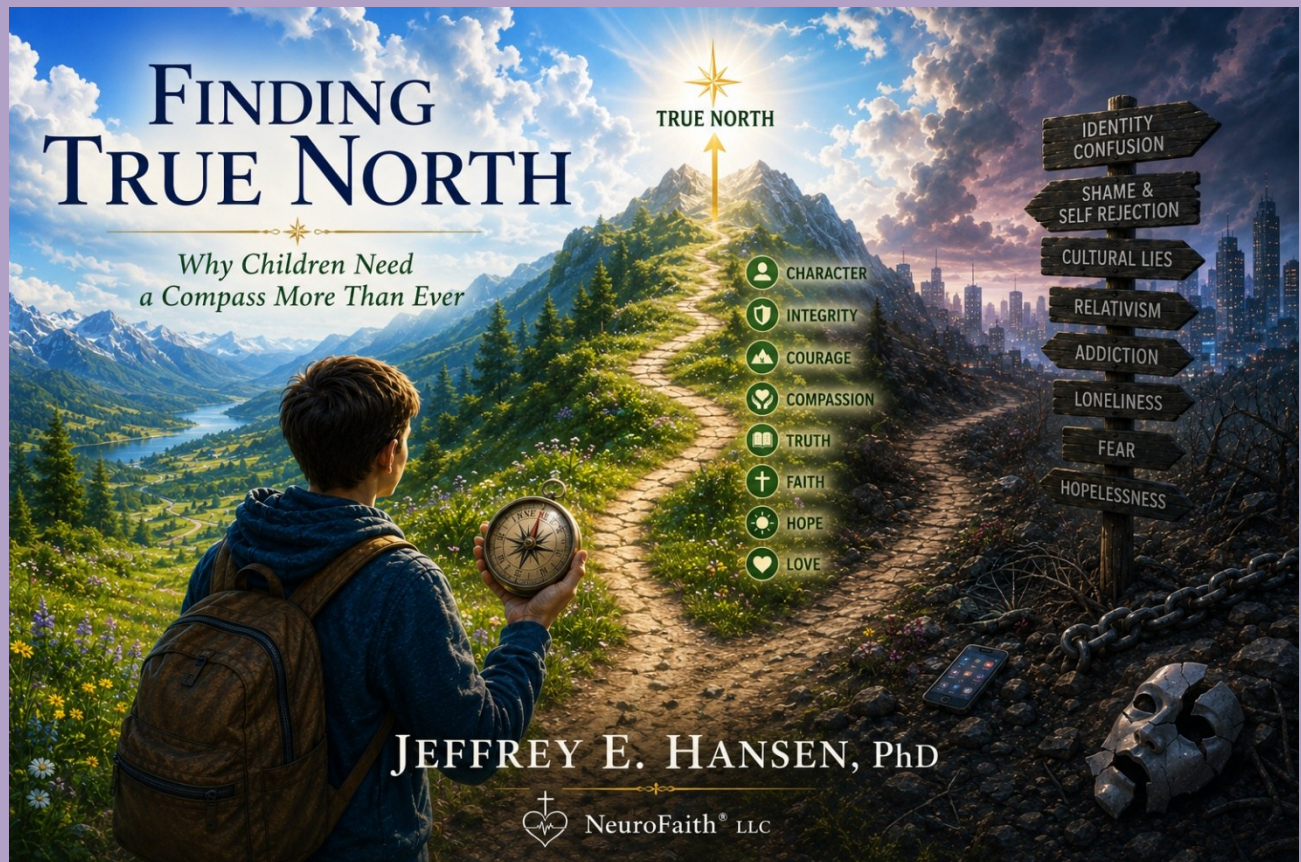




The Compass

This morning I found myself staring at a simple compass.

I don't know why it caught my attention quite the way it did. I've owned compasses for years. I've carried them hiking, thrown them in a backpack, and tucked them away in the tank bag of my motorcycle. They're such ordinary little instruments that most of us hardly think about them anymore.

But this one made me stop.

The longer I looked at it, the more I realized it wasn't really the compass that fascinated me. It was what the compass refused to do. It refused to negotiate with reality. It didn't care what I believed. It didn't ask whether our culture had voted to move north somewhere else. It simply pointed where it had always pointed.

That struck me as a rather profound lesson.

Over the years I've become convinced that every human being carries an internal compass as well. Whether we recognize it or not, all of us are living according to our deepest beliefs about ourselves, about other people, about God, and about the world we inhabit. Those beliefs

become the lens through which we interpret everything else. They influence the values we hold, the decisions we make, the relationships we build, and ultimately the people we become.

If you've followed my writing over the years, much of what you're about to read will sound familiar. In many respects, I have been writing this essay for years. These themes have gradually found their way into *NeuroFaith®: A Light for the Broken, Pornography Enslavement, The Shadow of Shame, The Sacred Path of Wholeness*, and many of my essays. Much of that work has been a privilege to share with my beloved friend, pastor, and co-author, Pastor Earl Heverly, whose theological insight, steadfast friendship, and unwavering love for Christ have profoundly influenced both my life and my writing. More recently, I have had the distinct privilege of collaborating with my highly esteemed colleague, Dr. Russell L. Gombosi, a triple board-certified physician, our book, *Building Adolescent Resilience*. Although we have approached these questions from different disciplines and life experiences, we have repeatedly arrived at the same conclusion: human flourishing depends, in large measure, upon whether our internal compass remains calibrated to what is true.

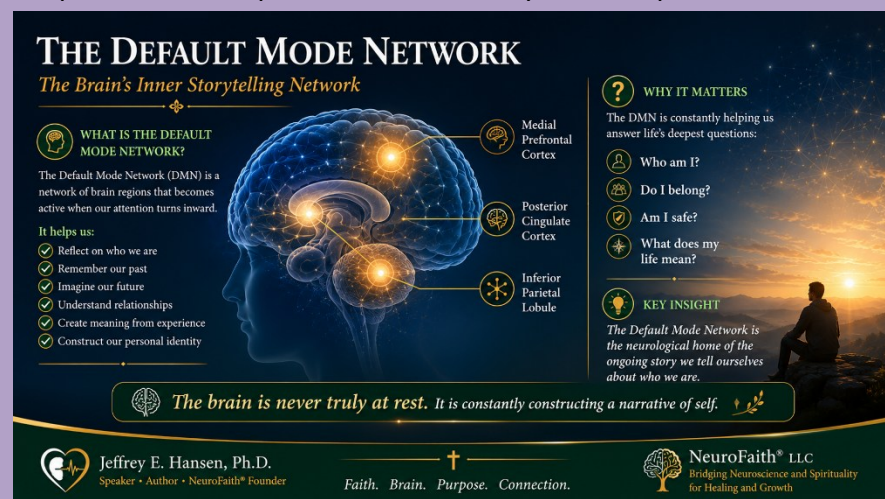
That may sound more philosophical than psychological.

I don't think it is.

One of the most important discoveries in neuroscience over the past several decades has been the identification of what researchers call the **Default Mode Network**. When I first began reading about it, I remember smiling because it seemed that neuroscience had finally given a name to something experienced therapists had been watching for years. There appears to be a network within the brain that is continually weaving together our memories, our relationships, our disappointments, our hopes, and our experiences into a story. It is the place where we quietly answer questions that few of us ever ask aloud.

Who am I?
Am I lovable?
Can I trust other people?
Does my life matter?

Those questions don't stay in our heads very long. They settle into our hearts.



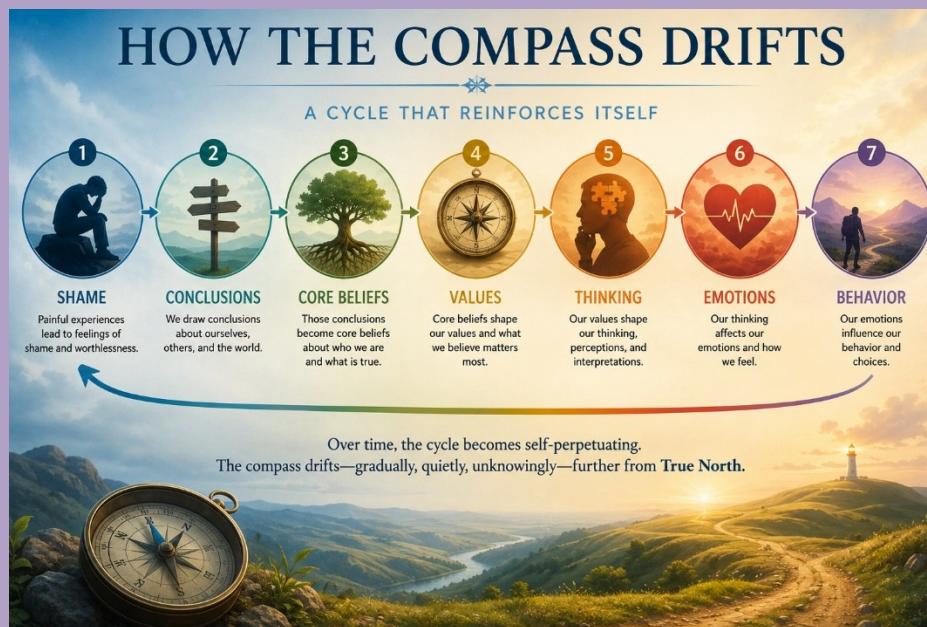
Finding True North: Why Our Children Need a Compass More Than Ever
-Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

After nearly four decades of sitting with children, adolescents, veterans, first responders, married couples, and families, I've come to believe that most people don't suffer because they simply have bad habits or distorted thoughts. They suffer because somewhere along life's journey they came to believe something profoundly untrue about themselves. Those conclusions often formed long before they had the maturity to question them. A frightened child doesn't usually conclude that his father is emotionally wounded. He concludes that he must not be good enough. A little girl who has been abused rarely thinks, *'Someone has sinned against me.'* More often she concludes, *'There must be something wrong with me.'*

That is the birthplace of toxic shame.

John Bradshaw helped introduce many of us to that idea years ago. More recently, Dr. Curt Thompson and Tim Fletcher have continued to expand our understanding of how shame shapes the developing person. I've found their work deeply consistent with what I've witnessed throughout my own career.

Guilt says, *'I did something wrong.'* Shame says, *'I am something wrong.'* That single shift changes the trajectory of a person's life.



Over time those conclusions become core beliefs, and core beliefs quietly organize everything else. They influence our values. Our values shape our thinking. Our thinking affects our emotions. Our emotions influence our behavior. Eventually our

behavior begins reinforcing the very beliefs that gave rise to it in the first place. The cycle becomes self-perpetuating, and before long the compass has drifted so gradually that we no longer realize we are no longer heading toward true north.

That realization eventually became one of the cornerstones of NeuroFaith®. I became convinced that genuine healing is much more than reducing symptoms. It's more than learning

copied skills, important as those may be. Healing is helping people rediscover reality. It is replacing lies with truth, shame with dignity, fear with security, and isolation with healthy attachment. In many ways, psychotherapy is the patient work of helping someone recalibrate the compass of the heart until it once again points toward what is true.

As I sat there looking at that little compass, another thought slowly emerged.

If trauma can bend the compass of one child... What happens when an entire culture begins bending the compass of its children? I believe that is one of the defining questions of our time.

Who Is Calibrating Our Children's Compass?

Every generation leaves an inheritance to the next. Sometimes it is financial. Sometimes it is political. More often than not, however, it is philosophical. Long before children are old enough to evaluate ideas critically, they are absorbing assumptions about what is true, what is good, what it means to be human, and ultimately what gives life meaning. Those assumptions gradually become part of the story their brains tell about themselves. They become the framework through which the Default Mode Network organizes identity, relationships, purpose, and hope.

This is why I have become increasingly convinced that ideas matter. They matter far more than most of us realize because ideas eventually become beliefs, beliefs become values, values shape behavior, and behavior ultimately shapes culture. Every civilization is built upon an underlying view of reality. When that view changes, everything else eventually changes with it.

For much of Western civilization, our moral compass was shaped largely by the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Ten Commandments were never intended to be a complete psychology textbook, nor were they the sum total of human flourishing. Yet they did something profoundly important. They acknowledged that there exists a moral reality outside ourselves. Human beings do not invent truth; we discover it. We are accountable to it.

During the past century and a half, another stream of ideas gradually gained influence. Karl Marx viewed history primarily through the lens of conflict between the oppressed and the oppressor. Antonio Gramsci concluded that enduring cultural change would require influencing the institutions that shape how people think, including education, media, religion, and the arts. Herbert Marcuse questioned whether every viewpoint deserved equal tolerance. Michel Foucault challenged traditional understandings of power and social norms, while later writers such as Gayle Rubin and Judith Butler questioned long-held assumptions regarding sex, gender, and identity.



These thinkers differed from one another in important ways. Nevertheless, I believe they share a common tendency to regard inherited moral structures with deep suspicion and to question whether objective truth exists apart from human power and social construction. Those ideas have profoundly influenced universities, teacher education, popular culture, and many of the institutions that now help shape the imagination of our children.

As a psychologist, I find myself asking a different question. What happens when those ideas are absorbed by an eight-year-old? What happens when they become part of the developing story the brain tells about itself? That is where my concern begins.

One of the great lessons of trauma psychology is that children personalize what they cannot explain. A child who is abused often concludes, *'I must be bad.'* A child who is abandoned frequently concludes, *'I must not be worth loving.'* The developing brain naturally internalizes painful experiences, and before long shame becomes identity. We spend years in therapy patiently helping people untangle those conclusions because they were never true in the first place.

For that reason, I become deeply concerned whenever children are encouraged to internalize shame for characteristics they did not choose. Whether the message involves race, ancestry, sex, or another immutable characteristic, the psychological mechanism deserves careful examination. That is not merely a political observation. It is a clinical one.

The same developmental caution applies to questions of sex and gender. Childhood is a season of extraordinary growth. Identity unfolds gradually through biology, attachment, family relationships, friendships, experience, and maturation. Esteemed clinicians such as Dr. Miriam

Grossman, Dr. Kenneth Zucker, Dr. Susan Bradley, Dr. Paul McHugh, and Dr. Stephen Levine have, in different ways, urged caution regarding childhood identity development.

Many of these physicians, psychologists, and psychiatrists have endured intense professional criticism for expressing those concerns. Some have seen reputations questioned, appointments challenged, or careers significantly affected because they departed from prevailing orthodoxies. During my own career there have been efforts to damage my professional reputation because I chose to speak according to my clinical convictions. Truth has often required courage.

When a Civilization Loses Its Bearings

The longer I have reflected upon these issues, the more convinced I have become that we are witnessing something much larger than a series of political disagreements. We are watching a civilization struggle with the question of whether objective truth still exists. Repeating an idea often enough does not make it true. Reality does not become negotiable simply because enough influential people insist that it is.

I have watched with genuine sadness the resurgence of antisemitism in our own nation and throughout much of the world. Criticism of the policies of any government is one thing. Hatred directed toward an entire people because of their ancestry or faith is something altogether different. History has already shown us where that road can lead.

Likewise, history urges us to evaluate political movements and revolutionary promises not merely by their slogans but by their fruits. Every generation is tempted to romanticize certain ideas while overlooking the human cost they have sometimes produced. Every idea deserves careful moral examination before we entrust it with the minds and hearts of our children.

This brings me back to that little compass. A compass has no interest in ideology. It does not ask whether truth is popular. It simply points toward true north because true north exists. What if we taught our children that truth is something to be discovered rather than invented? Perhaps that is where genuine freedom begins. And perhaps that is also where healing begins.

Rediscovering True North

If everything I have written to this point is true, then the obvious question becomes, Where do we go from here?

It is one thing to recognize that a compass has been bent. It is another to know how to recalibrate it. Fortunately, I believe that is precisely where both psychology and faith have something profoundly hopeful to say. Neither begins by condemning the traveler for getting lost. Both begin by helping him find his bearings.

Throughout nearly four decades as a psychologist, I have never met anyone who was argued into healing. People certainly change their minds through good conversations, but lasting transformation almost always begins somewhere much deeper. It begins when people experience safety. When the nervous system settles. When shame begins loosening its grip. When another human being quietly communicates, *"You are safe with me."* Only then does the heart become willing to reconsider conclusions that may have been carried for decades.

Perhaps this is why Scripture so often describes God as drawing near before calling us higher. Again and again, we find Jesus moving toward people who were afraid, ashamed, isolated, or rejected. He did not begin by humiliating them. He began with relationship. He connected before He corrected. Far from minimizing truth, He created the very conditions that made truth bearable.

The longer I have studied both neuroscience and Scripture, the less surprising that pattern has become. Secure attachment opens the door to growth. Fear narrows our vision. Shame keeps us hiding. Love, rightly understood, creates enough safety for truth to be received rather than resisted.

That, to me, is one of the great lessons of NeuroFaith®.

Healing is rarely about becoming someone entirely different. More often it is about removing the obstacles that have kept us from becoming who we were created to be in the first place. Trauma distorts the compass. Shame bends it. Fear confuses it. Sin pulls us away from true north. Yet none of those things has the final word. The human heart was designed for restoration, and the remarkable capacity of the brain to change throughout life reminds us that change is always possible.

I remain deeply hopeful because I have watched that restoration happen thousands of times. I have watched marriages recover after years of bitterness. I have watched veterans rediscover purpose after believing their lives were over. I have watched men and women walk out of addiction after years of believing they were beyond redemption. I have watched frightened children become confident adults because someone finally helped them distinguish between the lies they believed and the truth that had been there all along.

The Way Home

As I look at our culture today, I confess that I have genuine concerns. I worry about the messages we are giving our children. I worry about institutions that sometimes seem more interested in ideology than wisdom. I worry that we are asking young people to carry burdens they were never designed to bear. Those concerns are real, and I believe they deserve thoughtful conversation.

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But concern is not the same thing as despair.

I have read the last chapter of the Book. Hope still wins.

The little compass that sat quietly in my hand when I was a youngster reminds me of something I desperately needed to remember. True north has never moved. Cultures move. Governments move. Philosophies rise and fall. Popular opinion shifts from one generation to the next. Even our own hearts can become confused after seasons of suffering.

Truth, however, remains remarkably steadfast. The invitation before us is not to invent a new north. It is to rediscover the One that has always been there.

If we can give our children anything of lasting value, perhaps it is this: a home where truth and love are never enemies; relationships that are safe enough for honest questions; the courage to think deeply rather than react impulsively; the humility to follow evidence wherever it leads; and, above all, the confidence that their identity rests not in performance, politics, popularity, or pain, but in the God who created them, redeemed them, and calls them His own.



The remarkable thing about a compass is that it never had to move.

We did. And that is precisely why there is still hope. Because no matter how far we have wandered, the way home has never changed.

True north is still waiting.

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The compass is still pointing there.

All that remains is the courage to follow.