



Coming Home to Heal

By the time I met Dr. David Ayer at Madigan Army Medical Center, he and his amazing wife, Julie, had already traveled a difficult road. Prior to arriving at Madigan, they had been serving as missionaries in Africa. It was meaningful work, the kind of work that grows out of deep faith and a sincere desire to serve others. Yet during those years, something deeply painful happened to their daughter, Ella. Out of respect for Ella and her family, I will not describe the event itself. It is her story to tell, not mine. What matters here is that it profoundly affected her and profoundly affected the family who loved her.

Like many parents facing a crisis involving one of their children, David and Julie found themselves confronting something they could not simply fix through determination, intelligence, faith, or hard work. The family made the difficult decision to return to the United States. They came home not because they lacked commitment to their mission, but because healing had become the mission. Sometimes the mission field is not a distant country. Sometimes the mission becomes helping the people you love heal.

It was during that season that our paths crossed at Madigan. One of the great privileges of my life was getting to know Ella during portions of her journey. Healing is rarely a straight line. It involves setbacks, discouragement, uncertainty, and a tremendous amount of hard work that most people never see. What I observed in Ella was a remarkable young woman who was determined to reclaim her life. She continued moving forward, often one difficult

step at a time.

Years later, watching Ella apply to medical school and receive her acceptance brought me tremendous joy. Knowing some of the road she had traveled to reach that moment made it all the more meaningful. When I think about Ella today, I do not think first about what happened to her. I think about her resilience, her courage, and her determination to heal.

The Madigan Years

While Ella was healing and rebuilding her life, Dave was building an extraordinary career at Madigan. He was already an accomplished physician, military officer, and flight surgeon, but what impressed me most was not his résumé. It was the kind of man he was behind the accomplishments.

Patients respected him. Students respected him. Colleagues respected him. I respected him. possessed that rare combination of competence, humility, intelligence, and kindness that naturally draws people toward trust. Not surprisingly, he became an exceptional educator and was recognized as Teacher of the Year. The best teachers are not simply knowledgeable. They care deeply about the people they teach, and Dave had that gift.

Madigan became a season of rebuilding for the entire family. While Ella continued her healing journey, Dave continued serving, teaching, mentoring, and leading. From the outside, life appeared to be moving forward, and in many ways it was. Yet beneath the surface, the family was still carrying the weight of experiences that had changed them forever.

Two Wounded Healers

It was also during those years that Dave and I became friends. Some friendships develop around activities. Others develop around conversations. Ours was built largely around conversations about life, faith, medicine, suffering, healing, family, and the deeper questions that emerge as we grow older.

What Dave probably did not fully appreciate at the time was that I recognized some of the wounds beneath the surface because I carried wounds of my own. By the time I arrived at Madigan, I had already traveled through some very difficult chapters of life. Much of my own story involved developmental trauma, wounds that reached back into childhood and later became compounded by difficult life experiences, medical challenges, losses, and seasons in which my life felt completely fragmented.

When I returned to the Department of Defense after ten years of active military service and more than thirty years in private practice, I was finally finding my footing again. I was healthier, stronger, and beginning a new chapter, but I carried scars that had taught me lessons I could never have learned any other way.

One of the things I appreciated most about Dave was his kindness. He was genuinely

interested in people and genuinely interested in ideas. He listened. He encouraged. He affirmed. He was curious about how others thought and why they thought the way they did. Looking back, I realize how much those conversations meant to me.

At the time, I saw Dave as someone who had his life remarkably well together. He was successful, respected, accomplished, and deeply committed to serving others. What I did not fully appreciate then was that he, too, was carrying burdens that would eventually demand attention. Perhaps that is one reason our friendship developed so naturally. Not because our stories were identical, but because we both understood something about suffering, perseverance, healing, and grace.

Returning to Africa

Eventually, Dave and Julie felt called to return to Africa. This time the destination was Tanzania. They returned with greater wisdom, greater life experience, and a deeper understanding of both suffering and healing than they possessed years earlier.

From the outside, it may have looked like a homecoming. In many ways, it was. Yet life has a way of keeping its own records. By this point, Dave had accumulated decades of responsibility and sacrifice. Military service, medicine, teaching, leadership, mission work, family struggles, and the ordinary disappointments and heartaches that accompany any full life had all left their mark.

The remarkable thing about highly capable people is that they often continue carrying burdens long after others would have set them down. They become so accustomed to serving others that they lose sight of the toll those responsibilities may be taking on themselves.

When the Weight Finally Caught Up

As Dave and I continued our conversations over the years, I found myself recognizing something familiar. The accumulated weight of a life spent serving others had begun demanding attention. The very qualities that had made Dave such an effective physician, teacher, leader, missionary, husband, and father were the same qualities that had caused him to carry enormous burdens for a very long time.

I understood that struggle because I had lived my own version of it. Life eventually asks us to account for what we have carried. Not because we are weak, but because we are human. The body remembers. The heart remembers. The soul remembers.

There comes a point when determination alone is no longer enough. There comes a point when healing requires honesty. There comes a point when even strong people must acknowledge that they need care just as much as the people they have spent years helping. I believe Dave has been navigating that reality with the same courage and integrity that have characterized his life for decades.

The Quiet Strength of Julie

No reflection on Dave would be complete without talking about Julie. Through Africa, through Ella's struggles, through the return home, through Madigan, through healing, and through the return to Tanzania, she has remained a steady and faithful presence.

There is a steadiness about Julie that I deeply admire. She possesses the kind of strength that rarely seeks recognition because it is too busy loving, serving, encouraging, and remaining faithful. Families survive difficult seasons because people like Julie keep showing up. They continue loving when circumstances become difficult. They continue believing when uncertainty feels overwhelming. They continue providing stability when everything else feels fragile.

Dave would be the first person to tell you how important she has been throughout this journey.

My Encouragement to You, Brother

My dear brother Dave, one of the reasons I wanted to write this essay is because I wanted to put into words something I have thought about many times over the years. I have tremendous respect for you. I respect the way you have loved Julie and your family, served your country, cared for patients, mentored students, and invested yourself in people.

Because I have walked through valleys of my own, I recognize some of the weariness that can follow a lifetime of carrying responsibility. I recognize what happens when decades of service, sacrifice, leadership, caregiving, ministry, and family struggles begin to leave their mark. Brother, I see it because I have lived my own version of it.

As I reflect on our friendship, I sometimes wonder if this is part of the reason God brought our paths together in the first place. Although our stories are different, both of us have known seasons of struggle, disappointment, loss, and healing. Scripture tells us to bear one another's burdens, and perhaps that is part of what our friendship has been about. There were seasons when your kindness, encouragement, and friendship meant more to me than you probably realized. You met me at a time when I was finding my footing again. You encouraged me, you believed in me, and you helped build me up. If I have been able to offer some of that same encouragement back to you during this chapter of your journey, then I am grateful.

I do not believe this chapter defines you. I do not believe your best days are behind you. I believe God is still writing your incredible and inspirational story. The mission may look different than it once did, and the pace may be different than it once was, but your value has never depended upon a title, a uniform, or a position. It has always depended upon the kind of man you are. From where I sit, I believe some of the most meaningful chapters of your life still lie ahead.

Brothers in the Valley

When I think about Dr. David Ayer, I think about a husband who loves his wife, a father who loves his daughter, a physician who cared deeply for his patients, a teacher who invested in his students, a missionary who answered God's call, and a friend whose conversations enriched my life profoundly.

Most of all, I think about a fellow traveler. Our stories are different. Our wounds are different. Our journeys are different. Yet somehow, by the grace of God, our paths crossed at exactly the right season of life.

Perhaps one of God's gifts is not that He spares us from every valley, but that He occasionally gives us a brother to walk beside us while we travel through it. David has been that kind of friend to me, and I hope, in some small way, I have been that kind of friend to him.