

Ashley: The Strength That Was Always There

A Father's Reflection



Beginnings

Ashley, it's hard for me to believe sometimes how much time has passed.

You were born on October 20, 1984, at the hospital in Fort Ord. I can still picture that moment clearly. When they placed you in my arms, I immediately fell in love with my daughter. You were one of the most beautiful babies I had ever seen.

Your birth was not without complications. It was a difficult delivery, and there were moments of real concern. But you came through it beautifully. Looking back now, it seems almost symbolic. You entered this world the same way you have approached so many things in life—with determination.

From the very beginning you had a spark. You were bright, talkative, quick, and funny. You laughed easily and you paid attention to everything around you. But more than anything, you were independent-minded from the start.

Only a few weeks after you were born, we moved to Germany. That's a big adjustment for any family with a newborn, yet you thrived there. People adored you. Even as a very young child you had a way of drawing people in.

One of my favorite memories from those early years is when you were about three. In the mornings, when I would come home from the night shift at the hospital and I was making coffee in the kitchen, you would climb up on a chair next to the counter. I would be scooping coffee grounds into the filter, and you would grab the spoon, push my hand away, and insist, "'Ashee' do it." That small moment captures something essential about you. You wanted to do things yourself. You wanted to learn, try, and participate.

That spirit has stayed with you throughout your life.

After three years in Germany, we returned to the United States for a time while I completed my postdoctoral work, and eventually we moved back to Germany again. You attended German kindergarten there. At first you were a little shy, but before long, you were speaking German remarkably well for such a young child. You adapted quickly, something that would become a recurring theme in your life.

Later came the transition back to the United States, middle school, and eventually high school. Those were years that made me very proud as a father. I remember watching you perform on drill team and later cheering, carrying yourself with confidence and energy. At the same time, you were doing well academically and growing into a thoughtful young woman.

Even during those teenage years there was something about you that stood out. You had a natural instinct to reach out to people who were often overlooked. I remember how you connected with the autistic and developmentally disabled students at school. You treated them with kindness and dignity. You didn't talk down to them. You simply accepted them as people. That kind of empathy is rare, and it was already clearly part of who you were.

Finding Your Way

Adulthood brought new chapters. You met Bob, and together you welcomed Hallie into the world. Halle is a beautiful child and an extraordinary gift. Watching you become a mother and seeing the love you have for her has always meant a great deal to me. She carries so many of

your qualities—your independence, your curiosity, and your willingness to think differently rather than simply follow the crowd.

Life, of course, rarely unfolds in a straight line. After your relationship with Bob ended, you went through a season of trying to find your footing again. During that time, you became involved in a difficult relationship. That period created real strain and real rifts. It was painful and complicated for many people involved. Yet what stands out most to me looking back is the way you eventually fought your way out of that situation. It took clarity, courage, and real determination to extricate yourself from something that had become destructive.

That kind of tenacity says a great deal about who you are.

Through all of those seasons you never lost sight of Hallie. She remained your priority, and that speaks volumes about your heart as a mother.

A Harder Road Than Most

In more recent years you have also been navigating a set of medical challenges that are anything but simple. Coming to terms with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome and POTS is not easy. I have some familiarity with Ehlers because I worked with a family for nearly twenty years where the mother and three sons lived with it. Even so, as I have read the information you shared and looked more closely at what you are facing, it is clear how complex these conditions can be.

What impresses me most is how you approached it. You sensed for a long time that something wasn't quite right. You researched. You asked questions. You advocated for yourself until you finally received answers. That kind of persistence takes grit.

At the same time, you have continued to maintain an extraordinary level of physical fitness. Given what your body has been dealing with, that is remarkable. Mom shared some of the reviews people have written about you at the high-end fitness center you instruct at, and they were impressive to read. But when I thought about it more carefully, they also made sense. The same qualities that made you reach out to people who felt invisible years ago are still part of who you are today.

Looking back now, I also realize that some of the emotional struggles you experienced over the past twenty years may have been connected to physical realities that no one understood at the time. To live with that uncertainty—to know something was wrong but not have it recognized—must have been incredibly difficult. In some ways, understanding that now gives me a deeper appreciation for the complexity of your journey.

Life is rarely simple and almost never linear.

A Depth of Spirit

There is another dimension of who you are that I have always admired, and that is your depth of spirit.

You have never been someone who simply accepts the status quo. Like your old man, you tend to ask questions. You think deeply about things. You are willing to challenge ideas rather than simply inherit them. That kind of intellectual and spiritual independence is something I have always respected in you.

We do not always see every issue in exactly the same way. That is natural. But what has always stood out to me is the depth from which you approach life. There is a seriousness and curiosity about the deeper dimensions of being human that has always been part of you.

Over the years we have had many conversations about these things, and in some ways you have even challenged me to think outside of my own paradigms. I appreciate that more than you probably realize. Real growth often happens when people who respect each other are willing to explore ideas together rather than simply agree.

That same depth shows up in the way you approach your work. I think part of the reason people respond so strongly to you as a fitness instructor is that you relate to them as whole human beings. You understand that health and strength are not only physical matters. They involve the body, the mind, and something deeper that connects us at a more fundamental level.

One of the things you appreciate, and something we have talked about together many times, is the power of sound and resonance. In your own way you have recognized that certain kinds of sound, rhythm, and energy can affect the human body and nervous system in profound ways. Interestingly, that intuition overlaps with things I have written about in NeuroFaith®. In neurocardiology and the study of the autonomic nervous system, we see how resonance and coherence within the body can actually shift physiology toward healing.

You discovered that insight through your own path, through fitness and the embodied experience of energy and sound. I came at it through psychology, trauma work, and neuroscience. Yet somehow the two paths meet in the same place.

In fact, we even started writing a book together exploring that very idea, where sound meets faith and healing. I still believe deeply in that project, and I hope someday we finish it together. Your perspective and mine come from different directions, but they resonate with one another in ways that are both fascinating and meaningful.

You bring intelligence, creativity, and a deeply thoughtful spirit to the work you do.

And as your father, that is something I admire tremendously.

The Strength That Was Always There

I think about my own turning point around age fifty, when I had to confront some things in my own life that had been buried for a long time. I also think about my brother, Gregg, and the larger story of our family. I dislike the word trauma because it has become so overused, but the reality is that Grandpa endured very difficult experiences earlier in his life that left deep marks on him. At his core he was a good man, but he carried wounds that never fully settled. My brothers and I felt the effects of that growing up. Later in his life he found faith, which helped him tremendously and brought him peace that he had not known before.

Gregg's life eventually ended in tragedy and losing him left a mark that will always remain with me.

What experiences like that teach you over time is that every family carries both wounds and strengths forward from one generation to the next. Some things we inherit without choosing them. But we also have the opportunity to shape what happens next. When I look at your life, Ashley, I do not simply see struggle. I see someone who has taken the complicated inheritance of family, circumstance, and personal hardship and continued to move forward with courage. That matters more than you probably realize.

Over the years I have also come to see experiences like these through a deeper lens of faith. Not the kind of faith that pretends suffering makes sense or offers simple explanations, but the quieter kind that trusts there is a larger story unfolding even when we cannot see it clearly in the moment. Life leaves its marks on us. It leaves them in memory, in the body, and even in the nervous system, something I have spent much of my career trying to understand. Yet love leaves its imprint as well. The connections we form with one another shape who we become, and in ways that continue long after particular chapters of life have ended.

All of these things are part of the larger story we come from. None of us move through life untouched by struggle or complexity. Yet when I look at you, what I see most clearly is resilience.

Resilience does not mean life has been easy. It means that even when life becomes complicated, painful, or uncertain, something inside a person continues to move forward.

I have watched that quality in you for many years now. Through changes in relationships, through the challenges of raising your daughter, and through the confusing and often

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frustrating journey of trying to understand your own health, you have kept going. You have kept asking questions. You have kept searching for clarity. And you have continued to build a life that reflects both strength and independence.

What stands out most to me is not simply that you have endured difficult seasons. Many people endure hardship. What stands out is the way you continue to grow through it. You continue to pursue health, to care deeply for your daughter, and to build a life that reflects your own convictions rather than simply following the expectations of others.

That takes courage.

It takes character.

And it takes a kind of inner strength that has been part of you since the very beginning.



When I think back to that little girl standing on a chair in the kitchen insisting that she could scoop the coffee herself, I realize now that the determination I saw even then was not a passing childhood trait. It was a glimpse of the woman you would eventually become.

Ashley, I want you to know how deeply proud I am of you.

I see your strength.

I see your heart.

And I see the remarkable woman you have become.

And I love you just as deeply today as I did the first moment I held you in that military hospital so many years ago.