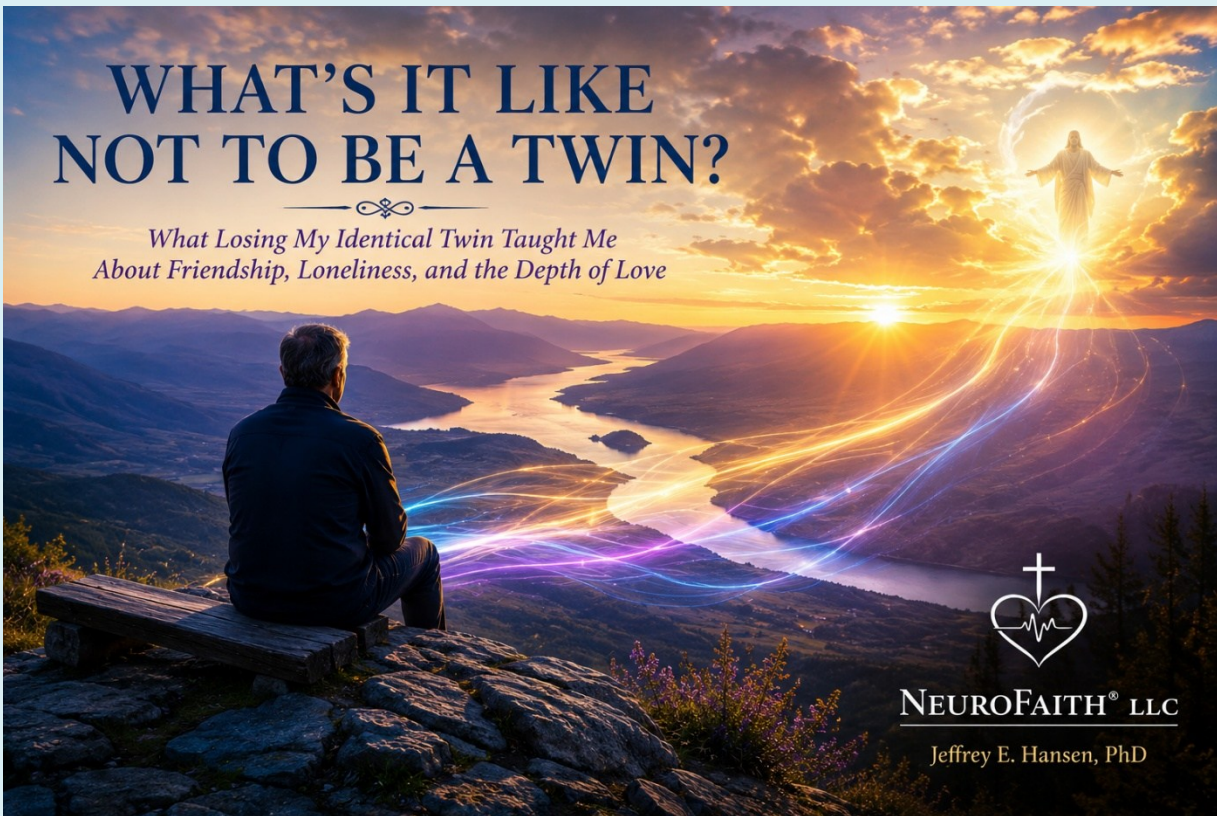




## When Gregg Died

When Gregg and I were young, people would often ask us a question that seemed perfectly reasonable to them: "What's it like to be a twin?"

And I would sometimes answer, not trying to be a smart aleck, "What's it like not to be a twin?"

I wasn't being clever. I truly didn't know. How could I possibly explain what it was like to be an identical twin when I had never known anything else? Gregg was simply there. He had always been there. From before memory, before language, before either of us knew there was a difference between me and we. I had no point of comparison.

Now I do. And I wish I didn't.

Since Gregg died, I have found myself increasingly aware of something I never fully understood while he was alive. I had known a depth of human connection that relatively few people ever experience. I didn't earn it or create it. I was born into it. And because I had it from the very beginning, perhaps I never fully realized how much I depended upon it, how much it shaped me, or how extraordinary it actually was.

I suppose I am finally finding out what it's like not to be a twin. And to be brutally honest, there are parts of it I don't like very much.

## Aristotle and the Friendships We Keep

More than two thousand years ago, Aristotle wrestled deeply with the meaning of friendship. Born in 384 BC in the ancient Greek city of Stagira, Aristotle became one of history's most influential thinkers. He studied for approximately twenty years at Plato's Academy, later tutored the young Alexander the Great, and eventually founded his own school, the Lyceum, in Athens. His thinking would profoundly shape Western philosophy, ethics, science, politics, and theology for centuries.

Among the many questions Aristotle explored was one that seems remarkably simple: What makes a true friend?

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle described three broad forms of friendship: friendships of utility, friendships of **pleasure**, and friendships of **virtue**. A friendship of **utility** is based, at least in part, upon what we can do for one another. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. There is nothing inherently wrong with such relationships. Much of life depends upon mutual exchange and cooperation. But the relationship lasts primarily because it is useful.

A friendship of pleasure exists because we enjoy one another. We laugh together, ride motorcycles together, share meals, stories, coffee, hobbies, adventures, and good times. These friendships can be wonderful and genuinely life-giving.

But Aristotle believed the highest form of friendship was the friendship of virtue. In such a friendship, I want what is good for you because it is good for you. I don't merely value what you do for me or how you make me feel. I care about your flourishing. I want to lift you when you fall, tell you the truth when the truth is difficult, and stand beside you when standing beside you costs me something. Your well-being matters to me because you matter to me.

That was Gregg and me.

Not perfectly, of course. We were human beings. We irritated one another. We disagreed. We had our own wounds, weaknesses, and blind spots. But beneath all of it was something immovable: I had his back, and he had mine. There was no calculation, no keeping score, no wondering whether I had called too many times or said too much or needed too much. There was no wondering whether this was a convenient time to be a brother.

We simply belonged to one another.

## The Friendship I Didn't Know I Had

I have many friends. Good friends. Dear friends. People I love deeply and who, I believe, love me deeply in return. This is not a criticism of them. I need to say that clearly, because what I am trying to understand is not their failure. It is my loss.

Since Gregg died, however, I have become increasingly aware that even very good friendships often have boundaries. There is a tempered quality to them, a limit, perhaps even a cost. They can go far, sometimes very far, but only so far.

A phone call isn't returned. A text goes unanswered. Someone says, "I'll call you," but doesn't. Someone asks, "How are you doing?" but doesn't really have the time, or perhaps the emotional room, to hear the answer. Not because they are cruel, not because they don't care, and not because they are bad friends. They have lives, families, responsibilities, wounds, exhaustion, and needs of their own. I understand all of that.

But I notice these things now in a way I didn't before, because Gregg is gone. And perhaps the painful truth is that when Gregg was alive, I didn't need others to reach that deepest place in me. I already had someone there. Now I don't.

### **Trying to Find Gregg in Other People**

This may be one of the hardest things for me to admit: I think sometimes I am looking for Gregg in other people.

I am looking for the returned phone call, the unexpected text, the person who asks, "How are you really doing?" and then sits quietly enough to hear the real answer. I'm looking for someone who notices when I disappear a little, someone who doesn't always need me to initiate, someone who says, "I've got you. You don't have to earn my attention today. You don't have to be interesting or funny or wise or useful. You can just be here."

And that isn't entirely fair. I know it isn't. No friend should be asked to replace an identical twin brother. No one should be measured against a bond that began in the womb and lasted for nearly seven decades. I know that intellectually, although my heart apparently hasn't fully received the memo.

Because I find myself reaching for a depth of connection that I once had without needing to ask for it. And when I don't find it, I feel the absence all over again.

### **Lonely Among Friends**

Perhaps this is the strangest part of grief. I am not alone. I have a wife I love, a family, many friends, brothers in faith, colleagues, and people who care about me. Their presence in my life is a genuine blessing.

And yet I am tremendously lonely.

Those two truths can exist together. Gratitude does not cancel loneliness, and love does not erase grief. Having many people around you does not necessarily fill the space left by the one person who knew you in a way no one else ever could. Sometimes loneliness isn't the absence of people. Sometimes it is the absence of one particular person.

But as I have wrestled with this, I have begun to realize that there is something more going on inside me than simply wanting my friends to understand my grief. Yes, I wish they could understand what I lost. But that isn't the whole of it. Perhaps it isn't even the most important part.

I wish they could understand what they may be missing.

### **I Wish You Could Taste the Chocolate**

For most of my life, when people asked me what it was like to be an identical twin, I couldn't explain it because I had nothing to compare it to. Gregg had always been there. Our connection was simply part of the fabric of my existence. I couldn't step outside of it and describe it any more than I could explain to someone what it was like to be me.

It's a little like trying to describe chocolate ice cream to someone who has only ever tasted vanilla. You can use all the right words. You can say it is richer, darker, different. But until you've tasted chocolate, you cannot really know chocolate.

For nearly seventy years, I had tasted something extraordinary in my relationship with Gregg, although I didn't fully understand how extraordinary it was because it was all I had ever known. Now, for the first time, I am learning what it's like to live without it.

And what I wish for my friends is not simply that they could taste the chocolate so they would better understand me. It is much bigger than that. I wish they could taste it because then they might understand what they could have.

I wish they could experience the richness of a relationship in which there was no keeping score, no wondering whether you had called too often, needed too much, or taken too much time. A relationship in which the other person's well-being mattered to you simply because that person mattered. A relationship where you knew, without asking, that someone had your back, and they knew you had theirs.

Because if they could experience that, even briefly, perhaps they might look differently at their own relationships. Perhaps they might return the phone call they intended to return, send the text they thought about sending, ask, "How are you really doing?" and stay long enough to hear the answer. Perhaps they might risk going a little deeper, giving a little more freely, and letting themselves be known a little more fully.

Not because every friendship can or should become what Gregg and I had. I know better than that. But perhaps many of our relationships could be deeper than they are. Perhaps we have grown so accustomed to guardedness, busyness, convenience, and carefully managed boundaries that we no longer recognize how much richness is available when two human beings truly decide to have one another's backs.

### **Perhaps Jesus Understood This Best**

And perhaps this is where Jesus understood something about human connection that even Aristotle, brilliant as he was, could only begin to describe.

Aristotle gave us the friendship of virtue, the highest form of friendship in which we seek the good of another not because of what they can do for us or because they bring us pleasure, but

simply because we love them and desire their flourishing. I experienced something very close to that with Gregg. I had his back, and he had mine. There was no keeping score, no wondering whether I had called too often or needed too much, no calculating whether the relationship was worth the effort.

But I think there is something even deeper here.

The more I think about it, the more I wonder whether the bond I shared with my identical twin brother might be, in some small and imperfect human way, a metaphor for the kind of relationship Christ wants to have with us. Gregg knew me at a depth few people ever could. He knew my history because so much of it was also his history. He knew where I came from because we came from the same place. He knew my strengths and my failures, my wounds and my foolishness, and I knew his. There was very little explaining required between us. There was simply a knowing.

Isn't that something like what Christ offers us, only infinitely deeper? To be fully known and still fully loved. To have someone who does not merely tolerate our wounds but enters them with us. Someone who does not say, "Call me when you've cleaned yourself up," but instead says, "I'm already here." Someone who knows the parts of us we hide from everyone else and does not turn away.

Jesus will go that deep. In fact, Jesus wants to go deeper. And perhaps he wants us to go deeper with one another too, yes, even among us non-twinners.

I don't mean that every friendship can become the equivalent of an identical-twin relationship. Of course it can't. Gregg and I shared something biologically, developmentally, historically, and emotionally unique. We began together before either of us had taken a breath, and no friendship can simply manufacture that.

But I do wonder whether those of us who are not twins sometimes accept a level of distance in human relationships that Christ never intended to be the best we could do. We guard ourselves. We ration our time. We measure our vulnerability. We say we'll call and then don't. We ask how someone is doing but sometimes don't leave enough room for the real answer. We love, certainly, but often with carefully negotiated limits.

And I wonder whether Jesus invites us to something richer.

My wish for my friends is not simply that they could understand my grief or comprehend what I lost when Gregg died. I wish they could somehow taste what I tasted, because then they might understand what they could have. Perhaps they would risk going deeper in their own friendships. Perhaps they would return the call, send the text, stay a little longer, listen a little more carefully, and risk being more fully known themselves. Not for me, but for them and for one another.

Because perhaps the deepest lesson of having been an identical twin is not simply that I lost something irreplaceable when Gregg died. Perhaps it is that, for nearly seventy years, I was



given a glimpse of the richness of being deeply known, deeply connected, and profoundly loved.

And perhaps that is not so far from what Jesus has been trying to offer us all along.

And perhaps that is not so far from what Jesus has been trying to offer us all along.

### **The Space in My Heart**

And then one day, he was gone.

Yesterday, I wrote about the space in my heart left by my identical twin brother. Perhaps I am only now beginning to understand the true dimensions of that space.

For most of my life, when people asked me what it was like to be a twin, I couldn't answer them. Now, after losing Gregg, I finally understand what it is like not to be one. It is to discover that there had always been another human being in the world who carried part of my history, part of my identity, part of my memory, and somehow, mysteriously, part of me.

And then one day, he was gone.

I am still here, and I have good people around me. I am grateful for them, and I love them. But I am learning to live with a loneliness I never knew before, because I once had a brother who occupied a place in my life that I didn't even know could become empty.

Yet perhaps the space Gregg left is teaching me something too. Maybe the gift of having known that depth of connection is not merely that I can mourn what I lost. Maybe it is that I can bear witness to what is possible.

Gregg and I didn't create what we had. We didn't earn it. We simply opened our eyes to the world and discovered that the other was already there. And perhaps Christ says something similar to each of us: **"I am already here."**

I cannot have Gregg back. No friend can fill his place, nor should I ask anyone to try. But I can carry forward what loving him and being loved by him taught me. There is more depth available to us. More intimacy. More presence. More courage to know and be known. More willingness to stay when leaving would be easier. More room to ask the question and actually wait for the answer.

Perhaps Gregg's final gift to me is that now, through his absence, I can finally see the extraordinary richness of what was always there.

**And I wish more people knew what chocolate tastes like.**