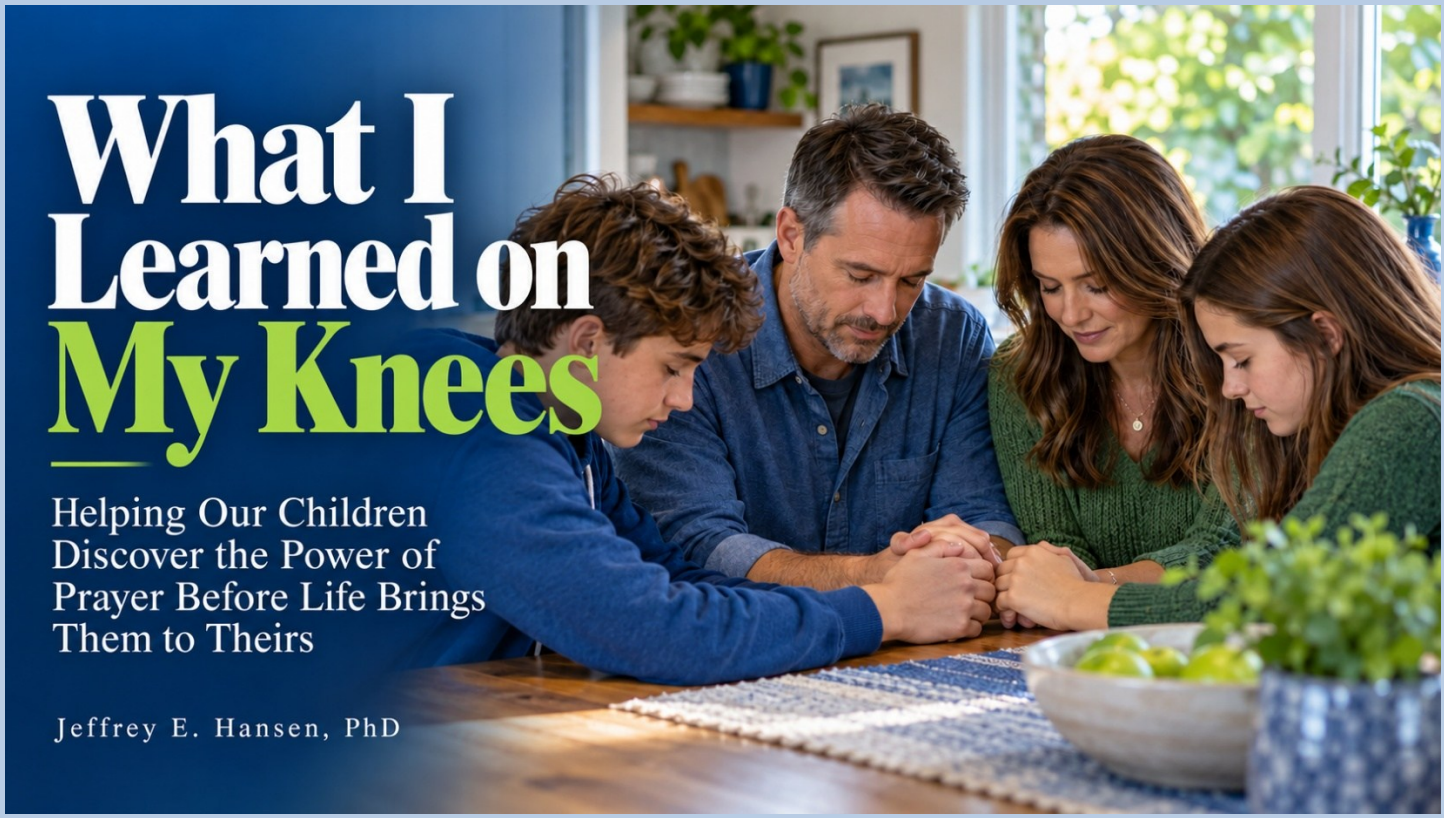

You can have a pulse and feel dead inside.

In my practice, I have sat with people who are biologically alive but living in a private hell. They get dressed. They go to work. They answer when someone asks how they are doing. Yet inside, they feel emptied out. Joy seems unreachable. The future feels like more of the same torment. They are getting through another day without knowing how many more days they can bear to feel this way.

We understand physical death. But people can also experience something that feels like an emotional, psychological, or spiritual death. “A dead man walking” is a haunting description of that experience. It describes how someone feels, not what they are worth or what their future must be.

I know more about despair than I ever wanted to learn.

In an earlier essay, I wrote that prayer saved my life. Those words came from a man who had been on his knees, in tears, wondering how he was going to make it. That man happened to be a psychologist (Hansen, 2026).

That man was me.

I did not have it all figured out

Lest you, dear reader, imagine that I have always been some shining example of excellent judgment and stellar Christian faith, let me disappoint you early. I made mistakes. Some were foolish. I gave too much of myself to things that mattered less than I believed they did. And I

did not give enough attention to the relationship with God that I would desperately need when my life came apart.

To be fair, I did not grow up with the kind of prayer life I am describing. I had to learn it later. But I did learn. Thank God I did.

My wife had been facing cancer. We feared that my daughter might have cancer, too. Our son, Gregg, was in Iraq with his fellow Marines, and not everyone was coming home. Around the financial crisis of 2008, I also faced the possibility of losing almost everything financially.

I could explain stress and trauma professionally. I could help other people make sense of their suffering. Then I found myself inside a season I could not think my way out of.

There is an old saying that you never know God is all you need until God is all you have. I came to understand those words on my knees. Sometimes, through tears, prayer was all I knew to do.

Big men and gentle hands

During that season, I had joined the Christian Motorcyclists Association. Some of those big, burly Harley riders gathered around me, laid their hands on me, and prayed.

I still remember those hands.

Think about that. Here I was, a psychologist who spent his professional life helping other people, needing these men to come close and help me. And they did. They stood with me in my despair and brought me before God.

I experienced their prayers as love.

They did not need me to sound impressive. I did not have to earn their care by pretending I was doing better than I was. They stopped. They stayed. They prayed. Their presence gave me something I still carry all these years later.

When I say prayer saved my life, those men are part of the story. I reached toward God, and I experienced His care through people willing to put their hands on a hurting man and pray.

I am so grateful I had that. So grateful I learned. But I wish I had learned earlier.

What might have been different

I wish prayer had been part of the culture I grew up in. Part of my daily psychology and spirituality. Part of my neurology, if you will: a way of turning toward God so familiar through practice that I would already know how to reach when trouble came.

I wonder what might have been different. Would I have made wiser choices? Would I have been less consumed with worldly pursuits? Would I have been more grounded when the phone rang with frightening news?

I believe a more consistent prayer life could have given me greater resilience to withstand what was coming. The cancer, the danger overseas, and the financial uncertainty would still have been real. But I might have entered that season more attuned to God and more practiced in accepting help.

It was a wake-up call. An expensive one, emotionally and spiritually.

And that gets me thinking about our kids.

I hear the father's plea in Kenny Rogers's *"Coward of the County":*

"Promise me, son, not to do the things I've done.
Walk away from trouble if you can."

—Written by Roger Bowling and Billy Edd Wheeler, recorded by Kenny Rogers (1979).

I am borrowing those words for a different kind of trouble. I think about the years we can spend chasing success, approval, or possessions while our spiritual lives go unattended. I think about a father looking back and wanting his children to learn something from what cost him so much.

You will have your own struggles, son. Daughter, you will face disappointments I cannot prevent. But perhaps I can help you develop something I wish I had cultivated sooner.

Why this has become a burden for me

Through my involvement with the American College of Pediatricians and its Adolescent Health Council, I have been thinking more deeply about what we can give young people before they reach a breaking point.

What an awesome responsibility. What a privilege to study these questions, write about them, and perhaps offer parents something that helps them reach their children. I take that personally.

In my earlier essay, I explored the neuroscience of prayer in greater detail. But I could not leave the subject there. Why would we wait until a teenager is drowning in despair to introduce a source of strength that could have been growing with them all along?

We work hard to prepare our children for life. We care about their education, their physical health, and the opportunities ahead of them. What are we helping them build inside? Where will they turn when achievement does not protect them from heartbreak? Will they know they can ask for help without shame? Will prayer be familiar to them?

I want our children to have that resource. And there is research worth knowing about.

Let us turn to Lisa Miller

Psychologist Lisa Miller has devoted substantial work to the relationship between spirituality and mental health. Her books The Spiritual Child (2015) and The Awakened Brain (2021) bring that conversation to parents and a wider audience. The research she and her colleagues have published gives us concrete reasons to take spiritual development seriously.

Miller and Gur (2002) studied 3,356 adolescent girls. Personal devotion and participation in religious community were associated with less depression, with stronger associations among girls who were more physically mature. Miller, Davies, and Greenwald (2000), studying 676 adolescents, found that personal devotion was associated with less substance use and fewer substance abuse or dependence problems across several substances.

That gets my attention. We are talking about difficulties that can alter the course of a young person's life.

Miller and colleagues (2012) also followed 114 adult offspring of depressed and nondepressed parents for a decade. Those who considered religion or spirituality highly important had approximately one quarter the risk of major depression. Among those with a depressed parent, the authors reported approximately one tenth the risk, with the association primarily concerning recurrence. That is the source of the widely discussed 90 percent figure. It describes this particular adult subgroup, rather than a promise that prayer prevents 90 percent of depression in children.

The neuroscience adds another fascinating dimension. In 103 adults, Miller and colleagues (2014) found that greater religious or spiritual importance was associated with thicker cortex in several brain regions, with some stronger associations among those at greater familial risk for depression. They proposed a possible contribution to resilience.

Related work by Svob and colleagues (2016) examined 104 people aged 11 to 60. Among those at higher familial risk for depression, greater religious or spiritual importance was associated with lower connectivity within the default mode network, which participates in inward, self-related mental activity. The authors interpreted the pattern as potentially protective.

Spiritual life, in other words, belongs in a serious conversation about the brain and resilience. These studies do not show that prayer itself caused the brain differences. Several also come from the same broader family study. What they offer is evidence of meaningful associations worth investigating and taking seriously.

What happens in the family matters

Svob and colleagues (2018) studied 214 children and adolescents aged 6 to 18 within that Columbia family research program. Greater parental religious importance was associated with lower odds of suicidal thoughts or attempts in their children. The children's own religious importance was associated with lower odds in girls, but not boys. These findings concern thoughts and attempts, not deaths by suicide.

A separate study by Chen and VanderWeele (2018) followed thousands of young people for 8 to 14 years. Adolescent prayer or meditation was associated with greater purpose, forgiveness, and volunteering in young adulthood. Daily practice was also associated with lower marijuana use, other illicit drug use, and prescription drug misuse.

There is good reason for encouragement here. These are observational findings about religion, spirituality, or combined prayer and meditation, rather than trials proving that a prescribed prayer routine prevents illness. Family care and community also belong in the picture. I see this research as a strong reason to make room for spiritual development, with curiosity and care. For me, as a Christian, prayer gives that relationship with God a daily expression.

We are called to a life with joy

I want more for our children than the ability to drag themselves through another day. I want them to experience the goodness of being alive. To love someone. To laugh without having to fake it. To wake up with something to look forward to. To know that failure has not erased their worth.

Jesus said, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10, King James Version). He spoke of His joy remaining in His followers, “and that your joy might be full” (John 15:11). Nehemiah 8:10 tells us, “the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

What a gift to help our children grow toward that kind of life.

A child who is depressed has not failed that calling. Neither has the parent who prays and still watches a child struggle. Scripture also tells us that the Lord is near to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18). We can pray, seek skilled care, and keep showing up. Sometimes love means making the appointment and sitting beside a child who cannot yet imagine feeling better.

But let us also welcome prayer into the beautiful days. Give thanks for a friendship. Pause over something wonderful. Pray when the family has reason to celebrate. Let our children experience a relationship with God that has room for delight as well as tears.

Our children are watching

We cannot teach a living prayer life through words alone. Kids watch. They observe. They notice whether our faith has anything to do with how we actually live.

Do they hear us ask forgiveness when we have hurt someone? Do they see us turn toward God when we are afraid? When a family member is in trouble, do we stop long enough to pray together and then offer practical help?

Imagine a father saying, "I am worried about this, too. Let us pray." There is something a child can learn from seeing a parent acknowledge fear without surrendering to it. We do not need to hand children our adult burdens. We can show them how we seek help carrying them.

Make time to ask your teenager what is weighing on them. Listen. Invite them to pray with you, and allow them to listen quietly if they prefer. Let them bring their questions. "God, I do not understand" can be an honest beginning.

When the chips are down, gather as a family. Bring the fear into the room where love can meet it. And when the prayer ends, keep caring. Follow up on what your child shared. Make the call. Help them take the next step.

Let the prayer continue through your hands.

Those CMA men taught me something I have never forgotten. They came close. What if our children grew up expecting that kind of welcome when they were hurting? What if prayer already meant being heard, loved, and helped?

We can begin now

I cannot go back and give my younger self the prayer life I wish he had developed. I can thank God that I learned when I did. I can keep practicing. And I can share something of what it cost me to discover how much I needed Him.

If you wish you had begun earlier with your children, you can tell them that. "I have not always done this well. I would like us to make more room for God together." There is no need to pretend you have a spotless history. I certainly do not.

Prayer saved my life. I say that with gratitude and with the memory of those big men standing around me, their hands resting on me, their voices bringing my pain before God.

I would love for our children to discover that kind of love before desperation brings them to their knees. To grow up with prayer woven into the way they live. To have somewhere to bring their fear and someone with whom to share their joy.

I still remember those hands. I hope our children will have memories like that, too.

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