Remembering Whose Son I Am

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REMEMBERING WHOSE SON I AM

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Dedication

Albert L. and Charles “Buck” Hale – Grandpa and Daddy. You are the guiding lights that illumine my path through life. All that I am that is of any positive note is because of you. All that I am that falls short of goodness is because I have failed to heed you.

O Lord Jesus Christ our God, the true and living way, be thou, O Master, my companion, guide and guardian during my journey; deliver and protect me from all danger, misfortune and temptation; that being so defended by Thy divine power, I may have a peaceful and successful journey and arrive safely at my destination. For in thee I put my trust and hope, and to thee, together with thy Eternal Father, and the All-holy Spirit, I ascribe all praise, honor and glory: now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.
REMEMBERING WHOSE SON I AM

by

CLINTON KIETH HALE, MAT

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Critical Preface

The approach to this work, *Remembering Whose Son I Am*, is that of a personal, creative non-fiction essay. As Dinty Moore has pointed out, this form “is, of course, *personal*, meaning you, from your unique point of view” (5). It can serve as the fusion of both the “stylistic devices, tropes, and rhetorical flourishes of the best fiction and the most lyrical of narrative poetry” (Forché and Gerard 1). Therefore, I have endeavored to craft a book-length work that considers something very personal, yet literary. As Forché and Gerard go on to explain, this style “is fact-based writing that remains compelling, … that has at heart an interest in enduring human values: foremost a fidelity of accuracy, to *truthfulness*” (1). “Each of us has a miraculous mind, full of associations, ideas, and richly remembered experiences…” and can use these things to evoke a response from our reader (Moore 7). I focus on three men of my family: my grandfather, father, and myself. In the pages of this journey through the past and into the present, I have attempted to discover, uncover, and determine who I am and how I became me (Cf. Williams 6-7). While it is certainly personal, the discoveries should be readily understandable by readers, allowing them the opportunity to consider their own heritage, or perhaps even applications that I am unable to anticipate.

Of course, the non-fiction essay is not a new form, though it is being rediscovered in the academic setting. Drawing upon both past and present examples of this genre allows me to create something in my own voice that serves to both honor my forebears and define my own identity. It is an exploration of heritage, desire, values, and familial characteristics. There is little doubt that some results are surprising, even to me, and yet that is consistent with real life. I do not know what the future holds in my life, but I can get some ideas from how things have happened
in the past. I can come to understand why I react to certain situations by examining past events and how my recent ancestors responded to them.

In a sense, this is a representation of what David Shields describes as:

A deliberate unartiness: “raw” material, seemingly unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored, and unprofessional…Randomness, openness to accident and serendipity, spontaneity; artistic risk, emotional urgency and intensity, reader/viewer participation; an overly literal tone, as if a reporter were viewing a strange culture; plasticity of form, pointillism; criticism as autobiography; a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real. (5)

Therefore, I evaluate some vignettes from the lives of these three characters, based upon real events, yet interpreted through the prism of hindsight, expectation, and extrapolation. While the framework of the narratives may be historically accurate, the details often are not, the result of three ever-present and unavoidable truths: my faulty memory, the lack of first hand witnesses who are still alive, and the passage of time. Yet the core of the work strives for truthfulness in the broadest sense of the term, where the focus is not necessarily on the actual events, but on the underlying causes, reactions, values, and lessons learned.

Those three truths serve as the major obstacles to the work. Since I am the only living subject of the work, I cannot access the direct input of the others. I must rely upon my own memory. This reliance is applied to two areas: the actual interaction between the three of us and in the stories that they, or other people, told me, concerning events to which I was not privy, whether because I had not yet been born or simply was not present. While I supply the details of the work, as I yearn for truthfulness, I attempt to maintain some fidelity to the others, as much as possible. I have to trust that my memory is sufficient. There are few living relatives to whom I
may appeal for verification. Over time, memories fail or shift, and so I have applied research to those things that I can, and lean on my understanding of the veracity of the details that I cannot. Research seems most appropriate as I discuss the broader culture of the times, and less valuable when writing of the particular circumstances from our lives.

One final potential problem is the danger of this becoming a sappy memoir, wherein I produce a hagiography of two men that mean very much to me. It would be easy to emphasize their strengths and positive attributes and minimize their deficiencies. This would be selfish and self-serving, as it would really be prideful, producing a false genesis of myself. I have worked hard to avoid such a result, but have carefully considered each person as a well-rounded character, rather than as a caricature. In the end, all three are, I believe, presented as a complete person, strengths and weaknesses examined and included.

Whereas it is a part “of the American character … to push at boundaries,” and my goal is to “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” it is incumbent upon me, as the author, to frame the work in such a way that this truth is both edgy, while still maintaining its veracity (Shields 79-80). That can be a challenge, yet provides an exciting opportunity for me and the reader. My nature is to challenge rules, seeking my own way. This genre allows this fundamental personal characteristic to be evident not only in the subject matter, but in form. The exploration also gives some insight into why this is part of my personal psyche. As Terry Tempest Williams so clearly articulates, “I write because it is dangerous, a bloody risk, like love, to form words, to say the words, to touch the source, to be touched, to reveal how vulnerable we are, how transient” (7). I am the product of my heritage, both genetic, social, and personal. Yet, as transient as each person is, individually, that heritage is passed from one generation to the
next. Just as my father, and his father before him, passed this on to me, so I pass it on to my children, and their children.

James Galvin may argue that the “real world goes like this: … indifferent, unburdened,” and perhaps he is correct when speaking of the world as a whole, but the reality is that our personal world is not indifferent or unburdened (3). Rather, a discussion of familial relationships can often be personal, focused, deliberate, and heavy with the weight of love. Parents tend to make decisions for the protection of their offspring, and experience anxiety on a regular basis, rooted in their burdensome concern. This is not to say that burden is unwelcome, but simply that it exists. It is the opposite of indifferent, but is intimately valued. My goal is to explore that.

As I began the MFA program at UTEP, I originally expected to write a novel for my final project. This was an assumption on my part, with little forethought, but something that I have always wanted to do. As I progressed through the program, it became apparent that I gravitated toward writing shorter pieces. In part, this was because of the course assignments, which tended to be shorter, but also because I found that it fit with my temperament and schedule. Life simply allowed me to produce better short stories than it did something that was more expansive or comprehensive.

Due to this revelation, my expectations changed accordingly. I began to consider I would compose a collection of short stories for my Thesis. In fact, I began to form a plan of writing a group of short stories about my grandfather, and these came to be the bulk of my creative work for courses. The shift in focus was not intentional, but naturally occurred, and the role of my grandfather as protagonist came in the same way. I grew up hearing his stories, and as I faced deadlines for coursework, those old stories, with my own personal input, were brought to life.
Over the first two years of the program, I compiled several of these stories, and intended to organize them and rework them into my Thesis.

In the Fall 2014 semester, I took Liz Scheid’s Lyrical Essay course and it had a tremendous impact on me, both as a writer and as an academic. For the first time, I encountered Creative Non-Fiction and my thoughts toward the final Thesis again shifted accordingly. While the course did not force the subject matter to be intimate or personal, allowing for a variety of topics, I saw the potential for applying the characteristics of the lyrical essay to my own creative writing. My initial idea was to take the short stories and more intentionally fictionalize them. While I had always added in details that were not strictly biographical, I considered that it might be appropriate to create a more deliberate fusion of fiction and non-fiction. As such, the work would be focused on the “truth” of my grandfather’s life without worrying so much about the literal details.

The following semester, I took Liz’s Creative Non-Fiction course and my intended thesis changed once again. While I had already begun to apply the non-fiction concepts to my own plans, this second non-fiction course introduced me to a more personal application. As I grew more confident in my understanding of the genre, I saw an opportunity to create something totally different than the original fictional narrative approach. In this way, it would be less dependent upon objective narrative, and allow me to be not only the author, but an actual participant in the work. The adjusted goal would be much more subjective, and obviously so. It seemed appropriate to expand my focus to include my father and myself as subjects. Not only would I consider the culture that produced my grandfather, but how this led to the next two generations. While limiting the work to three main protagonists, one following the other, while still overlapping, the story is actually timeless. It could be extrapolated backward to great-
grandparents and forward to future children. For this reason, I have chosen, with Liz Scheid’s encouragement, to write the familial narrative in present tense, even when discussing past events. The goal of this stylistic choice is to tap into that timeless element. With that in mind, it is noteworthy that some of the historical summary, as well as the final chapter, which is less narrative and more pondering on possibilities, do not rely on this present tense approach. Since this is a creative work, not an academic essay, I have chosen not to include in-text citations in each chapter, with the exception of this critical preface, but have listed each consulted work in a works cited page at the end of the document. The critical preface, being an explanation of the influences and process used to create the work, demanded a more academic approach.

“Art is born from struggle and touches an anonymous center. Art is inexplicable and has a dream-power that radiates from the night mind. It unleashes something ancient, dark, and mysterious into the world. It conducts a fresh light” (Hirsch xi). Here, Hirsch argues that true art is inspired in some way, whether from the depths of darkness or from some form of heavenly muse (the demon or angel in his terminology). Family can, and often does, serve as both. Most parents can attest to the fact that they never knew true fear until their children were put into danger. Likewise, few emotional highs can compare to those produced within the context of loved ones. Using that tension, my work hopes to find inspiration in familial heritage and to attempt to provide clarity to the inexplicable. Hirsch’s describes demons and angels as “vital spirits of creative imagination…they come only when something enormous is at risk, when the self is imperiled and pushes against its limits, when death is possible. They embody an irrational splendor” (xvi-xv). While I certainly felt no impending physical death by this exploration into my family’s history, in a very particular sense, there is danger. I discovered things about my Grandfather, Father, and myself that redefined what I had always believed. The accepted stories
were occasionally challenged and overturned. By necessity, dark events are discussed, and the inner recesses of our hearts brought to light. The emotional highs that we hold dear were occasionally dampened. It is this engagement in the process of creating that is vital to an effective creative work. Honest and active engagement may cause “truth” to be reevaluated and redefined. Anytime we attempt such an analysis, the family that we know and love could “die,” to be replaced by another. That other may be better or it may be worse. Or, it is possible that we might find that while some details are affected, the overall narrative changes little, and we can entrench ourselves in comfortable memories. That conclusion will not be evident until the final words are written. It is the potential of loss – that risk – that motivates the writing and produces the end result.

Of course, there is no way to provide for a proper traditional biography. Most of the events in my Grandfather and Father’s lives are lost to the mists of time. Few people are still alive to share those stories. However, our close relationships allowed me to hear of many of their experiences first hand, and I will rely upon my own recollection, providing some creative details when appropriate. To structure the work, I will approach it thematically, rather than in a strictly chronological manner, though the text will not be devoid of chronology. A topic will be introduced, discussed, evaluated, and then applied to excerpts from our lives. Some topics are considered from the vantage point of all three men, while others may be limited to one or two. The goal is not to tell our life stories, but instead to share our family story, viewed both externally and internally, as appropriate. It is not a biography of what it meant to be Albert (Grandfather), Buck (Father), or Clint (me). However, it is intended to be a personal reflection on what it means to be a part of the Hale family, and how the discovered characteristics and traits
are passed from generation to generation, within the social context in which we have lived and were produced.

As mentioned, chronology is not at the forefront of the organization, though many things will be told chronologically. That is simply a serendipitous occurrence. Taking my cue from the great Modernist author and artist, David Jones, I have structured the work from a religious perspective. This is not to imply that my goal is to push any certain religious dogma, but rather to provide a meaningful organizational framework for the work. While my family was not always religious, Christianity came to be a vital component of our family’s identity, beginning with my Grandfather. That transition has continued, and while I am still a devoted Christian, the manner in which I practice that devotion is much different than the form used by either of my ancestors.

Jones organized his masterful work, *Anathemata*, around the components of the Latin Roman Catholic Mass. He shapes this book based upon the various parts of the Mass, seeding these elements with historical allusions. In many ways, the book could be considered an early form of creative non-fiction, as it pushed the boundaries of what made up poetry, history, and traditional story-telling. My own work is similarly organized, but around the Eastern Orthodox Divine Liturgy, as that is the church with which I identify. Each section is based upon the chapter titles of Fr. Lawrence Farley’s introduction to the Orthodox Divine Liturgy, *Let Us Attend*. While neither my Grandfather nor Father were Orthodox, the family story is of a journey, and this is where that journey has led. It seems appropriate to organize the work in this way.

So far, the focal point of this preface has been the topic, history, organization, and structure of the work. Yet, it is also important to consider the audience of the work. As Moore points out, we are looking for a dialogue between writer and reader, a resonance. I want to
provide the reader with “a memory, an emotion made richer by the experience of another. Such an essay may confirm the reader’s sense of things, or it may contradict it. But always, and in glorious, mysterious ways the author cannot control, it begins to belong to the reader” (9). I hope that the reader of my work can experience something akin to what I felt as I read David Jones, especially his World War I book, *In Parenthesis*, for the first time. Jones states that “this writing has to do with some things [he] saw, felt, and was part of,” and yet I felt my own soul drawn into the horror of combat in the battles of the Somme and Ypres. I was able to “feel” the marching, “hear” the sounds of war, and “experience” the ungodly conflagration that Jones did, and yet it came to belong to me in a manner that I doubt he would ever have supposed. His novel is the blending of genres in narrative form, alternating between poetry and prose, yet thematically unified. The plot often takes a back seat to the language, so my deep affection for the work is not contingent on a coherent story line. Rather, it is the emotional impact that I felt as I immersed myself in his words:

Wipers again.

He can’t keep off it – like a bloke with a pimple.

What’s the use of the place anyway – where’s the sense in it.

Don’t talk wet.

Who’s talking wet.

You’re talking wet.

They get warmed to it – they’re well away in tactics and strategy and the disciples of the wars— (78)
Here, Jones pens a lyrical passage that communicates the frustration of the British soldier in this setting. Yet the majority of the book is in traditional prose, though the language is often quite poetic. While my structure is influenced by Jones, it is his command of the language that is most impressive to me. It would be disingenuous, not to mention beyond my capabilities, to use the exact language forms that Jones employs, as my writing style is quite different than his. I simply hope to apply the fluidity of genre and ability to turn a phrase.

I intend to accomplish something similar to Jones, using historical accounts to communicate the emotions, desires, and inner selves of the members of my family. The plot is not linear, but more aligned to Jones’s *Anathemata*, and tells the appropriate story, according to the “truth” as I see it. The narrative alternates between traditional prose, dialectical thoughts, flashbacks, and historical analysis, with the language and structure as the vital elements contained therein. How the reader chooses to interpret and react will be left to him or her.

“We’ve entered a realm of unknowing, a place where definitions are constantly in flux, a place where answers are not as important as the questions to which they give rise” (Miller 14).

This is not to say that some opinions or conclusions are not shared, as they certainly are. Yet my own interpretations will be presented as just that – mine. The reader is free to accept, dismiss, challenge, or ignore them. Those answers are not the concern, but the journey to get to them is. Different non-fiction authors approach their works in various ways, prompted by diverse points of origin. James Galvin’s *The Meadow* considers the history of a particular spot along the Colorado/Wyoming borderlands. James Shields focuses his *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* on the very topic of the blurring of fiction and non-fiction. David Jones’s *Anathemata* evaluates the fusion of Welsh and British History as seen through the organizational lens of the Roman Catholic Mass in lyrical form. His *In Parenthesis* blends poetry and prose as he straddles life and
death on the battlefield. Liz Scheid’s *The Shape of Blue* looks at her thoughts on dealing with the loss of a loved one and how that affects her in numerous ways. Steven Church’s *Ultrasonic* uses sound as the organizational rally point for his thoughts on parenthood and family. Matthew Gavin Frank’s *Preparing the Ghost* starts with the picture of a giant squid to explore his fascination with compulsion. James Everett Kibler’s *Our Father’s Fields: A Southern Story* is an expose on the family history of the original owners of an old plantation home he set out to restore. The key aspect of this list is simply that there is no one way to present a non-fiction work.

Using these works as a starting point for what a successful non-fiction essay (or book) looks like, my intention has been to use some of the components of each to formulate my own. I mimic Jones in the religious structural framework, but differ from his attachment to ancient British history. My own content is more in line with Kibler, Church, and Scheid’s emotional familial aspects. At the same time, a clear attempt to tell traditional narrative stories exists in the pages of my work, but as I am forced to supply many details to fill in gaps, Shield’s thoughts on the blurring of fiction and non-fiction are apropos. Emotion, rather than fact, is vital in this regard. Therefore, these three authors will be the most influential on my own content and approach.

Specifically, Kibler produces a detailed narrative of a South Carolina plantation family [spanning] six generations…[and] offers an especially vivid portrayal of the antebellum South, a compelling collection of Civil War letters, and a poignant account of life after the war…The resulting tale is a comprehensive, ambitious, and eminently readable chronicle of a family in pursuit of the agrarian ideal…Kibler concludes that only by knowing a
place truly well – its past and its present – can we guard against its abuse (from the cover synopsis of his book).

My own work attempts something similar, by telling snippets of my family’s history, connecting it with life in the various stages of Texas (and World) history of the 20th century. While it will be up to the reader to determine how ambitious and readable the resulting work is, and I make no claim to be comprehensive, Remembering Whose Son I Am is directly focused on establishing my family in a particular time and place in order to know it well.

Likewise, as Church urges the reader to engage in active listening to hear and notice the sounds of life, which leads to “the power to create identity, lead inward towards irrevocable grief and awe, and outward into the ever-curious world,” so I hope to have prompted the reader to respond to my story by reflecting inwardly on his or her own heritage (from the “Praise for Ultrasonic” by Lia Purpura). Church uses the catalyst of sound to ponder on the deeper meanings of life. While sound itself is not especially relevant to my own work, the principle behind his approach is. I hope to have penetrated the culture that produced these three generations of my family, evoking empathy. The process includes analyzing and describing simple, mundane items, and events that take on important meaning, just as noise does for Church. Using those things as the catalysts, deeper meaning is brought to the surface. As Church states: “I cannot figure out if it makes me a bad person or a good person. But the essay is, of course, also about how one sound, one knock on the door, can radically alter the course of the story you tell yourself…” (165). In like manner, individual meetings, events, decisions, and conversations altered the trajectory of my family, and I hope that has been brought to light.

Scheid makes the point that she enjoys “watching and exploring how things in this world overlap and intersect” (113). She sees patterns in every day events and seeks “to recreate this
overlapping and explore the tensions…[wanting] all of these disparate elements to smash into one另一个 in an attempt to speak to and against one another” (110). As I consider three varying generations, and the strikingly different milieus that produced each one, there are still many areas of overlap. One bleeds into the next, helping to produce what comes after, while redefining itself. I explore those intersections, following divergences when appropriate, to see if there is some commonality that can be discerned. I hope that I have produced, like Scheid, a piece that utilizes emotion and inner thought, more than objective observation. As an intimate participant in the events, it would be difficult to remove myself, as it would retard the heart of the work. Rather, my own involvement allows me to find that kernel of “truth” that combines the whole.

A generalized view of the content discusses the lives of my Grandfather, who lived from 1912-2001; my Father, who lived from 1942-1996; and myself, born in 1969, and still in the midst of my life’s journey. Along the way, we delve into the changing American culture, sometimes in detail, sometimes in passing. Our relationships with one another, as well as with others (especially our spouses and children), also figures prominently. Some important aspects that receive attention are particular events, especially those that had long term ramifications on the family: the changing world of the 20th Century, religious conversion, the growth of the oil business, military service, and other such things. Again, the focus is not on the events themselves, as much as the underlying value of the experience. How did it shape our family? What were the results of this activity? What changes were incurred?

The driving question – “Who am I?” is at the core of the work. I hope to “capture a bit of that life, to produce an enduring record of our better thoughts” (Moore 1). While both my Grandfather and Father have passed away, their lives are still a part of me, contained within my living memory. While I still have the ability, it seems incumbent upon me to put their existence
into some form of written record, to preserve who and what they were, and in the process, discover who I am myself. Perhaps someday, my own children or grandchildren will pick up the mantle and tell the story of the next generation. With that possibility in mind, I am furthering their potential efforts by exploring the family history that I am privy to, and saving it. Even if the next chapter is never written, this snapshot of the Hale family can serve the purpose of exploring what it means to have been a part of the family in the 20th and early 21st Centuries. By the end of the text, I have uncovered some of the reasons why I do what I do, in the manner in which I do it. I am closer to knowing myself, drawing nearer to the Greek aphorism to “Know Thyself.”

Along the way, the presentation of this material fleshes out what Shields argues is the purpose of art: “to import the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life” (122). He presents this idea in the context of literature, as well, positing that literature is not all about the “moves the traditional novel makes,” but “instead as a form of thinking, consciousness, wisdom-seeking” (118). Furthermore, he applies these concepts to non-fiction, which he sees as “nothing more or less than a very flexible (easily breakable) frame that allows you to pull the thing away from narrative and toward contemplation” (124). Like Shields, this is what I want.
Remembering Whose Son I Am

Image P.1: The Three Generations Together
Chapter 1: Vespers

Each day begins
  the night
before.

‘Ere the sun’s light
  pierces darkness
so it shines.

Every man’s life
  shoots from soil
composed of others.

He is not his
  alone
but a product of generations.

So the story begins
  and ends
never completing the task.
Chapter 2: Orthros

Though day and night are separate, there is a time when they must, of necessity, meet. Darkness becomes light, and a new day begins. Likewise, as the sun sets, so light is transformed into shadow, and night returns. It is a never-ending cycle, for as long as the earth shall stand.

Families are much the same way. A father raises his son, who in turn will father and rear his own offspring. This chain of events can be traced in both directions – back to the past, and onward into the future. This present work is a snapshot of one particular family.

There is nothing special about this family, except that it is my own. That makes it special enough, for me.

A study of my family’s genealogy provides some curious points. For example, William Hatcher, born in 1613 in Lincolnshire, England and known as the “Immigrant,” landed in Virginia, and by 1636 had a son born there. This son would have another son, and so on, until a daughter was born to one Charles Harrison Hatcher in January 1895. He named her Myrtle. At the age of 17 years, 8 months, and 17 days, Myrtle gave birth to Albert Leamon Hale, my grandfather.

Of course, this is just one small branch of an ever-expanding family tree that includes many immigrants, vagrants, and criminals, in addition to gentry, nobility, and even royalty. This particular line can even be traced back to Robert the Bruce, the Scottish King, and for my purpose, this branch is a sufficiently detailed twig.

Grandpa did not suddenly pop into existence, but was the culmination of decisions, actions, and chance meetings that occurred in previous generations. In the same way, his life was composed of numerous events, activities, and choices that not only reflected those that had gone before, but were then transmitted to his own children, and their offspring, *ad infinitum.*
Russell Kirk points out that “before a person can live tolerably with himself or others, he must know order. If we lack order in the soul and order in society, we dwell ‘in a land of darkness, as darkness itself.’”. He further posits that the 20th Century was a time of disorder. In his estimation, order “means a systematic and harmonious arrangement…[signifying] the performance of certain duties and the enjoyment of certain rights in a community.” This order is necessary to live in peace with the world around us, both in the larger society and in the localized family. Just as Kirk goes on to say that American order grew organically from the world in which it was founded and developed, so a single family changes with ever-present circumstances. “No order is perfect…but if the roots of an order are healthy, that order may be reinvigorated and improved. If its roots are withered, ‘the dead tree gives no shelter.’”

Here, we will look at three generations that experienced such a renewal and change: Albert, his middle child (and my father) Buck, and me.
Chapter 3: Beginning the Journey

Happy is he who dwells with a sensible wife,
and he who plows not like a donkey yoked with an ox.

(Wisdom of Sirach 25:8)
There is a standard American myth that half of marriages end in divorce. The veracity of this is easily discerned – it is false. In fact, it is based upon a faulty reading of a statistical table by some unlucky scribe who saw that in one given year there were X number of marriages, and X/2 number of divorces. Being adept at arithmetic, the deduction was made that the divorce rate was 50%. Of course, this ignores the fact that the X number of marriages are all conducted in that specific year, while the divorces (though certainly occurring in that same year) are of marriages from all previous years. So the marriages that end in divorce are originally contracted (whether civil or religious) in many previous years. Hence, the “half of all marriages end in divorce” is not statistically viable. However, we can determine some more accurate numbers, or at least make a good guess. “The National Health Statistics Report” from the CDC, in 2012, points to a more specific number. Approximately 28% of females, who underwent their first marriage between 2006-2010, saw their union end in divorce. That number is comparable for males’ first marriages, as the men had a 27% divorce rate over the same time period. So apparently, Americans are better at being married than we are usually given credit for. That means that we have a 72-73% success rate. Still, the rate of divorce has risen over the past century, and anyone who finds him or herself considering marriage should take the time to consider what is necessary to meet, woo, and marry the right person. Luckily, I do know a little something about how a man can go about meeting, attracting, and eventually marrying the right woman. I suppose these same principles can be applied to anyone looking for a significant other, whether a wife, husband, or some other incarnation. This is not solely dependent upon my own circumstances, though they factor in, but by my observations and considerations regarding how others have successfully accomplished the task. I have come to the conclusion that the
Hollywood/fairy tale myth is no true indicator, but perseverance and dumb luck are pretty important.

Image 3.1: Granny and Grandpa

My grandfather, Albert, meets my grandmother in 1934, when Granny is 16 and Grandpa is 22. That age gap seems a bit strange today, but is not really a big deal back then. Grandpa drops out of school in third grade, instigated by his father to go work. That does not keep him from visiting the school bus stop, though. The bus comes by in the morning to pick up students and then drop them off in the afternoon. Grandpa has his eye on some other girl nicknamed “Goldie.” Of course, we all assume she possesses blonde hair, but he never says for sure. Whenever he brings her up in conversation, Granny makes sure it comes to a quick close, even 60 years later.

Grandpa makes sure his path from home to the cotton fields allows him to stop at the bus stop where he waits around for Goldie to show up. He also talks with the other children,
bragging about all the money he makes working rather than going to school. That was no small matter in the mid-1930s. In the midst of The Great Depression, a man that earns a decent living is considered quite a catch. Apparently, Goldie feels ill this one particular day, but young Hattie Chalker appears. It is love at first sight, at least for Grandpa. Hattie, who would eventually become Granny, has some reservations, but eventually she comes around.

By 1935 they marry, and two years later begin producing offspring. So how does Grandpa pull off this switcheroo, shifting from Goldie to Hattie? Pure dumb luck and persistence. Ever after, when he tells the story, he focuses upon Granny’s beauty, and even though Goldie is a looker, she just does not compare. Still, Grandpa goads Granny for years with a well-timed, “I wonder what old Goldie is doing today?” No one in our family has any idea what becomes of her, because Grandpa keeps showing up at the bus stop each morning, asking Hattie if he could come spend time with her, meet her family, and such era-appropriate sweet nothings. Goldie becomes a footnote in the Hale family history.
Nearly thirty years later, in late 1962, my daddy goes on a date to the local burger joint (one of those drive up places) and enters the establishment to get a drink refill for his girl. As he walks toward the entrance, he notices another pretty young lady, sitting alone in the car, waiting for her date to return with her refill. So that is how my daddy meets my momma, when he stops by and introduces himself. They marry five months later. No doubt, plenty of dumb luck factors in – and no small amount of chutzpah – but because they marry so quickly after meeting, persistence is not a major factor. Still, being in the right place at the right time opens the door. Even though her father adamantly proclaims that his daughter will “never go with one of those Hale boys!” – and yes, that is a direct quote – love will not be denied. Within a decade, they have two sons, of whom I am the oldest.

Exactly thirty years further along, having recently left the military, I re-engage my college studies. One weekend, I visit my parents, and Mom, convinced that I am incapable of
finding an appropriate spouse for myself, chooses a likely candidate for the role. Honestly, based upon my track record to that point, I cannot blame her. In fact, she took it upon herself over the prior few years to “introduce” me to some young lady or another she met and felt was appropriate. Still she has a worse track record than I. She introduces me to several potential matches that are fine people, but definitely not appropriate for me. One, more talkative than I, does not make the cut. Another will not eat red meat – I am from Texas, so that is a deal-breaker. Others simply do not elicit a response on my attractiveness meter. So for one reason or another, mom’s efforts fail every time.

So, you can imagine the thrill I feel when mom mentions that she has a “really nice girl from church” that she wants me to meet. I am not really too worried about it, as I figure that I could just avoid meeting the girl. I spend the weekend with my parents, who live a little over three hours away from me. I plan to attend church with them on Sunday morning and then leave for home. I even driven my own car to church, to expedite my journey.

As the service begins, I sit next to mom (Dad preaches that day, so does not sit with us). She leans over and whispers in my ear, “Oh! She is here!” I know who “she” is, and I have no desire to deal with that scenario. I concoct a plan, wherein I will time my exit perfectly. I envision red-cushioned pews blurring by as I escape this most dreaded of all set-ups: a mother-instigated church blind date. As soon as I hear the final “Amen,” I plan to bolt up the aisle, out the door, get into my car and leave. And that is exactly what I do.

Well, that is what I start to do, anyway. As I jet up the aisle, I notice a pretty young girl in a blue and pink dress off to my right, and I think to myself, “Now, why can’t mom introduce me to someone like that?”
This is the point where my mom catches me from behind. She sprints after me, because I can move pretty quickly, but she grabs me by my collar, and promptly drags me over to that pretty girl in the blue and pink (should I add the awesome 80’s big hair, too? Yes, I think so). In 2016, we celebrate our 22nd wedding anniversary. So what is the key to meeting my wife? Pure dumb luck (with a little Momma thrown in for good measure). And this time, like my grandfather, persistence plays a role.

I return home and tell my roommate I have met the girl I will marry. The girl in pink and blue with the great hair does not share my confidence, unfortunately. It takes me a little while to convince her that I am “the one.” I actually move to be closer to her, and often call to see if I can come over for a bit. I get the classic rebuffs: Sorry, I need to wash my hair. Oh, sorry, I have to rearrange my sock drawer. I would, but my dad hates visitors. Maybe next week, as I am walking my goldfish today. Stuff like that. Still, I stick it out, and it all comes together. Why do I stick it
out, rather than looking for greener pastures? I do not know. She is the only person to whom I
ever react that way. I suppose that in my heart, I know she is the one.

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That does not mean I always do the right thing, or say the correct words. In fact, it does
not take long after our marriage, before I make a fundamental blunder. I know right away I have
said the wrong thing. I mean, it should not be that shocking that she would respond that way, but
yeah, I say it anyway. I do not consider it a big deal. In fact, I cannot even remember what the
original disagreement is about. And yeah, it is a disagreement, not a fight. We are not angry. Just
a simple difference of opinion about some asinine thing.

Does it matter who is right? Looking back, probably not. At the time, though, it seems
quite important to me. I suppose that an additional twenty years of marriage garners me a little
more wisdom in that regard, but back then, I want to be right. I want to win. I want to establish
my ground as the “man” in our relationship. All of that leads to what I call my “first real lesson
in marriage communication.”

There I am, freshly degreed with a BA in English, and a few additional months into
graduate school. My opposition: a sweet, lovely, beautiful woman who agrees to share her life
with me. She does not have a degree in English (and in fact, has not even completed college at
all). She is smart and wise, but not as educated as I. I try not to drag that into things, but
sometimes it just comes out.

Honestly, I know what words mean. I endeavor to use them properly. I say that I am
doing “well,” when folks ask. I do not want to run fast. I want to run quickly. That sort of thing.
One component of that mentality is to use words according to what they actually mean. I do hope
that if anyone ever hears me use the word “rachet” and I am not talking about a set of tools, that the listener will just go ahead and put me out of my misery. But I digress…

So we find ourselves having a simple, friendly disagreement. Regardless of the topic, which is lost to the mists of time, my position is correct. Really. I remember that distinctly. I keep trying to explain my position, but my darling wife keeps disagreeing, standing her ground (and trust me, she is wrong on this one!). The problem is not the disagreement, but that the topic, whatever it is, falls within my domain of knowledge, not hers.

And so I say it. Really, I swear to God, I say it.

“Honey, you are ignorant.”

Time stops; the earth ceases to spin; birds stop in mid-flight and mid-song. And I know it. I know before the final sound leaps past my lips that I utter the wrong thing. A bad thing.

I mean, come on. We know what ignorant means! It means to lack knowledge about a certain topic. We are all ignorant. I am ignorant about Physics and Calculus. In this case, she is ignorant about what we are discussing. And yet, she does not hear it that way.

She hears: “Honey, you are stupid.”

Wherein I learn quick-like and properly, connotation is as important as denotation. I have failed to learn that as I earn that BA…

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Jeff Haden, an accomplished author who tends to focus on business and technology, argues that one’s chances for a successful life are intricately tied to marrying the right person. Apparently, there are studies (like one at Washington University in St. Louis) indicating that marrying a certain type of person has a direct correlation on how one performs at work and in life. Seriously! Who could have imagined that one’s spouse would have a direct impact on the
work habits of the individual? “Workers who scored highest on measures of occupational success tend to have a spouse with a personality that scored high for conscientiousness, and this was true whether or not both spouses work and regardless of whether the working spouse is male or female.”

I suppose that much of that depends on the influence and habits that the couple develop, especially over time, but maybe it is an indication of what a person is, on the inside, even before that influence is brought to bear. Who knows?

How does this all tie in with the marriage statistics that were presented earlier? Glad you asked! Grandpa and Granny are married for nearly 66 years and stay together until he dies (she follows 3 months later). My wife and I are in the midst of our 23rd year of marriage (and 25th being in a relationship), and we are going strong. But not all these fairy tales turn out with the stereotypical ending. The “hookup” story that I enjoy the most – my parents – ends in divorce after 29 years of marriage. That does not mean their relationship is an unmitigated disaster, but rather that things do not follow the expected path in their marriage. In fact, our family history seems to be pretty darn close to the statistical averages that the CDC provides: roughly 2/3 of marriages last.

In my parents’ case, it turns out that my mom has a weakness – she really likes men. Lots of them. For a long time, she fights to avoid succumbing to her baser desires, but my father develops major health issues, beginning in his mid-40s, and she starts to look elsewhere for companionship. Later, Daddy hints that she might have done this some in the early days of their marriage, too, but my brother and I never see it. Daddy tries hard to never speak ill of her, because until the day he dies, he never stops loving her, and he hopes she might come back. She never does.
Their marriage finally ends when Daddy catches her red-handed with another man. While this happens more than once, when he sees her car at the hotel and blocks it in with his own vehicle, it comes to a head. The hotel clerk calls the police, fearing violence might ensue, but Daddy is no longer a violent man – at least not in his weakened physical condition – and they resolve everything peacefully. In the end, he tells her that she must choose, and she chooses the other guy, who promptly dumps her once he finds himself with actual responsibilities toward her. Eventually, she remarries, but passes away less than two years after my dad, both losing battles with their infirmities. He dies four years after their divorce finalizes. His poor health improves until she leaves. After that, he just circles the drain, until he permanently checks out. Once she departs, he never acts the same. In an odd twist, the day he catches her cheating and gives her the ultimatum is the day after Mom introduces me to my wife. Apparently, she waits to introduce me so she can leave. Again, dumb luck? Coincidence? Maybe. Or maybe it was just the way things work out.

As I consider these three marriages, I cannot help but pass judgment: My grandparents possess a true, beautiful love story. From my perspective, my parents fail, on par with a Shakespearean tragedy. My own marriage, though the final act is not yet written, appears to be quite wonderful. So what gives? Why are two good and one bad? Why does that law of averages balance out in our family?

I chalk it up to dumb luck and perseverance. Grandpa and I work for our relationships. Not to keep them – everyone has to work to keep a relationship. But we labor to have one to start with. Our wives are not so sure about us, and we must convince them. Daddy, on the other hand, does not have to do that. Mom has a rough childhood, and my dad offers her way out. He does not have to work hard for his relationship with her in the beginning. He just lucks into it. In most
lists of “how to have a successful marriage,” we usually find some elements of perseverance and tenacity. Some of the specific suggestions include, “When things get tough and couples do not know what to do, they need to hang in there and be there for their spouse” or “Crises are like storms: loud, scary and dangerous. But to get through a storm you have to keep driving.”

Successful? Grandpa provides for his family very well. He and Granny raise five children, they support a widowed sister and her two children, as well as two of their own grandchildren after their father (my uncle) dies in a car wreck. Likewise, I would say that I provide for my family very well. We have a nice home, food, clothes. We want for nothing of importance. Unfortunately, Daddy constantly fends off phone calls from bill collectors on past due accounts, primarily because my mother cannot manage money. I recall her receiving money to pay a particular bill. Rather than making the installment, she spends it on frivolities. I do not intend to sound bitter, as she simply possesses no ability to handle finances. Because of these money issues, while we never starve, we seldom have much “extra,” either. We just get by. Maybe Haden and the folks at Washington U are on to something.

Three generations, holding fast to the American averages for successful family life. All three relationships enjoy great times and endure tough times, and while all three marriages share similarities, there are some significant differences, as well – not the least of which is the changing generations involved. It is at this point that I am tempted to do a withering denouncement of Baby Boomers in general (my parent’s generation), but that would be getting off topic, so I will save it for another day. It is worth considering the different eras in which the relationships are instituted and in which they endure or fail, as well as the technological changes that have come to be such a major part of our society. But in the end, people are people. Sometimes things work out the way we plan, and sometimes they do not.
So, ultimately, how does a fellow meet and hold onto a wife? Get lucky and do not let go when you do. At least, that is what works for me and Grandpa.
Chapter 4: Blessed Is the Kingdom!

But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them

(Wisdom of Solomon 3:1)
I wonder what it is like to be a fly on the wall as my Grandfather, Albert Hale, makes his world debut. His parents, Luther and Myrtle, are married in December 1911, and now he comes along, prematurely, on August 27, 1912. He must sleep in a shoe box, due to his tiny stature. I suspect they fear he will not survive, but he does, which works out well for all of us.

Not much is known about these first few months, as he begins to grow and gain strength, but shortly before he is four months old, his father dies. A few days before Christmas, Luther Hale eats some tainted sausages for lunch and gets food poisoning – botulism, perhaps – and dies on Christmas Day. The local newspaper, the Jefferson Jimplecute, reports that “Luther M. Hale died December 25, 1912 after a short illness at his home west of Jefferson. He was the son of L. M. Hale. A young wife of one year and a little babe survive him. The burial took place on the 26th.” Grandpa’s first experience of holidays is pretty rough, even if he cannot actually remember it.

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Myrtle soon marries another man, Daniel Duncan, 28 years her senior and a widower with several children, so she inherits a ready-made family to which the young Albert is grafted. In all, between step-siblings (several of which are as old as his mother) and the children that Myrtle bears afterwards, there are fourteen children in the Duncan household. Grandpa alone does not carry the Duncan surname.

Once Grandpa reaches adulthood and has his own family, a photograph of his biological father, Luther, hangs on his wall. There is no picture of Daniel Duncan, though he is remembered fondly. Blood matters in our family, as much as proximity.

Daniel is a hard man. He kills a man when he is fourteen, protecting a hired hand on his family’s farm. Fearing for his safety, he flees and never returns. Sam Bass, the noted outlaw,
frequently visits the old Duncan homestead, indicative of the type of people that associate with the Duncans. Still, Daniel works hard and provides for his family.

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Grandpa adopts much of his work ethic and morality from the lessons instilled in him at an early age. At about nine or ten years old, he brings water from the well to the house every day. Several families share the communal water source. Two neighbor boys, near his own age, wait until Grandpa fills the bucket with water, and then they throw sand into it. Daniel asks Grandpa why he keeps bringing dirty water home, and Grandpa explains. Daniel’s response?

“Did you whip them?”

“Daddy, there are two of them.”

“Boy, the next time you bring sandy water into this house and I hear that you did not whip those boys, I will whip you instead.”

The following day, Grandpa nears the well, seeing his two foes. He warns them not to put sand in his water. They laugh and do it anyway. So he swings the water-laden wooden bucket at the larger of the two boys, hitting him in the head. The bucket shatters into pieces and the boy falls to the ground, unconscious. The smaller boy runs away.

Fearing his father’s reaction, Grandpa returns home and relates the story, explaining the broken bucket. Daniel laughs, “Son, we can buy a new bucket. Those boys won’t be throwing sand in it anymore.”

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When he is twelve years old, Grandpa runs through the fields with his younger brother, Walter. They near a stream, perhaps planning to go for a swim. Suddenly, Grandpa feels a stinging sensation on his lower leg (they are barefoot, of course), and looking down, sees two
bloody holes, and a Cotton Mouth Water Moccasin. He kills the snake, and the snake almost
returns the favor. His leg swells up, and he hovers near death for several days. Again, the fact
that he survives works out well for the rest of us.

Grandpa often speaks of the fun that he and Walter share, as they grow up in East Texas
and South Oklahoma. Indoor plumbing does not exist, at least not for poor folk, so they take
advantage of an outhouse, toilet paper an unknown luxury. They use old corncobs for that job. It
is fashionable to hang dried hot peppers inside the outhouses, and though Grandpa never
explains why, maybe it provides some relief from the smell. In any event, on one particular day,
he finishes his business and looks for a corn cob, but none is seen. So he decides that one of
those peppers will work just as well. The burn must be something terrible, as Grandpa bursts
from the door of the outhouse at a dead sprint, and it takes Walter nearly two miles to run him
down and tackle him.

All in all, it sounds like a fine childhood.

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Five months after Grandpa turns thirty, my daddy becomes the third child born to him
and his wife (who always uses the nickname “Bill”; her grandchildren call her Granny). This
occurs a month and a half after the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor. Daddy’s early years find
definition in the context of war and scarcity. Grandpa works in the oil fields of West Texas, so
his job is considered “vital” to the war effort.

Eventually, Grandpa and Granny have five children: two boys and three girls. The first
four are bunched together within six and a half years. The last waits until 1950 to come along,
seven years younger than the nearest sibling. Their oldest son, named Luther after his deceased
grandfather, goes by the nickname “Punkin,” which is a standard Texan pronunciation of “pumpkin.” My daddy loves his older brother.

While still small, Daddy follows Punkin everywhere, as little brothers often do. He tells me about a time that Granny forces Punkin and a friend to allow Daddy and the friend’s little brother to accompany them on a youthful escapade. Once the four boys leave ear-shot of the house, the two older siblings tie their younger brothers to a tree and leave them there for several hours, retrieving them on the way home. Nevertheless, Daddy continues his attempts to tag along.

Punkin grows into a handsome man, much favoring his father. Both have a dark complexion and full, dark hair. Both are tall and well-framed. Punkin is also considered to be a “good” boy by all who know him, and I hear only good stories about him. Grandpa often brags that Punkin alone beats him in arm wrestling, but he is 21 years old before accomplishing that feat.

Daddy, on the other hand, also a handsome fellow, takes after Granny’s family in appearance. He possesses a rounder body type, not reaching the same height or dark complexion as his brother. As he grows into manhood and becomes less physically active, weight becomes a major concern, eventually leading to serious health issues. His behavior diverges from his brother’s example, as well.

Near to Daddy’s twelfth birthday, Grandpa buys a car that he promises to give to his younger son, once he reaches the age to drive. In the 1950s, it is possible to become a licensed driver at fourteen. Admonished to stay away from the car until he obtains his license, Daddy, at the first available opportunity, decides to take it for a spin. He makes it about a block before running a stop sign and causing a minor fender bender. He never drives that car again.
As a teenager, Daddy and a few buddies steal Grandpa’s work truck. They load the bed of the pickup with pilfered watermelons from a neighbor’s garden and drive through the main street downtown, throwing the melons out, smashing them on the road. Even 40 years later, Grandpa’s voice will quiver in suppressed anger, “I could have gotten fired!”

When my daddy is 27, I come along. My parents have been married for six years and wonder if perhaps they are barren. They consider adoption, but in 1968 decide to give it one more year. I arrive the following August. Three years later, my only sibling, a little brother, joins us.

Though my birth occurs during the heated days of Vietnam, I really do not have much recollection. I can recall some significant events that took place, such as in August 1974, when President Nixon resigns. I am born a month too late to watch Neil Armstrong make his giant leap, but I remember the later Apollo missions and aspire to the life of an astronaut. That is pretty common in the mid-70s, I think.

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As the older brother, I don’t have to worry about being tied to trees. I am the aggressor, most of the time, although my younger sibling and I have our share of tussles. I know how to manipulate him into starting a physical confrontation. While I consider myself pretty sneaky in that regard, Daddy knows my tricks. They do not fool him.

Daddy spends several years as a car salesman, but after I turn two, he feels the call to the ministry. So we go to seminary. Well, he attends, but the family moves to Lubbock, TX, from my birthplace in the Dallas area. We are in Lubbock when my brother is born.
Daddy’s receives his first preaching job in a very small town in central Texas, and we live in a newly-built parsonage. His receives the salary of $700 per month, plus the house. Several boys my own age live nearby, and we band together to cause as much mischief as we can. I become a poster child for the stereotypical PK (preacher’s kid).

One boy who lives next door, though a couple of years older than me, becomes a regular play companion. We spend lots of time together, building forts, playing football, climbing trees, fighting – normal boy stuff. One day, at his house, he pulls out a pair of hedge clippers and starts to prune the shrubs in his front yard. I notice a small group of leaves that he misses and pointing with my left index finger, say, “you missed one.” He misses again.

My left index finger is removed from my body at the last knuckle, hanging on by one small strand of stubborn skin. I run home screaming, shaking my hand like it is covered in fire, trying to put out the pain that should have been there, but is absent. My mom holds me down, wraps a dish towel around my offended digit, and calls my dad, next door watching the Cowboys play the Oilers.

Dad returns home and loads the car with my baby brother, my mom, and me (she is still holding me – no seat belt laws back then), and drives twenty miles to San Saba, where the nearest hospital can be found. It is a tiny, rural hospital, with about 20 beds, total. The ER doctor emerges to evaluate me. He is an older man – we often joke that he was so old that he did not attend medical school, but just apprenticed himself when he was a boy. He looks at my ruined finger and gives my parents the bad news: “There is probably no way to save that digit.”

Luckily, he is up for the old college try. Rather than throw the lost joint away, he decides to try to reattach it, “just to see what happens.”
From the time the accident occurs, until the time I lay on the ER table, I feel no pain, the nerves too shocked to register any sensation. I feel only numbness. Once Doc Finger-Saver starts working, however, the pain becomes intense. Daddy sits next to me, on my right side, and tells me stories. That keeps me occupied, while the surgery takes place. For a long time, I do not appreciate what Daddy does that day, but after I become a father, my heart breaks to realize that he watches them cut, pull, sew, and painstakingly work to save my finger. On that day, as I listen to his stories, his voice never wavers. His strength keeps mine alive.

To this day, I cannot bend that knuckle, but I do have the joint still attached to the end of my finger.

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I endure a similar fatherly experience. Soon after the birth of our second child, I go outside to do yard work. I diligently push the lawnmower across the yard, when I see our back door fly open and Debbie rushes out, carrying our three-year old daughter, Becky. Blood pours from her mouth, with both mother and child yelling and crying.

It seems while my wife changes the baby’s diaper, Becky decides to get a better view of the proceedings by crawling up into a chair. She promptly slips and falls, hitting her face on the edge of the kitchen table. Her bottom lip torn, with a gash nearly an inch and a half long, she completes her fall to the floor. One of her upper front teeth is broken and pointed back towards her throat.

Immediately, I take Becky and have my wife get the baby. We drive to the emergency room. Using our new seldom-used cell phone, we call my mother-in-law to meet us. Once processed into the hospital, Becky is taken back to be assessed by a doctor. He determines she needs seven stitches in her lip, so the nurses put her into a papoose-like constraint to hold her
still. As the doctor cleans and repairs her wound, Becky wails, over and over, “Daddy, make them stop! Daddy, help!”

My heart breaks into a million pieces, as I stand helplessly, knowing that she requires medical attention, but that my daughter’s confidence in me may never be the same.

To further compound the insult, a week later, at her pediatrician’s office, I hold her steady while he removes the stitches. Again, I contribute to what she perceives as a threat, ignoring her pleas.

In the end, her lip heals nicely, though she carries a visible scar for the rest of her life. I tell her that it gives her gravitas and that guys find such things cute. I think she believes me, since it is true. Her broken tooth turns out fine. The tooth itself is ruined, but it ends up staying in place for another few years, until her adult teeth begin to emerge.

The scar on her lip is the physical manifestation of the scar that sears itself onto my soul.
Chapter 5: Great Litany

For the fruit of good labors is renowned,
and the root of understanding does not fail

(Wisdom of Solomon 3:15)
Grandpa never finishes the third grade. Even as an adult, he borders on illiteracy. In the years around World War I and immediately thereafter, in rural Texas, many folks fail to value education. Daniel Duncan wants his boys working, earning their keep. So after two and a half years of school, Grandpa heads to the fields.

Later in life, as his strong work ethic leads him to become a reliable and valued employee in the oil business, he receives promotions to mid-management positions (foreman, etc.), but he always declines invitations to advance further, recognizing that his lack of education prohibits him from being successful in those ventures.

Grandpa arises long before the sun, working multiple jobs before returning home late at night. Then he labors over correspondence course work, trying to gain enough education to better his position. All those years in hard, physical work allow him to raise his own five children and two grandchildren, as well as support down-on-their-luck relatives that occasionally show up.

He never improves his educational standing, even with the effort. He just does not have time to get that sort of work done. Other, more pressing, needs always intervene.

As a boy, he takes his breaks by lying down on an old disc plow. One day, while resting in the sun, his back on the blades of the plow, a lever falls and crashes down upon him. It fractures his skull, flattening the crown of his head. He staggers home, where his mother looks it over. She gives him a couple of aspirin and he returns to the field to finish his day’s work.

In my childhood, we often ask to feel his flat spot. He always obliges. Did I mention his hard work and enviable work ethic?

Daddy gets the opportunity to go to school. Grandpa makes sure that his children are afforded that much. Daddy makes it through tenth grade, before he drops out and joins the U.S. Army.
Daddy does not care for school. Though a very intelligent man, he focuses on other interests, things he prefers to do. Once, the school calls to ask how Buck is doing. Granny, taking the call, says that he is just fine and dandy, and why are they asking? It seems that Daddy has not been to school for several days, so they fear he might be terribly ill. The reality? He simply ditches class.

The next day, Grandpa drives Daddy to school and watches him enter the front door. Satisfied that the lesson has been learned, Grandpa drives away. Daddy walks in the front door, down the hall, and out of the back door.

Daddy tells me that in all of his years of school, he reads only one book, a biography of George Washington Carver. I ask him why he read that one. He says that he picks it up to pretend to be reading in class and notices that an African-American had invented peanut butter and done many other amazing things. His shock over the fact that a Black man was smart enough to do such things overwhelms him, and before he knows it, he reads the whole book. Such beliefs fit the times.

When teachers assign book reports, Daddy does them over stories that his maternal grandfather tells him. One he particularly recalls: “Snow Bird and Dan” by O.C. Chalker, who is my great grandfather, and who has never written a book in his life. I have no idea where the story originated, but most likely from an old western. Daddy probably uses that story, and book report, multiple times.

****

In order to join the army, Daddy earns his GED. He enlists to spite Grandpa. It turns out that the football team in their hometown loses more often than they win, while the team where Granny’s dad lives possesses one of the great Texas teams of all time (the Breckinridge teams of
the 1950s). Not long after his brother’s death, Daddy asks to move there so he can play for a winner. Grandpa refuses, because family should stick together.

Daddy decides to make a statement, so he enlists. He plays a dangerous game, since as a 17-year old, he needs parental permission. At the time, it takes both parents to agree before the army can accept him. Daddy thinks this will motivate Grandpa to let him move to Breckenridge.

The recruiter and Daddy show up at the house with the paperwork. Daddy knows that his parents will never sign them. Grandpa looks at them for about three seconds and signs his name. Granny refuses.

“Woman, sign that paper.”

“I have already lost one son. I couldn’t bear to lose another.”

“Sign it.”

She does. And just like that, Charles Buck Hale becomes a soldier.

After his enlistment ends, Daddy returns home from Germany. He opens the front door, sets his duffle bag down, looks at Grandpa and says, “I have never seen a man get as smart as you in only three years.”

****

As I grow up, American society expects more education from its young people. Long gone are the days when a seven-year old spends his days in the fields rather than the classroom. Graduating from High School is a foregone conclusion, my enrollment in college expected.

I graduate fifth in my class, accepted to every college and university to which I apply. Growing up, I always figure to attend Abilene Christian University in Abilene, TX, a common expectation for PKs from our denomination in those days. Though accepted into the honors program, I receive no feedback on scholarships from ACU.
As an afterthought, I send an application to Lubbock Christian University, as well. Mainly, I do it just because the SAT and ACT let you send your results to several schools. I also send it to the University of Texas. LCU responds to me with a nice scholarship package. So, to LCU I go.

I last three semesters before joining the U.S. Army.

****

Athletics serves as an important part of the Hale family ethos. While football has not yet taken root as the national Texas pastime in Grandpa’s younger years, boxing has. Grandpa grows up fighting. In fact, the vast majority of the stories he tells us involve either fighting or fishing, and usually both.

The same two brothers that throw sand in his water bucket as youngsters remain a nuisance to him over the years. One day in the fields, their confrontations come to a head. By this time, Grandpa approaches twenty years of age. The nation experiences the Great Depression, and things will not improve for several more years. Most likely, the fact that Grandpa works while they do not fuels these boys’ personal animosity. Remove him, and a position opens.

Following his standard protocol, Grandpa goes for the larger one first. He reasons that if he can handle the bigger one, the smaller will either flee or at least be a lesser challenge.

Squaring off, Grandpa and his nemesis circle one another warily, looking for an opening. Quick as a flash, Grandpa throws a solid right cross that connects with the other’s chest. He later wonders if he made the fellow’s heart skip a beat, but whatever the reason, the young man drops to the ground. Grandpa fears that he has killed his opponent, and it does take the fellow several weeks to be able to function normally.
The two brothers never bother him again, but Grandpa hears the road calling, anyway. Maybe, like his stepfather, he worries that he might get into legal trouble for hurting someone so badly. Perhaps he just wants to get away. In any event, he starts walking across eastern Texas and southern Oklahoma, looking for whatever work he can find. He eventually makes his way to north central Texas, where he meets Granny.

****

Murray Rothbard refers to the Great Depression as “the great American trauma.” For well over a decade, the effects of 1929 staggered the American society. Unemployment was rampant, surpassing 20% at some points and remaining above 15% until World War II began. Another major impact was the change in governmental policy towards economics. Prior to 1929, for the most part, the American government had followed a laissez-faire approach toward recessions. As a comparison, the first great American depression, in 1819, was met only with an ease on “terms of payment for its own land debtors.” The governmental actions in 1837 and 1920-21 followed suit.

In 1929, this changed, as first President Hoover, followed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, began “an anti-depression program marked by extensive governmental economic planning and intervention – including bolstering of wage rates and prices, expansion of credit, propping up of weak firms, and increased governmental spending.” Amity Shlaes concurs, offering up the thought that this government intervention prolonged the depression.

Furthermore, Shlaes points out that the Great Depression even altered the way Americans used language. Before this time, the word “liberal” had been connected to the idea of individual freedom. Afterwards, it was associated with groups and equality. She argues that the New Deal was damaging, not just to the economy, but to the regular people who lived through that era.
The two books referenced here, Rothbard’s *America’s Great Depression* and Shlaes’ *The Forgotten Man* offer distinct approaches to reach similar conclusions. Both advocate that the government prolonged the difficulties, with Rothbard focused more on the economic considerations and Shlaes discussing the social implications. Whereas the former book is filled with charts and discussions of business cycles, the latter is a narrative about the common man who endured the Great Depression.

My Grandpa is one such man, a part of the “less-governed America of Coolidge,” willing and ready to serve his country in the war that absorbed the Depression. The economic downturn lasts for so long that it seems to be permanent; “being poor was no longer a passing event.” Americans become adept at finding “light in the dark – even creating their own light.” While the government fiddles with novel ideas about how to combat the problems, Grandpa – and others like him – simply find a way to survive and even thrive.

****

Daddy also boxes, though not as well as Grandpa or Punkin. In fact, Punkin becomes a Golden Gloves boxer in the Odessa/Midland area of West Texas. Daddy always says that he does not like to get hit, so runs too much in the ring. Instead, he really excels in street fighting, where the rules are a little more lax.

Once I reach adulthood, Daddy and I have many intimate discussions, and on one occasion, he off-handedly mentions that when he fights, he always prefers to fight two guys at once, rather than just one. Shocked, I inquire as to why.

“Well, when one guy fights you, you sorta feel obligated to fight fair. But if two of them jump you, they have already broken the rules. Now, anything is fair. You can use a chair or
whatever is handy then. In fact, the worst damage I ever did in a bar fight was with a pair of pliers, when these two dudes came at me…”

I quickly change the subject. I do not really want to know what he does with his pliers, to be honest. That scares me a little.

Daddy is fearless.

He has so many fights as a boy and young man that he loses count. In all those altercations, he only backs down one time.

Out in West Texas, where fighting is a way of life, when two young men come to the point of physical conflict, everyone heads out to the sand dunes that stood outside of town. All those present park their cars in a circle, with the headlights facing inwards, to provide illumination for the combatants. Then everyone gets out of the cars, standing around or sitting on the hoods of the vehicles, watching the entertainment.

Daddy and another fellow agree to meet. The circle of lights are put into place, and Daddy approaches the center of the ring, throwing shadow punches to warm up. The opponent also arrives and heads toward the open area. Daddy notices that the man carries a pistol. Daddy promptly turns around, gets back in his car, puts it in reverse, backs away, and leaves.

“I wasn’t scared, but I wasn’t stupid, either.”

Again, that works out pretty well for the rest of us.

****

Fighting may be a traditional Hale characteristic, but maybe it weakens with each generation. While Grandpa is a well-known and respected fighter, Daddy is less so, though still formidable. Faced with such situations, I avoid them when possible, and only fight as a last resort. I never enjoy fighting, in a ring or elsewhere. Still, I am pretty good at it. I use my limited
opportunities to build a reputation as someone to leave alone, which allow me to avoid actual fighting, most of the time.

Around the age of twelve, my brother and I often ride our bikes. An old abandoned construction site sits near our home, and the contractors leave a huge mound of dirt there, which all the kids in our neighborhood call “the hills.” It makes for a great place to ride bikes, as you can really get up a head of steam coming from the top. On this particular day, some other kids are out and about, as well, and as often happens in such situations, someone decides it was time to test the “other guys.”

My little brother and a kid from the other group, both of the same age, get into a fight. It is fair, so I just stand by and watch. They give each other a good tussle, and I figure that once it ends, we can go ahead and get back to bike riding. My brother begins to get the upper hand (he is a Hale, after all), so one of the older boys from the other group jumps in to defend his younger friend.

I grab the older boy, near to my age, and tell him to let the two little fellows fight. He pushes me off and takes a swing at my brother. I warn him one more time to leave off, since it is not his fight, but he will not be dissuaded. So I tear into him.

It is my best fight ever, and sets the stage for about five or six years of never having to actually fight, until we move several years later. I work that poor boy up the hill and down the hill, demonstrating a majestic display of pugilism. I hit him thirty or forty times and not one time does he lay a hand on me. Finally, he collapses to the ground, and I stand over him and tell him, “I said to leave them alone. The next time you want a whipping, you just come find me.”

With that, my brother and I get on our bikes and head home.
The following year, walking home from school, I notice a large crowd down a side street. I meander over to see what attracts such a group. It is a fight. One of the kids from my neighborhood receives a pummeling by another kid. I watch. After a bit, it becomes apparent that this fight is over, and my friend has been soundly defeated. I step in and say, “That’s enough. You whipped him. I’m going to take him home.”

His opponent enjoys the attention too much, and wants to continue to fight. I look him the eye and warn him about what will come down upon him, if he tries to stop me from taking my friend away. Honestly, I doubt he truly felt fear, desiring to continue the beat down that already took place, but he turns to one of his buddies, crying out, “Joe! Get him!”

I looked at “Joe,” and lo and behold, I see the same fellow I had beaten the prior year. He turns a pale shade of green, contorts his face into a sickly grin, and mumbles, “No. Don’t mess with that guy.” Just like that, I am fight-free for years.

****

As an adult, outside of my military experience, I have only one physical altercation. I work as a teacher for a prison school (for juveniles) and a student attacks me. A stout sixteen-year old, the student takes offense at my correction of his misbehavior. We move into the hall for a private discussion, part of the proper protocol of such activities. While I provide him with some redirection, he pushes me. Honestly, I think he just reacts without pre-meditation, but once he touches me, he knows he is in trouble. I can see it in his eyes.

At that point, he figures that if an assault arrest looms (though based on a weak push), then he might as well go for it. So he tackles me with fine form, shoulder in my belly, arms wrapping around me, and he picks me up and slams me into the opposite wall. As he slings me into the sheetrock, my back tears an imbedded picture loose from the wall. My shirt ripped to
shreds, several large cuts and scrapes on my back begin to ooze blood. Then my feet finally find purchase on the ground.

The fight lasts about four seconds. Really? He is a kid. A tough kid, but just a kid. I have trained for years on how to fight and defend myself. I immediately resist the urge to use brutal force, restraining my response. I simply grab him, twist him around, and put him on the floor. Then I hold him in place until other faculty and staff arrive. Technically, I win the fight (and none of the other kids ever threaten me after that – they see the whole thing through a window), but my sore back feels the pain.

To his credit, after his arrest, he never denies my description of what happened, always admitting that “it happened just like Mr. Hale said it did.” I think the courts just add some time to his sentence, in the end, but he receives an assignment to a new class.

****

For a while, Grandpa operates a couple of Texaco service stations. That is back when folks get gas at an actual service station, not convenience stores. He continues to work in the oil industry, running leases and maintaining equipment, but finds time to manage one station himself. Punkin, about fifteen then, manages the other. Still a student in school, Punkin needs to have an adult around, so Grandpa hires a young man to assist. I do not recall his name, so we can just call him Joe Knox, since it sounds appropriate.

Joe fancies that he will be the next Heavyweight Champion of the world. He knows it in his bones. He knows it in his soul. Most importantly, he feels it in his iron fists and bedrock chin. After less than two years of active boxing, he earns a 12-0 record, with 12 KOs. The people in the know all say he is a shoo-in for a Golden Gloves Championship, and probably a spot on the American team for the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki. For Joe, those are details. He realizes that
they serve as stepping-stones to the ultimate goal of being the best professional fighter the world will ever know, even better than Joe Louis and Jack Dempsey. Someday, kids will run around shadow boxing, dreaming of being like Joe Knox.

Of course, dreams do not pay the bills, so while Joe climbs his ladder of success, he earns money by working for Grandpa’s local Texaco stations, pumping gas. Now, Punkin can throw a mean punch himself, though not quite in Joe’s league. It becomes a game between them for Joe to stick his chin out, mocking the young manager to try and hit him. Every day, the boy takes a swing, and every day, Joe moves out of the path of the blow, avoiding contact.

“See, Punkin, you’re just too slow. Ol’ Joe Knox is world class, man. I am too fast for you. You ain’t never gonna hit me, boy.”

One day, after the taunting, Punkin warns Joe, “Yeah, you’re probly right. I sure cain’t hit you, but you shore better not ever stick your chin out to my daddy, ‘cause he’ll bust you plum into next week.”

Of course, the next time Grandpa stops by, Joe tests him. Jutting his jaw out, Joe makes his challenge: “Mr. Hale, your boy there tells me that you are some kind of fighter and know your way around a boxing ring. He shore ain’t able to hit me, and I’m betting that you can’t neith……”

Joe looks up at the sky, wondering where he is, pretty sure that he has been talking to someone, but cannot for the life of him remember to whom nor about what. He closes his eyes, and realizes that he lies on the hard ground, gravel and rocks scratching and poking his back and head. He sits up, and realizes that Grandpa, Punkin, and a few patrons look down at him. Then he remembers. That old man, who must be at least 40, has punched him square in the chin and floored him! Joe Knox! The next world champion!
Joe gets to his feet and looks Grandpa in the eye.

“Mr. Hale, you done hit me, so now you gonna have to whip me or get whipped by me.”

“Joe, I’m OK if you just go to work, but if you’re gonna challenge me, I’ll have it to do. I carry a couple pair of mitts in my truck, just in case a fight needs to break out, so let me go get ‘em.”

Grandpa meanders to his truck, reaches behind the seat, and pulls out two pair of boxing gloves. He pitches a pair to Joe and both men prepare to fight.

They fight for over ten minutes of man-to-man carnage, with neither man ever going to the ground. Of course, Grandpa does not go down because Joe never lays a glove on him. For the duration, Grandpa throws jabs and crosses, peppering Joe’s head and body. Joe blocks most of the early punches, but after a few begin to slip his defenses, he soon wearies, and more blows land. By the end, unable to even hold his hands up anymore, but refusing to go to the ground, Joe doggedly faces his opponent. Though he knows his nose pours blood, a cut swells his left eye, and he feels the hole in his mouth indicating at least one lost tooth, he wavers firmly.

“Joe, I reckon we’re about done here. I gotta tell ya – you are one of the toughest fighters I have ever had the privilege of lacing up the gloves with.” Looking Joe over, Grandpa continues, “Still, I ain’t so shore this is much of a sportin’ match anymore, so why don’t you go on home and take it easy for the rest of the day. I’ll even pay you for the whole day.”

Conceding eats at Joe’s soul, but he knows that it is futile to continue the fight. Grandpa—the old man—clearly bested him. Grudgingly, he nods. Unable to find his voice, he looks pleadingly toward Punkin and makes a small motion with his hands. Punkin comes over and helps him remove the gloves, whispering, “I didn’t know he could do that. I’m awful sorry to have tricked you.”
But Joe knows. The fault lies not with the boy, but himself. If an old service station owner can beat him like that, then maybe Joe ought to be looking for a new line of work.

****

Some folks may read that above story and think that I have taken liberties in telling it. Well, sure, I have in some details. Certainly, I do not remember the young man’s real name, but I do know he never becomes the Heavyweight champion. I also know that the overall story is accurate. My 40-year old grandfather whips a mid-20s Golden Glove boxer, and the fight is not remotely competitive.

It is also true that Grandpa carries those gloves in his truck everywhere, since oil field workers tend to be of a rough sort, and physical altercations commonly happen. This strategy allows the men to get the fight out of their systems so they can return to work. At the same time, it hurts business for the men to hurt their hands, since their work is vital to operations. Broken hands mean lost work. So Grandpa keeps two pairs of gloves, just in case the need arises.
Chapter 6: Antiphons

But the righteous live forever,
and their reward is with the Lord

(Wisdom of Solomon 5:15)
A regular part of the Hale experience involves fishing. In fact, I am not sure that it ever
was not part of the experience. Still, growing up, it seems that more and more of Grandpa’s
thoughts turn to spending time on a lake or river, catching as many fish as possible. One of my
high school teachers remarks that folks always talk about retiring and going fishing, but that it
never lasts, and boredom sets in. I reply that he should meet my grandfather.

It is a rare day at Grandpa’s house that the subject of fishing does not take center stage. In
fact, he enjoys regaling us with past exploits, and often tell us the same stories multiple times.
We enjoy them, all the same. Granny learns to navigate these stories, without getting too
involved. She tends to spend her time cooking and cleaning, but if not so engaged, she spends
her time doing two things: watching her “stories” (soap operas) and embroidery.

Grandpa regales his listeners about the time he and Walter spend the weekend at the lake,
run trotlines, and catch a whopper.

“That yellow cat was 38lbs…or was it 42 lbs…Momma, which was it?”

Without missing beat, Granny replies, “42, Daddy.”

So he carries on with his story. She never even looks up from her sewing. Looking back, I am
sure that she has no idea how much the fish weighs, or even recalls the actual event being
described. She just knows how to keep a story moving.

****

I have a photograph of my daddy and his maternal grandfather, standing together with an
impressive string of fish that they caught. Their smiles illuminate the picture. They enjoy the
time together, or maybe are just happy about the haul of catfish, but they surely radiate from the
image.
Daddy takes my brother and me fishing quite often, a Hale family tradition, and as a youngster, I buy into the activity – hook, line, and sinker. On one occasion, when I am about six or seven, we fish along a river bank. The sun shines brightly, the temperature is a nice 76°, and we have quite a few fish, enough to end our efforts and head for the house. We look forward to the evening meal of fried catfish.

We add each fish we catch to a stringer that Daddy stakes out along the bank. Stringers keep the fish from swimming away, as the line passes either through the fish’s mouths or gills, holding them in place. We throw the snagged fish back into the water, line secure to something along the bank. As Daddy begins to pull the stringer out of the water, we see that a couple of water moccasins feast on our fish. Our catch ruined, Daddy cuts the line, and we watch the snakes make off with all of our fish.

This would be a good time to mention that I hate snakes. OK, that might be a little too tame. I am pretty scared of them, and always have been. It is not a lose-my-mind-and-start-shrieking sort of fear, but rather a healthy respect that I prefer to manifest by keeping a suitable distance from such creatures.

On this occasion, my disgust and fear cause me to lose my love of fishing; I have never enjoyed fishing since. I still do quite a bit of it, but always, in the back of my mind, I am waiting for a dastardly snake to come and take my catch.

****

Of course, by the time that my daddy starts school, Texas has caught the football bug. This deep emotional tie between the inhabitants of my state and the sport are immortalized in plenty of other works, such as Friday Night Lights, both in print and on the screen. The only real thing I can add to those other works is to observe that the authors toned them down a little.
Texans love football more than any other activity. I do not exaggerate to point out that while it would be a wonderful opportunity for robbers to steal to their hearts’ content on a Friday night in any Texas small town, many people still leave their doors unlocked, when they head to the game. Why? The thieves are at the game, too. We just do not miss football games.

While Daddy still attends school, he wears the number “24” on his jersey, playing Center and Linebacker. Folks who know him always say he possesses great athletic prowess, though excelling more at baseball and bowling than on the gridiron. I have often hear others lament the fact that he drops out of school, as they suppose he has a future in sports.

Even after his playing days end, he closely follows his favorite sports, and once Texas begins to field professional teams, he gives his devotion to them. The Dallas Cowboys and Texas Rangers especially claim his allegiance, and so they become my teams, as well. However, as much as we enjoy our professional teams, most Texans find their interest heavier at the bottom and lighter at the top. In other words, local High School football is King, closely followed by teams at the collegiate level. Professional sports occupies a third-tier.

Perhaps Texans base that hierarchy upon the perception that kids play because they love the sport, while professionals play for money. Regardless, Texas falls are known for hot weather and good football games. One of our most popular magazines is *Dave Campbell’s Texas Football* which comes out each year, gives an overview of every single high school football team, and lists prominent players for each.

Dr. Ty Cashion, a History professor at Sam Houston State University, authors a great book that considers the importance of Texas high school football. His *Pigskin Pulpit* argues that the game is placed on the same pedestal as other icons of the state: oil, cowboys, and the like. Focusing upon the impact that coaches have on multiple generations of Texans, Cashion weaves
“together the voices of a representative sample [of coaches] into a narrative that discusses their lives and careers.” These men are a unique breed, in his terminology, “whose deeply planted values were nurtured in the common experiences of traditional Texas culture, economic depression, and times of war.” Of particular note, I have the opportunity to know and play for several of the coaches introduced therein, Gordon Wood and Morris Southall amongst them. Wood retires as the winningest coach in football history (at any level). Southall, Wood’s long-time assistant, shares a common refrain from all these men that exemplifies their role, both as educators and as men who carry on seminal Texas values. His philosophy of football (and life in general): “values are very important – honesty, hard work, ethics, be on time, follow rules, and contribute.” This book, more than any other I have read, gets to the root of why football becomes so important in Texas, especially at the high school level. It allows young men to manifest those core principles that the citizens of the state hold dear. These men are not oblivious to their role as educators, outside of football. Wood points out that “I believed my students [in academic classes] deserved the same effort out of me as the athletes…I wanted other teachers to respect me as a good teacher.”

Since we move often as I grow up, I garner the opportunity to watch football teams for several different towns. I play on most of those teams, once I reach a suitable age. Even before that, Daddy loads us up each Friday night to go the stadium and watch. Before I start Kindergarten, he buys me two jerseys, one yellow and one maroon (the local school colors – the Yellow Jackets), with the number 24 on them. While I cannot fit into them anymore, I still have them.

Once I start playing myself, I never wear 24, as that number is assigned to running backs or defensive backs. I do not possess the speed to play those positions. By High School, I wear 61
each year. In fact, that becomes a new tradition in our family. The year after I graduate, my brother, four years behind me in school, takes my number to wear throughout his playing days.

Image 6.1: Football Clint

In small town Texas football, it is common to play iron-man, meaning both offense and defense. We move to a new town during my sophomore year, and so I play two seasons at Nueces Canyon, a 1A school. That designation means it is really, really small. Everyone, from freshman through seniors, plays on varsity. We do not have enough people to field a junior varsity team. Though our jersey numbers differ, Daddy and I play the same positions: center and linebacker.

My senior year affords me the opportunity to play on the best eleven-man football team in our school’s history (which is still true, as of this writing). We make it to the state playoffs for the second year in a row, and only third time ever, since our school left the six-man game to play eleven-man. Unlike the previous year, though, we win our first playoff game. No other team from Nueces Canyon has duplicated that feat. That year also allows me the chance to realize a personal dream – I intercept a pass.

I play football for eight years, always hoping to intercept a pass. By the end of the regular season of my final year, I fail to do so. In our first playoff game, I finally accomplish it. One of
my good friends, playing defensive end, hits the opposing quarterback, causing his pass to sail on him. It falls right into my arms, as I drop back into pass coverage. I hold onto the pigskin like it is worth a million dollars, and I begin to run toward the end zone. While it would be great to speak of my touchdown return, it would also be a lie. I do run back about fifteen yards before being tackled, but I do not score. Still, I finally intercept a pass.

The next week, in the second playoff game, our opponent crushes us, but we enjoy the experience, all in all. I hear that my old school will be returning to six-man football soon, leaving the more familiar eleven-man game. Maybe it will be that my senior year will always be remembered as the best eleven-man team in our school’s history.

Of course, while we love our High School football, we do not ignore our professional teams. In fact, there is a loyal and rabid fan base, both for the Dallas Cowboys and Houston Texans. In part, the NFL’s growth in popularity over the past half century has been reflected in Texas. As I type these words, I am wearing a Dallas Cowboy hoodie. The reality is that football is a way of life in Texas. Most young men, especially in rural and inner-city areas, grow up dreaming of playing for their favorite teams.

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Our family also reveres military service. Of course, not everyone serves directly in the Army or Navy, but some of us do. Those that do not always support those who are able.

On December 8, 1941, at twenty-nine years of age, Grandpa goes with his best friend Cluster, who is also his nephew (the son of one of his older step-brothers), to the recruiting office in Kilgore, Texas, to join up. The long line that day wraps around the block, as half the men in the county come to enlist on the day after Pearl Harbor. When Grandpa and Cluster get to the
front of the line, Cluster signs his name to the enlistment papers. However, the military rejects Grandpa.

It turns out that as an oil-field worker, his job is considered “mission-sensitive” and the local recruiter will not take him. The military needs fuel for its war machines, and Grandpa helps supply it. The fact that Grandpa has two small children, with a third on the way, impacts the decision. Still, though he does not put on an Army uniform, he supports the war effort in every way possible. Along the way, he instills in his children a love of country and service that continues into the present.

Times might be hard, and provisions scarce in those days, but they make do.

****

It has already been discussed how Daddy joins up, but once he enters the service, he completes his training as a Combat Engineer, stationed in Germany. He stays there from 1959-1962. The idea of a Combat Engineer sounds rife with possibilities of heroism and bravery, but the reality is that the country experiences peacetime while Daddy serves, so no opportunity for such things occurs.

In addition, while in Europe, he dates the daughter of his commanding officer, receiving the assignment to be the CO’s personal driver. He spends his first year in Germany as a glorified chauffeur. While that sounds pretty cushy, it pales in comparison to his last year or so there.

While still in high school, Daddy works part time, after school, at the local bowling alley. During his time there, a new invention becomes all the rage – automatic pinsetters. No longer must employees manually pick up and set the knocked down pins, but a machine accomplishes that task. Daddy becomes proficient at operating and maintaining the apparatus.
In the early 1960s, all the U.S. Military installations in Germany receive automatic pinsetters. Somehow, the powers that be found out that Daddy possesses this valuable experience with them. So he spends over a year driving around to the different posts and bases, showing the employees how to operate them. In all, after three years of honorable service, Daddy returns to Texas with gripping tales of the dangers of bowling pins and illegal left turns.

Not everything goes so easy for him, though. Entering the Army as an E-1, the lowest enlisted rank, he earns promotion up to E-3, before being busted back down to E-1. Mostly likely, though he will never confirm this, drinking instigates the event. Again, he makes his climb up the ranks, earning an E-5 rating.

One night, assigned guard duty at a check post, and told explicitly to make sure he mans that post himself, rather than getting someone to cover for him, Daddy rebels. His First Sergeant makes this order abundantly clear. Of course, Daddy has a date that night, so he gets someone to cover for him. After a movie, he and his date exit the theater only to see his first sergeant, who is taking his wife to the same theater. The superior espies him at the same moment. Daddy runs.

Daddy makes it back to the guard post before the First Sergeant arrives to catch him, but they both know the truth. A tense confrontation ensues.

“Hale, how many days do you have left in the service?”

“100 days, First Sergeant.”

“I will bust you to buck private before then, soldier.”

“First Sergeant, you cannot do it. I am too good of a soldier.”

“We will see about that.”

With two days left in service, as his buddies throw him a going away drinking party, Daddy is busted. By the end of the night, my inebriated daddy finds himself in the brig, busted to
E-1, and the First Sergeant has the last laugh. In fact, Daddy spends two extra weeks in the Army, serving out his punishment. He exits at the same level as he enters.

He returns home and requests a meal of Granny’s meatloaf.

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Image 6.2: Basic Training

After three semesters in college, unsure of what I want to do with myself, I follow his footsteps. My daddy and grandpa raise me to be patriotic and conscientious, so on a whim, I join the Army. Caught up in the moment, I convince two friends to join with me. Exactly thirty years after my father, I begin my service as a U.S. Army infantryman.

I fail to find those storied chauffeur jobs or bowling opportunities. I start out as an anti-tank gunner, where the life expectancy in combat is about seven seconds. Really. I do that job for a year or so. During that year, the United States invades Panama (1989), but I do not participate.
My battalion heads to Germany for a training exercise, so other units are tasked with dispatching Noriega from Panama City.

After returning from a month in Germany, I move into a Sniper/Scout platoon, and attend Sniper School at Ft. Benning, GA. I enter my enlistment as an E-3, due to my college course work. I tend to outrank my fellow soldiers, since I start higher up the chain of command than they. I soon make E-4, and even pass my interrogation at a promotion board, making me eligible for E-5. I only have to earn enough promotion points for that to occur (the promotion system changes from when Daddy serves).

I earn about half of the required points, with military schools attended, and other such activities, but then Saddam Hussein invades Kuwait and the world changes. Ironically, just as I miss Panama because I go to Germany, so I miss Iraq because I find myself in Panama. We endure jungle training there, and fly for Central America on the day that our Air Force begins bombing Baghdad. During our three weeks in Panama, we receive orders to go to the Middle East to participate in the offensive, but by the time we get back to the US, the war ends. Our orders are rescinded.

After Desert Shield/Desert Storm, the military begins a system of budget cuts, including the downsizing of its personnel. One way to facilitate this endeavor is to raise promotion points exceedingly high. In fact, about the only way to actually earn enough points to be promoted to E-5, a soldier must attend and pass Ranger School. By then, I have only a year left in service. I get a call to come to my First Sergeant’s office. The only time you get that call is when you are in trouble.

Not knowing what I have done to cause trouble, I knock on his door.

“First Sergeant, did you call for me?”
“Hey Hale, just the man I wanted to see. I need you to sign these papers,” he smiles as he pushes a stack of official documents across his desk.

“First Sergeant, ummm…what are they?”

“Soldier, we are sending you to Ranger School.”

“First Sergeant, don’t you have to have 18 months left in service when you complete that school?”

“Oh, well, yeah, this is actually an extension to your contract. Rather than getting out in May of 1992, you will get out the following January. No big deal.”

“So you want me to stay in the army for another seven months, just so I can go to Ranger School?”

“Yes. That’s the deal.”

“No, thanks,” I timidly reply.

“What? Did you hear me? We are going to get you promoted, get you to be a Ranger!”

“Honestly, First Sergeant, I just want to go home. I have a year left and then I am going back to Texas. I would love to be a Ranger and all, but this ain’t going to be my life. You have plenty of soldiers who are lifers. Send one of them. For me, it will be a great story, but for those guys, it will make a difference in their career.”

Shaking his head, he dismisses me. I still get a story out of it, and one of my buddies gets to go to Ranger School. He ends up flying helicopters and just recently retires after putting in 25 years.

I actually get out before May 1992 (my original discharge date), since the Army begins to offer college early-outs. I enroll in a college back home, submit the required paper work and
hope to get out in time for the Spring 1992 semester. Unfortunately, my orders to separate from
the military come too late for that, but I do get out in March.

I drive home and request a big pot of Daddy’s chili.
Chapter 7: Little Entrance

God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity

(Wisdom of Solomon 2:23)
Grandpa grows up in the first quarter of the 20th Century, and reaches manhood just as the Great Depression takes root in our country. Jobs remain scarce, especially for uneducated farm boys. With a baker’s dozen of siblings, he finds little prospect for him at home, so he wanders. He literally walks across north Texas and southern Oklahoma, finding odd jobs here and there. He works in the fields for a while in one place, then moves on when that work dries up.

Eventually, he makes it back to east Texas, in the Kilgore area and finds work in a new arena, the oil business. He starts out doing odd jobs, but his incredible work ethic quickly allows him to move up to more permanent positions. In spite of the ongoing economic downturn, he is inundated with work by this point, so his family weathers the hard times fairly well.

He fathers his first four children during this time, either in the midst of the Great Depression or during the first couple of years of World War II. By the end of the war, it becomes apparent that the oil business gathers strength in West Texas, so he loads up his family and moves to Andrews, just north of Odessa/Midland. There he remains until he retires in the late 1970s.

The oil discovery in West Texas takes place in the second decade of the 20th Century, and exploration continues through the 1920s in earnest. The early 1930s saw “the great East Texas strikes and depressed oil prices [which] adversely affected further large-scale exploration in West Texas.” Chaos defines this environment, as many of the wells are quite shallow, equipment relatively inexpensive, and many individuals try their luck at wildcatting. Entrepreneurs found thousands of small companies, competing with one another, but the Great Depression quickly forces the weaker organizations out of business. Grandpa stays in the East
Texas area during this chaotic time period, but soon after World War II, moves his family out west.

Richard Moore indicates that the oil industry’s “basic tenets and those of rural West Texans” are extremely compatible. The large influx of families that could fit into the culture “transformed it [West Texas] in a half-century from a semiarid, agriculture frontier to a thriving, still growing region of metropolitan centers sustained by both agriculture and industry.” For my Grandpa, Granny, and their children, it is a match made in heaven. No doubt, they stay rural, both in mindset and in fact, but they contribute to the changing face of the region.

Working in the oil fields is a difficult and physically demanding job, well-suited for Grandpa and his talents. His tireless demeanor, coupled with a very strong and tenacious character fit perfectly. Arising long before the sun, he works until long after it sets. I reach the age of ten before I realize that the silver/grey hard hat he wears is not permanently attached to his head. I simply never see him without it, except at church.

The metal hat has a leather webbing inside. Designed to protect the skull from falling objects and other dangers, he keeps it on, even when driving his vehicle. He has a method to his madness. First, he would not forget to have it on when he arrives at his various locations, but it also serves another purpose.

I do not know if Grandpa suffers from narcolepsy, or if his schedule makes him chronically tired, but the man can fall asleep in seconds, anywhere and at any time. He often drives down the highway at top speeds, falling asleep. One of my cousins recalls the story of how the hard hat keeps Grandpa awake while driving.

My cousin drives down the road and chances upon Grandpa coming the other way. Needing to talk to him, my cousin executes a U-turn and follows him, hoping to catch him at the
next stop. He sees Grandpa’s silhouette in the car in front, obviously falling asleep, his head nodding and bobbing. However, every time his head leans toward the left, the hard hat strikes the car window, and from later experimentation, we learn that this contact makes a distinctive “ping” sound. That noise awakens Grandpa, so he can continue.

Often, after such a “ping,” Grandpa shakes his head to clear it, and then makes a fist and strikes the dashboard of the car with all of his strength, trying to get the blood flowing, and to keep himself awake. Is that strange? Yes, I suppose it is. I never claimed my family did not have some quirks.

Still, even after his retirement, when his schedule slows a bit, Grandpa never stops falling asleep at odd times. In fact, the only time I can recall him sitting in one place for more than a few minutes without falling asleep was in church, where I never see him nod off. However, if he sits in the living room of his house, having a conversation with one of us, within a short span of time, his words tapers off, and he enters dream land.

Grandpa’s head is covered with long, full hair, and he combs it straight back on his head. Most of the time, he keeps a wooden toothpick in his mouth. When he dozes off, he leans forward, bending almost in half, his face nearing his knees. His swept back hair falls forward in one large clump to hang down like a bad toupee, sticking straight out from the front of his head. His mouth opens and the toothpick dangles precariously from his bottom lip, but it never falls out. Some force always stops him at that point, and he remains in that position until he awakens, whereupon he rights himself, his hair returns to its original position, and he picks up the conversation right from where he left off, even if he had stopped in mid-sentence. Sometimes this sleeping episode lasts a minute or two, sometimes for ten or fifteen. He never misses a beat.
Granny continually worries about him, of course, and asks us to remove his toothpick, fearing that “he is going to fall out in the floor and stab himself in the mouth.” But in his 89 years of life, I do not think that ever happens.

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Conflict dominates the world in which we all inhabit. The First World War shakes the world in Grandpa’s youth. The Great Depression follows closely on its heels, being subsumed into the Second World War. No sooner does that conflagration end than the USA and Soviet Union strategize and parry one another’s advances in the Cold War. Interestingly, both countries advocate empire, just on different terms.

Odd Arne Westad highlights two terms that are usually viewed favorably – one applied to each Empire. The American Empire focuses upon Liberty, while the Soviet Empire centers on Justice. These two concepts serve as the fundamental concern for the respective Empires. Both terms deal primarily with the world of economics, as applied by Westad.

The United States, utilizing a free market approach, develops the idea that “what is America today will be the world tomorrow.” This sort of messianic approach guides American policy, both domestic and international. Recalling Thomas Jefferson’s words that Americans are a people who like to both explore and develop commerce, the addition of the teleological viewpoint provides an ethical standard upon which to base the expansion of the empire. The reality is that the United States always pushes for expansion, like other empires, but carries the idea of “free men and free enterprise” as the underlying reasons for why the superiority of the American Empire. Grandpa wholeheartedly agrees with this premise, and passes that ideal along to his progeny.
At the outset of the United States, private property is required for liberty, so those who possess no property cannot realize true liberty. As such, collectivism is anathema. Individualism is supreme. This attitude, though modified by subsequent events, continues to have a strong influence throughout the twentieth century. There develops a decided attitude that anti-centralized power is requisite. Rather than relying on a central political power, Americans place their faith in the market. The free exchange of goods based upon value, rather than on political reasons, is paramount. In fact, this faith in the market “transformed itself into a self-serving belief in open international markets” where American companies can achieve success.

For all the talk of free men and liberty, America achieves the vast majority of its territorial conquests through violence. Besides the Louisiana Purchase and the acquisition of Alaska, all other territorial growth is garnered via war. The main recipients of this “manifest destiny,” the myth used to justify these actions, are Native Americans. Where does this destiny end? By the end of the nineteenth century, many argue that it was an American duty to “assist in the ‘freedom and independence’ of others” in various places in the world. Presidents McKinley and T. Roosevelt accept this responsibility, leading to the United States serving as “the protector and balancer of a capitalist world system.” It maintains that role throughout the twentieth century. The World Wars show that America can have an impact on a global scale.

This desire to spread free-market capitalism worldwide leads the United States, especially in the Cold War, to engage in extensive aid programs in the Third World. By the 1950s, the market becomes deified, both in terms of spreading American ideals and in opposing the collective efforts of the Soviet Union. The United States attempts to take responsibility for the world economy. Founded upon the ideal of individual liberty, that comes to be redefined as representing American imperial interests.
Yet America is not alone in the world, and Westad describes the Soviet Union as relying upon Justice as a foundation. Similarly to the United States, the original goal attempts to achieve a better humanity. Like the United States, the Soviet Union turns universalistic and strives to engage leaders of other nations in order to spread the Soviet worldview. Both empires desire to expand, but where the Americans originally place individual liberty as the ultimate prize, the Soviets “placed the liberation of the productive potential of the people at the core of the political process.” No longer will property, the cornerstone of the capitalist mentality, be important, but the rise of the worker him or herself. The United States sees this capitalist approach as the pinnacle of freedom and modernity, while the Soviet Union views capitalism as a step toward a higher form of life – communism.

While the American capitalist perspective remains open to the importance of religion, the Soviets believe that their communistic approach should be “materialism. As such, it [was] relentlessly hostile to religion.” Based upon this economic system, Russia endeavored to be the center of a new world civilization, “both modern and just.” This leads to intervention in the Third World, both via economic and military aid, to guide these other people toward the Soviet ideal and away from American capitalism. When Stalin seizes power, he enhances this approach, as he believes that backward people will only reach this ideal by being put into contact with Russian workers.

The Soviets have no desire to rule an empire forever, at least theoretically. Rather, they hope to influence other people to accept Soviet Marxism and then take control of their own destinies. In fact, Soviets view Empire as a vestige of Capitalism and non-congruent with Marxism. Practically speaking, this fails. Just as the Americans speak of liberty as they
annihilate entire tribes of Native Americans, the Soviets speak of spreading justice, as they view it “necessary to kill, arrest, and imprison” those who oppose them.

Americans see themselves as the natural “leader” of the drive to spread capitalism worldwide; the Soviets view themselves as “leader” of the worldwide drive toward world communism. The development of the Comintern plays a central role in this. This mutually exclusive approach to world domination exacerbates Stalin’s fear that the United States may achieve hegemony and make the world dangerous for the Soviets. This leads to armed conflict in the Third World, where the two world powers support opposing sides. While the Soviet Union and the United States never fight one another directly, they conduct numerous third party conflicts during the course of the Cold War.

Both nations hope to improve the world. The United States desires to make the world safe for capitalism and individual liberty, as long as those things coincide with American interests. The Soviet Union plan to support world revolution and “assist in the progress” of humanity. While they share many of the same aims, the American devotion to free markets and the Soviet attachment to justice for workers remain incompatible. The Cold War results.

It is into this milieu that our family grows and develops, meandering intently through life.

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Daddy experiences a varied employment history. As a youth, he works at Grandpa’s gas stations, the bowling alley, and other part time endeavors. After his military service concludes, he labors for a few years in the old fields with Grandpa. After he marries my mother, they decide to branch out, and he takes a job in St. Louis, MO, selling pots and pans from door to door. Later, he never speaks much about that period of time, except to say that he does not stay at it.
long. He develops impeccable salesmanship skills, but the good folks of St. Louis apparently possess little need for cookware.

On the way back to Texas, their car breaks down in Texarkana, TX, and so they stay for three years. Using what little money remains, Daddy rents an apartment, and then finds a job with the city’s fire department. Mom works as a secretary. Eventually, they get restless and begin to look for something else.

My maternal grandparents relocate to Alaska in the early 1960s, so that my grandfather can work on the pipeline there. They report that there are good paying jobs to be had, so my parents move to Alaska in early 1968. Daddy hates it there, and within a few months, they move back to Texas, where he again makes ends meet by working with Grandpa. Soon, he and mom decide to attend a tech school in Dallas, so they pick up their few possessions and move there. While mom performs well at this, Daddy only lasts about three days at the school, deciding to just go find a job.

He peruses the help-wanted ads in the newspaper where a local car dealership has placed a call for a salesman. Daddy applies and gets the job. After, his new boss seats him at a desk, Daddy looks around, and realizes he has no idea how to sell a car. A phone book and a phone sit on the desk, so he picks up the book, turns to the A’s, and starts calling.

“Hi, my name is Buck Hale, here at Hutton-Eddins Dodge, and I just wondered if you needed a new car…”

The first few cold calls do not succeed, but about half way down the page, he strikes gold. He sells his first car that afternoon to someone who answers the call. In doing so, he discovers something at which he excels - selling. For the next several years, Daddy works for car dealerships, earning several awards as the top salesman.
During those years, he develops a reputation as a fair, honest seller. If someone experiences a problem with a car he has sold them, they bring it in to have it fixed, and he gives them a loaner to drive. Occasionally, his managers frown on this, but he sells so many cars that he gets some leeway. Whether he sells Dodges, Fords, or Toyotas, customers actually follow him to whatever dealership he represents. They make their purchases based upon the man, not the vehicle.

Not long after Daddy begins selling cars, a middle-aged man, wearing overalls – a typical hayseed – brings his son into the dealership to buy a car. The old man announces that he had promised to buy his son a car upon graduating college, so was making good on that.

Looking at the man’s apparel, Daddy assumes that his customer is a poor farmer, so he begins showing them economy models. The son quickly states that he really wants a Dodge Charger, a fairly expensive sports car. Not wanting to cause embarrassment, Daddy attempts to redirect his customers to more economical cars, but the old man announces: “If my son wants a Charger, then let’s look at some Chargers.”

Soon, the son chooses a particular car, and Daddy and the old man sit down to work out the details of payment. Daddy inquires if financing had already been arranged, or if the fellow wants to submit loan applications at the dealership.

The old man chuckles, “I am going to pay cash today.”

He reaches into his overall’s pocket, located on the chest, and pulls out a huge roll of $100 bills. He counts out the agreed upon price and hands them to my shocked daddy.

Soon, Daddy discovers that his old hayseed is one of the wealthiest men in the area. He appreciates my father’s hesitation in selling something out of his customer’s means, so he
continues to buy all of his new car purchases from Daddy, for as long as Daddy remains in the business.

As he matures, Daddy’s religious faith becomes more important to him. His older brother had contemplated going into ministry, and at the age of 29, Daddy decides to honor that desire himself. With his wife and two-year old son (me) in tow, he enrolls in a denominational school that trains men to serve churches in pastoral roles. Not an accredited seminary, the school accepts students regardless of educational status, but trains students with a full-time, two year program that requires students to attend class all day. With his GI Bill and some financial support from his home church congregation, Daddy completes the course of study, graduating in 1973.

He spends the rest of his life in ministry. As a young, idealistic preacher, he moves the family often. Three years in central Texas, a year and a half each in Colorado and Oklahoma, then a move to another Oklahoma town, followed six months later by a return to central Texas. That particular move allows him to work on a larger staff, honing and developing skills, before a final move to south Texas. At each location, Daddy is heartily received, and he could probably stay indefinitely at each one, but he has a wandering soul.

At the south Texas church, my brother and I both graduate from High School and leave home. Daddy never really takes care of himself physically, and his health break down, culminating in a heart transplant. This means he can no longer able to work in full-time ministry; the demands of the position tax his physical abilities too much. He spends the last five years of his life in part-time and temporary church roles, working odd jobs on the side.

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My own career history takes a similar path to my forebears, but with some noticeable differences in results. I never give my aforementioned military stint any serious consideration for a career. I know that the organized structure of the Army poorly fits my chaotic and disorganized personality. Inevitably, I return to college and take my chances with more academic pursuits.

Initially, I major in electrical engineering, but not for long. During my pre-army college days, I bounce between majors, without any real connection to any of them. Once I return to school, after a four year break, I determine to return to the things I love most. That means football. While I am not physically talented enough to play at high levels – honestly, the Dallas Cowboys never have me on speed dial – I can coach. So I register for school as a Kinesiology major, intending to minor in math.

It only takes one semester for that plan to change. I take Pre-Calculus and Trigonometry before the Army, and against the advice of my adviser, I sign up for Calculus I during my first semester post-Army. It is the only class I ever fail. And I fail spectacularly. I am sure that my final average never rises above the single digits. I really have no idea, since I quit attending class in mid-October. I am unable to drop the class, as I would lose some of my GI Bill money, which I use to pay rent. So I take my “F” like a man.

At the same time, the school requires me to take “one more English class.” I resist, but requirements are requirements. Enrolling in “Introduction to Literature,” (along with the promise of the course being easy), I find my calling, even if it takes a long while for it to stick. I excel in the class, both because I voraciously read, and because the instructor connects with me. In any event, by the end of the semester, I change my intended instructional subject from math to English.
I also meet my future wife that semester, though not at school. I soon move to San Antonio, Texas, to be closer to both my daddy, whose health fails, and the girl, who had captures my heart. Though I live with my daddy, I spend every spare moment with her. Like Daddy, she takes her Christianity seriously, and their combined influence begins to rub off on me. Within a short time, I change my major again. I focus on English alone, with coaching no longer a consideration. I plan to graduate with my BA in English and enter seminary. Yes, I shall follow in my father’s footsteps and go into ministry.

Eventually, I decide to approach my religious education from two fronts. Once I complete the BA, I enter my father’s alma mater. That allows me to get a job after two years. Then I can study for a true seminary degree while I work. With my new wife, and after earning my BA, that is what I do. Well, the first part, anyway. I graduate from the denominational school, and get my first job as an “Outreach Minister” for a church in east Texas.

Beginning this phase of my life with vim and vigor, I become quickly disillusioned. I last less than a year, before swearing I will never again work for a church. I enter the ministry, determined to immediately impact the lives of my church members, but I soon discover that many of those members are not as interested in being impacted. I teach lessons, encourage, cajole, and plan, but few people want to participate in anything beyond regular church attendance. My efforts received little recognition or response, and I assume that people simply do not care. Later, I come to realize that people have busy lives, and adding additional activities is not always a feasible option.

After a few weeks of self-pity, I take a temporary job answering the phone for American Airlines. Soon, I find an opportunity to teach school at a charter school, located in a prison for juveniles. Most likely, I could stay there for years, and earn a comfortable living, but
circumstances intervene. That is a nice way of saying that a student attacks me, and my wife makes it clear that my job is leading her to a nervous breakdown. So I start looking for something else.

The answer is working as a minister again. So I do. I spend three years as a preacher for a small town just outside of San Antonio. My faith in full-time ministry returns during this time, and I find comfort in serving the spiritual needs of the members of our little church. Still, when I had attended the ministry-training school, I fell in love with the idea of doing foreign missionary work.

By the early 21st century, that door opens. Along with another family with whom we are close, we move to Estonia in 2002. This small country is one of the constituent parts of the former Soviet Union. Our new home is in the heart of the empire we had been, as children, taught to fear. Sponsored by a Christian congregation from north Texas, who budget money to allow their staff to continue their education, I finally begin to live out my ministerial dream and enroll in school, via distance learning, to work toward a graduate-level seminary degree.

We spend three and a half years in Eastern Europe, and have wonderful memories of that time, but my career takes a hit. Associated with a particular protestant denomination, my income depends on my relationship with the sponsoring church. They pay our bills. While doing my missionary work, I come into contact with Eastern Orthodoxy, and eventually realize that it is our true spiritual home. That creates a major dilemma, to say the least. In the end, I inform my sponsors that we need to come back to Texas, as I could not longer, in good conscience, take their money. That also dampens opportunities for me to work for churches back home.

So I spend several months as an appliance repairman, fixing dish washers, stoves, and the like. A physically demanding job, I enjoy it very much. With better pay and shorter hours, I
might just continue to do that, but I seldom see my family, now grown to a wife and three children. We scrape by financially, but just barely. I know that this was not a permanent solution. So I cave on my religious principles.

Still convinced that Orthodoxy is the place for us, my endeavors to convince my wife are not so successful. In the end, I just give in, and apply to several churches from our former denomination looking for preachers. Eventually, a small church in Virginia hires me, so I return to my former profession, with the same churches that I had forsaken before.

For two years, life moves swimmingly. Really. I love the church and the people there. I enjoy living in Virginia. However, I cannot shake the draw that Orthodoxy has on me. In time, my wife reaches the same conclusion, and so we prepare to make another change.

During those last few months in Estonia, I enroll in an MA program for English. Though over a decade since my last studies in the field, I figure that my church prospects have become slim, and I might have more opportunities in academia, if I complete a graduate degree. My religious studies have long since dried up, since they are funded by my former sponsoring church. So I work on my English degree, providing my own funding. During my time in Virginia, I complete the program and receive that coveted MA.

Immediately, I begin applying to colleges. Truthfully, I figure I will have my pick of jobs, thinking that schools might beat down my door, desiring my services. Little do I know that there are many, many holders of graduate English degrees out there, searching for those same jobs. Finally, a local community college gives me a couple of classes per semester as an adjunct, where I gain some needed experience.

After a year of that, I get the opportunity, through a friend, to procure a job teaching at a high school in the Houston, TX, area. I resign my position at the church in Virginia, and embark
on the next career move. I teach for almost a full semester at that school, leaving during the last week of the term, after receiving an offer for a full-time position in a rural community college, located a couple of hours away. And I am still there, more than seven years later.

The road may be long and winding, but not so much more bizarre than what others have experienced. Not so much different than my daddy, the former oil field worker, turned pots-and-pans hawker, turned fireman, turned car salesman, turned preacher. Maybe a bit more eclectic than my farmer turned oil man grandfather.
Chapter 8: Trisagion

Yet even God’s holy ones must fail in recounting the wonders of the LORD,
Though God has given his hosts the strength to stand firm before his glory.
(Wisdom of Sirach 45:17)
Grandpa often picks up a little extra money by doing basic mechanic work on the neighbors’ cars, and seldom finds himself facing a true challenge, but this Buick gives him fits. The motor mount will not budge. A neighbor had driven it ragged while her husband had spent three years fighting Nazis. The soldier’s return was imminent, so Grandpa wants to get the car running right for his return. Putting his wrench back on the bolt, he applies all of his considerable strength, groaning a verbal exhale as he pulls downward, but it remains lodged.

Exhausted, he pulls the tool off the bolt and sets it on the ground next to him. He remains in the prone position for a few moments, trying to get his anger under control, his breath coming in ragged gasps. Finally, he pulls himself out from under the car, sits up, and rests his arms on his knees, which he had drawn up to his chest.

“I ain’t never, in all my born days, been so mad at a car. What is the blue blazes of tarnation has got that stupid bolt so stuck?” He mutters to himself. “Well, it won’t be no more stuck after I go get some tea.”

Muttering several phrases that would be considered inappropriate in mixed company, he stands and begins walking to the back door of the house. Along the way, he passes his youngest son, Buck, playing nearby.

“Hey boy, you stay away from that Buick. You hear me? It’s up on blocks, and I don’t want it to fall off on you.”

“Yes, Daddy,” Buck giggles, “blue blazes! Blue Blazes!”

Buck starts running around the yard in a circle, repeating his new phrase. Grandpa smiles and continues toward the house for his tea, his muttering of profane thoughts regarding the audacity of the Buick to confound his strength remains on his lips as he enters the back door.

“It’ll be a cold day in hell before that &*#$! thing beats me. I will take that …”
“Albert! You keep a civil tongue in your mouth inside this house!” Granny stops his rambling short. “There is no cause to use such language. I swear.”

“Sorry, momma. It’s just that blasted car has me all kinds of upset.”

“Well, not much I can do about it, I suppose. You just sit down and have a glass of tea and ponder it a bit.”

Grandpa takes the offered glass, sits at the table, takes a deep, satisfying swallow, and chuckles.

“Remember back in ’36 when I was working on the Johnson’s Ford, and I tore that bolt plum out of the frame? I was trying to tighten everything down, and just flat out ripped that thing in two! I wonder if I am losing my strength? Am I getting old?”

“No Daddy, this one is just stuck.” Granny returns to her embroidery, not looking up since he had sat down. It became her practice to ‘listen’ to the stories, but not worry too much about them. She had heard them all before, and had even been there for most of them. She nods, responds with a well-timed “umm-hmmm” to keep him satisfied. Over the course of her life, she embroideries tens of thousands of square cloths, producing images of presidents, cars, flowers, and more. For each of her children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren, those squares would be turned into quilts to be cherished long after she had passed on. In the present situation, though, she wonders how to keep Grandpa from cussing in her house. That was the one thing she demands from him. Though a quiet woman, she grows up a devout Baptist, who brooks no such tomfoolery in her house. While her nickname of “Bill” brings to mind the disappointment her father had felt when she was not born a male, she is all-woman, in the post-WWII sort of way. She will not cotton to the male propensity to profanity.
“Yeah, I suppose so,” Grandpa replies, his mind considering every angle at which he could attack the offending bolt. “I just wish I could think of something…”

As Bill turns needle and thread, and Albert ruminates on bolts and various aspects of damnation, their oldest son, ten-year old Punkin bursts into the room. He holds his school books in one hand, and piece of paper in the other, which he waves about frantically.

“Daddy! Momma! You ain’t gonna believe it! Donnie done asked me to come with him to their church tonight. Is it OK if’n I go? I hear it’s gonna be something!”

“Punkin, what church is this? It ain’t that holy roller church over on 3rd St is it? You know I don’t take to none of that Holy Ghost nonsense,” Bill questions.

“I know, momma. It’s over to the Church of Christ. They done gonna bring some traveling preacher in and have what they call a Vacation Bible School. Its sounds awful swell. They already been having it for a few days.”

“Boy, what you want with that church crap. You know them churches ain’t nothing but a gathering place for hypocrites and complainers,” Albert interjects.

“Daddy! You hush now. They is plenty of good Christian folk in the churches. Just ‘cause you don’t like it don’t make it bad,” corrects Bill.

“Hmmph. If I ever see a church that don’t try to make you feel bad for being normal, I’ll eat my hat – and it’s a hard hat!” Albert laughs, as does Punkin, albeit a bit nervously.

“No, really, Daddy…Momma… can I go?”

“If you want to, go on ahead. Me? I am gonna go tackle a dad-blasted bolt,” Albert continues, his muttering getting a kickstart, “Vacation Bible School? Taking summer time away from folks. My God, what an idea…”
Punkin starts for his room, while Grandpa heads back to the waiting Buick. Once outside, he notices that Buck no longer plays in the yard, though his five-year old voice proclaims loudly: “!*&*@! bolt! Come off you Blue Blazing &*%@$!!”

Unable to see the boy, Grandpa knows he better stop this string of profanity before Bill hears the young boy. Both of them would be in trouble, if that happens.

“Buck, where you at boy?”

“@%#$! Let go!”

Fearing that the boy is in danger, perhaps attacked by a dog, Albert grows frantic. Running around the yard, looking behind the shed, peering over the fence, the child is nowhere in sight – only heard.

“*@%$^ Blue Blazes. ^#(*&@# Blue Blazes of Hell!”

Albert stops his frantic perambulations and begins to hone in on the location of the voice:

“Piece of &#!^! Let go!”

Grandpa moves toward the sound, which he now realizes emanates from under the Buick. Dropping to his knees, he looks underneath the car – no Buck. Standing up, he still hears the voice, coming from the car, so he looks down at the engine from above, the hood being raised during his earlier work. The voice could grows strongly from under the engine: “I said let go you &(#^@&$^!”

Again, Grandpa gets down, crawling under the car and there he sees his son, hands wrapped around the formerly discarded wrench on the stuck bolt, feet up on the car’s frame, pulling with all his might. He pulls so hard that his body lifts off the ground, only making contact with the frame and the wrench. Everything else remains suspended inside the frame of the car, hiding him from view of those not directly under the vehicle.
Grandpa barely controls himself. The relief that his son is safe, as well as the potential humor, becomes overshadowed with the realization that his child has the vocabulary of a drunken sailor. No puritan, even Grandpa recoils at the blatant profanity spewing from the five year old’s mouth. Yet, he cannot fault the child, since there was no doubt where this language originates.

“Hush up, Buck, before you get us both in trouble.” Then to encourage his son, “you about got that bolt? Looks like you might’ve loosened it a bit for me. Why don’t we go on in and get you something to drink, and then I’ll come back out and finish up.”

Father and son emerge from under the Buick, Buck proud of his dedication in helping his daddy, while Grandpa’s parental worry remains etched on his face. The screen door squeaks and squelches, as only a screen door spring can do, alerting Granny to their entrance.


“Oh yeah. He’s fine. Just getting a little underfoot. Maybe you could get him entertained in here, so I can go work.”

Grandpa leaves Buck with Granny, and absent-mindedly crawls back under the Buick. Sure enough, Buck’s efforts had loosened the bolt, or at least something had. Within minutes, Albert competes the task. He remains on his back under the car for nearly an hour. Occasionally, he whispers, “what I am doing?”

Eventually, Punkin walks by, stops, and returns to his father, prostrate under the vehicle.

“Daddy, I’m headin’ off to meet Donnie and go over to his church….sure you don’t wanna come along?”

Grandpa hesitates. Sure, he is chagrined by Buck’s language, but that hardly means he needs to get churchified. Right?
“No son, maybe if we can ever find a church that just preaches and teaches the Bible, I will go check it out, but I just ain’t got no use for hypocrites that just want to teach their own thinking. You go on. Come right back when it’s over.”

Granny watches through the door, listening to the conversation. Grandpa remains on the ground, whispers continuing to sporadically coming from beneath the car.

Eventually, hunger and boredom force Grandpa to leave his refuge. He returns to the kitchen sink and begins washing his hands.

“Momma, we got anything ready to eat here? I have a powerful hunger going,” he calls out.

Granny, having long since moved into the living room to continue her embroidery, joins him in the kitchen, opening the icebox, and pulling out leftovers from earlier.

“Here’s a little roast and some squash.”

He thanks her, sits at the kitchen table and loads his plate with the food.

“Daddy, you want to tell me why you was laying out there on the ground for so long? I was starting to think you mighta had a heart attack or something.”

“Not sure. Just thinking. Earlier, when I brought Buck in, it was because of his mouth. He was cussing a blue streak out there. Got to worrying me. I mean…I know I ain’t much of a church-going man, but maybe something needs to change….I don’t know. Maybe Punkin getting invited to church is some kinda sign.”

Granny seats herself across the table from him, silent as usual. She watches him eat, each bite slowly rising on the fork toward his mouth, before being devoured. They sit there together, quietly, for several minutes.

This time, they hear Punkin from halfway down the block.
“Daddy! Daddy! Daddy! You ain’t gonna believe it! Daddy!”

Grandpa jumps up, and bolts out of the door, Granny close on his heels.

“What is it, Punkin? What’s the matter?”

They meet each other at the spot where the driveway, street, and yard all come together.

Punkin’s face is all eyeballs and teeth.

“Daddy, I done found that church you was talking about earlier!”

“What in the he…world are you talking about, boy?”

“Remember, you said that if we could find a church that only taught the Bible, we would go? Remember? This church I went to with Donnie just teaches the Bible. Their preacher done said so. I listened real hard and I didn’t hear him say nothing that wasn’t from the Bible. You just gotta come. You said so.”

The boy’s expectant face overcomes Grandpa’s reservations.

“Yeah, I reckon I did say so. Maybe we can take your Momma and go check it out next Sunday.”

“We ain’t gotta wait for next Sunday. This here Vacation Bible School they is having is every night! They’re gonna have another meeting tomorrow and we can all come. I asked the preacher and he said it was fine and dandy.”

Bill jumps into the conversation, “What church did you say this was again?”

“The Church of Christ, Momma.”

“Oh fiddle-dee-dee, that is just the Campbellites, and I hear tell they are all a little crazy. I don’t know if I could go somewhere like that…”
“Woman,” Albert says, “you have been trying to get me to church since I met you. This here might be your only chance. You get your Bible and get ready. Tomorrow, we are going to church. I done promised the boy.”

“Well…OK…But I don’t like it. I’m gonna take my Bible and check on everything that preacher says. Make sure he ain’t pulling a fast one on us.”

Punkin smiles. His Daddy is going to church.

The following evening, Grandpa, Granny, and Punkin put on their best clothes. Granny carries her worn Bible and a notebook. She intends to pay attention, take notes, and verify the preacher’s message. Albert has not idea what to expect. He has not been in a church building, besides for weddings and funerals, in his entire life. Just a few hours before, he would have not expected this to change. He feels cornered by his promise to Punkin and his own jumbled conscience.

Punkin’s elation is evident. He inherited his mother’s piety, and his father’s tenacity. He knows that God can open a door that had always seemed locked. While he does not know the particulars, he figures that is God’s business. He just wants his daddy to go to church.

They live only a few blocks away from the church building, so they walk, leaving Buck with Granny’s sister, Aunt Louise, who lives just down the street. As they near the church, they notice a large mass of people milling around. Albert recognizes several friends and acquaintances.

“My Goodness! Albert, I never expected to see you here.”

“Holy Cow, but the Lord surely does move in mysterious ways!”
The conversations often begin this way, as Grandpa and Granny, with Punkin in tow, make their way to an empty pew. The buzz grows around them, as folks converse about the visitors, shocked, but excited. While liked in the community, Grandpa’s views on religion are well-known. Many folks might consider his appearance to be akin to St. Paul being confronted by the Lord on the road to Damascus.

As others find their seats, Glenn Long, owner of the local furniture store and an elder in the church, stands up before the congregation. As quiet descends upon the group, he begins to speak, “It is wonderful to have everyone here tonight…” Grandpa’s attention focuses on the speaking man, and while the words themselves seem to be lost in the atmosphere of emotion that fills the room, he does hear Long’s concluding words, “….So, if you will please take up a hymnal and turn to page 236, we will start up our singing.”

During his life, he had heard many, if not most, of the hymns, but they seem to have a different feel on this night. The words connect with him in a way that they had failed to do in the past. His singing voice leaves something to be desired, and he often stumbles over the words, but the zest with which he engages the songs demonstrate the passion in his heart. By the time the singing ends, he feels his nervous energy bouncing around inside his stomach, straining to burst out.

Granny, being a good devout Baptist, does not share his enthusiasm. The singing sounds odd to her, since no piano or organ accompanies the congregation, as she was accustomed to hearing. In one of the oddities of the Church of Christ, they eschew all use of musical instruments in worship. The sermon makes sense, but she was used to sermons. She takes copious notes: “…the early church baptized new believers immediately in order to have their
sins washed away (Acts 2:38); ... "Come unto me, ye who are heavy laden..." in order to verify that what the traveling preacher says matches up with the Scriptures.

Punkin keeps his head down, silently praying that something could be done to save his father’s immortal soul. His mother had taken him to church for as long as he could remember, and the reality that his father seems destined for hell weighs heavily on his young heart. He sings along with the others, as his divided attention allows, but he never hears the first word from the preacher. He has his own dialogue with God.

Brother Boyd, the preacher, finishes his sermon, inviting those sinners who desire to “put on their Lord in baptism” to come forward to the front of the congregation and be saved. The church members stand and begin to sing a final song, an “invitation” song, as Brother Boyd waits in front of the crowd for any who might come. Several people make their way forward, some to be baptized and some to ask for prayers to live a better life. Grandpa starts to move forward, but Granny catches his arm, hissing under her breath, “don’t you dare! I haven’t checked this preachin’ out yet!”

“Momma,” Grandpa tearfully whispers, “Jesus is now tenderly calling me to come home.”

“You just wait,” she answers, “he will be calling tomorrow night, too. You let me get home and make sure this preacher ain’t no huckster.”

So he relents. After all, Granny had the claim on being the Bible-thumper in their family. He defers to her, feeling inadequate to argue. Punkin, overhearing the conversation, doubles down on his prayers, tears filling his eyes, knowing it had been a close thing.

For the next ten nights, Grandpa, Granny, and Punkin attend the nightly services. Each evening, Albert feels compelled to respond to the preacher’s invitation to come forward and
repent of his sins, being baptized in the water that would wash away those sins, uniting him to Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. Each night, Punkin immerses himself in prayer. Each night, Granny takes notes, stops her husband from going forward, then goes home to compare her notes with what she could find in her worn Bible.

Finally, the last night of the meeting arrives. Two weeks of nightly religious services yields a fine bounty for the local church. Over 40 people are baptized and saved. Nearly 100 find restoration to a Christian walk, repenting of their backsliding ways. The congregation remains abuzz with excitement, knowing that the fruit of this Vacation Bible School will be felt for a long time to come. Sure, some of these folks are only caught up in the emotion of the moment, but some will stick. Some will be faithful Christians, having received a sort of ecclesiastical jumpstart.

Punkin can hardly contain his prayers within himself this final night. He nearly glows with fervent piety. He knows that his father has made a momentous decision, and that his mother will support him. He overhears their conversation the night before. Grandpa weeps actual tears. As Punkin takes his place on the pew, his mind drifts back to that previous evening’s talk:

“Momma, I just know that this is what God wants me... no, what God wants US to do.”

“Well, I gotta tell you, Daddy. I thought Brother Boyd was trying to sell us a bill of goods at first, but I have been checking his words each night, and what he says come straight up out of the scriptures. He is telling it to us straight.”

“Does that mean you will let me go at the invitation tomorrow night?”

“I will. I might even join you.”

Punkin closes his eyes, returning to the present. The time and place are perfect. He knoww that Satan will be trying to stop his father—has been stopping his father—but that God
will overcome the father of lies. He also knoww that his prayers may be of some benefit.
Tonight, the ultimate showdown in his father’s life, and perhaps in the life of his family, will
take place. If Grandpa becomes a Christian, will the rest of the family follow? How will their
future change? If he does not, where will they end up? Punkin scrunches his eyes tighter shut and
keeps praying.

The final service begins the same as the others. Singing, praying, and scripture reading all
preceed Brother Boyd’s sermon. Grandpa continues to sing badly, but with gusto. He not only
bows his head during the prayers, but he listens to the words and adds his own silent entreaties.
During the scripture readings, he attempts to discern the point. In all, his attention focuses on the
events unfolding around him, subsuming the raw emotion of the first few nights. Granny sits
silently at his side, just as engaged as her husband. Brother Boyd, a tall thin man, balding head
covered in a sheen of sweat, preaches his sermon for nearly an hour. Finally, he reaches the
climax:

“…Brethren, as we come to a close of this fine Vacation Bible School, we can reflect on
the many blessings God has bestowed upon us. As Christ himself told his disciples, ‘I beheld
Satan as lightning fall from heaven.’ In those words from the Gospel of Luke, our Lord and
Savior points to the very fact that Satan may appear beautiful and powerful, but in the end, he
has no power. Christ has the power. Jesus tells his followers ‘I give unto you power to tread on
serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means
hurt you.’

“Do you want your name written in heaven? Do you want to be joined with Christ in
overcoming Satan? Do you want to have your sins washed away and cast Satan out of your life?
If you do, then come forward this evening. Come down to the front and let us pray with you, and
if needed, baptize you. We are here waiting. Waiting for you to come, so won’t you please come, while we stand and while we sing.”

The congregation stands, singing the selected song. Several people begin to step out of their pews and move toward the front, where Brother Boyd awaits them. Grandpa looks down at Granny, tears openly flowing down his cheeks.

“Momma, get Punkin and let’s go.”

Granny reaches over, touching Punkin on the shoulder. His eyes pop open for the first time since the service began, his lips still moving in fervent prayer.

“Punkin, let’s go.”

“Momma,” the boy protests, “we can’t leave. We just can’t!”

“Son, we are not leaving. We are going forward. See, your daddy is already two rows up, just waiting on us.”

With joy in his heart, Punkin shoots to his feet, willing himself forward. They catch up to Grandpa and make their way to the front. As they near the mass of people congregated around Brother Boyd, the crowd parts, and suddenly, they stand face to face with the preacher, who smiles at them.

“Oh Albert… Bill… Punkin. I have been praying that you would come. Please come over here and sit down and let’s talk for a minute.”

Brother Boyd asks them about their intentions.

“We come to be baptized and become Christians.”

“Do you understand that this is a serious matter? That once you make this step, you are held to a higher standard?”
“Yes, sir, Brother Boyd. I have spent my whole life running from God. I am done running from him. I am ready to run with him.”

Others also come to the front, and when the song ends, Brother Boyd asks everyone to have a seat. He stands before them and announces the intentions of those who have come forward. Most are rededicating their lives to Christ. A few request prayers for special circumstances or problems.

“We also have three who have come forward to request baptism. While we get prepared, would the song leader please lead the congregation in a song or two.”

Grandpa and Punkin head to the male changing room on the right side of the baptistery, which stands directly behind the pulpit at the front of the church. Granny enters the women’s room on the left. A few of the church ladies accompany her to help her change into a baptismal garment, just as a few of the men do for Grandpa and Punkin. Brother Boyd puts on a set of fishing waders and enters the water of the baptistery.

When all are ready, Albert joins the preacher in the water, with Granny and Punkin watching from the side, awaiting their turns. Brother Boyd proclaims loudly: “Albert, you have come to be baptized into Christ. Do you renounce your sinful past, and willingly accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Do you intend to have your sins washed away? Do you make the good confession that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?”

“I do. With all my heart, I do,” Albert meekly warbles.

“Then I do baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, unto the remission of your sins…”

At that point, Grandpa finds himself completely under the water, being immersed by the preacher. As he rises up out of the water, Brother Boyd continues:
“…raising you to walk in newness of life. Welcome Brother Albert.”

Grandpa hugs the preacher, making the waders of no use.

“Thank you, Brother Boyd,” Grandpa whispers. “Now please get my wife and son in here and get them saved, too!”

Once the service ends, and the church folks welcome them into the family, hugs given, tears shed, congratulations offered, Albert walks back to the baptistery and looks down into the water.

“Lord, I know you said that you have washed away my sins. I know that must be some powerful dirty water in there now. I promise you that I will do my best. I am now yours to do with as you want. Thank you.”

Leaving the church, the family returns home. As they near the door, Grandpa stops and looks over at the spot where the Buick had been just a few days prior.

“Things are changing,” he says. “And that is a good thing.”

Looking down at Punkin, Grandpa smiles. He puts his arm around his son, pulling him close.

“I know you are the one that made this happen. God sure blessed us with a good son. Thank you. You saved our lives.”

Granny wipes the tears from her eyes and reaches out to open the door. Punkin grins.

“Yep, things are changing, and that is a good thing.”

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The above story is true. OK, sure, I add some of the details, but the basic story line happens just that way. I leave out my father’s sisters from the story, and I mix in some made up names, but the story is often the topic of discussion at family gatherings. An invitation to a
Vacation Bible School prompts my uncle to visit the local Church of Christ, and within short order, my grandparents and their children become an integral part of that community.

That community nurtures and feeds our spiritual side. That very congregation in West Texas goes on to produce at least two preachers: Daddy and the celebrated author Max Lucado, who grows up around the corner from my grandparents’ house. That church financially supports my daddy through his ministerial schooling and prompts a desire in our family to know God.

Grandpa becomes devoted to helping the less fortunate after his conversion, and though still interested in politics, considers himself first and foremost a citizen of the “Kingdom not of this world.” His religious devotion finally brings harmony to his life. Every decision that he makes after this will be informed by his understanding of the Christian faith. He endures life’s trials, “trusting in God, and hoping to attain beyond time and death to the City of God.” His new life allows him to find the order that had been lacking previously.

Of course, it would be silly to claim that there were no backsliding or sinning in our family after that point. In fact, many of my relatives revert to a non-religious, or mildly-religious status, but for my grandparents, my daddy, and me, this conversion is a monumental occasion. It alters the course of our lives.

While Daddy grows up in this church, he turns his back on Christian principles for a season, before returning and giving his life to full-time ministry. He spends the vast majority of his adult life in service to others, both in the pulpit and in pastoral settings. When he dies, a church that can easily seat 600 people overflows with people who come to pay their respects. To this day, two decades after his death, if a picture of my father is placed on a social media site, it receives numerous comments that share how important he was in the lives of many people. His religion and his devotion to God come to define him.
He prays and works to pass that on to his children. It is worth mentioning that not only do I become a minister in that denomination, though I later convert to Eastern Orthodoxy, my brother still serves as a full-time minister for Churches of Christ. The flame lighted immediately after World War II in the hearts of my grandparents still burns in our family. Even those relatives who move to other faiths, or claim to be non-religious, have a deep respect for God, Christians, and Christianity.

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My own conversion to Eastern Orthodoxy is no less severe or transformative as my Grandparent’s experience.

While living in Estonia, we have the opportunity to visit many of Christian groups, from Baptists and Roman Catholics, to Lutherans and Pentecostals. One of our family’s earliest “tourist” trips involves time spent in a celebrated Russian Orthodox Church, though we have no idea that we will eventually be joined to that group.

Learning Estonian is tough. It is a very difficult language, and few people want to learn it, especially from English. Eventually, we find a language school willing to try, and my wife and I, along with the other couple in our missionary team, make up the entire student body of the class. For several weeks, the four of us struggle together, alone, to navigate the trying labyrinth of Estonian vocabulary, conjugation, and sentence structure.

One day, the school owner asks if it would be acceptable for another student to join our group, as he has been learning Estonian from Russian (more common), but his Russian skills are subpar. While he speaks Greek and French primarily, his English is proficient. As missionaries, we are overjoyed at the opportunity to make contacts with others.
So the man we come to know as “Harra Reiner” (Mr. Reiner) enters into our little group. A dapper, pleasant man, he fits in quickly. He possesses a great sense of humor and engages us in conversation. Note that “Reiner” is not his actual name. We all take Estonian names to use in class (I am “Ott,” which is pronounced a bit like “Oyt”). As an older man, our new classmate has taken a more dignified and formal designation, but it works.

Eventually, we learn that Harra Reiner is actually the Metropolitan of the Estonian Orthodox Church (meaning, the Bishop for the Orthodox Church in that country). He is a “big wig,” in every sense of the word. Still, even outside of class, he always takes time to meet with us, both to practice English and Estonian, and to answer theological questions that eventually become more common.

Of course, for the first year or so, we have no desire to change religions, and in fact, we hope to convert him. We have delusions of grandeur in thinking of the newsletter we will send back home to our sponsoring churches: “We have converted the Orthodox Metropolitan and he has brought 50,000 adherents with him…” We will become celebrities in our denomination.

Eventually, we all complete our language studies, and beyond a few emails or phone calls, we seldom talk to the Metropolitan. One day, that all changes.

My first real experience in an Orthodox Church does not happen during the earlier tourist visit, but on Easter 2003. Receiving an invitation from a friend to attend the Roman Catholic Midnight Mass, we attend that event and the experience wearies us. The late hour factors in, but the real reason is that I make a fool out of myself during the service.

We have no expectations of what we will see or do at the Mass, but we hope to be respectful. That all flies out of the window before the service even begins. In our ignorance, we do not know that it is appropriate to have candles during part of the service, so our friend helps
us find some. It turns out that one of her friends, the wife of the Swedish Ambassador, also
attends, accompanied by her husband. She sends him back to their nearby residence to get
candles for us.

While we wait, people begin to take their seats, so we all enter and find a place. I notice
that some altar boys are handing out candles at the back of the cathedral. I ask my missionary
teammate if he thinks we should go get a pair of these candles, to which he replies: “No, the
Swedish Ambassador is fetching us some.”

For some reason, that strikes me funny and I let out a loud guffaw. In a European
cathedral. It echoes across the walls, which just makes me giggle even more. I cannot shake the
laughter. For the remainder of the service, I keep laughing, and not quietly. Though embarrassing
my friend, I can do nothing to squelch it. My teammate catches the giggles, too, and laughs quite
a bit, himself.

At one point, as the bishop makes his way down the aisle, sprinkling Holy Water on the
faithful, he stops at our row, looks directly at me, and douses me about five times with a copious
amount of the liquid. I suppose he hopes to perform an impromptu exorcism on me.

In any event, we survive, though our friend is mortified for inviting me. As it has become
very late, no public transportation is available. Our apartments are a mile by foot, so we decide to
walk to our cars, and then give our friend a ride home, since she lives quite a distance away.

As we walk along, trying to apologize for our unseemly behavior, we notice that the
Orthodox Church that we pass still has its lights on. The friend asks if we want to step inside.
Why she asks, I have no idea, but it ends up being worse than the Catholic experience.

We step into a completely dark room, save a few candles that offer minimal light on the
proceedings. All is silent.
Suddenly, from the front of the church comes a bellow, in Estonian. Our ecclesial word knowledge limited, I am not sure what I am hearing. Regardless, it is loud. Extremely loud. For clarity, note that the vast majority of Orthodox services are sung or chanted. There is little speaking or reading, without some sort of intonation.

A priest, from the altar area is chanting a prayer. I am sure he is a good, Godly man, but he has not been gifted with a beautiful voice. Needless to say, in our already church-drunk-silliness, we burst out laughing again. Our friend quickly ushers us outside, and we continue on our way home.

The following year, this experience deeply buried in our memories, my teammate and I decide it would be nice to visit other area churches, just to see what they do. For logistical reasons, our own small church meets in the mid-afternoon on Sunday, freeing up our mornings for visits. We visit several other denominations, and eventually come to the Orthodox Church in August 2004.

Wondering if they will remember us (or even let us come in), we quietly stand in the back of the same church that we had offended a few months prior. Immediately, three or four people come up to us. We fear the worst – liturgical bouncers.

“It is so good to have you here, today!”

“Please, after the Divine Liturgy, we have a coffee hour. Stay afterwards, so we can get to know you!”

We are nonplussed. We expect the exact opposite reaction, figuring it will be similar to the response we had received at other churches.

Estonians tend to be pretty non-emotional and do not interact much with outsiders. Our experience at the Lutheran Church, for example, is quite common. Historically, Estonians
affiliate with the Lutheran Church, but on our visit to that group, not one person speaks to us. Not one. We even stand in the doorway afterwards, blocking it, to see if we can get someone to tell us to move. They do not. Everyone just turns sideways and squeezes between us and the doorframe.

So we are surprised to find such a warm reception at the Orthodox Church. We stay for coffee hour that day, and return the following Sunday. In fact, we continue to visit almost every week. Eventually, they even invite us to sing in their choir!

The more time we spend with the Orthodox, the more we begin to question what they do and teach. We wonder why they kiss icons. Why do the priests wear vestments? Things that are commonly troublesome for low-church Protestants. Not initially drawn to the theology, we fall in love with the people. They act like what we hope to see from people who called themselves Christians.

Still, we eventually dig into the theology, and keep noticing that each Orthodox practice finds its root in legitimate reasoning. Within the next year, both my teammate and I become convinced: we need to be Orthodox.

Each week we visit the church together, but our wives stay at our homes to watch the children. One evening, we get a babysitter, and we take our wives to supper, and tell them that we had spent our entire lives looking for the Church spoken of in the Bible, and we have at last found it.

Their reaction is less than tepid. They think we have lost our minds. They refuse.

Before all is said and done, we know that we can no longer continue working as Protestant missionaries, so we inform our sponsors that we need to return home. They comply, and not in a friendly manner. My teammates’ family returns to Texas within three weeks.
My wife and I have recently adopted a son, from Estonia, so we have to deal with all the immigration concerns. It takes us about four months to work that all out and to return home. My wife, now bitter regarding Orthodoxy, blames it for our “troubles.”

When we arrive back in Texas, I refuse to attend the Church of Christ, just out of spite. My wife refuses to attend the Orthodox Church, out of principle. We meet in the middle, and for a short time attend a small Reformed-theology church, but eventually, I give in and we start attending with her family, in our original denomination.

After several months, my new appliance repair job wears thin, financially and in the amount of time required. I return to preaching for a Church of Christ in Virginia. I still want to be Orthodox, but life has beat me down enough that I no longer actively pursue it at that point.

One day, while reading a blog post from an Orthodox priest, I stumble across a thought that I think my wife will enjoy. My intention is not to reignite our former brouhaha over that topic, but simply to share a nice devotional thought. I email her the link.

For two weeks, she stews over it, unbeknownst to me, thinking that I am trying to “convert” her again. Finally, she decides that she must stomp out my odd obsession and end it, once and for all.

So she starts doing research. Using that linked article, she begins to study. For several weeks, she spends every minute (when I am not around) finding facts and data to prove to me that Orthodoxy is wrong and that I should abandon my pursuit.

Finally, one morning, I awaken to see that my wife is not in bed. That is strange, as I am the early riser. I get up and find her sitting at the computer, tear stains marking her cheeks. She turns to look at me, and says, “You are right. You have been right this whole time.”
Of course, I know exactly what she means. After three years, my prayers are answered. I start looking for other employment, not wanting to have a replay of our quick exit from Estonia. After a time, I find a job teaching at a High School in the Houston, Texas, area, and soon get a full-time position at a community college.

As soon as we possibly can, we begin to visit Orthodox Churches and services, first on non-Sundays (since I am still preaching then), and then on a full-time basis, becoming catechumens (those learning about Orthodoxy with the intent of becoming Orthodox), and in the spring of 2009, we are received into the Orthodox Church.

At first, I often have negative thoughts about shortcomings that I perceive in my former tradition, but time tempers that. I now realize that my desire to follow God and to place him first in my life is formulated because I was taught to do that. I am not created in a vacuum. My grandparents and parents instruct me in that manner. The church in which I grew up admonishes us to follow truth. Had it not been for a Vacation Bible School invitation in the mid-1940s, I would not have found my way into the Orthodox Church.
Chapter 9: The Scriptures

Therefore set your desire on my words; long for them, and you will be instructed.  
(Wisdom of Solomon 6:11)
Grandpa is an all-or-nothing sort of man. Back when still non-religious, he wants nothing to do with anything involving churches. Once his opinion changes, he gives himself completely to his new devotion.

While he never learns to read well, I fondly recall his worn Bible sitting on the end table next to his couch, where he tends to sit. Every day, he makes time to read portions of the scriptures in his slow, halting manner. Though he reads silently, his lips move as he meticulously and methodically struggles his way past the words. After many years, the oil from his fingers leave marks on the pages, showing how often he returns to each page.

I enter my teen years before I realize that Grandpa is functionally illiterate. I never take the time to notice that Granny always sends birthday cards, writes checks, and things of that nature. The only time Grandpa writes much of anything is when required to sign something official. It takes him over a minute just to sign his name, which he always truncates: “A. L. Hale.” Once I understand the struggle he has with written language, my admiration for his devotion to reading the Bible grows exponentially.

In the Churches of Christ denomination, like most religious groups, there is an expected hierarchy of leadership. Elders, chosen from amongst men of the local congregation, are accorded the highest levels of control. Deacons, also chosen from men of the church, oversee certain tasks: taking care of the landscaping, paying bills, etc. Finally, ministers, also traditionally all male, though not necessarily from the local congregation, are often imported after receiving some sort of theological education, and take on the leadership in teaching, preaching, and providing pastoral care. (I would note that it is not uncommon today to see female ministers on staff, though they are usually relegated to roles directing children or other women, but not the congregation as a whole: youth director, children’s minister, etc.).
For whatever reason, Grandpa never assumes any of those roles. Most likely, he just never feels competent, due to his poor education. He knows he cannot read well enough to preach or teach, and so he remains a devoted member, but never an official leader.

Instead, he dedicates himself to living the life to which he feels called. That includes not only attending services and contributing money to the church, both of which he doggedly accomplishes for the rest of this life, but he also embodies the words of Jesus:

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.”

Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, “Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?”

And the King shall answer and say unto them, “Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” (King James Version, Matthew 25:34-40)

Over the course of the last 55 years or so of their lives, Grandpa and Granny not only raise their own children, but support one of his widowed sisters and her children, two of their grandchildren (after Punkin dies), and more people of the community than can be remembered. Even many years after Grandpa retires, and they move away from West Texas, they keep in touch with most
of the young people who find refuge in the Hale house, many of them going on to have successful lives, with families of their own.

Grandpa took special pride in hearing that one of those who he supports, with no obligations, becomes a faithful member of the Church of Christ. So, no, Grandpa never serves as an official leader of a local congregation, but he leads by example.

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As much as I enjoy writing about my family, the world context must be considered. Grandpa adopts a loving, kind spirit in the midst of world bent on self-destruction. It is impossible to consider the 20th Century without keeping the Soviet-American conflict in mind. Walter LaFeber points out that when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik on October 4, 1957, it signaled to the world that the Soviets possessed a rocket capable of reaching targets over 4000 miles away. The America no longer had a monopoly on ICBMs. While the Russians had actually fired an ICBM a few months earlier, the launch of an artificial satellite into space showed Soviet accomplishments to the world. This event also led to an acceleration of the arms race. The projections at the end of World War II had shown that the Soviets would not be able to chance a major war for at least 15 years; that time had effectively elapsed. The events after the launch of Sputnik, from the American perspective, showed that the Soviets were quickly catching up, and possibly surpassing the capabilities of the US, regarding rocket and weapon technology.

In fact, the Soviets were bluffing. While they did launch Sputnik, and had tested ICBMs, they actually declined to build “elementary first-generation” ICBMs, but waited for second and third-generation models to be developed, which took several years. The Soviets even used American views to parrot back to the US, reinforcing the deception. This believed, but non-existent, “missile gap” allowed John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson to attack Eisenhower’s
policies, putting themselves into prominent positions before the country, which helped to get
them elected in 1960. Their political attacks coincided with Eisenhower administration reports
that warned of the growing Soviet threat and encouraged a 50% spending increase in military
funding. Eisenhower himself dismissed the studies and blamed the public scares on politicians
focusing upon the upcoming elections.

While focusing on the threat from the Soviets, the US had become less competitive in
world markets, with nations like Japan and Germany, both supported and rebuilt with American
dollars, producing cheaper and higher quality goods. Despite the weakness of the economy,
Eisenhower refused to allow the military spending to drastically increase, believing it would
skew the economy, and not really help. As the president bade farewell to the nation upon
Kennedy’s inauguration, he warned of the growing power of the military-industrial complex, and
the negative impact it would have on the economy and society. However, once Eisenhower was
out of office, the Soviet threat and how it was perceived by the new administration led to several
serious and potentially disastrous events.

As Mao Ze-dong pointed out at the time, “the international situation has reached a new
turning point,” indicating his belief that the Soviet ICBM had redistributed power amongst the
nations, and relegated the US to a position of lesser strength. Included in this new distribution of
power was a call for wars of liberation in smaller, third world countries. The Soviet Union tried
to avoid this controversy, knowing that their strength was greatly exaggerated, but the period was
filled with revolutions and anti-colonial rebellion, such as in Cuba and Indo-China (Vietnam). As
these developing nations began to wage war, the Americans feared that each nation that fell to
communism would be part of a chain leading to communist control of the world (the “Domino
Theory”). While President Kennedy did have reservations about the validity of the Domino Theory, military budgets in both nations were increased significantly.

In fact, not only did Kennedy ignore Eisenhower’s warnings about the military-industrial complex, he actually “established in 1961 a special post in the Defense Department to sell American arms through private corporations to foreign nations.” No longer were the two nations stockpiling arms to use as bargaining chips, intimidation, or defense. Both nations began to ship arms to foreign nations to influence the outcome of governmental policy in those regions.

Cuba came into focus after Castro came to power in 1959. Supported by the Soviets, Cuba was viewed as a serious danger, being only 90 miles from the US border. In addition, America did not want to see a series of Cuba-like revolutions across Latin America. Attempting to remove Castro by force, in the Bay of Pigs invasion, proved fruitless. A year later, the two powers came extremely close to engaging in nuclear warfare over Cuba. The Cuban Missile Crisis “rechanneled the policies of the United States and the Soviet Union. It affected many facets of world affairs.”

By the spring of 1962, American officials were publicly dismissing the Soviet claims to military equality with the US, especially regarding missile technology, yet by the fall of that year, Soviets were installing weapons sites in Cuba, with missiles capable of reaching over 2000 miles. The Soviets had ships, carrying missile parts, sailing for the island nation, so the US determined to set up a blockade to keep them from reaching their destination. It appeared that war was imminent. At the last moment, the Soviets turned back, refusing to challenge the blockade and inciting war. Negotiations between the two nations led to an agreement that the US would not invade Cuba again, amongst other things. The major problem was that Castro was not consulted on these decisions and he was loathe to give up the arms he had received. However, he
eventually did, and with Kennedy’s assurance that the US would not invade Cuba – as long as it commit aggressive acts against neighboring countries, and that all offensive weapons were removed – things began to calm.

The fear of nuclear war hung over the populace of both the US and the Soviet Union. Because of how close war had come over the Cuban Missile Crisis, Khrushchev encouraged Kennedy to sign a non-aggression pact and signaled a willingness to break up the US and Soviet blocs. Eventually, this led to test bans on nuclear weapons, as well as the decline of Khrushchev’s power. The Soviet-controlled communist bloc was breaking up, slowly. Kennedy, on the other hand, came out of the crisis with a renewed popularity. These events also led an improvement in relations with the Soviet Union, but signaled trouble between the US and older allies, such as fellow NATO members.

Between 1950 and 1979, there were many major, important events. However, in my opinion, the launch of Sputnik, and the Soviet ICBM program as a whole, serve as the turning point of the Cold War. Until then, the US had enjoyed a publicly known advantage in nuclear arms and delivery systems. When the Russians showed that they would compete (or at least convinced the Americans that they could), the arms race entered a new phase, where people began to live under the threat of nuclear war. These new long-range weapons redistributed the power between the nations, and allowed many smaller nations to experience revolutions, without immediate and direct influence by one of the major powers. The threat of missile attack by the other kept them at bay. This arms race came to a head over Cuba, and the result was that policy changed for both countries. Treaties were signed, intending to curb nuclear missile development, testing, and distribution. What transpired for the duration of the Cold War was the direct result of the events in these 5 years, from 1957 to 1962, and those events happened because the Soviets
proved that they could produce a rocket, capable of sending a nuclear warhead half way around the world. That world serves as the backdrop for the last half of Grandpa’s life, almost the totality of Daddy’s, and the first two decades of mine.

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Daddy, of course, serves as a minister. While he never takes on the role of lay leader (Elder or Deacon), he spends 23 years in full-time or part-time ministry. After several years of “wandering in the wilderness,” he returns to Christianity with a vengeance. He hopes to expunge his sinful past by jumping into ministry with his whole self.

Sometimes, those two parts of his life intermingle. In one instance, soon after he decides to attend the denominational training program, but before actually begins schooling, he lives in East Texas, planning to leave for his educational endeavor in a few weeks.

Daddy and mom, along with another couple, travel to Dallas for some reason, and while walking down the street, come to Jack Ruby’s nightclub, though the man himself is already dead. Daddy mentions how he desires to see the inside of the club. They all agree upon a plan to enter, drink a coke, and then leave.

So they do. As they walk out, just a few minutes later, they bump into one of the elders from their own church, who happens to be walking down the same street. Needless to say, awkward and embarrassing exchanges take place! Daddy later tells me that story to impress upon me, as I also begin my theological studies, to “always remember that no matter where you are and how ‘alone’ you think you are, if you do something bad, someone will find out.”

Thankfully, Daddy survives his nightclub encounter and still attends school, and finds employment as a minister. Money is tight during the education years, as we live on minimal financial support from his home congregation. On weekends, while other students (who often
possess more education than Daddy) study and work on projects, Daddy drives two hours to his hometown and works for Grandpa in the oil fields. In that way, he makes ends meet.

After graduation, he begins his ministry in a very small town in central Texas, earning $700 per month, plus a free parsonage in which to live. In his excitement at being gainfully employed, he buys a brand new AMC Hornet and a ten-year-old 1963 Ford F-100. For the old car salesman, it feels good to have some new wheels, I guess.

His successful tenure there lasts for three years. Daddy always says that he could have remained at every one of his preaching jobs for the rest of his life, but he entertains the quirky thought that every person should hear the gospel (as he understands it) at least once. Within three years, he speaks to everyone in the small town, so the time to move comes.

At one point, it seems that the family might move to Papua New Guinea as foreign missionaries, which excites Daddy, as his preaching alma mater frequently imparts the desire to do such mission work to its students. However, those plans come to naught. Eventually, a former classmate, who preaches in eastern New Mexico, informs Daddy that his congregation helps a new domestic mission in western Colorado, and so we move there.

We remain less than 18 months. For the most part, I think my parents just miss Texas. They live elsewhere before, but this experience reminds them of why they always end up back home. Of all the places he works as a minister, this is his least favorite, and after we move he seldom talks about it. Unable to obtain a position back in Texas, he preaches for another small town, this time in southeastern Oklahoma.

We last about 18 months there, as well. We might have stayed longer, but circumstances intervene. One of the members of the church, a wealthy cattleman, plans a trip to the Holy Lands, but at the last minute is unable to go. So he gives the trip to my parents. In the summer of
1978, they visit Egypt, Israel, Greece, and other places on a Mediterranean cruise. On this cruise, my parents meet a number of other Church of Christ groups, as the entire vacation is marketed to that denomination. Close friendships develop with one group from Texas, and they talk about how their larger congregation needs an associate minister, and Daddy seems to be the man for the job.

Not long after returning, it appears the job will be offered, so Daddy gives his notice to the Oklahoma church and prepares to move us back to Texas. Then the Texas church backs off, saying they may not be ready for the additional expense of adding another staff member to the budget.

Suddenly without a job, Daddy applies for the only job he finds, at another small Oklahoma church, near Lawton. Mom hates it, considering the town to be ‘dirty.’ We move there in June of 1979, and by Thanksgiving, my mom informs Daddy that during the Christmas break, she and the kids will be heading back to Texas, and it would be nice if he comes along. Feeling the pressure, his anxiety intensifies.

It was a week or so after Thanksgiving that the Texas church calls him and offers the associate minister job. The crisis averted, and six months after moving to the dirty town, we leave, returning to our home state.

For all the awkward beginning, this latest job becomes Daddy’s favorite ministerial experience. We live there for five years. We arrive there during the Christmas break of my fifth grade year, and leave in the middle of my sophomore year of high school. Mom loves that town, and that church remains an important part of our family’s life, even long after we move away.

For the first time, Daddy’s role is not as only preacher, but one of several ministers on staff. He dedicates his time and energy to working with people, rather than on developing
sermons and class materials. Honestly, while Daddy preaches well, his temperament suits his role as a pastoral minister. He excels in that arena – getting out amongst the people and working in their lives. He finds great joy there.

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Granted, some experiences provide tension. He spends more than his fair share of time and energy helping people come down from drug-induced highs, jail-time experiences, and so forth. I remember one evening when he gets a phone call and leaves in a hurry. When he returns a few hours later, he is obviously shaken. Only many years later does he tell me what happened.

The call comes from an elderly lady at church who has her 20-something grandson living with her. He gets drunk or high (I do not know which), takes a pistol into the front yard, without a stitch of clothing, and starts shooting up the neighborhood. The grandmother does the only thing she can think of. She calls Daddy.

He arrives to see the young man twirling around in the yard, firing his gun randomly. At risk to his own life, Daddy tackles him, taking the gun away. He holds him down until the police and ambulance arrive to take him away. That it is just characteristic of the way people see my Daddy. They call him for anything.
Chapter 10: Intercessions

Do not delay your return to the Lord, do not put it off day after day; for suddenly the Lord's wrath will blaze out, and on the day of punishment you will be utterly destroyed.

(Wisdom of Sirach 5:7)
When life goes well, people tend to forget about the hard times that inevitably come around. Whether those difficulties are health-related, financial, or come from another source, no one is immune. In that regard, our family is no different. All of us experience our fair share of obstacles and troubles.

For nearly a decade, Grandpa tries to have a heart attack. I do not mean that he searches for one, but he is determined that his heart will soon give out. When I consider his work schedule and lack of rest, it is no surprise. Recalling his work ethic, the man lives on about 4 hours of sleep per night. After a few decades, that can start to wear on a guy.

From the mid-1960s, he begins to carry nitroglycerin pills with him everywhere. If he feels a tightening in his chest, he pops a few tablets and carries on with his work. Daddy always argues that Grandpa talks himself into a heart attack, but for whatever reason, it finally happens.

At the age of 62, the “big one” hits. The pills do not offer the expected relief, so Grandpa goes to his doctor, who immediately admits him into the local hospital, transferring him to Lubbock, Texas, where state of the art medical facilities exist, so he can receive better care. A double-bypass ensues to alleviate multiple clogged arteries.

Now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, a double bypass is fairly routine, though still a major surgery. In 1974, it is a big deal. Taking a couple of veins from his inner thigh, the doctors reroute his blood flow near the heart. The scar that runs from neck to navel provides hours of fascinated awe from his grandsons. Really! How many people will let you trace a two foot long scar down their torso?

I actually get to be there when the surgery happens. Daddy takes me with him, and we drive the five hours to the hospital, my first solo trip with Daddy. We stay in a hotel, and I even see Daddy go swimming – the only time I ever experience that.
As they prepare Grandpa for the operating room, he spends a few minutes with Granny and his other children and grandchildren, then asks to speak alone with Daddy. Later, they only share a little of that conversation, but my speculation is that Grandpa wants to pray, and since Daddy has recently become a minister, it seems appropriate.

The small snippet of the private words that both of them finally share talks about death:

“Son, I hope to see you in a few hours, but if I don’t, this is what I have been living for.”

Hard times? Yes, a heart attack and major open-heart surgery are considered hard times. Even in those circumstances, though, Grandpa never forgets his place in the world. He gives his life to Jesus, and medical issues will not change that.

Of course, the surgery goes well, and Grandpa lives for another twenty-seven years. He changes his diet and begins to slow down, at least by his standards. Within a year, he retires, and spends his time fishing, rather than checking oil leases. Long gone are chicken livers and eggs, replaced with baked squash and other low-cholesterol foods. For years, he carries an extra suitcase with him when traveling, full of the pills and other medications prescribed for him. As far as I know, his heart never really gives him any more trouble.

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Daddy experiences tougher “hard times.” Major health issues are ever-present, beginning in his early 40s, and finances always pose problems for him, even before that. In his final decade, Daddy deals with diabetes, heart trouble, renal failure, and many more maladies. Much of this stems from his own life-choices, as he becomes more sedentary, something Grandpa never experiences. Daddy’s stress levels also impact his health, as personal and financial issues plague him.
I do not intend to cast too much dispersion on my mother, as she is a good mom, and I love her still. At the same time, the marital relationship between Daddy and Mom experiences constant tension. Besides her infidelity, she has little concept of how money works, and often wastes what little extra they possess. Sometimes she blows money that they cannot afford to lose.

Much of Daddy’s anxiety comes from both the realization that Mom is not committed to him, and that, honestly, he plays a role in that. As I look back on their relationship, as best I can, I think that overall, he tries to be a good husband. At the same time, he possesses major flaws. Whose fault is it that their marriage eventually crumbles? While the facts seem to indicate that Mom serves as the catalyst, the reality is that both of them share the burden.

What he does well, Daddy does very well. What he does poorly, he does extremely poorly. While he works hard, in his own way, he does not provide the level of income that Mom hopes for. He is willing to earn less money in order to do a job he loves. Mom has a different set of core values. While she never expects to be wealthy, years of just scraping by take their toll on her. One outlet she finds leads her to spend time with other men. While it is easy to blame her, and I often do, the reality is that Daddy plays a role in that to some degree.

Daddy also loves golf. Always athletic, as he ages, he continues playing golf, whereas other sports are no longer a viable option. He begins to spend more and more time away from home, during his free days, on the golf course. Does he do it as a reaction to Mom’s infidelity, or is the infidelity her reaction to the feeling of abandonment that comes from his absence? I do not have the answer to that, but it is obvious that it becomes a vicious cycle that compounds the problem. The time apart from one another feeds into her desire for affection that she believes he fails to provide her, and his desire to spend time away.
At the same time, since money is scarce in our household, every penny counts. By the time I become a teenager, Daddy takes over all aspects of our finances. He learns the hard way that Mom cannot be trusted to pay bills. In several instances, he gives her money to go pay a bill, and she spends the money on something frivolous instead.

Bill collectors often call our house, and my brother and I develop skills, at an early age, in fending them off. I distinctly remember one occasion, where Daddy tells the collector: “But we paid that bill last month. I gave my wife the money to come down and pay it.” It turns out that rather than paying the Montgomery Ward bill, mom buys some clothes with the money.

By the final years of their marriage, Mom receives an allowance. Now, I realize that sounds a bit harsh, but it is the only way they can figure out how to keep her from spending every dime on frivolities. She does not fail to pay one important bill in order to cover another one, or to get something else needed for the house. The money tends to be spent on ice cream or a movie ticket.

Mom has her own checking account, with a specific amount provided there each month. She can do what she wants with it. Daddy deposits the rest of the family income into his account, and he uses it to pay bills. By the time I enter college, we get few bill collector calls. The system works.

Of course, all of these strategies are little more than stop-gap measures, and eventually everything comes to a head. Mom runs off with another man, and Daddy’s health, which has been improving a bit over the past few years, takes a turn for the worse, and he never really recovers. He receives a heart transplant at 48, and his medical condition after that precludes him from continuing in full-time ministry. What little earning power he has enjoyed is diminished
even more. So finances again become a major concern, joined with the loss of his marriage and his declining health.

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To this point, my experiences are not quite as severe as either of my forebears. I enjoy good health, overall. Financially, I do pretty well, though a few minor money troubles develop along the way. But even in the midst of a fairly painless life, exceptions crop up.

In 2009, during the spring semester, I begin to have some pains in my upper abdomen. Assuming an ulcer, as the symptoms seem to fit, I take over the counter medicine, and the pain soon subsides. At the same time, I begin to experience loose bowels. I do not just mean that I have diarrhea for a few days, but for weeks and weeks. Just starting a new job, my health insurance remains inactive until 90 days after employment, so I bide my time and endure the trouble.

As soon as the insurance comes into force, I visit the doctor, and he decides that I most likely have Colitis. He prescribes some medicine and tells me to come back in a week or so. Now, the pain that I earlier experienced returns with a vengeance. I can hardly stand to eat, because anything passing through my intestines produces excruciating pain.

After losing thirty pounds in less than a month, and my medication having negative effects, the doctor orders a colonoscopy. He diagnoses Chronic Colitis, though the definition perplexes me. I have never had this before (nor have I had it since, so I am dubious about the “chronic” part). But, I limit my diet to eat certain foods, take a different sort of medication, and within a few weeks, things clear up.

On my last follow up visit for this condition in late May, I wear shorts, since that time of year produces summer weather in Texas. As the doctor looks over everything, he asks about
some bumps he notices on my legs. I reply that they seem to be mosquito bites. He disagrees. By the time I leave, I am diagnosed with Erythema Nodosum. I recommend that this condition be avoided at all costs.

Within a week, the bumps grow into hard nodules under the skin and produce intense pain. Sure, my bowels now work fine, but I can hardly walk. It takes me nearly five minutes just to get out of bed. My walk becomes a slight shuffle. I cannot stand for more than a few minutes at a time. After nearly six weeks, the condition finally passes, once the underlying causes are removed.

Erythema Nodosum is an inflammatory reaction to some sort of infection. The potential causes are numerous, but suffice it to say that the doctor checks me for Tuberculosis, STDs, and probably lots of other things I am not even told about. In the end, tests indicate that I have a strep infection. We have no idea where in my body it is to be found, and I have no other symptoms, besides the bumps. A round of antibiotics takes care of the infection, but only time heals Erythema Nodosum.

By the time the fall semester rolls around, I am back to my spry old self. In fact, the weight loss that has been forced upon me makes me healthier than I have been in years. Realizing that I near the age when my daddy first begins experiencing his major medical problems, I endeavor to start being more proactive in that regard.

Now, I am only slightly above the weight I was in the Army. I eat better and exercise. I keep regular tabs on my blood sugar (it is fine), blood pressure (also good), and other easily-checked markers. Hopefully, one thing I can take away from the hard times experienced by Grandpa and Daddy is a renewed appreciation of health, and the determination to do a better job of taking care of my body.
Chapter 11: Great Entrance

And thou hast dealt with us, O Lord our God, according to all thy goodness, and according to all that great mercy of thine
(Baruch 2:27)
If there is one thing that is consistent and unchanging in life, it is that change happens. While that may seem a bit contradictory, it is an ever-present reality. Circumstances and many catalysts outside of our control often force this change. At the same time, occasionally, maybe even often, we force this change upon ourselves with our life choices. No doubt, this happens when my wife and I determine that we want to leave the religious group in which we have been born and raised, but I am hardly the first in our family. Whether the change happens in employment, familial structure, education, or religion, we all make choices that not only change our own trajectory, but that of generations to come.

Why does my grandpa get into the oil business? Honestly, I have no idea on the particulars. I can only surmise that in the era of the Great Depression, those are the jobs available. Most of us see photos and hear stories of the “Dust Bowl” days, and since Grandpa grows up on farms, the economy and environment limit his opportunities to support a family by
those means. The advent of the booming oil business offers another alternative, and he readily accepts. He quickly finds out that he has talent in that field.

Over the course of the next four decades, Grandpa not only makes himself a vital employee for his company, but takes advantage of the opportunity to rub shoulders with many influential people. He recalls the time he had a conversation with a company executive, explaining some details to the man. The talk lasts for a few hours, and often departs from the topic of oil, moving to families, religion, and other things. Grandpa recollects that it was a fine discussion. Later, that man, George H. W. Bush, is elected the 41st President of the United States. While probably the most recognizable of Grandpa’s brushes with “greatness,” President Bush is hardly the only famous or influential interaction that Grandpa experiences. Others include elected officials, business leaders, and religious stalwarts. Grandpa simply has no trepidation in speaking with anyone about anything. He will never meet a person that he does not know, and refuses to be intimidated by their position.

Of all the impacts that Grandpa’s foray into oil makes on our family, none is as important as the move to West Texas. Born and raised in east Texas, Grandpa gets his start there in oil, but it becomes apparent that more opportunity exists in the west, so he moves his young family to Andrews, just north of Midland and Odessa, in the mid-1940s. There he and Granny raise their children, and live until his retirement.

“The population buildup that follow[s] oil discovery [is] often intense,” begin Roger and Diana Olien. However, the “boom growth depends more upon the exploration for oil than on the production of it…after the commercial production of oil has been established…the pumpers, who tend the production and maintenance of producing wells, have always been the most numerous group” of workers. Grandpa finds himself in that milieu. He avoids the rapid buildup
and chaotic nature of the West Texas boom period, but follows quickly upon it, once things settle
down. Our family joins with others doing the same. While the exploration phase exists as
primarily a male endeavor, once the production system is in place, families soon find their way
to the region. Upton County, not far from where Grandpa settles, has only 119 female inhabitants
in 1920; by 1930, there are 2741. This environment, along with a myriad of new families moving
into the area, provides the soil for Grandpa and Granny to establish roots.

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My earliest memories of my grandparents center upon their home in Andrews. There is a
very distinct culture in West Texas, unlike that of the other parts of the state. In fact, the
stereotypical Texan is really a West Texan. Those from the eastern part of the state are more akin
to the Southern USA, while Houston and Dallas are more cosmopolitan. Each region has its own
“style,” and though Grandpa is truly a son of the east, his family quickly adjusts and absorbs the
culture of West Texas. Though we now live throughout the state, and elsewhere, our familial
makeup is quintessentially West Texan.

In the realm of politics, Texas, like the Deep South, is historically a Democratic state. If
one looks at the makeup of the political delegations sent from Texas to Washington, D.C., from
the advent of statehood to the mid-1980s, Democrats proliferate. Grandpa is an outlier, though.
He explains to me that he votes for a Democratic Presidential candidate only one time in his life
– the first presidential election in which he is old enough to vote. He always says it was in 1932,
but he is either mistaken (being only 20 years old that year, and the voting age at the time was
21), and it is really in 1936, or he votes when he is ineligible. In any event, he casts a vote for
Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He regrets that vote for the rest of his life, and it prompts him to
become a life-long Republican.
Why does he regret that vote? Again, I can only guess as to his reasons in the 1930s, but I do know what he thinks about government and its role in public life as he ages. The main concern here, though, is the fact that in a state steeped with Democrats, Grandpa swims against the tide. Whereas our family had been Democrats for as long as we had been in Texas, and it had been a long time, everything changes with him. To this day, most of my family still identifies as Republican.

Grandpa’s political shift, and that of the entire family, can be understood in the context of Russell Kirk’s “six canons of conservative thought:

1. Belief that a divine intent rules society as well as conscience…political problems…are religious and moral problems…

2. Affection for the proliferation of variety and mystery of traditional life, as distinguished from the narrowing uniformity and equalitarianism and utilitarian aims of most radical systems…

3. Conviction that civilized society requires order and classes. The only true equality is moral equality; all other attempts at levelling lead to despair…

4. Persuasion that property and freedom are inseparably connected, and that economic levelling is not economic progress…

5. Faith in prescription and distrust of ‘sophisters and calculators.’ Man must put a control upon his will and his appetite…Tradition and sound prejudice provide checks upon man’s anarchic impulse.

6. Recognition that change and reform are not identical, and that innovation is a devouring conflagration more often than it is a torch for progress…”
In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson, a Democrat, runs for reelection, and as a native Texan, there is little doubt that he will carry Texas in the November elections. That does not stop Grandpa from campaigning for the Republican nominee, Barry Goldwater. In fact, I hear from many family members and friends how Grandpa distributes Goldwater buttons at football games and other local get-togethers. We joke that Grandpa is one of the eight people in the state that actually vote for Goldwater that year – and that the other seven are people and family he influences. Of course, Johnson wins Texas (and the entire election) handily, but Grandpa never flinches in his support of the Republican candidates for office, regardless of the office being sought. One of his favorite political moments is the election of Ronald Reagan, who Grandpa considers not only a great president, but a great man. By that time, Texas shifts from supporting Democrats to Republicans, and is now usually considered a guaranteed win for Republican presidential contenders.

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Daddy undergoes similar job changes over his lifetime, trying his hand at several things, but the primary method that he affects change, both in his own life, and in that of his family, is the propensity to move. Sure, Grandpa moves his family out west, but he then stays put. Daddy joins the military at 17, and spends three years in Germany. Returning home in 1962, he soon marries my mother, and the next decade sees him move to various places in Texas, Alaska, Missouri, and then to a few more places in Texas. That all happens by the time he reaches 30 years of age. After finishing seminary, he works for churches in Texas, Colorado, Oklahoma, before finally moving back to Texas for good. Still, even after returning to Texas, at the age of 38, he lives in four different cities by the end of his life. I count the number of times I move, either to a new town or a new house, before I leave home: 13. Thirteen times in my first
eighteen years, my family moves. Really, if you count me moving out to go to college, it is 14.
All by my 18th birthday. Daddy is a nomad, and my brother and I both inherit that propensity.

No doubt, the moving gene runs strong in our family, but so do job descriptions. While
Grandpa practices manual labor, Daddy moves from that realm, where he starts, into office jobs,
specifically in sales or ministry. My brother and I do the same, but with less time in the manual
category. My brother works his way through college, first at a convenience store, and then in
hardware, where he loads materials on trucks. Eventually, he becomes a public school teacher
and then a minister, like our daddy.

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The end of Cold War defines my early adulthood. I am in the military when the world
changes. One week, we study the military hardware of our Soviet enemies. The next week, they
are our friends. Comparing our familial personalities with those of world leaders contextualizes
our place in that world.

Odd Arne Westad states that “without a genuine reorientation of its foreign policy,
American democracy may end up suffering the same fate as Soviet socialism.” This is based
upon Westad’s observations that both the Soviet Union and the United States exhibited colonial
or imperial tendencies – often in competition with one another – with the Third World as the
playing field. Toward the end of the Gorbachev era in the Soviet Union, Gorbachev attempted to
find common ground with the American leaders, with the Third World conflicts serving as a
bridge between the two superpowers rather than as obstacles. He was thereby able to “adhere to
the harsh demands of the Reagan Bush administrations.” Westad also indicates that Gorbachev
had little success in reigning in Soviet foreign assistance to Third World nations, until the
Supreme Soviet insisted. The Soviet Union’s prospects for worldwide influence, according to
Westad, were hampered and overcome because of the “Reagan Offensive.” Reagan’s military buildup, the strength of the American economy (especially in comparison with the Soviet economy), and a growing dissatisfaction with Marxism in the Third World led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It appears that Westad assumes the traditional American perspective, that Ronald Reagan and his military buildup, coupled with a few fortuitous items (Soviet isolation and economic stagnation) caused the Soviet Union to go bankrupt. Gorbachev is given a less direct role in the cessation of the Cold War in Westad’s opinion.

Melvyn P. Leffler, on the other hand, sees Gorbachev as the main instigator of the end of the Cold War and specifically states this as fact. Whereas Westad sees both superpowers as two sides of the same coin – both had imperialistic designs on world domination – Leffler indicates that by the 1980s, neither superpower was actively seeking world supremacy. Gorbachev simply wanted to reinvigorate his nation’s economy, and realized that the ongoing Cold War hampered those efforts. He inherited a troubled nation when he became leader. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan wasted money, men, and time that Gorbachev knew could be better spent elsewhere. The fear that the Americans were trying to encircle and conquer the Soviets had led to large military expenditures that the Soviets could no longer afford. Leffler argues that Gorbachev came to realize that he did not have to fear the United States, so those expenditures were no longer necessary.

Gorbachev worked with Reagan (and later Bush) to reduce arms, and remove obstacles to peace, so that the Soviet Union could focus on domestic issues that were more pressing. Leffler argues that Gorbachev was forced to end the Cold War in order to reorient Soviet focus away from foreign intervention and toward domestic policy. This was not because Reagan had “forced” this change in policy with the military buildup, but simply because the Soviet economy
was in shambles. The events that transpired would have happened with or without the American military buildup under Reagan. From Leffler’s perspective, Gorbachev was the catalyst for change, not Reagan. Reagan was a vital part of the process, but only in a supporting role for Gorbachev.

The major difference between Westad and Leffler is that Westad sees both superpowers from the perspective of the Third World, and the influence they provided, militarily, financially, and politically, upon the smaller nations. Westad’s analysis is colored by his understanding of the Soviet Union and the United States as imperial powers. Leffler’s analysis is focused upon the two superpowers in relation to one another. Third World concerns are not of paramount importance for him. Therefore, the superpowers are simply two nations at odds with one another, and are defined by their interrelations with one another, according to Leffler.

With those distinctions in mind, Westad would argue that the American policy of imperialism outlasted the Soviet policy, but the seeming American victory of the Reagan/Bush era is most likely short-lived, and the abuse of the Third World will eventually lead to America’s demise, just as it did to the Soviet Union. Leffler would argue that things did not have to turn out the way they did, but the decisions by various leaders from both superpowers led to the events that transpired. Ultimately, it was not wasted Soviet money in the Third World nor military buildups that led to the end of the Cold War, but simply that the right men were in the right place at the right time to make the right decisions. In fact, Leffler points out that Gorbachev saw little opportunity in foreign adventures in the Third World. Reagan was indispensable in that he allowed for an environment where Gorbachev did not feel threatened, allowing for Gorbachev’s changing focus on enacting domestic policy changes within the Soviet Union. Where Westad views the Gorbachev/Reagan era as the end result of Third World intervention, Leffler views
Gorbachev making tough choices to democratize socialism, ultimately failing, and leading to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. While that was not Gorbachev’s goal, the Cold War was ended, and the animosity of the Cold War was replaced with closer relations between Russia and the United States.

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While Washington and Moscow tinker with world affairs, I work on a construction crew for a phone company, in a convenience store, in the military, load trucks for a sandpaper plant, and enter the ministry, before eventually finding a place in academia. Most of those early jobs are physically, if not mentally, demanding. By the end of the day, I am worn out. Now, my jobs (and those of my brother) are rarely physically difficult, but can still wear us out emotionally or psychologically. My children now talk about being computer programmers or electrical engineers. My daughter has dreams of art and music. The transition from physical to intellectual pursuits is happening in the life of our family.

But we all still move. My brother, after graduating college, lives in nine different locations. He is an amateur. I move seventeen times after high school. OK, only sixteen different city moves, as one is from one house to another, but the nomadic trait is definitely there. To highlight the fact that I frequently move, I am living in the same location for seven years now. Not only is that, by far, the longest I live in one house, but that means that I move seventeen times between the ages of 18 and 39. I do that in 21 years. To compare my current residence of seven years: the longest period spent in a single house before this one is three years and one month (in my life, not just as an adult). The longest time frame in the same city is five years and two months (spread out over three houses, and that is when I was a child).
Will my children also move frequently? I do not know. What I do know is that they love
to travel. That is something Grandpa rarely does before retiring, though he travels some
afterwards. Daddy loves to travel, and we do it quite a bit, as I grow up. However, nothing the
earlier generations do compares to my immediate family’s experience. Not only do I visit 45 of
the 50 US States, and live in Eastern Europe for three years, but I visit fourteen foreign countries,
on four continents. As far as I know, Grandpa never leaves the United States. I suppose he may
briefly visit Mexico, but if so I never hear about it. Daddy spends time in Germany, and visits a
few European nations, as well as Mexico, but my own travels far exceed theirs. So if the trend
holds, even if my children do not move often, they will sure visit lots of interesting sites.

Change? Yes, our family experiences change. We change jobs. We change locales. We
change religions. It has become a part of our DNA. What would you expect from the descendants
of people who migrate to the New World, as soon as that door opens? Those genes lay dormant
for a few centuries, but return with a vengeance. It fits with a world that changes so much during
our lifetimes. Our ancestors arrive on wooden ships, slowly making their way toward the west on
foot or horseback. Grandpa recalls the first time he sees a Hollywood movie and automobile, yet
lives to see humanity walking on the moon. Daddy is born into a world embroiled in a horrific
war, but he learns to adapt to the changing world around him, both educationally and
technologically. I arrive on the scene in the midst of their lives, just after Neil Armstrong’s great
step, but see information move at the speed of light, as we talk to people from the other side of
the world via the internet and satellite. It only make sense that we change along with society.
Chapter 12: Peace

Remember not the iniquities of our fathers, but think upon thy hand, and upon thy name at this time:
For thou art the Lord our God, and we will praise thee, O Lord
(Baruch 3:5-6)
Every family experiences grief, and ours is no exception to that iron-clad rule. Of course, Grandpa’s life begins with turmoil, as he loses his father before his first Christmas. Still, things remain fairly calm until 1959. That year marks a turning point in the family’s history. Grandpa’s oldest child, my uncle Punkin, dies in a single-car accident at the age of 22.

Punkin marries in his late teens, and is a father by 19. He considers going to college (something no one in our family has done to that point), and entertains the notion of entering Church ministry, but circumstances intervene. He works in the oil fields, spending long, hard days toiling away to support his young, growing family. His first child, my cousin Michael, is born in 1956, followed by Jackie Sue in 1959.

The details are a little sketchy on exactly what happens on that tragic night, but while Punkin works that day, his wife takes the children to her parent’s home. Punkin and his in-laws maintain a tense relationship, and his family’s absence upon his return home bothers him. He drives from Kermit, the town where the family lives, to the in-law’s house, outside the city limits of their hometown of Andrews, and parks down the road, watching the house and considering if he wants to enter and return home with his family. Littering the roadside is a pile of cigarettes that he smokes while he ponders.

Eventually, he decides that he will avoid a confrontation, so he begins the drive back home alone. It is late, and after a hard day, exhaustion sets in. Somewhere, on the highway between the two towns, he falls asleep at the wheel and crashes, killing him instantly.

This causes the festering relationship between the two families to boil over. In fact, it takes two decades before my Granny even acknowledges the other family. She, and many others, blame them for Punkin’s death. The impact his wreck has on our family extends far beyond those inter-familial relationships, though.
Everyone who knows Punkin loves him. I never hear a cross word said about the man. He is friendly, hard-working, reliable, and devoted. He loves his family, his friends, his country, and his life. His loss shakes our family to the core.

His siblings often identify themselves based upon their relationship to him. Not only is he their big brother, but a mentor, friend, and protector. Suddenly, he is gone. Daddy takes it very hard, as he idolizes his older brother. He feels adrift and alone.

Grandpa is understandably torn to pieces. For the rest of his life, his eyes moisten when discussing his lost son. He recalls how proud Punkin makes him, especially recalling feats of strength that demonstrate his oldest child’s prowess. A physically strong man, Grandpa bragged that Punkin is the only man to ever beat him while arm-wrestling, just a year before the latter’s death.

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Once the others leave, Grandpa kneels on the ground, the hot dry earth sending shivers up his body. Tears carve red ruts down his face, disappearing into muddy splashes absorbed by the recently turned dirt. He unconsciously flexes his hands over and over, alternating between angry fists and pleading gestures of prayer. He is alone, more so than ever before in his life. As his knees bear down into the soil, his unfocused eyes finally come to rest on the marble slab before him. He refuses to look at it for as long as he can, but he no longer resists. He knows that once he reads the words, there will be no turning back. It becomes real.

A cry, something between a whimper and a bestial bellow of anguish, forces its way from his lungs, through his airways, out of his mouth, piercing his very soul. Before the sound fully escapes his lips, his right hand shoots out, striking the stone that looms before his suppliant body. The powerful blow is impotent; the object remains unmoved. The knuckles along his fisted hand
split open, blood marking the territory. It is his blood, the same that once coursed through his son, who now lay under the heaping mound upon which Grandpa had fallen.

His sight clears, as if the blood that now seeps from his hand brings clarity. The words on the tombstone come into focus:

Image 12.1: Punkin’s Gravestone

Grandpa’s son, his best friend, his legacy, is gone. He will never come back, just like the blood that escapes from Grandpa’s wounded hand.

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J. William Worden, in his foreword to the anthology *Living with Grief*, articulates three concepts associated with the grieving process: 1. Continuing Bonds, 2. Disenfranchised Grief, and 3. Meaning Making. The first concept recognizes that the living maintain some sort of connection to those who have died. Sometimes, these bonds are productive and useful, but sometimes they can have adverse effects. The second concept speaks to grief as a communal process. It provides for rituals to express the emotion felt during the loss of a loved one. The final concept considers how the living struggle to find some sort of meaning in their loss, and how it can be related to their lives.
In that same anthology, Dennis Klass, states that “for parents, a child’s death is an awful truth that seems unreal.” It is important that the family’s community demonstrate that they care about the loss. Unfortunately, it is common for the parents to remain bonded to their deceased child, and my Grandparents – really, the whole family – is a great example of that. Punkin is still an integral part of the family’s identity, though he dies over fifty years ago. Klass goes on to point out that many parents “are adamant in their conclusion that ‘you don’t get over your grief,’ [but] they often add, ‘…it doesn’t stay the same.’” Though these thoughts focus on the parents, in this case Grandpa and Granny, they apply to the other members of our family, as well.

Daddy reacts by acting out. His grades, never a strong suit, begin to plummet. He asks to move away, to live with his grandparents in another town. Denied permission, Daddy joins the army. He lives a wild life, drinking and getting into trouble. Not until I am born a decade later does he really calm down. In fact, his decision to become a minister finds root in his desire to honor Punkin. While Daddy does go on to make that profession his own, doing it in his own style, the impetus to accomplish his brother’s dream permeates the effort.

The entire decade of the 1960s characterizes Daddy’s attempt to redefine his place in the world. He spends 1959-1962 in the military, which helps him to mature, but it fails to provide him with a long-term direction. His frequent moves and job changes, so different than prior generations, provide evidence that he fails to discern what he wants out of life. Would things have been different had Punkin survived to old age? Without a doubt. What would the Hale family have become? No one knows.

The fact is that Punkin dies in 1959. Those of us from later generations only know of him from stories and the ever-present picture that adorns my grandparent’s wall. Still, those stories
Proliferate as a constant part of our upbringing. It becomes a vital component of the Hale family mythos.

Thankfully, Daddy does not lose any children. My brother and I, his only offspring, both outlive our parents. The closest he comes to such an occurrence happens when I am about 12. My parents decide that it would be good to adopt a daughter. They always want a girl, but as Daddy puts it, “all I got was a couple of hairy-legged boys.”

In one of his ministry positions, he serves as a board member for a children’s home. A young pre-teen girl becomes eligible for adoption, and Mom and Daddy determine to bring her into our family. They have only one obstacle – me.

Dead set against it, I fight them. I am not against a sister, but she was older than I by a few months, and I have a knuckle-headed concept of family pecking order, and it goes by age. Daddy is #1, Momma is #2, I am #3, and my brother is #4. I have no desire to be demoted. So I resist strenuously. Unfortunately, my parents give up their dream, and the girl does not join our family. I regret that afterwards, and often wonder what becomes of her.

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I clearly remember the first time I hear a popular song from my teen years referred to as “retro.” At that moment, I realize that I am old. Actually, I am not really old, but it feels that way. My children love 80s music, and we all enjoy watching the cheesy movies from that decade. Occasionally, I am asked what it is like to grow up then, and I have to say: “it is tubular.”

“The 1980s were years of excess and achievement, of economic turmoil for some, and economic advancement for others.” So begins Michele Camardella’s brief tome on life in that most excellent decade. We elect an actor as president, label the Soviet Union as an “evil empire,”
and see popular perceptions of the nation improve. Watergate and Vietnam dampen American social views in the 70s, but by the early 80s, things begin to improve somewhat. The decade starts with an emotional sports moment when the amateur American Olympic Hockey team scores one of history’s greatest upsets by defeating the “unbeatable” Soviet team. That event is such a big deal that it receives a name: “The Miracle on Ice.” Kurt Russell even stars in a movie, Miracle, describing the team and its exploits.

On Ronald Reagan’s inauguration day, Iran releases American hostages that have been held for nearly 450 days. Within a couple of months, the president survives an assassination attempt, quipping to the doctors about to remove a bullet from his lung that he hopes they are all Republicans. He even tells his wife, “Honey, I forgot to duck.” All in all, the decade begins with great optimism, and Americans start to remember how to enjoy life.

By the end of the 1980s, a new tarnish emerges. The Reagan administration becomes embroiled in the Iran-Contra affair. A Saving and Loan scandal rocks the economic world. Faith in the government turn back toward the feelings that had emerged in the 1960s and 70s, and have never really recovered, even to the present time. So in that regard, the 1980s are the most recent era of optimism in our country.

At the same time, relations with the Soviet Union move from bad to worse to better. They had already been bad for decades, but Reagan is seen as a staunch foe of all things Soviet, more hardline than his predecessors. By the end of Reagan’s tenure in office, we experience glasnost and perestroika, indications that the Soviet world crumbles, which it finally finishes doing in the early 90s.

The music of the 80s is sublime. The decade produces Prince, Madonna, Cyndi Lauper, and a myriad other acts that revolutionize the entertainment industry. I still have a cassette of
The Outfield that I listen to once in a while. Movies are likewise a major draw. The decade witnesses the rise of Sylvester Stallone (who admittedly strikes it big in the 70s) and Arnold Schwarzenegger, a body builder turned actor. The latter becomes so popular that he follows in Reagan’s footsteps, being elected governor of California in the early 2000s.

So what is it like to grow up in the eighties? It is the best. Good music. Good movies. Good environment.

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My wife and I have three children, all healthy and active. Our oldest is a beautiful daughter, followed by her two younger brothers. In an act that I hope serves as some small propitiation for my failure to support the adoption of my nearly-sister, we adopt our youngest. Interestingly, he fits perfectly into our family, and most people express shock when discovering that he is not a biological Hale, because he sure is in temperament and behavior.

But before the birth of our children, my wife and I do experience a great loss. After two years of marriage, my wife gets pregnant for the first time. We consider it wonderful news, and share the joyful tidings with everyone. My daddy, in declining health, is ecstatic, as he knows that he has a short time to live, and wants to see his grandchildren before he dies.

At my wife’s eight-week appointment with her doctor, we excitedly view the sonogram for the first time. The baby is seen, but no heartbeat. My wife suffers a miscarriage, devastating us. Already, in those few weeks, we have planned for our new arrival, but suddenly, the dream dies. Daddy’s spirits take a major blow. Sadly, he dies the following summer, less than a year before the birth of our daughter. He never meets any of my children.

We experience another miscarriage later. In between our oldest and second child, the exact same scenario plays out. Week eight. No heartbeat. Another horrifying loss. A year later,
we produce a son and then decide against trying to have any more children, as the emotional rollercoaster is too much to endure. Our original goal of four children adjusts to two, with the idea that we may adopt at some time in the future. A few years later, we do.

While living in Estonia, we get the notion to see if an opportunity exists for us to adopt a child. We meet a couple of American families who are adopting internationally from Estonia, so we inquire as to the opportunities we might find, since we live there. Surprisingly, we discover that we will be treated as citizens, since we legally reside there. The process is more streamlined and straightforward than an international adoption.

We complete all the required steps, including a home study, medical checks, background checks, and a psychiatric exam. In that last exam, the psychiatrist speaks only Estonian, while my wife knows only English. I serve as translator, with my rudimentary Estonian skills. After ten minutes or so, the doctor realizes how idiotic it is for me to be translating – what kind of ethical concern that must be – and just approves us.

After a few months of waiting, the adoption service matches us to a child, and we meet him at a local orphanage. Though 17 months old, he is not yet walking. It is love at first sight – at least for us. As a toddler, he shows little concern. Every day, for three weeks, we drive to the orphanage to see him, as we wait on the next round of paper work to go through. I casually mention to the orphanage director how wonderful it will be when we take him home. She replies that we can take him home right then. So we bring him home as a loaner, while waiting on the adoption process to conclude.

On my wife’s bedside table, she has a picture of him from that first meeting. Wearing a pink striped jump suit, he bounces around on a frog pillow. His hair jaggedly cut, he looks tired.
He lives with a dozen other babies, cared for by a couple of nannies, so receives little personal attention. That all changes once he moves to our home.

He gets his own bed and clothes, and within three months, the Estonian legal system declares him our son, even changing his official birth certificate to indicate that we are his parents. In fact, the whole process turns out to be pretty painless, at least on the Estonian side of things.

When we prepare to bring him back to the United States, things get a little tricky. We must redo our home study to meet American standards, fill out hundreds of documents, and pay thousands of dollars in fees. In the end, the Estonian social worker who conducts the home study fails to understand how to effectively word things for an American government official, as she suffers from a serious case of common sense, something our government seems to be lacking. Luckily, I am fluent in both common sense and governmentese, so I eventually compose the home study report myself. When I complete it, I take it to her, explain it to her, showing what was contained therein, and she signs it.

In order to get his immigrant visa, we travel to Helsinki, Finland. However, in order to get there, he needs a Finnish travel visa. While Americans and most Europeans are able to travel throughout the continent without a visa (for up to 90 days anyway), our new son is citizenless, a quirk of the Estonian legal system. Birthed by a non-citizen, he is considered a citizen of no country himself, therefore needing the visa. We receive a 24 hour visa, but our ferry to Helsinki leaves at 11:55 p.m., five minutes before the visa goes into effect.

Estonian officials are not ones to bend rules. We prepare a backup plan. If the customs officials try to stop us from boarding, I plan to raise a ruckus lasting long enough to get us to midnight. Then my wife will call our missionary teammates to come bail me out of jail, while
she takes our son to get the visa in Helsinki. For the first, and only, time in our experience, the officials bend the rules and let us board the boat. The rest of the trip back home is pretty event-free.

In the end, we get an awesome son, and some wonderful memories. Most touching was the last thing our Estonian social worker tells me, as she signs that last home study: “Thank you for taking this boy. If you had not, he would either be dead or in jail before he turned 18.” I still think we receive the best end of the deal.

Image 12.2: My Children

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Loss is a part of our lives, just as it is for others. We learn to navigate through the grief. Grandpa has to bury not only Punkin, but Daddy, as he dies five years before Grandpa. The pain of saying goodbye to both sons is burdensome, but Grandpa bears it with grace. Likewise, the loss of his brother causes Daddy to lose his way for many years, but when he recovers, he makes a difference in the lives of others, knowing that death comes for us all. He helps people who grieve, because he knows their pain. In the same way, my wife and I endure the loss of children,
babies that we plan to hold and love, but never get to meet. Still, through the pain, we all enjoy happy lives, on the whole.

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Our family’s losses are not any more tragic than those that many other families endure. We are always been there for each other to share the pain, and maybe that is why we persevere through them all, relatively unscathed, in the grand scheme of things.

Maybe it is a matter of perspective. I am in seminary when we endure our first miscarriage and when Daddy dies. A few months after his passing, I refer to a Bible story while speaking with my wife, and comment on how so many Biblical characters that are renowned for their faith endure so many tragic experiences. I state, “I don’t know if I want to be a great man of God because I don’t want to have those tragedies in my life.” She looks at me as if I have lost my mind and reminds me that in the past few years I see my parents unexpectedly split up, I lose a child and my father, and that if those things are not tragic, she has no idea what is. So yeah, maybe it is just perspective. For me, life just works out that way.
I and my sons, and my brethren will obey the law of our fathers.
God be merciful unto us: it is not profitable for us to forsake the law, and the justices of God
(1 Maccabees 2:20-21)
When trying to decipher what it really means to be a Hale, there are plenty of obstacles. The world into which Grandpa is born no longer exists. The world is a vastly different place: space flight, the internet, medicine, social norms, the rise and fall of the Soviet Union. Figuring out what core values truly represent our heritage demands investigation into principles buried in a morass of details. Yet that is part of the fun of figuring out who we are and where we come from.

Patience has never been one of my strong suits, which is something that seems to run in my family. However, such things are a matter of perspective, are they not? What one person sees as patience, another sees as lethargy. Impatience may well be viewed as focus and drive. So while I tend to consider myself as lacking in forbearance, in reality, most would describe me as quite content and calm, able to endure. It is in my comparison to my Grandpa and Daddy where I see, and define, my impatience.

After I become a sniper in the military, I quickly learn that Hollywood rarely portrays that particular profession accurately. Movies show hidden men, with long rifles, hiding in trees or on roof tops, shooting enemies at long distances. Surely, there is some element of reality there, but the fact is that snipers rarely do those things. Shooting, while a requirement, is only one small part of the job.
Much more common is low-crawling. That is where a soldier lies prone on the ground, camouflaged in ghili suit, and crawls toward an objective. He carries his rifle, a 45-lb bag of equipment, and while crawling, the body never leaves the ground. If you are on your hands and knees, that is high-crawling. Snipers do not do much high-crawling. Rather, with our faces in the ground, using the insides of our elbows and knees, we pull ourselves across the terrain, regardless of rocks, cacti, or any other such obstacle. This low profile allows one to move, slowly and warily, from one location to another.

During one particular training activity, I need to move to a new position, about 300 yards away, across an open field. No way exists to go around the field; I must go directly through the open area. Unfortunately, an enemy camp lies about 700 yards away, in plain sight. Attempting to walk, run, or even high-crawl will lead to an immediate death. So I low-crawl, dragging my equipment and rifle along with me. It takes me nearly eight hours to reach my objective. Once there, I call in artillery fire on the enemy, and inflict heavy losses on their forces. Though I move in clear view of their encampment, they never notice my activity. I am patient. Though not in actual combat, but training, the fact remains that I stay focused on my goal, moving inch by tedious inch.
Snipers are also opportunistic. During my sniper training at Ft. Benning, Georgia, I complete a task called "Stalking." Our instructors sit at the end of a predetermined course and all aspiring snipers begin on the opposite side. Unseen, we start far distant from the observing instructors. The intention is to sneak toward the observers, remaining unseen, and simulate shooting them. Anyone observed by the instructors becomes "dead." Those snipers who remain concealed and prove they can see and shoot the instructors without being identified "win."

It is difficult to win. Though camouflaged, we have a hard time not being caught. On my third attempt, after two unsuccessful tries, I realize that a large patch of poison ivy covers one side of the field, and all the other snipers avoid it. Luckily, I am immune to it, so I methodically creep into the thick undergrowth, surrounded by the vines. I let the spotters know that I am in position and proceed to ‘kill’ the instructor. He never sees me in the poison ivy, because he never looks there, assuming that no one in his right mind would be in that mess. Score one for me.

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But really, I am pretty impatient. Grandpa, on the other hand, exhibits the very model of patience. Enduring tragedy and difficult times with aplomb, he rarely fails to put on a contented face. I have never known a man who smiles more than he, even when facing sad or unhappy circumstances.

This characteristic turns up in many facets of his life. In his final years, he enjoys keeping a garden. In the morning, he arises, exercises, eats his breakfast, and putters around with his plants. Each evening, he and Granny take a bath (not a shower, but a real bath), and save the water. The next morning, cup by cup, he carries the dirty bath water out to his garden to water it. Deliberate and careful, he places each drop exactly where he wants.
In Texas, we have four seasons: almost Summer (hot), Summer (scorching hot), just past Summer (hot), and Winter (3 days, where temps can drop down into the 50s). That might be hyperbole, but the fact is that temperatures in Texas are usually warm. That never slows Grandpa down. He comes in after hours in his garden, his clothing soaked in his sweat, his body exhausted. He takes a drink, cools off, and begins his next activity, whether planning a fishing trip, travel, or whatever strikes his fancy.

He constantly rides a stationary bicycle for a cardio work out, and usually watches television, especially political news, as he exercises. I see him ride that bicycle for hours at a time. There is no telling how many miles he has covered, were he on the street instead of suspended above his carpet. Of course, the news often agitates him, and the angrier he gets, the faster he pedals the contraption, creating a distinct whirring sound, as the chain propels the back tire into nowhere. He provides more entertainment than watching the television. He never stops. He sticks with it, fast or slow, deliberately and intentionally.

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Daddy endures in much the same way as Grandpa. After he enters the ministry, he often finds himself helping those less-fortunate, whether their problems are money, drugs, alcohol, familial issues, or something else. One man in particular, I remember very well: Jack. Jack fries his mind with drugs and suffers from several mental instabilities. When he meets Daddy, Jack cannot hold a job, find a permanent place to live, or have any semblance of a normal life. So Daddy makes Jack a priority, since no one else will.

He helps Jack get clean, putting aside the drugs and alcohol. He coaches Jack on how to interview for a job. He finds him a job, some new clothes, and a place to live. Daddy and Jack agree that Daddy will take care of Jack’s money for him, so that Jack avoids the temptation to
spend it foolishly. Each week, when the paycheck arrives, they visit the bank together and
deposit the money, purchase money orders to pay bills, and in that way, Jack learns how to
function in society.

Patience is fairly evident in that anecdote, but the story hardly tells it all. In fact, this
process lasts for years. Jack repeatedly falls off the wagon, finding ways to get drugs or alcohol.
Each time, Daddy helps him back up and they start over. For the last few years of Jack’s life, he
finally lives clean and sober, and becomes a functional human being. Unfortunately, Jack is
killed when a horse kicks him in the head. However, the sadness of Jack’s death is overcome by
the reality that he would have died many years sooner, and never had the thrill of overcoming his
demons, without Daddy’s patience with him.

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I suppose the patience that runs in our family, such as it is, is indicative of the fact that
we always value hard work. It should be evident by now that Grandpa knows nothing else. If
lacking work to do, he makes something up. He cannot sit still for long, except during church
services, but works from sunup to sundown, even after his retirement. Not until his last year of
life, as his health wanes, do we see any evidence of slowing down. In fact, during his years of
employment, rarely did he not work multiple jobs, both to make ends meet and to satisfy his
innate need for hard work.

Daddy is cut from the same cloth. When he works a job, he labors hard and correctly. He
truly believes the veracity of the old adage: “If something is worth doing, it is worth doing
right.” He also puts in long hours, both in his career and in other activities. Daddy does not sit
on the sidelines if a need exists. He actively participates in sports booster clubs, community
organizations, and other activities. A typical day from my high school years might see Daddy get
us up, cook our breakfast, send us boys off to school and mom off to work, clean up around the house a bit, go to his office and work on church needs until lunch, then meet a congregant for lunch. After their lunch, he might return to the office, or drive a sick person to the doctor. He squeezes in time to go to the football stadium to do landscaping work, visit some sick church members, and still get back in time to cook supper for the family. Mind you, such a day is not exceptional, but just a normal average occurrence in that time of his life. On Saturdays, he often loads my brother and me up, along with our lawnmowers and trimmers, and we spend the day cutting grass, whacking weeds, and raking leaves for some of the elderly ladies in the community. Not much idle time.

Compared to Grandpa and Daddy, I tend to view myself as lazy, avoiding work as much as possible. Perhaps, in that context, my assertion is correct. When compared to most people around me, however, I think my work habits are acquitted quite nicely. A few years ago, the educational institution for which I work undergoes a restructuring, and a need arises to replace an outgoing department head. A co-worker approaches me, quietly and privately, and begs me to apply for the job. Of course, I have no interest in the position, but I ask why I am being asked. He replies, “You are one of the only people around here that actually seems to care about doing a good job.” It stops me in my tracks, as I realize that I truly am my father’s son. I have a job to do, and I do it to the best of my ability. And no, I still do not want to go into administration, so I decline his entreaty to apply.

Recently, my oldest son mows our lawn. It is easy, as a parent, to notice when our children fail to live up to our expectations. However, watching my son walk back and forth behind the lawnmower, making sure that he does not miss any strips of grass, often going over
the same spot multiple time to ensure completion of the task, I am impressed by the fact that
patience and the desire to do a good job has been transmitted to the next generation.

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I know shortly after I enlist in the Army that I am not cut out to be a “lifer.” Some people
enlist, desiring to make that a career. I do it on a lark. I intend to complete my initial enlistment
and return home to Texas, which I ultimately do. However, that attitude is actually pretty
common, even amongst those who eventually do make the military a career. During my last year
in the service, as my mind begins to dream about the final drive back to Texas, my squad leader
calls me into his office.

“Hale, next year, when you re-enlist, sign up for Panama. I am going there in a couple of
months, and if you will let me know when you sign up, I will get you in my unit.”

“Sergeant, thanks and all, but I am going home next year.”

“They all say that. Trust me, when you re-enlist, go to Panama.”

I later speak with the assistant squad leader, relating this experience, and ponder aloud
why the Sergeant wants me, of all people, to come to Panama. The response was telling: “He can
trust you. You do what you are supposed to. You know how to think and act. You do not find
excuses to avoid the necessary work. You are a good soldier.”

The fact is that I hate being in the Army, but it takes that conversation to remind me that
even in the midst of an activity I dislike, I work hard and do a good job. I endure (patience) and I
excel (hard work). Those are two fundamental values that my family holds dear.
Chapter 14: Anaphora

For so the ways of them which lived on the earth were reformed, and men were taught the things that are pleasing unto thee, and were saved through wisdom

(Wisdom of Solomon 9:18)
My grandpa never spanks me. He does not have to. His reputation alone is enough to cause his grandchildren to behave properly. The stories our parents tell us about his epic whippings suffice. To be honest, I am not sure why we fear him in this way. He is the kindest, most gentle man I have ever known. Granted, my experiences with him come in the latter third of his life, so he has plenty of time to mellow and grow before I come along. That metamorphosis might influence his behavior toward his grandchildren compared to his own children.

As far as I can recall, I only face a spanking from him one time, and he gives me the option: a spanking or a week of being grounded. I recall the circumstances quite clearly. I spend several weeks with Grandpa and Granny, and we visit their daughter (my daddy’s sister) and her family, which includes a cousin near my own age. He and I play around outside, investigating all that the trailer park, where they live at the time, has to offer six or seven-year olds.

Apparently, some fellow’s wife discovers his stash of “girly” magazines; perhaps, the man just has a religious conversion. For whatever reason, a huge pile of dirty magazines, including all the naked female flesh we could have ever imagined, lies next to a dumpster for all the world to see. So we proceed to investigate very diligently. We turn page after smutty page, our little brains absorbing more pornography by the moment. As our attention never strays from the images, we fail to notice my uncle approaching. Needless to say, he is less than thrilled with our activity.

Immediately, we return home, confessing to what we had been doing. Both of us are offered the same option: spanking or grounding. My cousin opts for the grounding, but soon changes his mind and receives the corporal punishment from his father. I, on the other hand, being under the guardianship of my grandpa, fear his physical wrath, simply because of the
stories. I take the grounding and never reconsider. That is as close as I come to a Grandpa whipping.

Daddy, however, rarely gives me the option. If he thinks my behavior warrants a spanking, then I get one. We live in a different culture, in the 1970s and 80s, compared to now. In fact, I never have a school teacher or principal, until I reach Junior High School (which is 7th Grade then), who fails to spank me at least once. Whippings are simply an accepted part of the culture then in Texas, and Daddy actively participates.

When I first begin Kindergarten, I chafe at the structured environment. I do not like living on a schedule: study now, nap now, play now. I want to do what I want to do when I want to do it. Of course, like most five-year old boys, I enjoy recess most of all.

On our playground, a large cement slab covers the ground to one side, and I start wondering what treasures lie underneath it. So I round up some classmates, and we begin to excavate it. We dig in the sand around all four sides, trying to get to whatever we might find beneath the concrete. Back in those days, teachers send students out to play, with no supervision.

When the bell rings to return to class, my friends get up to go back inside. I inform them that our task is not yet completed and we should continue digging. About half of them agree and remain with me. Soon, the teacher sends out a fellow student to call us back. All but three or four of my companions abandon their posts and go inside. A few minutes later, the teacher herself comes to get us. Again, I refuse to quit, but find myself alone. All of my fair-weather friends return to class.

When it becomes apparent that I will not obey her, the teacher turns and leaves. I feel pretty big and important, having established the pecking order at the school, with me on the top. For five minutes or so, I happily dig sand from around the slab.
A movement from the side of the building catches my eye, and I look up to see my father rounding the corner, heading for me. At that point, I decide that the time to return to class has probably arrived, so I stand up, brush the dirt from my pants, and start walking toward the door. I go right past my daddy, without saying a word.

“Where are you going, son?”

“Recess is over, so I am going back to class.”

“No, you come with me.”

He leads me in the door, past my classroom, and to the principal’s office. He knocks on the door, and a voice from inside calls out, “Come in.”

We enter to see Mr. Brister, the elementary school principal, sitting behind his desk.

“Hello, Mr. Hale. What can I do for you?”

Daddy turns to me and orders me to tell Mr. Brister what I have been doing. When I finish, the principal, admittedly a little nonplussed at having a parent forcing his child to behave this way, admonishes me for not coming in when the bell rang and for ignoring and disobeying my teacher.

“Are you going to do that again?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, then, go on back to your class.”

“Is that it?” my daddy interjects.

“Well, Mr. Hale, what do you want me to do?”

“I want you to bust his butt.”
So Mr. Brister retrieves his paddle, and gives me three solid licks. That is my first school whipping, though certainly not my last. In any event, ever after, I never fail to come in when the bell rings, and the cement slab excavation is never completed.

I cannot recall most of the spankings I receive over the years. Time, along with the sheer number of instances, blurs my memory. I do remember the last one though. To be honest, even then folks consider it excessive. At the same time, it serves its purpose.

Being three years older than my brother, I am always bigger and stronger than he. I run faster, hit harder, and physically dominate him in pretty much any activity, simply because of the age difference. Since Daddy is also a younger brother, he tends to sympathize with my sibling in physical altercations between us. Probably because Daddy fights so much growing up, he really pushes us to avoid fisticuffs. I learn that lesson slowly. Resorting to fighting is easy when you know you will win.

One summer, in 1981, (I was twelve), I invite a couple of friends over. Mom and Daddy both work, so the four of us – me, my brother, and my friends – watch television, play Atari, and goof around. Eventually, my brother and I enter into a disagreement, which ends with me pummeling him. I always avoid hitting him in the head because my mom once told me that people could die from head injuries, and I have no desire to really hurt him. I just want to put him in his place. We normally run around barefoot, wearing only a pair of shorts, and so I smack his stomach and back pretty good.

Our altercation just ends when I hear Daddy’s truck pull into our driveway. I order my brother to his bed and tell him to pretend like he is taking a nap. The plan is weak, but I am working with limited time. He complies and I return to the living room with my friends and we act like we are watching *Gilligan’s Island*, or whatever show fills the screen.
Daddy enters the house, greets us, and asks where my brother is. I mumble something about a nap, pointing to the bedroom down the hall. While my eyes look at the screen, my ears tune to the conversation taking place at the bedroom door.

“Son, are you feeling OK?”

“Y-y-y-eah…” my brother whimpers.

“What are you doing in bed? Get up.”

There was a rustle of bedding, the bed creaking as my brother arose.

“What in the world! Why are their bruises…”

And I hear Daddy coming back down the hall. No, really, I feel him. It is a visceral, emotive feeling and I know I am in big trouble.

“Tim, Ricky. Go home.”

They disappear before he enunciates his last syllable, a vapor trail marking their exit from the house.

“Get to your room. Now.”

He turns and goes back to my brother, making sure that he is not really hurt. He spends about twenty minutes caring for the bruised body and ego, providing comfort. I sit on my bed, contemplating the imminent and impending punishment. I do not realize how severe it will actually be.

Suddenly, he stands in my doorway. In my mind’s eye, backlighting frames his silhouette, but that is just my memory playing tricks on me. I cannot see his visage, but his actions are unmistakable. He slowly and methodically undoes his belt buckle and begins to remove his belt. As the belt unwinds from his body, the end hits each belt loop with a distinct
“whap.” I hear all seven “whaps.” Once the belt is fully extricated, he folds it in half, and I think to myself, “This is going to be a bad whipping.” I have no idea.

He walks toward me, swinging the belt from side to side, the “whap” replaced with a “swoosh…swoosh.” I look at him moving toward me, wondering what he is doing. I have been propped up against the head board, with my knees drawn up toward my chest. On about the fourth or fifth swing, the belt makes contact with my shins, and I realize that he is going to beat me, no matter which end of my body faces toward him. I roll over, putting my back and buttocks upward, sheltering my front (with all those vital areas now facing down). I clasp my hands over my head and try to curl into a ball.

All the while, he keeps swinging the belt, hitting back, thighs, butt. I lose track of time, so I am unsure of how long this beating takes place, but when it finally ends, I look considerably worse than my brother. Welts cover me from my knees to my neck. Finally, he stops, turns, and leaves the room.

Now, is it child abuse? Without a doubt. Even in those days of regular spankings, he could face serious legal trouble if the authorities find out about it. Is such a beating warranted? No, the punishment is excessive and too severe. At the same time, it works. In the intervening three and a half decades, I have yet to hit my brother again.

How do I feel about it all? Well, to be honest, I deserve some sort of punishment. While I do not condone child abuse, I definitely need something to impress upon me the seriousness of my actions. I really could hurt my brother. I need to stop that sort of behavior. So really, I have mixed feelings about my beating. In the end, I suppose I am glad he did it. It teaches me, flawed methodology and all, that physical altercations are not to be taken lightly.
Daddy never utilizes corporal punishment on me again. I am not sure why, but now that I am a father, and can analyze the experience from a distance, I think he realizes that he lost control. Fearing the danger of such behavior, and desiring to avoid being in that situation again, he simply refuses to spank me at all, resorting to other methods of discipline. Due to my age, they tend to fit better anyway, more effectively redirecting my behavior.

I am sure that many people who read this story will react strongly to his actions. I am fine with that. It is alright to condemn his behavior. I certainly never resort to such abuse of my own children. At the same time, while I fault his application, I support his intention, and none of us can argue with the results. I am not angry with him for the beating. That one action is not the totality of our relationship, but only one moment – a decisive one, but just a single event.

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Of course, while he never again disciplines me via physical force, he faces temptation to do so on later occasions. I recall one instance from my junior year in high school vividly.

“What took you so long?” he asks, sitting across from me at the table. He has just set my breakfast down in front of me, a normal occurrence. His taking a seat opposite me is not.

“What took you so long?” He repeats.

“What do you mean?” I mumble, looking for some way to extricate myself from what I know is coming.

“You are usually here ten minutes ago. You are moving slow. Why?”

“I don’t know,” I shrug my shoulders in the universal teen proclamation.

After a few moments, as the silence begins to take up residence between us on the table, he shifts forward, placing his elbows on the table, leaning heavily onto them.
“I know why. What did you do last night?” And there it is. I had been afraid he knows about the previous night, but this is confirmation. He is not asking. He is giving me a chance to come clean. I will be punished no matter what, but this allows me a way to alleviate some of the severity. And yet I cannot do it. If I admit to my deeds, then I throw my friends under the bus.

“I went to the movie…,” I begin.

“Just stop it. Susie Lou told me she saw you boys over at Martin Ray’s last night, asking if he would buy you guys some beer.”

Silence.

More silence.

“You know what I want right now?” he asks.

I know what I want— to get up and leave and never come back. Maybe I could join the French Foreign Legion. I hear they will give you a new name and identity and everything after your enlistment is up. Anything to not have to face what comes my way.

I shrug again.

“I want to reach over this table, grab you by the front of your shirt, drag you across this table and out that door into the backyard. Then I want to beat the ever-livin’ crap out of you right here and now. That is what I want to do.”

Never have I heard such words come from his mouth. I have angered my dad before, but never to this point. He never hits me with his fists, or even slaps me. I receive a few whippings over the years, some severe, but this is different. He fights to keep his fury subdued. Suddenly, I have a new want. I want him to win that struggle. I want him to not give in to his desire to cause me bodily harm. I begin to think about how I might defend myself, if I can.
For the first time that morning, I look up into his eyes. And I see hurt, not anger or fury. I see pain and sadness. My tears begin to flow. His pained expression may be worse than the threatened beating. I would rather that he did take me in the backyard and pummel me. Just stop looking at me.

I sob. I do not remember if I even try to say words or not.

“That is what I want, but I am not going to do it. I am afraid of what the neighbors would say. More than likely, Vernell would call the police and I would end up losing my job.”

He stands up, pushes his chair in, and turns to walk away. After a few steps he looks back.

“We will continue this later.” And then he moves down the hall.

Leaving my untouched breakfast, I hurry blindly to my vehicle and drive myself to school, still weeping when I arrive. My friends awkwardly try to console me, and I eventually find myself in the principal’s office, where he gives me some time to calm down, reminding me that my dad loves me, saying all of those things that principals are supposed to say in such situations.

Finally, I get myself together and go to class. I know that later I will have to talk to the man who has threatened to beat me up. Maybe he likes to make me wait, causing me to wonder what is taking so long.

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One result of my upbringing is that I tend to support the underdog. Few things get me more riled up than someone to pick on others who are unable to defend themselves, whether the abuse is verbal, emotional, or physical. The experience teaches me empathy for others. Maybe
that is why I often have people come to talk to me about their troubles. I certainly do not have
answers most of the time, but I am a shoulder to lean on.

Another important ramification is that I am pretty big on discipline. No doubt, I do not
advocate beating someone, but I can see the end result, wherein I stop physically assaulting my
brother. While too harsh, the discipline did teach me something. My own children will tell others
that I am pretty strict – at least during their younger years. I am much more comfortable in
allowing them freedom now that they are older, mainly because I know they receive proper
training in their formative years. It does not require severe physical punishment, like my own
experience, but even other forms of discipline yield beneficial results. It really fits into the Texas
ethos of expected behavior.
Chapter 15: Prayers

As gold in the furnace hath he tried them, and received them as a burnt offering.
(Wisdom of Solomon 3:6)
I make no secret of the fact that I produce lots of trouble while growing up. I often push the boundaries my parents set for me, occasionally blowing right past them. Whereas our church is always an important part of the life for our family, for me, as a teen, it is just something to do on Sundays and Wednesdays. Three times per week, Sunday morning and evening, and Wednesday night, we go to church. As I near adulthood, church attendance takes a backseat to many other endeavors, much less the theological and spiritual expectations associated with religion.

After I leave home for college, I still get up on Sunday morning for the first couple of months to attend church, due to behavioral inertia. One week, I stay up late partying on Saturday and am in no condition to go anywhere the following morning. Once the cycle of inertia breaks, attendance at religious services becomes spotty, at best, soon no more than a distant memory.

Three semesters into my college experiment, I find myself in the military. My grades sink so low that I will flunk out before long, anyway. My church attendance does not change at all. I still focus on my own pleasure, as I understand it, and my activities are based upon the potential enjoyment available from each day. I live a very narcissistic life. Each Sunday, I call home and each week, Daddy asks if I have gone to church. I continually offer up some lame excuse for my failure to do so. Finally, he offers to call the preacher at the local church near my military installation to have the minister contact me. I demur, promising to attend services the following week, which I do.

This is the point where I would love to say that my acquiescence to Daddy’s prompting serves as a watershed in my life, but that would be a lie. The preacher rubs me the wrong way, and he feels the same about me. There are many reasons why we grate on each other’s nerves so much, but if I am being honest, the main issue is that I am a hellion and he hates the life that I
live. Still, I keep my promise to Daddy, and for several months, when able, I get up on Sundays and attend worship services. My lifestyle does not change. Not one bit.

I develop a reputation as a partier. In High School, as a stereotypical “PK” or “Preacher’s Kid,” I want to overcome the perception that I might be a “goody-two-shoes” because my daddy was a minister, and I take my efforts to extremes. I drink and carouse. I fight. I get into trouble. That behavior becomes my identity.

Moving away to college only enhances that reputation. I attend a private Christian university, which carefully monitors draconian rules for behavior: We must be in our dorms by midnight, and the RA performs a bed check each evening. On weekends, university staff drive through the parking lots of bars and clubs to see if any parking stickers from the school can be seen on vehicles. If such a sticker is found, the number of the parking permit (and type of vehicle) is reported to the school officials and reprimands, up to being dismissed from the institution, are applied. To avoid that fate, I ride with non-student friends. Not living at home allows me to go even further into excess in my lifestyle.

Upon entry into the military, I learn that up to then, I only played around with partying. Soldiers really know how to squeeze every drop of hedonism from such an activity. I am sure that much of it has to do with the fact that our psyches are damaged. Consider that our job focuses on killing people. Every day, we train on how to be more efficient at causing death and mayhem. We learn how to shoot, bomb, burn, and kill with our bare hands. That is just not healthy.

In order to numb the damage, we drink. All the time. Most of the soldiers I know live a profligate lifestyle in many ways. By day, we train to be killers. By night, we drown that knowledge. It is a vicious cycle, in every sense of the word. I live that way for three years, one
month, and nine days. A couple of years ago, while talking with an old Army buddy who was trying to stop smoking, we reminisce:

“Man, I did not even know you smoked! I thought you hated smoking,” I say.

“Yeah, I did.”

“He smokes all the time,” his wife adds.

“You know,” I continue, “the only time I remember you smoking was when we drank.”

“Yeah,” he confesses, “but we drank a lot.”

Finally, in March 1992, I return home to civilian life. It takes a while for my mind to heal, though not as long as it could have.

By September of that year, I return to college, start a new fulltime job, planning to teach and coach in the Texas Public School system. Some semblance of normalcy returns; I no longer spend my days training to kill, but in learning to teach. About that same time, I meet my future wife, and by the end of the year move to San Antonio, living with Daddy (newly-divorced from my Mom, and in a serious health decline).

Living with Daddy leads to church became a regular part of my life, but by then, I no longer resist. I have experienced life on my terms and find it lacking. I come to appreciate the peace and love that I notice, for the first time, within the Church. Finally, my heart and mind open to what I have been told my whole life. It also helps that my new girlfriend is a devoted Christian. As we begin our relationship, I might choose to pass on Church, but it would mean passing on her, and I am not willing to do that. I endure.

Within a year, by the end of 1993, not only has my perspective changed, but along with my willing fiancé, I determine to enter seminary and give my life to ministry. The year that I
spend living with Daddy teaches me many things, both about myself and about him. He stops being just my daddy, but becomes much more.

Before this, I see Daddy as a stern, but loving disciplinarian. That year teaches me that he is a man. A regular, normal person, who struggles with life, just like I do. In my childish view of the world, he has always had the answers, but I come to realize that he fumbles through life like the rest of us, doing the best he can. What he knows, he learns from experience, and is always willing to share that with me. Ultimately, I become like him in most ways. I finally transition into the man he wants me to be.

After his death, I learn more about our relationship. Not only because I lose the ability to call him for advice, learning that I rely upon him much more than I realize, but because I hear from others about how he never gives up on me, even in my darkest moments.

It might be easy to look from the outside and think he considers me an investment, but I do not see it that way. From the inside of our relationship, I see the reality is that I am his son and he loves me. Those core family values are often missing in my life and it grieves him. So he does all he can to instill them within me. As a child, he disciplines me. He encourages me. He admonishes me. He often cajoles me.

Once I leave home, he has few opportunities to do those things, so he resorts to the only thing he has left – he prays. My relatives and our family friends relate to me, after his funeral, how much he suffers and works in his prayers. He never tells me these things, and so I am never able to thank him directly, so I endeavor to thank him with my life.

Each day, usually multiple times, he offers up intercession on my behalf. He prays that I make good decisions. He prays for my safety. He prays for God’s guidance in my life. He prays that I stop living a sinful life and come back to God. Looking back, I firmly believe that I survive
a decade of poor decisions because my daddy loves me, never gives up on me, and never ceases praying for me. The Bible states that “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (James 5:16). I truly believe that my life is a testament to the veracity of that scripture.

Really, though, he learns his behavior from his own father. Daddy is also a troubled youth. Grandpa is a firm disciplinarian, but one who also believes in the power of prayer. Granny relates a humorous story about this: In response to one particular reckless action of my teenaged father, she and Grandpa curse him, stating that they hope he one day has a son as “bad” as he. During my own teen years, they apologize to him. Regardless, Grandpa never stops praying for Daddy, and they both remember me in their petitions.

I do the same for my children, who thankfully take after their mother regarding behavior.
Chapter 16: Eucharist

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

(St. John 1:14)
Growing up, especially after I obtain my driver’s license, Daddy offers up a parting word each time I leave the house: “Remember whose son you are.” As a teenager, I assume that he reminds me that I am his son, and that as the child of a minister, I need to act accordingly, so as not to cause him embarrassment. Granted, I often fail in that endeavor.

Looking back, though, I have come to realize that his admonishment is not self-serving, as I had supposed. Rather, he encourages me to keep in mind the salient fact that I am supposed to be a Christian, a “son of God.” His concern has less to do with how my actions affect him, and much more on what impact they have on me.

Daddy speaks many such wonderful aphorisms. One of my favorites is his joking response to my brother or me anytime we are injured: “I have had worse places on my lip and never quit whistling.” It matters not if the wound is superficial, or severe enough to require surgery; I cannot recall a single instance of injury where he fails to quip his whistling line.

If we return home after any activity that has exhausted us, whether football practice, yard work, or something else, Daddy looks us over and points out that we “look like we have been rode hard and put up wet.” In my mind, I always imagine a wet wash cloth, rung dry and laid upon a towel rack, when he says that. I do not know why that image comes to mind, but it does, though, he refers to an old Western saying, relating to the treatment of horses: they should be rubbed down after a hard ride.

These are just a few of the great sayings that he shares with us over the years, always with a purpose. He does not just pop off quotes to ridicule us, or for any nefarious purpose, but rather to encourage us to persevere through tough times, endure pain, and emerge victorious in our struggles. His fatherly instruction tends to return to patience and endurance as common themes. A master of motivation, he knows which exact buttons need to be pushed on his sons.
He does not use a template in his responses to us, knowing that my brother and I are very different people, with our own peculiar personalities and insecurities. He knows that I suffer from arrogance, and that if he tweaks that aspect, I respond in a particular way. Each year during football season, especially during two-a-days practices in August, when the temperatures soar around 100°, each day he asks me if I have quit the team. Being young for my school year, with a birthday in August, I lag behind my classmates, with many of my fellow athletes older, larger, and faster than I. His nagging encourages me to not give up. It works, and I never quit any activity that I begin. By the end of High School, I catch up with my fellows, and earn all-district honors in football. Would I persevere without his chiding? Maybe so, but I do know that my pride, at his instigation, motivates me. I cannot imagine answering his question of quitting in the affirmative. I would be ashamed to face him.

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I never know Grandpa to engage in that sort of treatment of his children or grandchildren, but he motivates us in other ways. Primarily, his example encourages us. He is not a quitter. He works hard, and demands hard work from those around him. Even when he reprimands someone, the rebuke is not insulting. Grandpa never asks anyone to do something that he would not do, and has not done, himself.

Both men often resort to using songs or rhymes, both when playing or criticizing. That is even more remarkable due to the fact that neither man can sing. Both of them warble their songs in a sort of monotone chant, which makes the action even more endearing.

When Daddy speaks to little children at church, he often asks them their name. When they reply, he laughs and chants, “What’s your name? Puddin ‘n Tain, ask me again, and I’ll tell
you the same.” In fact, some of those kids relate that to me years later, as they fondly remember my daddy as part of their childhood.

One song from our family lore is “Rinktum Bony.” There is no telling where this song actually comes from. I never see it anywhere else, though it might be a bastardized version of “Froggy Went A Courtin’.” Somehow, with Grandpa and Daddy’s passing, I have become the family go-to guy for the words, and have cousins call me to sing it for them, just so they can hear it again, or to share it with a friend. Here are the words:

Well, I went down the hill

And a black snake bit me on the heel

Turned around to run my best

Whap! Fell in a hornet’s nest

Rinktum Bony, Guy Guy

Minnie Kinnie Kimbo Kyembo Why

Mollie with a mop bucket

Nellie with a knapsack

Come on Kitty

Won’t you Kye Me Oh!

Without a doubt, the words are nonsense. If it ever possesses an actual tune, it is now lost, since neither Grandpa nor Daddy can sing a note. We compare them to the proverbial person who cannot carry a tune in a bucket, by stating that they do not even have a bucket. The song is chanted in the aforementioned monotone. Of course, there are some emphatic emphasis on appropriate words, but just one note throughout.

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Daddy once informs me that there were three things he wishes he had learned and that he wants me to master: typing, singing, and speaking Spanish. I successfully accomplish typing and singing, but fail to effectively learn a foreign language. He forces me to take a typing class in high school, and while it upsets me at the time, thinking that typing was secretarial work and not worthy of a “man,” his decision proves fortuitous. The ability to type is pretty handy in our digital/online world.

Singing takes more than desire, so luckily, though I am no great shakes at it, I inherit the physical ability to sing from my mother’s side of the family. I even sing tenor in our seminary quarter. My brother is actually pretty good at singing. So that all works out.

Daddy never quits trying to learn to sing. A retired music teacher attends our church and is convinced that she can teach anyone to produce a tune, at least decently. She proclaims that she has never met a person she cannot teach, if the student will just follow her instructions. She takes on Daddy as a project. For months, he visits her home for private lessons. She gives him voice and breathing exercises and he diligently performs them. I see the frustration in his eyes as he tries to master the skill. Finally, he comes home dejected. It seems the teacher finally admits defeat. He never acquires the ability to sing.

When I was about seven or eight, we move to Colorado, where Daddy serves as a minister for a small mission church. Few men attend, and our denomination forbids women from “leadership” roles, so only males may teach classes, preach, or lead the church in congregational singing. Daddy, often the only adult male there, at least in the first few months, must lead the singing. So he announces the song, gives my Momma a pleading look, opens his mouth, taking a deep breath, and then Momma starts singing. They skirt the “no women” rule that way.

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One benefit of such a life is that I learn to speak (and sing) in front of crowds at an early age. The standard American fear of public speaking always surprises me, even reading that Americans fear public speaking more than death! Personally, I do not remember a time that I am not in front of groups of people. I start to lead singing and prayers at church at four years of age. I preach my first sermon, on St. James 1:13-15, at twelve. I suppose I get that ability from Daddy, who is also comfortable in front of crowds. I do not ever remember seeing Grandpa teaching (and definitely not singing) in public, but he often lead prayers at church, and basically “holds court” at home, speaking to as many as a few dozen people at a time.

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I adopt many of these same elements in my own life. I often tell my children that their injuries are nothing compared to my own lip wounds that have not stop my determined whistling. Even more so, the singing game becomes an important part of my playful repertoire. Frequently, when my family is riding in the car (though the habit may manifest itself elsewhere), I break into
song, making up the words as I go along. Usually, I sing a tune we all know, with the words that fit the situation.

All of those things – the aphorisms, admonishments, skills – exhibit some characteristics that we all share in common, even if they do come out in different ways. We enjoy life and like to share that joy with those around us, especially our children. We use these fun activities to pass along our wisdom, hoping that our kids will remember the silly phrases, when they might ignore a more didactic approach. Certainly, that works in my case, and I suspect it is true for my children as well. My youngest son recently comes in from playing outside with a scratch on his arm and tells me, “yeah, yeah, you had worse places in your lip and never quit whistling.”

I consider that a parenting homerun.
Chapter 17: Final Rites

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

(Genesis 3:10)
When Daddy dies, I really do not see much happen. I mean, he is there, looking at me as I talk, and then he looks away. I fail to notice that he sneaks away as I blather on. He is always tricky that way.

I am surprised he lasts so long, but he has always been pretty tenacious. The doctors say that once they take him off all the medications and remove the tubes that he will perk up for a few days before beginning his final descent into the ground. They are wrong again.

Once he moves into his hospice room, he falls asleep and I have little hope that he will ever wake up. I finally decide that he never will, but a week later, he opens his eyes, looks around, and sighs, maybe disappointed that he still lives. I am not sure, since he does not talk.

He turns into an observer of the 10 X 10 room, exploring each crack and crevice, visually traversing the spider webs in the corners where the walls and ceiling met. Or maybe I am totally misreading the whole situation, and he has become just a mindless shell with no purpose, eyes lolling around witlessly.

And I talk. And talk. And talk. I have no idea what else to do. Sometimes I hold his hand, and once or twice I am pretty sure he squeezes it. But mostly I just talk. I do not remember what I talk about, but in any event, I am there with him, talking about important stuff. Sharing my wisdom, as I wonder how much longer he will hang around.

Maybe he wonders the same thing. Or if I will ever shut up. Then again, he has not eaten anything in over a week, so maybe he remembers the smell and taste of home cooking. Lord knows the hospice does not have a pleasing aroma. Death and dying – like Pine Sol and old medicine – exudes a particular scent, and it does not compare favorably with chili or grilling steak.
That last day, Grandpa and Granny, along with one of Daddy’s sisters, visit him. They say that there is nothing worse than losing a child, and my grandparents sure look pained, but it is no picnic losing your parents, either.

They stay for an hour or so, but they are old and their strength wears thin, so they leave to return home. One final parental hug and kiss, tears, a sibling rivalry ending too soon, and they make ready to leave. I have been doing just fine on my own, but the grief etched across their faces hurts me. I am glad they had come, but I am also glad they are leaving.

I walk them to the car, say goodbye, and return to the death-room. Daddy watches me as I march across the room, sit down next to his bed, reach for his hand, and say, “It was sure nice to see Granny and Grandpa, wasn’t it? Aunt Reggie looked good. I haven’t seen her since last Christmas.” He looks away for the last time. He sighs once more, blinks his eyes, stops in mid-blink. It has been nice, but now it is over. He is 54 years old.

I reach over, feeling the artificial vein that has been inserted to allow for easier dialysis. Normally, the each heart beat forces a rush of blood that can easily be felt. Now, there is nothing but placid flesh. I call the Hospice nurse, who verifies that he has gone. Soon, the staff leaves me alone in the room with my dead father.

Later, I will call my brother and we will let the other relatives know. For a few final moments, it is just the two of us.
Grandpa lives for another five years, after Daddy’s death. It is a tough time for him, having lost both of his sons. Still, he continues to be the same person in those final years; he fishes, travels, and maintains his sense of humor. Our family holidays are not somber, but joyful. While we all mourn the loss of Daddy, and no one feels the pain more than Grandpa and Granny, we do not fail to enjoy one another. Grandpa continues to tell stories, gets worked up about politics, and steadfastly adheres to his God and religion.

Time eventually catches up with him, though. He once tells me that he hopes to live to the age of 106. I ask him why, and he simply replies, “It sounds like a good number.” Unfortunately, he fails to reach that milestone. In fact, had he done so, he would still be alive as of the time of this writing, with another two or three years to go. In the summer of 2000, his personality begins to change. We do not notice it at first, but looking back, something clearly
happens to him. Soon, all of his remaining children and grandchildren begin to speak in hushed whispers about his altered state.

He stops talking. For 88 years, Grandpa seldom remains quiet, but suddenly, he rarely speaks. He stops initiating conversations, and usually replies with single words when asked a question. Nothing excites him. He slows in every facet of his life. He sits on his couch and watches television, alone in his world. Granny also endures some major health issues at the time, so together they begin their descent toward the grave.

Of course, no one knows what happens to Grandpa that summer, but I suspect that he has a mini-stroke, which affects his ability to speak and think clearly. For several months, his lethargy is apparent. Realizing that a man who nears his 89th birthday, and exhibits such changes in his behavior, may be nearing the end, we all begin to visit as often as possible. We know that each meeting might be our last.

Shortly after the New Year, 2001, Granny is confined to her bed, and her death seems imminent. Grandpa can still move around, go to church, and engage in basic conversation, and his talkative nature returns to some degree, but he never regains his former vitality. As summer nears, we all realize that both of our grandparents are not long for this world.

During this time, my own family prepares to move to Eastern Europe, but we squeeze in multiple visits in those last few months. We drive from our home in the San Antonio area to their little apartment, attached to my Aunt Reggie’s house in Weatherford.

We make that five hour drive over and over, appreciating every minute. Spending time with Grandpa and Granny is special, just as it always has been, but the tone changes, as we know that these are our final meetings.
About the time that Grandpa experiences his silent phase, in late 2000, my wife gives birth to our second child, a son. We name him Joseph Albert, and one of my favorite pictures is of my Grandpa holding his namesake. Our son is the first child to be named after Grandpa, which thrills him. Of the many things for which I am thankful, the fact that Grandpa sees his great-grandson, and knows that he carries the same name, is at the top of the list.

But the end arrives, nonetheless. In mid-July, we make our last trip to see Grandpa and Granny. We spend several hours with them, sharing our love with one another, talking about the trivialities of life.

Finally, we begin our journey home, so we hug and kiss everyone goodbye, and start out of the front door. Just as the screen door begins to shut, I hear the once strong voice, now enfeebled, call out: “I love you. Be careful driving.”

I reply that I love him, too. And we leave. Those are the last words I hear my grandpa say. On July 21, 2001 – five years to the day after we bury my daddy – Grandpa dies in his own bed, surrounded by his daughters. Three months later, Granny follows him.
Of course, I have not yet reached my end. I do not know when that time will come, though I know it is inevitable. I take up the mantle that Grandpa is not able to carry to completion, and if I am able to do so, I still have nearly sixty years to reach 106.

When I ponder the lives of Grandpa and Daddy, I marvel at the joy, love, and devotion that both men exhibit. No doubt, both are flawed men, and make poor decisions along the way. At the same time, neither shirks his responsibilities on the main, and are quick to admit fault. They provide for their families in the best way they know, and never fail to let their family know that each and every person is loved. They provide discipline, but more importantly, they offer an environment in which a person can grow, develop, and have the opportunity to reach his or her potential.

My name is Clint Hale. I know exactly whose son I am.
Chapter 18: Dismissal

And Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the LORD which saidst unto me, Return unto thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee.

(Genesis 32:9)
I'm sure you've been told, “You can't go back” [...] Like most of what you are told these days, it's a lie. The one thing we know we can do is what we've already done. We can live in the good, wholesome, upright ways our forefathers followed.

– Thomas Hobbes in Victoria

My grandfather, Albert, was born in 1912, and his father died on Christmas of that same year. After a couple of years, his mother remarried to a harsh and demanding man, who saw little need for his children, or stepchildren, to waste time in school. When times would get tough, Grandpa would go looking for work. Sometimes it could be found picking cotton nearby, but often it required cross-country treks. That meant weeks on the road, walking across Texas and Oklahoma, looking for some sort of work. By the time he reached adulthood, the United States was mired in the Great Depression.

One might think that Grandpa would look back at his early life and consider it a difficult time that was full of pain, misery, and hard times. He did not see it that way. He loved his stepfather, and fondly recalled the life lessons that were taught. He laughed when he told stories about walking across Oklahoma, or fighting with neighbors over too few jobs. He would needle my Granny over old flames that he had considered as her rivals in the early days of their relationship. She did not think that was necessarily funny, but he sure did. The point? The times may have been tough, but that did not make them bad.

It was a time when men still shook hands to make a deal and that meant something. Right and wrong were easy to know, for the most part, and most folks agreed on where the two differed. Hard work was appreciated and expected. Honesty was demanded and necessary. Were the folks back then a little naïve about some things? Of course. I can remember Grandpa telling
us about watching a movie for the first time. He was glad that no one actually shot at the screen when the Cowboys started shooting – apparently that did happen on occasion. But he knew something was up when he watched another movie later, and saw a Cowboy that he knew had been killed the prior week gallivanting across the screen.

He enjoyed life. Times were simple and they were good.

[The next conservatism's foremost task is defending and restoring Western, Judeo-Christian culture. Not only does this mean the next conservatism is cultural conservatism, it also tells us we must look beyond politics…If the next conservatism is to…recover the America we knew as recently as the 1950s, the last normal decade, it must do three things. First, it must aspire to change not merely how people vote but how they live their lives. It must lead growing numbers of Americans to secede from the rotten pop culture of materialism, consumerism, hyper-sexualization, and political correctness and return to the old ways of living. The next conservatism includes “retroculture”: a conscious, deliberate recovery of the past. –Paul Weyrich and William Lind]

Many people will take not find any need for “Conservatism” in any circumstance. They have found the old conservatism to be of little use, so have no need for a new one. Then again, some might advocate that it is because the old one was so ineffective or counterproductive that a new one is required. Regardless of those considerations, I tend to find that in modern America, the terms “liberal” and “conservative” no longer have much useful meaning in politics. They are just terms that have become equivalent to “bogey-man” and are thrown around willy-nilly at anyone who disagrees with the speaker. I have been harangued as a right-wing nut job and I have been labeled a liberal hippy freak. So which is it? Both. Neither. Who knows? Who cares?
As Weyrich and Lind argue, a change that truly impacts a society needs to go beyond politics. My hope is that we can move past political differences and embrace some needed adjustments. I have close friends who self-identify as liberal Democrats, and I have close friends who claim to be ultra-conservative Republicans. My own personal perspective is more aligned with George Wallace’s observation that there “is not a dime’s worth of difference” between the two parties. I simply do not care any longer about politics. What I do care about is living in modern America and how the society impacts my family and those I care about. Things might have been different in my grandfather’s day; this is no longer the same time period. Things have changed, and not for the better.

I recently saw a photo that showed protestors with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the early 1960s. They were peacefully marching, arm in arm. I compare that to images that come from protesters in recent months, where millions of dollars in damages were inflicted on innocent folks. People are killed, buildings burned, lives are ruined. I have to wonder if life cannot be better than it is now and if we have not devolved from a better world that existed in bygone eras. I realize that everything was not idyllic in the past. There was violence and pain, and time has smoothed some of those edges for us today, but it is hard to imagine that the Ferguson riots of 2014 are an improvement on the Civil Rights marches of the mid-20th century.

Rather than resort to politics, I am intrigued by the idea that people can begin to reclaim some dignity and worth by changing externals in their lives. While Weyrich and Lind are arguing for a “deliberate recovery of the past,” I would urge that we would be salvaging the future. Whereas they are looking longingly to the past, I look fearfully at what has yet to come. They present a damning indictment of the present in comparison to days of yore; I longingly plead for an improvement over the current malaise and vitriol that permeates our culture. While the
perspective may differ, the avenue to achieve the desired goals aligns: retroculture shows promise.

An appalling calamity has befallen the American people since their chosen representatives last met in the halls where you are now assembled [referring to the assassination of President Garfield]. We might else recall with unalloyed content the rare prosperity with which throughout the year the nation has been blessed. Its harvests have been plenteous; its varied industries have thriven; the health of its people has been preserved; it has maintained with foreign governments the undisturbed relations of amity and peace. For these manifestations of His favor we owe to Him who holds our destiny in His hands the tribute of our grateful devotion – Chester A. Arthur

I promise you I will listen to what has been said here, even though I wasn't here
— George W. Bush

I've now been in 57 states — I think one left to go — Barack Obama

Few people look back at the administration of Chester A. Arthur with longing in their hearts, but perhaps we should. At his death, slightly more than a year after he left office, it was reported that “No duty was neglected in his administration, and no adventurous project alarmed the nation.” Mark Twain himself allowed that it “would be hard indeed to better President Arthur's administration.” While I am no expert on Arthur, or advocate that we return to that by-
gone era in totality, I do have to look with adoration at his command of the language. We need more “unalloyed content” that leads to “rare prosperity.” We could do without “strategery,” “misunderestimating,” and over-reliance on tele-promuters, I say.

While much of the prosperity of the early 1880s may well have been that the United States had “maintained with foreign governments the undisturbed relations of amity and peace,” the focus here is much more on how the people live. Arthur maintains that the people were blessed, with plenteous harvests, thriving industry, healthful dispositions, and a general comfort that permeated the nation. He further argues that much of that beneficence is due to the favor of God, and he was not afraid to say it.

Whether any individual adheres to any particular relationship with a divine being is not something that should be dictated by politics. If one desires to live as an atheist, I am convinced that they have every right to do so, and should not be punished for such a decision (at least in this life; what happens afterward is between them and God). At the same time, Western society is based upon a Christian foundation, and it would be ludicrous to ignore that. Even if one rejects Christian theology, they should recognize the positive impact that Christianity has had on society and at least adhere to those advantageous components.

What are those things? I would say that there is no exhaustive list, at least not here, but there are some general areas which would serve as a good starting point: honesty, dignity, respect, hard work, charity, and a sense of community. Another important component is less about what should be done and more about what should not be done. We should learn to avoid materialism, political correctness (which is really just a form of lying), busy-bodiness and narcissism. If we would begin to reacquaint ourselves with the former list and eschew the latter,
society would be better. Even looking at that list, I am forced to recall people from an older generation.

When I was about ten or eleven years old, I met an older man from our church. He was a veteran of World War I. He joked that he had worked in the medical corps, and when one of the wounded came in with a broken leg, it was his job to shoot the patient. Of course, we were shocked, but he would then tell us that he had worked in the battlefield hospital for the Calvary, and his patients were horses. This man and men like him, like my grandfather, tended to embody the ideals of hard work, honesty, and dignity. They told stories to tie younger generations to their own. What I fail to see from these memories are people with their faces in their phones, the mindless suck of endless video games, or the need to force personal beliefs on other people.

...being politically incorrect -- I find [it] fascinating because I hate the so-called PC thing. I think that's one of the things that's damaging our generation at the present time. Everybody is taking themselves and everything so seriously. If they just relax a little more and take themselves and everything else a little less seriously, they'd have a lot more fun—Clint Eastwood

No one with any semblance of credibility argues that everything was perfect in the “old days.” Racism existed, as did every other form of bigotry. Some people were unable to achieve their dreams due to skin color, gender, socio-economic status, etc. Do I want to bring those things back into mainstream acceptance? Of course not. What I do advocate is that people be able to be themselves, without fear of being abused by those who disagree with them.
Do you disagree with President Arthur’s point that America was blessed by God? Fine, vote against him next election. Write him a letter that points out your disagreements. Those are fine and acceptable, but to allow your opposition to consume you is unhealthy. To define your existence by your opposition to someone else is not a good way to approach life. Clint Eastwood is correct – “the so-called PC thing” is wrecking our society. Not only are those who do not conform to the socially acceptable thing often ruined for life (what is Paula Deen up to these days?), but the one who spends all the energy is also negatively affected.

It is alright for people to disagree. It is not the end of the world. What is not needed is the forced compliance of everyone else. I was recently watching a film from the late 1980s and noticed that a background character was smoking. What made him stand out was that he was in the aisle of a hardware store! Can you imagine someone walking through Lowes or Home Depot with a lit cigarette dangling from his mouth? Or how about your local grocery store? Now, I am not a smoker, and I find cigarette smoke a nuisance, but why should my preferences be forced upon others? Can we not find some sort of common ground? Does it have to be all or nothing? In today’s America, the preferences of the non-smoker has been forced upon the smoker. Tough. Deal with it. Oh, and let us add some crazy-high taxes on the cigarettes, too. So not only is the smoker forced to abide by my preferences, he has to pay extra to do it.

We need to enjoy life a bit more and worry about other people a bit less. When I think back to the stories my grandfather told us, I remember him often referring to individuals and judging actions or behaviors, but I do not recall him ever judging an entire group of people. That is the sort of world we need. A world where neighbors look out for one another, help one another, and support one another. A world where we only mind someone else’s business when it is also our own.
I'm a greater believer in luck, and I find the harder I work the more I have of it”—Thomas Jefferson

The three great essentials to achieve anything worthwhile are, first, hard work; second, stick-to-itiveness; third, common sense—Thomas Edison

“Something for Nothing” is a disease that affects millions. Whether this is a particularly American phenomenon begs to be studied but this problem pervades the planet...It seems we, individually and collectively, feel an increasing emptiness—Terrence Shulman

It is a common affliction in our modern America that people want something without earning it. Occasionally, in times past, people would receive such things. They tended to refer to these events as “serendipitous” or “providence” or “just flat out lucky.” However, few people actually expected to receive things with no effort. Folks understood that one had to work to earn. For those who were legitimately unable to work, there was charity. My purpose here is not to call for the abolition of help provided to the needy. My purpose is to advocate for the return of good, honest, hard work to our society.

People need to stop feeling entitled to what others have. If someone possesses something legally and honestly, then it belongs to that person. The ultimate disposition of the item is determined by the owner. No one else has the right to dictate what happens to it. At least, that is how it should be. According to Jeff Landauer and Joseph Rowlands, “Redistribution of wealth is an attack on the successful, and a subsidy to the unsuccessful.” While these authors are targeting
government programs, I would argue that such ideas should be universally accepted. I do not want the government, or any other organization, forcing me to do anything with my possessions, including property, income, time, and self. Landauer and Rowlands go on to make the valid point that “If people felt they should be charitable, they could donate on their own.” Marvin Olasky’s *The Tragedy of American Compassion* effectively argues that those mired in poverty and neglect received *better* care when charity was handled privately rather than via government involvement.

I daresay that Jefferson, Edison, and even my grandfather would look at the current state of affairs with disgust and loathing. Not because people need help, but that people are forced to give such charity, rather than of their own volition. If Olasky’s argument is correct, then past charitable activity worked better anyway. Why not return to a system that worked better?

In 1959, my father’s older brother was killed in a car accident. He left behind a 22-year old widow, a 3 year old son, and a 1 year old daughter. No one approached the government for help. My grandfather took in his daughter-in-law and grandchildren and helped to care for them. They joined the other members of the household: my grandparents and their other four children, Grandpa’s widowed sister and her two children, and a cousin that periodically stayed with them. No one starved. None of those involved look back on those times and considers how tough they were. Rather, they look back on those days with fondness.

*Retroculture is (or would be) a movement in which people pick a time in history prior to the 1960s (because that is when the major cultural upheaval began in the open) and build their lives around the norms of the day, complete with period clothes and technology*—Brent Gerrity
To this point, the majority of this essay has considered broad tendencies and issues: avoidance of wealth distribution, personal responsibility, etc. Yet, we must live in the world in which we inhabit. I can look at my paycheck and see the taxes that are taken from me, whether I like that or not. Pictures that compare Dr. King with Ferguson protestors may cause me to pause, but my world is no longer Dr. King’s world. So how can I (or anyone) go about combatting this current era, and attempt to draw in some of the “norms of the [older] day” that might be applicable and valuable in our own. How might we merge 2014 with my grandfather’s world?

I mentioned externals earlier, and here it is appropriate to go into more detail. If I were to choose to build my life around the 1940s, for example, then I would strive to engage the technology, fashion, social characteristics, etc. of that era. I might purchase a 1948 Buick Roadmaster for my family vehicle. I would strive to live in a home that uses era-appropriate technology: a 1946 Bluebonnet Range, and a 1940 Shelvador refrigerator, and so forth. I would dress is the appropriate attire: boxy, full men’s wear, focused on class and dressiness. Men wore dress pants and collared shirts, with tie. Oxford shoes would be a must. The ladies would wear tea dresses and curled hair. Missing from the 1940 retro-culture home would be the television, Internet, video games, and microwaves. In their place would be radio time ("The Shadow knows!"), board games, family conversations, and sit-down dinners.

That sounds heavenly. Time slows, life is peaceful, and the family shares the events of the day. I can see Dad with an unlit pipe, two fingers of bourbon, in his dinner jacket, talking with little Timmy about the ball game down on the corner lot. Dad listens from his chair with his feet propped up. Mom embroiders a floral piece for the new quilt. Susie finishes her homework, and begins reading a Jane Austen novel, while Timmy sits on the floor, baseball glove in hand,
explaining how he slid into home to win the game. OK, so maybe life is not really like that, but a dream is nice.

In 2016, that 1948 Buick would cost about $50,000 fully restored. The Range would be another $5-6,000, as would the refrigerator. Such a lifestyle would not come cheaply. At the same time, if one were to approach it piecemeal, how could this be different from a hobby? Might it not be approached that way at first? Even if one intended to go all out in a retro-cultural approach, until such time as all things were in place, one could “practice,” using the things that could be more readily obtained. A good 1940s-era Fedora can be had for less than $50.

*Your life today is essentially the sum of your habits...How happy or unhappy you are? A result of your habits...What you repeatedly do (i.e. what you spend time thinking about and doing each day) ultimately forms the person you are, the things you believe, and the personality that you portray*—James Clear

... our lives are largely determined by factors we never fully notice: our habits, those unthinking, automatic choices that surround us each day. They guide how we get dressed in the morning and fall asleep at night. They affect what we eat, how we do business, and whether we exercise or have a beer after work—Charles Duhigg

So who cares if we change a few habits? Does it matter if I choose to give up television? Internet? Modern automobiles? It is all a matter of perspective. To many people, I would be eccentric. To others, I might be “the strange man in the weird clothes.” But to many, I could become a clarion call to a better time. Not just a time in the past, but a beckoning toward an
improved future. Utilizing elements from the past that I find attractive, I can change my current life to incorporate those things. My life and lifestyle then move beyond eccentricity and become a call to others to join.

An earlier quote from Edison mentions the importance of common sense, and we would do well to keep it in mind. The lack of common sense has led to many of the problems in which we now find ourselves embroiled. Some might argue against adopting the lifestyle of an earlier era: “why, the Polio vaccine was not used until the 1950s. So if you adopt a time period before then, you are subjecting your children to death or crippling disease.” No, while we might adopt the vehicular transportation and home lifestyle of the 1940s, that does not mean we are trying to bring back leg braces and iron lungs. We can still take advantage of modern medicine, and other such things. We just have to use common sense.

Our habits can be changed over time. The way we dress can impact the way we feel, act, and are received by others. ZZ Top has long argued that “every girl’s crazy ‘bout a sharp dressed man.” Gerrity points out that “retroculture addresses most of the important aspects of the modern world. Notably, technology and the ways in which it interferes with human lives and relationships is a major consideration for the movement. Microeconomics, a focus on local concerns over global abstractions, agrarianism, and even New Urbanism” can be addressed to help return society to normalcy.

It is true there are advantages to modern technology. The ability to communicate with people around the world instantaneously can be productive and helpful. Had such technology existed in the early 19th century, General Jackson would not have needed to defeat the British in New Orleans, since the war ended weeks before. Slow communication prevented the news from
arriving in time. Lives may have been saved. But do those advantages outweigh the negatives? I do not have the answer, but I fear few people are even asking the question, which is tragic.

For the links of the chain of Tradition are uniquely made of thoughts and efforts, but especially of the living beings who are at the origin of these thoughts and efforts. The essence of the Tradition is not a doctrine, but a community of spirits that endures from age to age—Valentin Tomberg

What is tradition but the cultural accumulation of habits? We make conscious choices and act upon those choices. Others react to use and our actions. We reciprocate. The cycle continues and eventually an equilibrium, of some sort, is established. Father and mothers pass along their traditions to sons and daughters, who in turn join with their own wives and husbands who bring in their own traditions. These new couplings then establish their own.

That paragraph may seem a bit esoteric, but it highlights the way in which culture can shift. Life in Chester A. Arthur’s America might have been peachy. Today, many would argue otherwise. So how did it get from there to here, and more importantly how can we move the pendulum back to the positive side? I would argue that it is primarily due to changing habits. Some of those changes occurred long before our own time, but many are more recent.

I am a child of the 1980s. When I was in high school, no one walked around looking at their smart phones, nearly bumping into one another. We had other vices. However, many of my coworkers, even those my age, walk around, nose in their phones. How did my 40-something colleagues come to adopt such behavior? A change in habit. They then pass along those habits to future generations, who then pass them along, ad infinitum.
It is our duty to engage faulty social habits and do away with them, resurrecting habits of bygone eras that are superior. Who decides what is superior? We all do, consciously choosing the ones we desire. If we choose the desirable habits, those that are the best-received in a society will become prevalent. Will everyone drive an antique automobile or dress in zoot suits? It is doubtful, but the underlying principles behind those actions just might. Tomberg is right that it is not the external things themselves that truly matter, but the “living beings,” who make up the “community of spirits.”

*Modern man simply needs to look to how his ancestors lived if he is ever to recover some semblance of a normal life, let alone a rewarding one*—Brent Gerrity

*The modern world is like a train full of ammunition running in the fog.*—Robert Ardrey

Where are we headed? Prognosticators have been failing to figure that out for millennia. We can only reflect on where we have been, see what worked, and do our best to learn from it. We cannot go back to the past. Yesterday is never to return; however, those underlying values and principles that were alive and well a century ago can be revived. It takes intentional effort and activity.

Will people truly embrace William Lind’s Retroculture? I do not know. Will the future be a bleak, desert-like wasteland, as so many of the apocalyptic movies present? I hope not. Will we
see some hybrid approach take root, such as Guillame Faye’s *Archeofuturism*? Your guess is as good as mine.

All I know is that the world cannot continue on the path it is currently following. If something does not change, and I suspect change soon, the consequences will be catastrophic. If the adoption of an earlier lifestyle can help, then that is better than nothing.

*A man can’t just sit around* – Larry Walters
Works Cited

Critical Preface:


**Chapter 2: Orthros:**


**Chapter 3: Beginning the Journey:**


**Chapter 5: Great Litany:**


Chapter 6: Antiphons:

Chapter 7: Little Entrance:

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Chapter 18: Dismissal:


Vita

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