

# 20.0 THE THREE TREES

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CURT ILES

THE THREE TREES

Notes From My Journals

CURT ILES

With Noah Iles

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# Chapter One

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## Inner Title 5 March

A S OF WED 5 MARCH TG

**The Three Trees**

Notes From My Journals

CURT ILES

with Noah Iles

[ sketch of young pine by Tim Conner ]

"The best time to plant a tree is twenty years. The next/second time is  
today."



# Chapter Two

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## PROLOGUE The Three Trees

If you notice the cover, there are three trees.

Each has a story to tell.

I'm in the season when I want to pass on the heritage and culture of the Louisiana Pineywoods, which have shaped my life.

The three trees on the cover illustrate my intention. The small longleaf has spent years in a grassy stage; all of the time, it grows slowly above ground for a number of years but puts down a strong and deep tap root.

Then, there's the majestic mature longleaf pine in the background. These native trees can live over one hundred years, standing watch over its field of children trees.

Then there's a third tree on the cover you shouldn't miss. It's the thin skeleton of a dead oak. I can't remember if lightning, disease, bugs, or simply old age led to its demise. Regardless, the next storm will probably topple it.

But it also did its job, earlier standing as a sentinel over my field and passing on its seeds to grow more descendants.

I want to think I'm at that tall, mature, longleaf stage. I know there's plenty of sap in me as well as a deep tap root. I plan to be around for a while. I've got too many books to write!

However, I— like each of you— will eventually become that blackened trunk.

That's why I want to share *The Three Trees*. There are many grassy stage pines surrounding me that weren't brought up in my culture. I want to pass on these rich rural values that the old, blackened trees taught me of the values that never change or wither.

I plan to do this until my pine topples or until they pry the pencil out of my cold, dead hands.

I've found my purpose in life. It's to write and share moving stories that inspire and encourage.

There it is. Write. Share. Moving Stories. Inspire. Encourage.

May I be a good steward of this assignment?

I want to finish strong and finish well.

More than anything, I'm a storyteller.

"The shortest distance between the truth and a human heart is a story."

-Anthony DeMello

Stories have the power to change us.

To change how we look at others as well as ourselves.

My hope and prayer is that as you travel with me through a lifetime of my journals, you'll find your own life story.

And write it down.

To pass on to those dearest to you.

That's legacy.

That's what legacy is.

I sign all of my correspondence with “Onward,”  
That’s where my legacy is.

# Chapter Three

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## PART 1 THE SOUTHERN WAY

# Chapter Four

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## LEGACY

**O** NE OF TEN WORDS

The trail behind

The markers

The crumbs

Legacy is not what you leave behind.

It's not what you'll be remembered.

It's about who you're becoming.

It's about the trail you're blazing for those behind you.

The loved ones that matter.

They're your legacy.

True legacy isn't about material things and heirlooms.

True legacy is about the circles of life around you.

The buckets you choose to pour into.

And remember that your water is limited.

Be careful to pour yourself into the buckets that really matter.

Be careful. Some worldly buckets have holes in them. Be sure to invest in those that hold water.

Legacy.

Get a large sheet of paper and sketch out the buckets of your life.

What are they?

Who are they?

Yes, make your own bucket list.

The people who'll outlive,

My final word, and today's subject, is legacy.

Legacy is all about where you end up.

Legacy is about how you'll be remembered.

Anyone can start well.

It's finishing well that cements a person's legacy.

Being a middle-aged man who knows he has lived over half his life,  
legacy stays on my mind more these days.

I believe my own greatest legacy will be the three sons DeDe and I have raised, as well as the three grandsons they are raising (with hopefully more to come with a granddaughter thrown in.)

Because these grandchildren are at a malleable age, I want to spend my time, love, and money instilling a positive and Godly legacy in their lives.

Legacy is not about buildings or titles.

Real legacy has little to do with fame, money, or possessions.

If that is all a person is remembered for, I wonder about their priorities during the time they sucked air on this earth.

Yes, legacy.

How we'll be remembered.

It's not something you can place in a written will.

Legacy is determined by how we *choose to live*, not what will happen at our funeral.

Finally, when I think about a man and his legacy, I always turn to my hero.

Yes, Jesus is *my hero*.

He's much more than that. He's the living Son of God and my personal Savior and Lord/Boss.

But he is also my hero.

A hero is someone you respect, admire, look up to, and wish to be like.

All of those reflect how I feel about Jesus.

Jesus left the greatest legacy. A legacy of giving. Of dying in my place on the cross.

A legacy of "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve... and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The legacy of his life, death, and resurrection lives on. Jesus' legacy has changed the lives of millions over the past two thousand years.

Lord, help me live my life to leave behind a legacy of service, integrity, love, compassion, kindness, resolve, gratitude, and strong relationships with friends and family.

Amen.

NOTES TO MY FUTURE SELF:

# Chapter Five

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## JUST SHOW UP

**T**hat's it.

It's a significant measure of success. Just show up every day.

It's incredible what a difference that will make in the arc of your life.

If you're in school, don't sleep in and miss that 7:45 class.

Students who attend class usually pass.

Those who miss class often don't.

Just show up.

You may be in the workforce.

Show up every day.

Don't miss unless it's a true emergency

And by all means, use the phone to let your boss know ahead of time.

Show up for wherever you're supposed to be.

My friend Mollie Bailey runs Grant Christmas Tree Farm with her husband, Gray. The day after Thanksgiving (Black Friday) is their biggest tree sale and the most visitors.

It takes literally over one hundred workers to make it clear. Mollie rolls her eyes on the big morning, "Curt, you wouldn't believe how



many call the night before stating that a shopping trip or event will keep them from working that day.

Man, if you're supposed to be somewhere, show up.

And get there early.

Don't rush in right at time, xx

I have a friend who says, "If you're not ten minutes early, you're late."

Don't use that snooze button. It's not made for winners.

Get out of bed and get your day started.

Get after it.

It's also essential to build some lag time in your commute, whether it's a short walk across campus or an hour-long drive to the refinery plants in Sulphur.

Finally, I have a family member who uses the "A.I.S."

A.I.S. times means the kids are buckled up, and the vehicle is running.

I'll let surmise what "A.I.S." is.

It means getting a particular part of your anatomy in the seat ready to go.

That's A.I.S.

Just show up.

It's a big deal

END OF SHOW UP

# Chapter Six

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## Shake like a Man

**F**IRST IMPRESSIONS LAST

When I was a young teenager, Tubby and Agnes King moved to Dry Creek and joined our church. I soon learned a valuable lesson about Tubby.\* He had a vise-grip handshake and would hurt your hand if you didn't get a good grip.

I'd been taught how to shake hands like a man earlier in life. It's a proactive, slightly aggressive move where you ensure you get the webbed area between your thumb and forefinger right against the same part of the shaker or fellow shaker's. If you do this, you'll get a firm grip, and guys like Tubby can't squeeze your fingers like wringing a wet dishrag.

His handshake was hurtful only if you didn't know how to shake like a man.

It's a learned habit.

Extend your right hand in a friendly, forceful manner and give a firm handshake. It's not a contest of the tightest grip, but men in the Louisiana Pineywoods (and much of the world) are judged by their handshake.

There's no place for a dead fish handshake in our culture. Just as a firm shake gives an impressive impression, a limp handshake gives the opposite impression. There's no room in the Christian Kingdom of Men for wimpy handshakes.

That handshake doesn't have to be long or vertical. I've shaken hands with some fellows when I thought they were going to wrench one of our elbows out of the socket, shaking up and down.

In my world travels on missions, I was introduced to several variations. On the African Continent, it's common to place your left hand on your right forearm during the handshake. It shows that the shaker isn't holding a weapon behind his back with the free hand. As we'd say, "Etu Brute'."

I learned another handshake variation in Indonesia in the aftermath of the terrible 2004 Tsunami. I led a Louisiana medical team that ministered to the refugees from this century's worst natural disaster. The Indonesian Sumatrans would shake my hand while patting their heart with their left hand, saying, "Thank you for coming in our time of need." The hand to the chest was explained as their way of adding, "I am connected to your heart." Coming from the deeply Muslim people of Aceh, I always took this symbolic gesture literally to heart.

THE evolution of male and female handshakes and hugs  
LATER, WE'LL TALK ABOUT WHAT TO DO BETWEEN  
THAT 10-FOOT AND 2-FOOT SPACE.

# Chapter Seven

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## The 10-4-2 Rule

1 0- ACKNOWLEDGMENT  
10- DISARMING SMILE

4- GREETING/SMILE/EYE CONTACT WE'LL TALK ABOUT THAT LATER/EARLIER

2 FOOT REAL EYE TO EYE CONTACT

When you get about ten feet from a person, give them a disarming smile or a knowing nod.

I see you.

You're another person, and I recognize you.

When you get within four feet, speak.

A greeting.

I call them smiling eyes.

A question.

An observation.

In either case, a kind smile.

Several times in my life, a stranger has mentioned, "You have a nice smile."

I consider it the highest compliment possible...

“A stranger is only a friend you haven’t met yet.”

As I move closer to four feet, I try to pick up nonverbal clues about where their personal space begins. It varies from person to person and culture to culture.

The greeting of a Cajun from Mamou will differ from that of a businessman in Chicago.

Warm climates. Cold climates.

Speak at four feet and give a greeting

But you don’t want

EYE TO EYE:

Look a man in the eye. The combination of the firm shake and eye-to-eye contact is a powerful tool.

The combination of a disarming smile and smiling words forms the foundation of what could be a friendship or just someone passing you’ll never see again.

It’s not a stare. It’s more of an awareness. I see who you are and value you as a man. It also says that I’m confident enough to look directly into your eyes, which are indeed the windows to the soul. Staring at the ground or past the person infers that something’s wrong with you or them.

Simply look a man square in the eye and do it with a smile. In fact, I believe you can make your eyes smile. Heck, you can make your entire face smile.

Let whomever you’re meeting, whether it’s the first time or an old friend, feel that they are, at this moment, the most important person in the world.

I've also studied eye contact as part of our culture. It may be brief, but we make eye contact. Sometimes, when the busy cocci at Walmart doesn't look up, I decide not to leave until she does.

When she does, I give her the greatest gift one can confer on another: a kind smile.

I hope it makes her feel better. I know it does for me.

Because that's who they are as you firmly shake their hand and look them in the eye.

#### FOUR FEET

Eye to Eye/ 10/4 rule: What color are their eyes? Allow personal space, but not close enough to smell their breath. I like to be close enough to see a person's eye color.

And they can see my blue eyes.

Look a man square in the eye and do it with a smile. In fact, I believe you can make your eyes smile.

#### AS IN, IF YOU LIKE PEOPLE, THEY WILL LIKE YOU.

Heck, you can make your entire face smile, not in a fake way, but simply enjoying people. This applies to the introvert just as much as the extrovert. Let whomever you're meeting, whether it's the first time or an old friend, feel that they are, at this moment, the most important person in the world. Because that's who they are as you firmly shake their hand and look them in the eye.

It says, "I see you. You have my full attention.

Staring at the ground or past the person infers that something's wrong with you or them.

Neither of those are the impressions you want to make.

Simply look a man square in the eye and do it with a smile. In fact, I believe you can make your eyes smile. Heck, you can make your entire face smile—not in a fake way but simply enjoying people. This applies to introverts just as much as extroverts.

Let whomever you're meeting, whether it's the first time or an old friend, feel that they are, at this moment, the most important person in the world.

Don't invade their space: Close enough to see their eye color but not close enough to count their nose hairs.

# Chapter Eight

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## THE HAPPIEST SLED DOG

A sled dog is happiest when he's in the traces.

Adam, Eve, the Garden, and Work

We all have this distorted view that work is one of the punishments of original sin.

Adam and Eve sinned, left the garden, and were consigned to a prison sentence of work.

Yes, the Scriptures make it clear Adam and Eve had work before the Fall.

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

To the woman, he said, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor, you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."

17 To Adam, he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat



from it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil, you will eat food from it all the days of your life.

18 It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.

19 By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

# Chapter Nine

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## A LIFE STATEMENT

**K**now where you're going  
PRIORITY

I want to be a man God can use

Be an encourager

And be respected by those who know me best.

If I'm going to be a God-useful man, there are certain things I won't do, and just as importantly, there are things I'm compelled to do.

I'm not sure if Encouragement is a spiritual gift. But it's the word that best describes me.

I'm called to be an encourager.

Compelled

Empathy

God put it in me.

It's how I live.

How I write. My writing/speaking/platform is to share moving stories that encourage and inspire.

I'm an encouragement-inspirational writer. Yes, there's plenty of bad stuff out there.

I only know my assignment.

I'm called to be a good news reporter.

Finally, I want to be respected by those who know me best.

That's my wife DeDe, our three sons and their precious wives, my nine grandchildren. It extends to my clan: my 90-year-old Mother, two sisters, and a beloved aunt and uncle.

These are the inner concentric circles of my life. More on that later.

If these people respect me, nothing else matters.

I don't get my self-esteem from a best-selling book, award, or public acclaim.

If the people who know me best know my flaws and respect me, everything else is secondary.

It's my life statement.

I view it every day in the flyleaf of my journal.

My life statement isn't original. I borrowed it from John Avant. He gave me permission to use it. He laughed and said, "I borrowed it, too."

There's no copyright on my life statement.

You're welcome to take it and tweak it, but I think it's more important that you conceive your own rock-solid life statement.

Don't feel that you have to get perfect the first time. That's what the blank page, sketchbook, and pencil eraser are for.

Dream.

Think big.

But above all, write your own personal soul-clinging life statement that fits perfectly within your heart.

### **MY LIFE VERSE**

"Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you."

Matthew 6:33

My Ten Words

SPRINKLED Peppered throughout Three Trees. Some have a chapter for themselves. There's a chapter for each word. Others are hidden behind other chapters

But they're there.

They make up the DNA of my life

Adherence to these words has helped me become the man I'm trying to be.

These are the words I live by.

You'll hear more about them in Part 6

### **10 Words to Live by**

1. Perseverance

Encouragement

2. REACH: Influence/Impact

3. LLL/Lifelong Learner Curiosity

4. Legacy

5. Kindness

6. Passion.

7. Stewardship

8.

Humility

WHERE ARE 9 AND TEN

I choose them,

They change from time to time

Who are

you?

I'm not asking what you do for a living.

I'm a writer.

Oh, we love horses, too.

I'm a writer.

What kind of bike do you ride.

I'm not making this up.

But my true identity is not tied up in books, social media, or speaking tours.

My identity goes back to my life statement:

I'm trying to be a man God can use.

To be an encourager.

I want to have the respect of those who know me best.

That's who I am.

It saddens me when one homeless friend describes himself in that way. "I'm homeless and know I'll probably die on the streets.

Nor where you.

Or.

Who are you, Man?

# Chapter Ten

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## JUST SAY NO

It also involving making up your mind to say no to certain things.

### **I** IRREVOKABLE NO'S

"I'm most proud of the things I've said "no."

Now, why would I

My Irrevocable NOs

**Say no to lesser things so I can say yes to the things that really matter.**

**I am most proud of the things I've said no to.**

Now, why would I want to go and do something that stupid?

I will not cheat on DeDe.

I will not take money that doesn't belong to me.

I will not lie.

I will not intentionally hurt anyone. If I do, I'll try to make it right.

I will not be unkind.

I will not talk ill of anyone behind their back. If there is a problem, I'll address it promptly, personally, and face-to-face.

I will not talk ill of anyone when they walk away from a group.

I will seek to live an unoffended life.

I Will Not Coast

I will not carry a lazy man's.

My Irrevocable NOs

**Say no to lesser things so I can say yes to the things that really matter.**

**I am most proud of the things I've said no to.**

I will not cheat on DeDe.

I will not take money that doesn't belong to me.

I will not lie.

I will not intentionally hurt anyone. If I do, I'll try to make it right.

I will not be unkind.

I will not talk ill of anyone behind their back. If there is a problem, I'll address it promptly, personally, and face-to-face.

I will not talk ill of anyone when they walk away from our group

I will seek to live an unoffended life.

I will not coast.

**End of Nos**

# Chapter Eleven

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## LLL The Passionate Life Stay Curious/Be Amazed/Share Moving Stories.

**T**HOUGHTS ON LLL LIFELONG LEARNING The saddest thing to see is a man or woman who's lost their curiosity.

Next, they begin to ignore the amazing people and things around them.

If they lose their curiosity and amazement, the next stage appears.

They have no stories to tell.

I'm often asked, "Curt, where do all of those stories come from?"

I don't have a simple answer.

BEING A LIFELONG READER



Another friend will say, “I was there and didn’t notice that.”  
I shrug. “I don’t know if I noticed it or it noticed me and waved at me.”

Stay curious.

Be Amazing.

Share stories that move you and others.

That’s the part about the passionate life: It moves you.

If it moves you, it’ll probably move others.

I can read over a passage I wrote twenty years ago and laugh out loud. I can still see it.

Then, there are various passages I’ve seen that bring tears to my eyes. Regardless of how many times I read it. It moves me just like the day I wrote.

We authors have a saying, “No tears in the writer. No tears in the reader.

Live a passionate, moving life.

Stay curious.

Be Amazed.

Keep sharing moving stories, even if it’s at bedtime with your children.

As a Pineywoods Man, I’m committed to a lifetime of curiosity. To be a lifetime learner. To walk up to strangers, introduce myself, and slowly let them tell their stories. Everyone has a fantastic, remarkable story within them.

Our job is to listen well and make them comfortable with sharing.

Our job is also to see, with our eyes and hearts, the amazing things around us. Here are a few from the last week of my life:

I'd walked the entire cemetery, visiting the graves of my family and others who shaped my life as a Dry Creek boy.

Now, I waited under the cedar tree. I heard a strange buzzing from near the cedar tree. After a rattlesnake encounter last week, I stepped away quickly.

It wasn't a rattler, it was bees. The old cedar, wizened and hollow, contains a huge hive of honeybees. It touched me that this old tree, in its last stages of a long life, was alive with life.

I watched a bird circling the tree. I'm from a family of (nerdy) birdwatchers and immediately recognized the lone bird as a Kingbird. It's best known for two traits: tormenting hawks or crows that invade its domain. If you've seen a smaller bird pursuing a hawk, it's probably a kingbird or mockingbird, the two most territorial of birds.

Secondly, the kingbird, which likes sitting watch on high line wires or fences, delights in killing lizards and impaling them on the barbs of a barbed wire fence. That's where it gets one of its nicknames, butcher bird.

As I watched the kingbird circle the cedar tree, I remembered what my bird mentor, my grandfather Sid Plott, called them: "Bee Martins." That was because they love catching bees on the fly for a quick lunch.

The cemetery kingbird, or bee martin, had found a buffet line at the old cedar tree. I watched him capture bee after bee.

The unavoidable cycle of life and death was all around me.

I was touched.

---

Yesterday, we drove to Dry Creek. As we passed through Ten Mile, I watched a cow licking her newborn calf. I was amazed at this simple but extraordinary act of motherhood.

Today, I'm writing in a Lafayette coffeehouse. A mother with a newborn sat near me. I went over, "That's a beautiful baby."

"Thank you."

"You're at a special time in your life."

"I know."

I walked away. "You wait until you have grandkids. It's not better but different-better."

The mother smiled. "That's what my parents say."

The amazement of new life.

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My Mom went with DeDe and me to the party. As I dropped her off in Dry Creek, I helped my Mom from our car into her house. She's a proud 83-year-old but walks slowly with a cane. I remember how in her younger days we couldn't keep up with her shopping.

Those days are past. I grip her other elbow, determined to support her up the steps and into her house of over fifty years.

I walk back to our car, and as my eyes adjust to the night, I'm amazed by the bright canopy of stars overhead. I see all of my old friends, constellations, and planets that I seldom see in the city lights, trees, and buildings of urban life.

I love living in Alexandria among seven grandkids, but I miss the Dry Creek night sky most of all.

It's simply amazing.

All of life is.

I recall the first thing I ever wrote and showed it to others. I'd discovered *The Cat in the Hat*, and I guess my inner Dr. Seuss was coming out:

"This world is a wonder

By thunder."

I proudly showed it to my parents and family. I cringe thinking about it now. However, I still feel that way about the world around me.

I'm curious about it.

I want to notice and be amazed.

And I want to share remarkable stories about old cedars, honeybees, birds, motherhood, and the wonders of the Universe.

Yes, I'm still writing,

"This world is a wonder.

By Thunder.

May it always be so.

END OF BE CURIOUS

You can be a reader and not be a leader, but you can't be a leader without being a reader

It's one of the most important habits I've incorporated

Reading

It can be anything

Anywhere

Screens Read don't scroll

Do audio books count

What should I read about?

What interests you.

The internet

A dusty encyclopeia

My reading interests have changed but my reading hasn't

Field and Stream

Jack London

Rings Hunger Games

history/biography/leadership

Make your car a library

# Chapter Twelve

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## REVIEW THE VIEW FROM 30,000 FEET

**W**hat really matters  
LIFE PLANNING  
LIFE STATEMENT

I'm always amazed at how different Louisiana looks from an airliner cruising at 30,000.

Everything is so tiny.

I strain out my window, trying to make out a landmark, city, or river.

I pay special attention when we fly over one of America's most strategic ten square miles.

It's where the Mississippi comes close enough to kiss its neighbor to the west, the Red.

A series of channels and locks seek to keep the mighty Mississippi flowing southeasterly to Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and the Gulf.

But from 30,000 feet, I can view the problem. A new river, the Atchafalaya, flows south, seeking to combine the Red and Mississippi and scour a new channel on the shorter southern route to the Gulf, leaving Morgan City flooded and New Orleans high and dry.

This series of locks and dams is called the Old River Control Structure.

I've driven by it, and its channel locks and I've been confused about how it connects.

But from the airliner's seat, I can plainly mark it out.

I call it the 30,000-foot view.

Every young person/leader needs to see the 30,000-foot life view.

It's a periodic timed period to step away from the fray and get the big picture.

It takes discipline to take a break when there's so much to do, but it's essential to stay on course.

To keep the main thing the main thing.

To see it from a different view/angle.

It needs to be away from the house and office.

I carry a large sketchbook from Hobby Lobby. I call it my 30,000-foot view book. It's where I sketch out the big ideas and book outlines for the coming year.

I use a pencil. It's OK to erase on paper as well as life.

I'm not afraid to adjust when doors are blocked or

It can be as simple as a morning spent in a deer stand shaking with cold as worries and indecision melt away and you see the way forward more clearly.

It's a good time and place to step away.

It's called a retreat. It is not a good military word but an essential word for the lifelong learner.

Retreat. But step away, you must.

It's time for a review.

A chance to look back.

A review.

But a review retreat is more than looking back.

It also provides a focused view of what is most important in the coming days, months, and even years.

To get your inner compass out, set a heading for your priority.

You notice I said priority.

It's singular. The thing that matters most of all.

There can be no such animal as "priorities."

It's nailing down your priority. There'll be dozens, even hundreds, of connected strings to your priority. They're all important but not your priority.

That inner compass can show where you've come from, but its most important task is the way ahead.

I'll share in the next chapter about developing your priorities,

It's called your life statement.

Notes to my future self: Get a blank sketchbook (the size doesn't matter) and start your own 30,000-foot view booklet.

## REVIEWS RETREATS

### **Don't coast**

**"Lord, don't let me get too comfortable."**

It's one of the saddest things to see. A leader, teacher, construction worker, anyone

A person who has lost their drive.

They're just hanging on.

Waiting for retirement



Lost their fire  
Burnt out  
Rust out or burnout  
I'm at the season of my life where it'd be easy to get comfortable.  
Too comfortable.  
To give in and coast to the finish line.  
But I want to get out of my comfort zone.  
And in this day and age, that's difficult to do. It's so much easier to stay in our cocoon safely.  
I'm not complaining about the comforts of life in the 21st century. I enjoy AC, Wi-Fi, and What-A-Burger as much as the next guy.  
But I have a deep fear of getting too comfortable.  
Instead of being comfortable, I wish to be content.  
These two C words are very different.  
Here's a good story on contentment: My wife, DeDe, recently shared about our sojourn in Africa with our Bible study group.  
Someone asked, "How did it feel to sell your house and possessions and journey to another continent?"  
DeDe's reply was succinct, "I've never been more content in my life."  
Contentment is living happily with what you have and who you are.  
In a Comfort Zone, we get too comfortable, ease off the gas pedal, take no chances, and become lazy.  
And laziness is much more than physical.  
There's spiritual laziness.  
There's intellectual laziness.  
And there's emotional laziness.  
All are bad. None are good.  
As I look in the mirror this morning, I'm asking three questions:

What is my comfort zone?

What do I need to do to get out of my comfort zone?

What am I going to do about it?

I hope your day is contented but not too comfortable.

#### CURES FOR COASTING

Look in the Mirror

Decide to make a difference

Decide to go to the house,

Learn something new

Move to something else

Rearrange your office and desk

Tear up your notes and sound again

Don't be half-assed.

The **Mongolian wild ass** (*Equus hemionus hemionus*), also known as **Mongolian khulan**, is the of the. It is found in southern and. It was previously found in eastern and southern before being extirpated there through. As of 2015, the Mongolian wild ass is listed as by the. Current population estimates are approximately 42,000 individuals in Mongolia and around 5,000 individuals in Northern China.

# Chapter Thirteen

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## SAIL OUT

**T**he safest place for a ship is in the harbor, but ships are not made for that purpose.

Go for it, Man!

Living a regret-free life

**Quote: book. It's going to be another good one. There is a saying my family has always used, and it's proven true time and time again. 'Be a glad I did and not a wish I had.' Living this way has eliminated a lot of guilt in the aftermath of any time it was used.**

**MARK TWAIN**

**20 years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do. Throw off the bowline.**

**Sail away from the safest harbor. Catch the wind in your sails.**

**Explore. Dream. Discover. - Mark Twain**

3T Nimitz on Risk

REFERENCE

Twenty years earlier, as a student at the Naval War College, Nimitz had written his thesis on naval tactics. In it, he argued that “great results cannot be accomplished without a corresponding degree of

risk.” “The leader who awaits perfection of plans, material, or training will wait in vain,” he wrote, “and in the end will yield the victory to him who employs the tools at hand with the greatest vigor.” In the last week of May 1942, Nimitz staked everything on an unequal contest with the enemy’s main battle fleet. It

The Fear of Failure

But what if I fall flat on my face.

Keep up.

Fall seven times

# Chapter Fourteen

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## Go to the Funeral

Yes, You heard me go to the funeral  
When there's a death among your family or friends, acknowledge  
it.

There are all kinds of ways to acknowledge that a special person has  
both lived and died. We'll mention those later.

Human nature is that we avoid death.

We don't like to mention it at all if possible.

That's why it's so important

We don't like to admit it's real.

We avoid it.

But death is, excuse the pun, part of life.

Go to the funeral.

Your loved one will never forget that you were there.

You showed.

I've heard many a country woman, tears in her eyes, say, "I still name  
every person who came to Daddy's funeral.

It's the showing up that matters.

I hear the excuse, "Well, I'd go, but I don't know what I'd say.

At that moment, people don't need words. They need the presence of a group of friends gathering around them.

In fact, the less you say, the better.

I love you.

I care for you

I'm sorry for your loss.

Then shut your mouth, give them a big hug, and move along.

You are practicing the ministry of presence.

Resist the urge to use irritating platitudes such as "God just needed another flower or XXXXX. I resist the urge to thump a person on the back of the head when they start.

I love you. I care for you. I'm here for you. I'm praying for you.

You can bring great comfort to the grieving.

When the Space Shuttle Columbia came apart over east Texas, and the long search for remains and pieces dragged on, NASA Mailbags filled with letters of appreciation, support, and encouragement, mostly from children, arrived at the collection centers and at Johnson and Kennedy. They were unanimous in their sentimental messages. *We're sorry for your loss. We're praying for you. We believe in you. Keep flying.*

Southern funeral practices are changing rapidly. Usually, the wake is held the night before the funeral, thus allowing working people to come and give their respects.

The trend now is to combine the two- the visitation followed by the funeral.

If I must choose between the wake/visitation and the full funeral service, I'll attend the wake. There's a better chance to visit with the family.

Oftentimes, time, distance, and opportunity will prevent your presence.

There are numerous ways to express your sympathy. Flowers, a memorial gift, sympathy card, or handwritten note.

Even a heartfelt text beats silence.

A phone call. There's something connective about hearing an empathetic voice.

I've found that the grieving appreciate a call or text several weeks after the funeral, which assures them their loved one isn't forgotten.

I always record both birthdays and death dates on my iCalendar. It doesn't take a moment to text, "Hey, it's your Daddy's birthday. I know you miss him badly.

All of these small acts of kindness are multiplied at a time of death.

Go to the funeral.

If you can't, do something.

It's the Pineywoods way.

# Chapter Fifteen

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## DREAM STEALERS AND JOY KILLERS

**K**ENDALL

They're out there waiting for you.

They're joy killers/stealers.

They're dream stealers/killed.

Run as fast as you can from them.

But they'll still find your forwarding address.

That's what dream stealers and joy killers try to do.

Track you down and pour a bucket of cold water on your joy or dream.

Don't let them derail your dream.

Becoming a full-time writer.

A Restaurant that *only* serves Chicken Fingers? The business plan received the lowest grade in a college class because the professor said it wouldn't work. When he tried to get loans, the banks said no, but Todd wasn't giving up.

HORSE FARM



## CHICKEN TENDERS

My niece, whom I love dearly, had gone through a painful divorce. She was living in the Sahara desert of a good place to find a good man: at the dead end of Clayton Iles Rd.

Then she met Eric.

They fell in love through a Christian internet dating service.

Eric had been searching on this site for years.

It was Kendal's first day on the site.

Then they met.

And they fell in love over the telephone.

Talking every night late, sharing about their lives, children,

During this time, she kept her developing friendship with Eric a secret.

For months, they kept talking

Kendal kept it to herself.

She knew the Dry Creek naysayers would jump all over this internet romance one thousand miles apart.

She checked him carefully through his social media posts.

He checked her out, too.

There were no red flags.

These conversations went on for months.

When she announced to our family and the world that she was in love and would soon be going to meet him in Florida.

I only had one bit of advice for her, "Kendal, don't let anyone steal your joy."

There are plenty of people who love pouring cold water on things, especially an unusual romance like this. I knew they'd be waiting.

"Kendal, you're the happiest I've seen you in years. You've got your joy back, but let anyone steal that job.

Don't let them take/steal your joy.

There were probably those who did try to slow her down. Most meant well.

In the months leading up to her and Eric's wedding, I'd see her and whisper, "Don't let anyone steal your joy."

She'd smile. "I haven't."

She and her daughter made a big step. They moved to Florida.

Two families attempted one of life's toughest challenges: blending two families with children into one.

It wasn't easy.

Most things like this aren't.

But they did it. Well, they're still doing it. It's a process. It's a journey.

Kendal returned for a visit recently.

I hugged her. "Don't let anyone steal your joy."

"They haven't."

# Chapter Sixteen

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## HIGH EXPECTATIONS

“I have to live with myself, and I want to be fit to live with.”  
– Edgar Guest

Have high expectations for yourself.

And channel those high expectations for others.

Stimson on trust

As a learning leader, I discovered a powerful tool for leading young people. At the end of a long workday, I'd be surrounded by a tired group of teenage staffers and assign a group task.

I'd always end with, “I want to thank you in advance for doing this.”

It had a magical effect. Whether to a single worker or a group, they responded to “I want to thank you . . .” the result was a completed job done well.

I was learning the power of high expectations. If you expect the best of others, you'll usually get it.

I also realized another thing: people don't like to let us down.

They don't want to disappoint you, especially when you're depending on them.

The summer staffers had a vaudeville act, making fun of my sayings and gestures.

When one of them seriously quotes, "Now, I want to thank you ahead ..." the entire staff would burst out laughing. I laughed along with them but always said, "Well, there's at least one thing you'd listened to me on."

As a teacher, I worked for a unique principal named Jimmy Barrett. Mr. Barrett was what I call a "Quiet Leader."

He let teachers know what he wanted and got out of your way to let you do it.

He gave this young science teacher the greatest gift a leader can bestow: he trusted me.

I would've crawled on broken glass or drank a beaker of hydrochloric acid ( $H_2Cl_2$ ) to avoid disappointing Jimmy Barrett.

He didn't have to scream or push his weight around.

He led by the power of high expectations.

Have high expectations for yourself as well as those around you.

# Chapter Seventeen

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## The Power of a Handwritten Note

**L**iving gratefully/Living compassionately

Writing and receiving handwritten notes and letters are relics of the past.

Things that are rare become extremely valuable in the currency of money and life

That's why the power of the handwritten note has never been more valuable.

gratitude/Encouragement

Comfort

Affirmation

5 minutes

Make your tools convenient

a blank postcard blank on the side and blank on the reverse side for address and postage.

A pen

A stamp

You can find practically find anyone's address using Google.

Write that note.

Stamp it.

Send

It takes about five minutes.

It will be treasured for a lifetime.

Recently, when I met a former student of mine from my earlier years as a high school teacher, he pulled out his billfold and showed me a dog-eared letter I had written him years ago. The fact that he had kept this short handwritten note reminded me of the power of personal correspondence. This note, sent during a difficult period in his life, still meant something to this student decades later.

Connecting

. John Maxwell calls this ability to build relationships “The Law of Connection.” Maxwell wisely counsels, “You can’t move people to action unless you first move them with emotion. The heart comes before the head.”

There are many ways to build relationships by connecting with others’ hearts, and one of the best is to write short handwritten notes.

“High tech, yet high touch”

” This “high tech/high touch” balance is essential in our ministries.

In his excellent book, *The Tipping Point*, author Malcolm Gladwell shares how the explosion of e-mail and computer-generated communication has created a need for personal correspondence. He

writes, “The fact that anyone can e-mail us for free... creates immunity... and makes us value face-to-face communications all the more.”

I communicate primarily through e-mail and the telephone, which are quick and efficient ways to stay in touch. However, when I really want to thank someone or express a deep thought or inspiration, I get out a pen, a small card, and an envelope. A note connects with people, and the result is often both a deeper relationship and a cherished item that will be reread over and over.

The time spent personally encouraging and thanking others is not wasted but instead invested. Some may say they cannot afford to spend this time, but I reply that they cannot afford not to. Time invested in connecting with others is never wasted.

Seth Godin's innovative book *Permission Marketing* is premised on the following: “In business, we are seeking to turn strangers into friends, and friends into customers.” Personal communication helps the wise camp leader make this leap from stranger to long-time customer/guest/donor. Notes of

appreciation show folks that we value their involvement.

Notes of appreciation

The writer of Proverbs wrote in chapter 3:27 (NIV), “Do not withhold good from those who deserve it when it is in your power to act.”

When we have the opportunity and words to bless someone, we should express our gratitude, concern, or encouragement freely.

A quote from Mark Twain comes to mind, “I can live for six weeks on one good compliment.”

Former President George H. Bush is also known as a great note-writer. According to a Readers Digest article, throughout his career, Bush has followed up on virtually every contact with a cordial response. One surprised person received a warm, calligraphic pat on

the back for lending Bush an umbrella. If a busy president can find time for note-writing, any of us can, too.

One of the keys to staff morale is saying thanks to our workers.

Notes of compassion

In camp ministry, it is the little things done daily that add up to great things for God's Kingdom. As Mother Teresa stated, "We can do no extraordinary things, only ordinary things in an extraordinary way." Making the consistent habit of blessing others by writing notes of appreciation and encouragement will benefit others as well as enrich our own lives.

#### CURRENCY

We live in a high-tech world.

A world of screens.

We're high-tech, but I firmly believe we can still be high-touch.

High tech/High touch.

That's why something written by your hand carries such weight.

It's high-touch



# Chapter Eighteen

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## JOURNALING

**L**ive a Good Story

Live a good story

Vocalize your life

VOCALIZE YOUR LIFE

KEEP A JOURNAL

KEEP UP WITH YOUR LIFE STORY

**The Best Present I Ever Received**

Chapter 7 from *Christmas Jelly* by Curt Iles

It seemed to be a sorry excuse of a Christmas present ever as I unwrapped it.

I now value it as the best I've received.

It was Christmas 1973. I was a seventeen-year-old high school senior.

The present was from my Uncle Bill.

Always my favorite uncle.

He still is.

I held the cheap brown booklet in my hand, wondering what it was.

I flipped it open. It was a blank journal.  
 There was a handwritten note to me.  
 Encouraging me to write about my life.  
 Here’s a portion of what he wrote.

*Write about the things that turn you on– the things you like and the things you love. Also, write about the pain you see and feel– the things that upset you or disturb you. In writing these things down in this, your little book, you will be discovering parts of yourself that lie deep within, next to the soul of your being . . .*

I still have the original note.

It’s still tucked in the journal that I now call Journal #1

It’s still the best Christmas present I’ve ever received.

That first journal sits on the shelf next to the eighty-nine I’ve filled since then.

My first journal. Christmas 1973

Thanks, Uncle Bill.

Most of all, thanks for always believing in me.

Even when I didn’t believe in myself.

That’s what favorite uncles do.

Seasons

“Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time.

He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God’s work from beginning to end.”

Ecclesiastes 3:11 NLT

<https://bible.com/bible/116/ecc.3.11.NLT>

“He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”

Ecclesiastes 3:11 ESV

<https://bible.com/bible/59/ecc.3.11.ESV>

# Chapter Nineteen

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## GRIT PERSEVERANCE

**J**esus set his face toward Jerusalem  
A bad job to do

### **Grit... What is it?**

Today's quote: "I am not the most successful or most talented person in the world, but I succeeded because I keep going, and going, and going." -Sylvester Stallone

I heard a speaker recently refer to it as "DQ." *Don't quit.*

Grit is simply the refusal to quit.

Grit won't quit.

It rhymes, and it's true.

### **Resolve**

This week, I'm thinking about the word "Resolve" and its double first cousins, Grit, Determination, and Perseverance.

"Resolve: to act with determination, boldness, steadfastness, and faith."

Resolve: it's a good word to have in our toolbox.

Don't miss the nuance in Luke 9:51 NKJV Jesus begins his final journey to/toward Jerusalem:

Now it came to pass when the time had come for Him to be received up; he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem.

Notice the words

Time

Steadfastly

Set his face

Jesus gritted his teeth and set his jaw for the journey toward his approaching cruel death.

Other versions touch a different facet of this diamond:

Resolutely set out NIV

Moved steadily onward. TLB

He set his face.

That's grit.

You can see it in the set jaw and focused eyes of a man or woman when they've made up their mind to do a tough job or assignment or dangerous.

"You shall not pass here."

-Gandalf at the bridge of Khazad-Dhum opposing a balrog (fire demon) as the fellowship is about to escape from the mines of Moria as they are being chased by an army of Orcs.

Grit. Wizard standing astride the bridge stamping his staff.

You shall not pass here.

I've been a fan of the hobbits Bilbo and Frodo, Gandalf, and a gaggle of dwarves long before the Lord of the Rings became popular in mainstream culture.

After reading (and re-reading) the Trilogy to my boys, I'm convinced one word describes Tolkien's story: perseverance.

I have a small black booklet I've kept on my shelf for years.

It's titled "Resolve." to act with determination, bold, steadfast, and faithful

Swahili Kusuluhisha

Determination of firm or fixed intention to achieve a desired end

Grit

Firmness of mind or spirit. Unyielding courage in the face of hardship or danger

Perseverance.

Grit.

Perseverance, whether it be burglarizing a dragon's treasure or destroying the ring of power.

The journeys, against all odds, are about perseverance.

Staying the course.

Having grit.

Don't quit on your friends

Your family

Your faith

Yourself

Jon. Edwards Resolutions

Luther "Here I stand

Colonel George A. Taylor on Omaha Beach at Normandy. "Get up and come on. There are only two kinds of men on this beach: those that are dead, and those that are gonna be. Come on. Let's go."

No turning back

No turning back

No retreat, no surrender

Bruce Springsteen

What to do with failure

It's not final

It's not fatal

1-29

Rejection Folder: I am using it to spur me on.

Persistence Nothing In The World Can Take The Place Of Persistence. Talent Will Not; Nothing Is More Common Than Unsuccessful Men With Talent. Genius Will Not; Unrewarded Genius Is Almost A Proverb. Education Will Not; The World Is Full Of Educated Derelicts. Persistence And Determination Alone Are Omnipotent. The Slogan "Press On" Has Solved And Always Will Solve The Problems Of The Human Race." – Calvin Coolidge

Persistence

Curt at DC 1969

GA Camp

THERE ARE THREE TREES THAT ARE INTERLOCKED  
AND IN STEP

GRIT

CHOOSE YOUR HILLS

FINISHING STRONG

Book Finishing Strong Steve Farrar

Thought on Grit and perseverance

Admiral Chester Nimitz:

"We will all of us put our shoulders to the wheel & finish the job as soon as we can."

-Admiral Chester W. Nimitz to Catherine Nimitz

December 31, 1944 By 1945, Japan was a defeated nation.

Jesus: “Keep your hands on the plow. Don’t look back.”

END OF GRIT PERSEVERANCE

# Chapter Twenty

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## PART 2 LOUISIANA GREETINGS

**PART 2 LOUISIANA**



# Chapter Twenty-One

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## INTRO ON Greetings

**I** T'S CALLED GREETINGS.

It's both physical and verbal, maybe more  
IT'S WORTH A CHAPTER ON ITS OWN

SOUTHERN POLITENESS

I want to sound the rallying call for politeness. Politeness and good manners never go out of style.

A rallying call for Southern politens

GREETINGS

Down here.

Where I come from.

We're a little different. We like to do things our own way.

And that includes how we greet each other.

## TERMS OF ENDEARMENT

“If you like people, people will like you.”

It’s my favorite thing about Southern people.

We have ways, some overt, some subtle, of saying I see you as another human being of worth.

I was reminded of this during a recent drive through our McDonald’s for a sausage biscuit. The older lady on the PA called me, “Baby, the cashier window worker smiled as she addressed me as “Hon,” and to top it off, the order window worker called me “Sug.”

As she handed me my sausage biscuit order, I said, “You like people, don’t you?”

“Sug, I sure do.”

I’m thinking about how to spell “sug”, but I know what it means. It’s a shortened term for the endearment of “Sugar.”

Now, you go to the Dunkin Donuts window in Boston, and you won’t hear Baby, Hon, or Sug. They’ll probably file a lawsuit against you.

I once read about the difference in personalities between warm and cold climates. It claimed that residents of warm climates tended to be friendlier and more open.

Conversely, cold weather dwellers tend to be more reserved and, at first at least, cooler, maybe even icy.

I'm not sure I agree with that. I've known Americans who poked holes in the theory.

But I can say this with all confidence. Southerners are warmer people. We're open to welcomes, hospitality, and

That's why they call it Southern hospitality.

This isn't a slam on any other culture. It's just who we are. We make friends quickly.

I love these terms of endearment from Southern women. Most of the women who use them are Black, and I don't take offense at all. It's just their way of seeing you.

#### I SEE YOU GREETING

Acknowledging the presence of another is an INTEGRAL part of our way, and sometimes it's subtle. I write more on that in my chapter, "The 10-4-2 Rule."

It's so simple to greet people.

It can be a nod and a good smile.

You can say, "Top o'the Morning" or "How are y'all doing."

Give a greeting. It doesn't need to be loud, but it should be heart-felt.

How are you today, Sir?

Good morning, Ma'am.

It doesn't bother me a twit if they're my elder or half my age. It's never out of style to be polite.

#### INSERTED

Don't get me wrong: a Pineywoods Man isn't afraid to get in your grill. Just fool with his family, deer lease, talk about his Momma, or try to steal his hunting dog, and you'll be in a scrap to remember.

Being polite has nothing to do with being a pushover.

We always show respect when we're respected. A disrespected pineywoods man will do one or two things: fight, fight, fight.

Most of the time, she'll just sully up and have nothing to do with you. She'll walk away, losing all respect and goodwill.

Neither of these is needed automatically.

A Southern man is usually polite, and this is best shown in how we address people.

Another Southern verbal quality is the overuse of the terms "Sir" and "Ma'am." We're brought up to be polite to our elders. The problem is that we can never figure out who our elders are when we become elders.

So we just call everyone Sir, Ma'am, Uncle or Aunt.

It's a sign of respect, and we should embrace it.

I've observed Southern culture/customs all of my life, and I'm very aware of the sad record we have of addressing Black men. I counter that by calling every man Black or White, even near my age, "Sir."

As in, "How are you, Sir."

Sir is an essential word in our Southern culture. Male slaves, regardless of age, were called "Boy."

"As in, "Hey, Boy, get over here now!"

*It saddens me when I read of the population of Rapides Parish in 1860. There were 15,468 slaves here. 9711 Whites and 291 Free Colored.*

*Cotton was king and slave labor was needed to grow huge plantations. 44 slaveowners had over 100 slaves.*

*I mention this for this reason: Chattel slavery (slave for life) was a grain sin and the stain of it still COATS our Parish.*

*I can't do anything about the past.*

*But there's one thing I can do: view every human with respect and politeness.*

Because of that connotation, I address every black male from 18 to 89 as Sir.

It doesn't cost a dime to do it, and it shows respect to the other person.

To show I have no racial bias, I also address every White man with "Sir."

As in, "How are you today, Sir?"

I love to gauge the reaction.

I've observed Southern culture/customs all of my life, and I'm very aware of the sad record we have of addressing Black men. I counter that by calling every man, even near my age, "Sir."

In the 1860 Census of Rapides Parish, Louisiana, the population was broken down into three categories.

Whites

Free men of color

Slaves

It breaks my heart that most people in my city are descendants of those

As in, "How are you, Sir."

Sir is an essential word in our Southern culture. Male slaves, regardless of age, were called "Boy."

It's no cardinal sin to address people politely.

And I bet he got it from his daddy.

It's also hereditary.

But must be taught or modeled.

Being polite is contagious.

Try it out. It might be awkward at first, but it will convey respect,

Yes, Ma'am, you can do it.

Or is it "Yes, Ma'am, you can do it."?

Or Yes, Yes, Ma'am.

Oh, it doesn't matter. Just be polite

10-4-2 There's a glint in a man's eye when I address him as another man. I see you. You matter.

Something that you don't say conveys something more than words.

I want to address some of those non-verbal clues in the next chapter.

GREETINGS: RESPECT

## **the SOUTHERN NOD and other subtle greetings**

It's very subtle. I call it the Southern Nod. If you're not observant, you'll miss it. It's our unique acknowledgment OF RESPECT and awareness.

A Southern Nod is best defined as tipping your cap/hat without a cap/hat.

My brother-in-law, Charlie Greg Terry, has honed over a lifetime what I call the Southern nod. It's very simple. It's a simple short ssss of the chin with eye contact. It's a sign of respect toward older people and men. Greg does it without thinking. That's because it's a habit, and he genuinely likes people.

It's hard to describe the Southern nod. I call it the tip of the hat/cap while hatless. Tip of the cap without the cap.

You'll know it if you see it.

the two handed clasp

As I traveled the world, I've found that every culture and tribe has its own unique, subtle clues and greetings.

Recently, a younger couple entered Tamp and Grind Coffee. I immediately recognized that they came from one of the Horn of Africa countries (Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea.)

I introduced myself. "Greetings. I'm from Uganda."

I only lived there for three years, but I will always know part of my heart was left in East Africa.

"They smile as I continue, "You're from the Horn of Africa, aren't you?"

They nodded. "Somalia."

Then, the man made a subtle move that most Americans would miss. He lightly tapped his chest three times."

I returned his salute.

I'd made a new friend.

That's an Eastern African way of saying, "It is good to meet you. You are in my heart."

I cherished his sign of beginning a friendship.

In the southern areas of Africa, the handshake is slightly different. A man will shake your hand and then place his other hand on your forearm.

This means, "You have nothing to fear from me. I have no knife or sword behind my back."

I like that.

Just like I am touched by our Southern nod.

Pay attention. You'll notice this and other ways we have of greeting.

A Southern man is normally polite, and this is best shown in how we address people.

Another Southern verbal quality is the overuse of the terms “Sir” and “Ma’am.” We’re brought up to be polite to our elders. The problem is that we can never figure out who our elders are when we become elders.

So we just call everyone Sir, Ma’am, Uncle or Aunt.

It’s a sign of respect, and we should embrace it.

It’s also hereditary.

It’s how we were taught.

Being polite is contagious.

Try it out. It might be awkward at first, but it will convey respect,  
Yes, Ma’am, you can do it.

Or is it “Yes, Ma’am, you can do it.”?

Or “Yes, Yes, Ma’am.”?

Oh, it doesn’t matter. Just be polite

There’s a glint in a man’s eye when I address him as another man. I  
see you. You matter.

I’ll leave out the various hugs, winks, handshakes, and shoulder  
pads that speak loudly in our Southern Pineywoods culture.

In the meantime, I hope your day goes well, Suga.

IN THE END, GREETINGS ARE ABOUT RESPECT.

I SEE YOU.

YOU ARE A PERSON.



IT'D BE NICE TO KNOW MORE ABOUT YOU

# Chapter Twenty-Two

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## GREETINGS GRACIOUS SPEECH

Saying the right thing in the right way at the right time.  
Cc

PROVERBS A WORD APTLY SPOKEN

Excuse me

He was the kind to pay no mind when he was bumped into.

R

Proverbs 25 for November 25

Know when to say nothing.

Nothing speaks quite like silence.

CHESTER NIMITZ, ON A QUIET VOICE

Nimitz

Once he spoke, however, that initial impression of severity quickly dissipated. For one thing, he spoke in a soft voice, sometimes so quietly that people had to lean in to hear him. For another, it became evident

at once that he was genuinely interested in what people had to say. His instinctive empathy became clear to the members of the staff when he met with them for the first time. Many expected a tongue-lashing about the failures of December 7; some thought that, like Kimmel, they would be sent packing. Instead, Nimitz shook hands with each one, looked them in the eye, and quietly asked for their help. He was new to the command, he said, and would rely on them to help him get his bearings so that together they could recover from this setback and win the war. "I have complete confidence in your ability and judgment," he said. It was Nimitz's particular gift to be able to impart to others the confidence that they could succeed. A senior officer said later that it was as if someone had opened a window in a stuffy room. Not only was it a morale booster, but it was also judicious since a wholesale replacement of the existing staff would have led to even more confusion. Still, it was an early example of the fact that, as a longtime friend said of him, "he knew how to deal with people

Words can heal.

Words can kill

REFINED WOMAN

# Chapter Twenty-Three

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## GREETINGS, THE SWEETEST SOUND

**I**t is genuinely the sweetest sound in the world: someone calling out your name.

They have just proven that you are alive.

There are over 7 billion people on earth, but someone took the time to address you by name.

You matter.

At least to that person who took the trouble to know your name.

Something happens when we address a person by their name.

I have a reputation as someone good with names. If you knew how many names I've flubbed, you would laugh at the assertion.

But I am really good with names.

And I'll tell you this: it is hard work.

Discipline and focus  
Here are several steps  
Say their name out loud.  
Ask them something specific about their name.  
People today spell names so unusual; how do you spell yours?  
Repeat their name aloud again.  
Listen.  
Be authentic, but repeat their name again in the conversation.  
When you part, use their name.  
This may sound as if you're overdoing.  
But remember the sweetest sound.  
Then here's the real secret to learning (and remembering names: as quickly as you can, write down their name.  
On a scrap of paper, a napkin, your hand.  
Notate that name in your journal and mention something specific about the person and where you met.  
If you write it down, there's a much better chance you'll recall it when needed.  
I use Apple Notes on my iPhone to record and catalog names. I divide it by location: coffee shop, Bible study, and Rotary meeting.  
If I walk into the coffee shop, I'll scroll through my list of the baristas.  
Combing a greeting with their name always elicits a smile.  
You've noticed.  
But finally, it's hard work.  
Most people aren't disciplined enough.  
But it's worth it.  
The sweetest sound in the world.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

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## The Learned Art of Listening

“It takes a great man to be a good listener.”

— Calvin Coolidge

### **You lose Coolidge**

The Art of Listening

The Habit of Listening

Listening is hard work. It takes discipline.

It costs you something. More than words. It takes the spotlight off the most important person you know: yourself.

We walked and talked over the next five miles before reaching a trail shelter. I shared that I was in no hurry to reach Hot Springs (the next trail town) and planned to camp here. Bill initially said that he was moving on to the next shelter but then put down his pack and asked if I minded company. I told him he was welcome to stay. We visited,

cooked supper together, and were joined just before dark by another hiker.

Wild Thing The next morning, Bill started north before I did. After loading his pack on his shoulders, he came up and simply said, “Thanks for taking time to just walk with me and listen.

THE ARTHow to listen OF LISTENING[SI1]

Being a good conversationalist is an acquired skill. Conversation-  
alist The host was also a great conversationalist, contributing to a  
memorable experience. —Elizabeth Ayoola, *Essence*, 23 Jan. 2024

It takes discipline. It takes an innate curiosity. It takes good eye  
contact and nodding with the head. 14

CURT ILES Good conversation is a series of good questions. Uncle  
Bryant Curiosity It’s incredible what people will tell you about who  
they are, where they live, and their life work.

Just listen. Nod your head. Keep eye contact. Ask questions. This  
may sound contrived, but It isn’t. You cannot fake authentic listening.  
They don’t view it as intrusive. They see it as an interest in themselves.  
And everyone loves talking about themselves.

Good listening isn’t fake. You cannot fake interest in a person’s  
story. I get so many story ideas from visiting other people. Often,  
they’ll use a word or phrase in my journal that may bloom into a  
full-bloom story.

DISTRACTIONS

FIELD NOTES 15 Good listening takes time. It cannot be rushed.  
It must be distraction-free or at least distraction XXXX. minimized.

I spend much of my day on screens, including Laptops, iPhones,  
and iPads. These allow me to create and share what you’re reading  
now. But I put my phone on silent and turn my notifications off. I  
want to give my fellow conversationalists the gift of my undivided  
attention. I try to be practical. ?”

I check my phone to see if it's my wife or family. Assured of no earth-shattering crisis, I put my screen back in my pocket and resume my conversation. I have a friend who is addicted to his screens.

Any is punctuated with a series of calls, which he takes, texts that he reads. It gets pretty lonely sitting in his living room as he scampers in and out.

I'm also embarrassed that I'm not important enough to be connected to others 246[. a Pineywoodsian, I'm committed to a lifetime of curiosity. To be a lifetime learner. To walk up to strangers, introduce myself, and slowly let them tell their stories. Everyone has an excellent, remarkable story within them.

Our job is to listen well and make them comfortable with sharing. Our job is also to see, with our eyes and hearts, the amazing things around us.

AND There's a time for silence. You'd do well to learn when those times are.

ECCLESIASTES

Toth

Perhaps quiet places are rare because too few of us admit how much we need them. Noise seems to be the norm, and we are afraid to demand equal time for silence.

Something that you don't say conveys something more than words.

Overlooking an insult

Someone is trying to draw you into some type of politics during this most divided time in our history.

Silence in the presence of malicious gossip.

Crickets

AWKWARD. Saying something to just fill the air.

It's OK to hold your peace.



SOMETIMES NOT SAYING anything is the ultimate form of politeness

There's a remarkable story about a rural Georgia couple who struck it rich with an oil well.

They moved to Atlanta, and the husband insisted that his wife enroll in a charm school.

After several weeks of class, even her husband noticed the change in her manners, as some of her rough edges had been rounded off.

But the woman's patience and lessons were tested when she was seated beside a braggart at luncheon. The woman began a litany of how large her house was, her fleet of cars, her husband's job, and her son at Harvard. Each story seemed more exaggerated than the last.

Each time the braggart took a breath, our Georgia woman smiled and said, "Isn't that nice?" or "Is that so."

Eventually, the braggart left the table, and a third woman asked, "I can tell you learned a lot in charm school. What would you have called her before your lessons?"

I'd said, "You ain't nothing but a damn bald-faced liar."

Sometimes, silence or careful words show the most class.

You'll seldom regret biting off the tip of your tongue. Carefully choose your time and way of speaking.

Also, how you say something is as important as what you say. Your tone and facial xxxx often convey your words best.

That's the challenge with social media communications. The words are flat and can easily be misconstrued or misunderstood.

I once had one of my supervisors in the school system say that "I could tell someone to go to Hell and make them glad to go."

On being confidential

If I tell you, I'll have to kill you

It's one of the most essential traits of a strong leader.

He can keep things in confidence.

This leads to trust.

Being confidential is also one of the most challenging parts of leadership.

You're going to have a lot of information others don't have, but you cannot share it without breaking confidence.

Sometimes, it will make you look bad.

However, some things drive decisions that will only be known by the decision maker/leader.

You've got to be strong.

Keep it in confidence.

Resist the urge

The importance of trustworthiness

You can't tell anyone.

I won't tell anyone but my wife. I tell her everything. She's more tight-lipped than I am.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

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## PART 3 PINEYWOODS RELATIONSHIPS

**THE PINEYWOODS**

# Chapter Twenty-Six

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## THE UNOFFENDABLE WOMAN

**Y**ou'd like her if you met her.

I call her Deb.

We share a love of nature, whippoorwills, owls, longleaf pines

I can honestly say I've never seen Deb offended, set off-kilter, or lose her cool.

I know she's not perfect, but she seems unoffendable.

She's the unoffendable woman.

That's a good title to have.

What is the unoffendable life?

It's the mark of a person who doesn't easily get bent out of shape. They don't carry a chip on his or her shoulder. They let offenses roll off their back and choose to overlook slights, real or perceived.

The unoffended person chooses not to hold grudges. He understands that there is no heavier load to carry than a grudge.

He believes, "If you like people, people will like you." He realizes that relationships always trump harsh words.

The unoffended man is good-natured. He's chosen to develop the habit of being cheerful.

Webster's Dictionary describes *Good-natured* as "having a pleasant disposition and displaying an easygoing manner, especially in social situations."

The unoffended man oozes *graciousness*.

Listen to Paul's words in Colossians 4:6: *Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.*

You ask, "What is the definition of graciousness?"

I'm unsure, but you'll know when you see it.

As a gracious and unoffended man, Daddy was comfortable in his own skin wherever he went.

He would've been as relaxed and winsome in the Oval Office as he was at the Dry Creek Community Catfish Lunch. "I am just going over Jordan.

The unoffended man doesn't fly off the handle.

To become an unoffended person takes practice. It's a habit like any other.

I'm still working on it. I have a ways to go.

One way I'm learning to be unoffended is the part of writing I detest.

*Rejection letters.*

It's part of the life of a professional writer.

Rejection letters. You'll have a stack of them if you're sending out proposals.

I've learned not to take it personally.

To accept it with graciousness.

Send a nice note to the editor. Trying to glean anything from them and their rejection that can teach me.

*You have no friends. You have no enemies. You only have teachers.*

Additionally, I'm learning to accept life's setbacks and difficulties with a smile, "Oh, don't worry about that. I'll just put it in the next book."

How you look at something goes a long way toward being unflappable and unoffendable.

The confident, unoffended man doesn't have to get in the last word. Sometimes, he chooses to bite off his tongue. He knows that sometimes, the best answer to ignorance is silence.

Because silence can speak volumes.

Living an unoffended life is not a sign of weakness. It doesn't entail being run over, pushed around, or exploited. It is a sign of inner strength and peace.

The unoffended man knows there are hills to die on.

There's a time and place to dig in and take a stand.

But he understands these battles are few and far, so he chooses his battles carefully.

There's no chip on his shoulder.

He attempts to cut people slack, remembering that folks often act a certain way because they have a rock in their shoe.

Richard Carlson's excellent book *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* speaks of this concept of being unoffendable.

Take note of the full title: *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff (and It's All Small Stuff)*.

The unoffendable person overlooks the minor irritations of life.  
You'd like Deb.

Because unoffendable people are rare, they're easy to stop, especially when stuck in traffic or a long checkout line at Hobby Lobby.

I'm still working on it.

I have a way to go, but I'm trying.

I really am.

**“The unoffended life is the best way to live.”**

3T noffendable

Sensible people control their temper; they earn respect by overlooking wrongs.”

Proverbs 19:11 NLT

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

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## FIND YOUR JETHRO

“E very Camp needs a Jethro.”  
-Red Colquitt

When Moses' father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he asked, “What are you really accomplishing here? Why are you trying to do all this alone while everyone stands around you from morning till evening?” Moses replied, “Because the people come to me to get a ruling from God. When a dispute arises, they come to me, and I am the one who settles the case between the quarreling parties. I inform the people of God's decrees and give them his instructions.” “This is not good!” Moses' father-in-law exclaimed. “You're going to wear yourself out—and the people, too. This job is too heavy a burden for you to handle all by yourself. Now listen to me, and let me give you a word of advice, and may God be with you.

When I first heard about Red Colquitt, I knew I had to meet him.



I was the young camp manager at Dry Creek Baptist Camp.

Red Colquitt was a Texas legend. He retired as a long-term camp manager and now serves as a consultant for Texas Camps.

One of my friends said, “You need to have Red come to your camp, but you’d better be ready. He’ll find everything about your camp, good, bad, and otherwise.

Red spent a weekend observing several retreats we were hosting. He carried a small notebook and took copious notes for three days. He looked under tables and measured the length and height of various XXXX.

I was intimidated.

But I knew we needed some solid outside counsel about how Dry Creek could improve.

At the end of the weekend, Red sat down and gave me an in-depth summary of his observations.

He was so kind in pointing out positive things he’d noticed about our staff and facilities. Then, he went over a lengthy list of things we could and should improve.

That weekend, Red Colquitt became a mentor in my life.

He became a Jethro to me and made many successive trips to Dry Creek. He had a perspective that I needed to hear. He also became a friend.

That was the best part of the whole deal.

I believe every young person, especially leaders, needs to surround themselves with mature leaders who will listen, guide, and suggest.

We need those mentors who are willing to pour their wisdom and experience into our lives.

Throughout my life, I’ve been blessed with men and women who took me under their wing and invested in me and the work I was doing.

Even as I am near seventy, I'm still being mentored. Some of my teachers are half my age.

Here are some thoughts

**Find a person** who is good at what you do

Notice what I said, good at what you do.

They're a wealth of experience.

**Surround with someone who will be honest:**

Who'll tell you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear.

Be a good listener.

Notice that I invited him to visit, and we made a conscious decision to take much of his advice.

It takes humility to take blunt advice, but you need it.

I'm not talking about a negative person. They're a dime a dozen and can rain on anyone's parade.

I'm talking about a wise man or woman who will come in, shut the door, pull up a chair, and tell you the truth.

It's called constructive criticism.

They'll get in your face without getting in your face. They'll get in your heart, and the mentor's words and actions will shape you.

Remember, there is a grain of truth in every criticism.

We would all benefit from a life coach.

Not the kind that charges \$100 per hour.

The life coach who sits in front of you each week in church.

She's been through every season of life and has much left to give.

Just call her coach.

Or there's the Vietnam Vet who sits every morning drinking coffee at McDonald's.

I bet he's a wealth of information.

Just call him coach.

**Caveats:**

\*Make sure your honest person knows to come to you in private, and it can be confidential.

\*And they are loyal. They won't go around stabbing you in the back. They won't lower themselves to talk about you with the water cooler crowd. They're confident in their ability to bring their thoughts and concerns to their leader.

*A leader needs a whispering encourager.*

*A leader needs an honest truth-teller.*

*Finally, everyone-leader or not- needs a high-altitude pilot.*

Someone who sees the 30,000-foot view.

They get the big picture. The goals. The purpose.

Excuse the pun, but a pilot who will help you keep your feet on the ground.

**Yes, a leader needs a whispering encourager.**

**Yes, a leader needs an honest truth-teller.**

**And yes, a leader needs a high-altitude pilot.**

Find your own Jethro or Red Colquitt.

They're out there waiting for you.

Like Moses, we all need a Jethro in our life.

“In the end, people appreciate honest criticism far more than flattery.”

Proverbs 28:23 NLT

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

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## FRIENDS AND ENEMIES

**L**LL The most challenging part of adult learning is choosing to learn. LLL. Seth Godin

“You have no friends. You have no enemies. You only have teachers.”

Warnings

Lost their way

autopsies

Examples

Biblical Everything is a lesson

Every day, you are a student.

The semester never ends

The longer I go, the less I know.

**“When an old man dies, a library burns down.**

**—Mali Proverb**

Take careful notes

END OF FRIENDS AND ENEMIES

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

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## LTWBTYFI SHUT THAT GATE

**C**ombine  
This is an excerpt from our upcoming short story collection,  
*Where I Come From*.

"He was a man who went through life oiling squeaky doors."

I call it LTWBTYFI.

Leave this world better than you found it.

Recently, I read about a man who went through life oiling squeaky doors. He carried a small can of three-in-one oil in his pocket and was on the lookout for irritating squeaky door hinges.

It's amazing what a few drops of oil will do on the hinges of any door.

He went through life oiling doors.

Not a bad job to have.

Evidently, it was his calling, and he performed with dedication and commitment.

Someone might say that's such a minor act. Well, they've never had the hair on the back of their neck stand at the shrieking, nerve-shattering sound of a rusty hinge.

Maybe I exaggerate, but you get the picture.

Leave this world better than you found it.

It may be as simple as oiling doors, hugging a child, or mentoring a teenager. Anything we do can be our attempt to make this world a better place.

It need not be a big thing; Mother Teresa said it well, "We cannot do big things, but we can do small things with great love."

Everyone has a purpose to fulfill.

Find yours and *get after it!*

John Maxwell says, "Find your *why*, and you'll find your *way*."

LTWBTYFI

Leave this world better than you found it!

Rickey Robertson.

As I was growing up, I had chores, even as a little feller. My latest historical story is "Son, Shut The Gate"! My Dad taught me a life lesson that I have never forgotten those many, many years ago. And yes, this is a picture of the old stable gate that is still under the old barn built in 1917 by Lum Dowden. Hope you enjoy the story! SON, SHUT THE GATE!

Being raised on a farm in rural Sabine Parish, when I got big enough to help my Dad, I had specific chores. My Dad would go by the "pine pile," where we had a big pile of rich lighter pine, and would take the axe and cut a big pile of splinters. My job as a little feller was to gather up all those splinters, bring them into the house, and put them in a special place on the hearth. The splinters would be used to help

start the fire the following day. Another chore I had when I got big enough was to make sure to bring the old wheelbarrow and park it near the large stack of oak wood. My Dad would load the wheelbarrow up with good dry firewood and would push it near the door on the way back from feeding the stock at the barn in the evening. We would take several sticks inside and stack them near the splinters because that would be what would make a good warm fire on a cold morning!

But I had an essential job...and yes, that was more important than gathering the splinters and helping bring in the wood. Now, remember that in the late 1950s, rural folks all had a good milk cow. Now, a milk cow was a prized possession that provided good fresh milk to the whole family. Plus, from this fresh milk, we would use Momma's churn and churn some fine, rich butter. Boy, it was good on a big hot cat head biscuit! However, the milk cow had to undergo special treatment from the out cows. My Dad would put Sookie, our old milk cow, in a stall just for her. My job was to make sure that, after Daddy got through milking, the gate was closed and latched to keep the milk cow in her stable so she could eat all the sweet feed and hay that was in her feed trough.

But one evening, I got distracted following my Dad around the barn, trying to help him with all the other livestock. I forgot to shut and latch the gate to Sookie's stable! Well, the next day, when my Dad went to check the stock, he looked and was surprised to see Sookie grazing out in the field. And guess what kind of tasty treat she was enjoying? Yes, bitter weeds! Well, before there were ever different flavored types of milk, we had "bitter weed flavored" milk! Well, my Dad came and got me and asked if I had shut the gate and latched it on the milk cow's stable.

"No sir, I got busy helping you and forgot to shut the gate." Well, I learned a life lesson from my Daddy that morning. No, it was not what



you might have thought. He took me over to the gate, and he gave me words I never forgot. "Son always shut the gate," and he walked with me to the gate, and I shut and latched the gate after he had put Sookie back in her stall. Now, due to my mistake, we still had to milk Sookie even though the milk tasted like bitter weeds. All the dogs and cats got fresh flavored milk for the next 3 days! After about 3 days, the milk lost its bitter weed taste, and it was good fresh milk for us to use. But I learned a major life lesson from my Dad right there at that stable gate. I learned to always shut any gate I opened at the barn from that day on. Now, it has been many, many years since then, but when I go now to tend to my stock, and I get to the barn gate, I can still hear Daddy teaching me, "Son, shut the gate." To this day, I continue to shut the gate and latch it no matter how busy I may be. Thanks, Dad, for teaching me something I have never forgotten!

# Chapter Thirty

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## PART 4 DC LA INSPIRATIONAL

PART 4 DRY CREEK, LOUISIANA

# Chapter Thirty-One

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## How's Your Walk?

I'd see him coming and quickly duck behind a camp cabin.

Invariably, this young pastor would find me and grasp my hand as he pulled me into our personal space. I could smell the spearmint on this breath.

"Hello, Brother Curt. How's your walk?"

It was the middle of a hot summer with four camps behind us and four to go. The long days and short nights had taken a toll on me. I was running on fumes.

"There ain't no tired like Dry Creek."

My energetic friend wanted to know how my walk with Jesus was.

"Brother Curt, how's your walk?"

"To be real honest, pastor, I'm kind of limping along at the moment. It's been a long summer."

He meant well. He'd wrap an arm around my shoulder and pray a heartfelt prayer that I'd remain strong in the Lord. That my walk with Jesus would be fresh.

It was such a sincere prayer and I really appreciated it.

Looking back, I realize it was a good question:

How's your walk?"

Are you walking with Jesus?

It's such a good question, and I'm passing it on to you.

How's your walk?

I'm not asking if you never miss church or have a spotless record on your daily Bible reading.

I'm asking, "How's your walk?"

How's your walk with Jesus?

But it's a good question: How's your walk?

I highly recommend him. I've found Jesus to be a good traveling companion

We've walked together for over fifty years and his presence always warms my heart.

When I didn't think I could go on, he grasped my hand and refused to let go.

Just like those two fellow travelers on the road to Emmaus.

How's your walk?

# Chapter Thirty-Two

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## CHOOSE YOUR HILLS CAREFULLY

You only have so much blood to spill  
There are only a few hills worth dying on.  
You can have a beef every day if you choose  
Rapper Beef TALKBACK REFERENCE  
You can get in a fistfight every day.  
Have a beef  
Overlooking  
We talked in Unoffendable  
You only have so much blood

However, there are definite times we should dig in.  
These are bleed-worthy hills.  
Hills worth dying on.  
I can't tell you which ones they are.  
That's a very personal decision.

You can get all kinds of feedback, but there comes a time when a man must choose.

Martin Luther, the most outstanding man of the millennium, said, "Here I stand."

#### REFERENCE

Martin Luther

Here I stand

3T Luther

Martin Luther's speech at the Diet of Worms (also known as the Here I Stand Speech) is considered one of the most significant pieces of oratory in world history. It was given in response to the council's questions on whether Luther would stand by his doctrine or recant. His refusal to recant is a classic defense of personal freedom.

Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms

Emile Delperée (Public Domain)

Martin Luther (l. 1483-1546) was a German theologian, priest, monk, and professor at the University at Wittenberg who began to question the policies of the Roman Catholic Church at a time when the Church's authority was absolute. He was not the first to do so, as there had been earlier movements and figures such as John Wycliffe (l. 1330-1384) and Jan Hus (l. c. 1369-1415) advocating for church reform. The Church was able to silence these proto-reformers, but could not do so with Luther owing to his brilliant use of the printing press, which enabled widespread dissemination of his views and his personal power as a speaker and writer.

Luther never initially intended to break with the Church, only to amend what he saw as abuse and corruption, but when the Church attempted to silence him, as it had with Hus, he stood his ground and, supported by peasants and some powerful nobles, inspired and

informed the movement that became the Protestant Reformation. His speech at Worms is central to the beginning of that movement.

Ad ends in 3

What's right might not be popular.

Jon. Edwards

CHOOSE CAREFULLY

You only have so much blood

[box] **Key Concepts:**

1. We choose daily how we will react to people and situations.
2. The wise person makes careful choices on what to confront or ignore. [/box]

**It's true. A good cur dog can whip a skunk any day of the week.**

However, a smart cur dog won't.

It's simple: you can win the fight and still lose. I've seen dogs carry the scent of skunk for weeks and wallow in dust, mud, and cow manure, trying to get rid of it. If that dog could talk, I believe he'd say, "I won, but it wasn't worth it."

Conversely, if a fellow wants to, he can get in a fistfight every day.

There are folks out there who'll be glad to join you.

We make a choice daily. All day long. Will we get along with others, or will we carry a chip on our soul? (Or is it shoulder? or can it be both?)

We make a choice on how we'll react to the person who bumps into us (or cuts us off in traffic or blares their horn, then gives the one-half peace sign). It's a choice.

We must choose which mountains to die on. Honestly, many of the mountains we make last stands on aren't worth the price.

We must decide what we're willing to shed blood over. Some epic causes and ideas are worth the blood. Others aren't.

Success, happiness, and purpose in life are tied up to wise decisions on the right battles.

**Prayer for today**

*"Lord, as Saint Francis said, 'Make me an instrument of your peace.' Now, I know myself, and I'm prone to being prickly, defensive, and touchy. Remove that from my heart. Help me keep my eyes on you, Jesus, the Prince of Peace. If anyone ever knew what hill to die on, it was you.*

*You wisely walked away from some fights but stood tall and steadfast on the one(s) that counted.*

*Teach me, Jesus. I want to stand firm in you.*



# Chapter Thirty-Three

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## ENCOURAGEMENT

What a good word: *encouragement*. I could list various definitions.

Instead, I'll do what I do (and love) best. I'll tell a story:

The 1936 Berlin Olympics are among the most famous Olympiads of the 20th century.

Its location was Germany.

Its time: Europe was building toward another war, less than twenty years since the last one.

There wouldn't be another Olympics until after the worst war in history ended.

Then, there's the setting: Hitler wanted to use the backdrop of this event to showcase his Nazi party and the country of Germany.

My story is not well-known, but it's worth telling.

The most famous athlete of the Berlin Games was a black American named Jesse Owens. He won gold medals in three running events.

But our story is about what happened in the long jump semifinals.

Owens had fouled on his first attempts at the jump. His approach steps were off, causing him to overstep the foul line at the beginning of the jump pit.

As a frustrated Jesse Owens pondered his final attempt, a fellow competitor approached him.

His name was Luz Long, a German long jumper. Long talked to Owens about adjusting his steps and jump-off point to avoid fouling again.

Using this information, Jesse Owens made a clean final jump and advanced to the finals, where he won the gold medal. Luz Long finished second, winning the silver medal. His advice to Owens probably cost him first place. He expressed no regret over helping a rival.

Jesse Owens remains one of the most famous Olympians of all time.

Luz Long is largely forgotten. He later died fighting in World War II.

But 85 years after his act of encouragement, Luz Long lives on in this story.

Encouragement. It's something all of us can do.

It's something all of us should practice daily.

# Chapter Thirty-Four

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## THE BALANCED LIFE

**D** O WE NEED THIS?

# Chapter Thirty-Five

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## Trade-Offs:

**"There are two things you should never sell: a dog or a gun."**

### **DON'T TRUST A MAN**

Life is full of decisions, and each one you make is a trade-off.

You'll gain some things while losing others.

There's no shortcut.

You'll gain something as you trade off something else.

Seldom in life is any decision "a complete win."

Every gain means some form of pain. A gain will mean some loss.

Trade-off isn't a four-letter word. It's important to weigh those trade-offs before deciding.

Making wise decisions.

Considering the consequences.

It boils down to this: will my decision gain more than I lose?

Will this decision lead me closer to my life goals?

Will this result in a closer walk with God or pull me away?

That's called seeking God's will.

In my seasons of life, God has seemed to work through nudges in my soul and open and closed doors.

As usual, I have a story for everything, including the following about trade-offs.

I'm calling this one "When Two Fools Meet," and my son Clint related it.

The story concerns a prized squirrel hunting dog.

Evidently, a very good one. It was considered the best in the area, if not the entire state.

So good that a man drove from Arkansas and pulled out a thick wad of \$100 bills thick enough in our Pineywoods parlance as "That fella had a wad of cash big enough to choke a dog."

Pun intended.

The man counted 50 crisp one-hundred-dollar bills. "I'd like to buy your dog, and I have \$5000 in cash."

The squirrel dog owner stood silently for an uncomfortable minute before politely saying, "Sir, I'm sorry, but this dog ain't for sale."

They argued back and forth.

Sir, this dog ain't for sale for no price.

The elderly father of the dog owner was sitting on a nail keg observing this conversation.

He shook his head, "It ain't every day that two fools meet. A man who would pay \$5000 for a dog, and another man who wouldn't sell it for that price."

Stories like this are why I love Pineywoods, Louisiana. Some folks might not understand the joy of hunting squirrels with a gifted treeing dog or frown at even eating a squirrel, but I know all about the story. It's because some things are priceless.

Since I come from a dog culture, I suspect the refusal wasn't about the dog's ability but about that deep, nearly sacred connection between a man and his dog.

Some readers will scoff at this story.

That means they haven't had a HEART connection with a dog.

It's a story of priceless things in the rural area I call home.

I know. I owned a gifted labrador retriever named Ivory.

Let me rephrase that Ivory owned me. She wasn't even my dog. She belonged to my son Clint. When he left for Louisiana Tech, Ivory came into my care.

She was the best dog I've ever had. One of the joys of my life was watching her retrieve ducks in flooded timber or a marsh pond.

A retriever is so much more than just a hunting dog. Would I have sold her for \$5000? No way. Some things are priceless.

Even after her retrieving days were over and she limped around on gimpy legs, she was my priceless possession.

*This dog ain't for sale for any price.*

I cried like a baby on the day when Dr. White put her down.

In fact, tears are welling up in my eyes as I'm writing.

I suspect you've got something in your eye, too.

No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader.

The best way to make these tough decisions is to seek God's guidance, list the pros and cons of your decision, and then make the best, most well-informed choice you can.

When my sister Colleen was a teen and faced a difficult decision, she ripped out a sheet of notebook paper and drew a vertical line across the page.

She'd make two headings, "Pro" and "Con."

It was her paper chart that made her trade-off decision.

When I see Colleen, I'm going to ask if she still uses her notepaper chart.

It still seems like a good plan to me.

Some trade-offs are "no go."

Some decisions are automatic no-decisions.

I describe it as the "Now, why would I want to do something that stupid?"

Sometimes, the best decision is no decision.

I'm not going there.

Trade-offs or trade-ins are not an option.

Some things aren't tradeable or worthy of trade-offs.

There is never a guarantee that others will consider your trade-off. You own it. You decide to make and live with.

Additionally, there is no guarantee that you'll see it in a year as a good decision. That's why life is risky and exciting.

I know about trade-offs. In 2012, DeDe and I sold what we had in Dry Creek and went to Africa. DeDe described it well, "after I got rid of that stuff, I've never felt so content."

It wasn't easy, but it was terrific. We knew we were in the center of God's will, and that was a great place to be.

But it was still a trade-off. We were away for the birth of three granddaughters. DeDe lost her brother and father while we were in Africa.

When we returned to America in 2015, we faced another trade-off crossroads. Where would we live?

Most folks, including most of my family, expected us to move back to Dry Creek and build a house on our family land.

But DeDe, who I listen to very closely, said, “We don’t need to move back to Dry Creek. Our families are in Alexandria. We need to live in Alexandria. It’s where our grandchildren are.”

It was a reasonable trade-off. Nothing can balance against being among nine grandchildren weekly.

Sure, I miss the clear night sky,

Openness to watch a sunset or moonrise.

The owls and coyotes at night.

I miss being able to build a bonfire.

The three things I dislike most about living in a city:

1. Can’t build a good bonfire in the backyard.
2. Cannot shoot a .22 or shotgun.
3. I cannot clearly see the stars at night. Living in Alexandria is a trade-off. There are things I miss about country living, but being with seven grandchildren nearly daily offsets it. All of life is a trade-off.



The quietness at the end of Clayton Iles Road. For the first time in thirty years, I don't own a tractor. I miss bush hogging, one of life's most therapeutic chores. I miss my Dry Creek Church family, to which I will always feel close.

Then again, I like being close enough to Home Depot to make two trips in one day and not drive an hour to Texas Roadhouse before standing in line for forty-five minutes.

I've found a new church family that I love deeply.

I will never leave my Dry Creek friends, but living in Alexandria has opened another layer of friends.

I am a man most blessed.

*Trade-Offs*

*They're part of life.*

*They're about counting the cost and making a wise decision.*

To move ahead, you must necessarily leave something behind.

It may mean turning down \$5000.

It's your decision.

No one can or should make that decision.

It's your call.

Trade-Offs. It's the story of priceless things in the rural area I call home.

Where we value things a little differently than folks in Houston or California.

May it always be so.

END OF TRADE-OFFS AND CHOICES

# Chapter Thirty-Six

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## THE FRIENDSHIP LANE

### **T**he Friendship Lane

*The most important trip you may take in life is meeting people halfway.*

—Henry Boye

This story is about two men who refused to lose their friendship over a difference of opinion. It is a story worth telling and one worth remembering.

It's the story of The Friendship Lane in Dry Creek.

It's now an overgrown narrow path. There's little sign that it was once a narrow country road. It is located just east of Dry Creek Camp's property line.

This path separates the land between the pioneer homesteads of Sereno Hanchey and Lionel Green. These two men, now dead for

many years, were descendants of some of the earliest settlers of Dry Creek.

Mr. Rufus Hanchey, Sereno Hanchey's son, took me to "The Friendship Lane" just before he died.

As we stood there, he related the following story: "

*Curt, at some point many years ago, there was a difference of opinion between the Hanchey and Green families over where the property line, running east and west, was between our properties. Each family claimed ownership of land that reached over into the other's present field. Because there was no fence as the dividing line, the actual property line was open to dispute."*

Mr. Rufus continued, "My Dad and Lionel Green had always been good friends, and they valued their friendship more than any piece of land—and showed it by their subsequent actions.

*They met at the very spot where we are now standing and came up with a solution. They declared the disputed ten-foot-wide strip a 'neutral zone.' Each man would build a fence on his respective side of the strip. Together, they agreed on using the strip as a pathway, with neither claiming ownership. Due to this arrangement, both families were satisfied, and no further problem ever occurred."*

As the son of a land surveyor, I've seen some nasty fights between landowners over the difference of a two-foot strip along a fence. Some of the saddest things I've ever seen have been the sight of brothers and sisters falling out with each other over inherited land, going to their graves still holding a grudge.

How sad it is when we let *anything*, material or temporary, break a priceless relationship with our families or neighbors.

My visit with Mr. Rufus reminded me that my own land really doesn't belong to me. He had wisely stated during our visit to the woods, "Son, we don't own this land; it owns us. It really belongs to

God. He's just loaning it to us for this short, finite period of time we call life."

The Friendship Lane teaches me another lesson—if we're going to get along with others, we must give them a little room.

Young people today call it "cutting some slack." If we push against and rub on others, friction will result. Friction always generates heat, and heat can generate the fire of anger that, in time, harms and can ruin longtime friendships.

By simply giving others some space and walking away instead of fighting, the "friendship fences" in our lives can stay mended and in good shape. If we always must "win" by getting our way, we will leave behind a trail of broken relationships, many of them with those closest to us.

I am often reminded of the saying, "You only have so much blood to spill, so choose your battles carefully."

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Darkness is approaching as I leave The Friendship Lane behind.

Glancing back one last time, I visualize Sereno Hanchey and Lionel Green walking their respective fields at dusk as they stop for a visit. Each leans against his own fence, separated by the ten-foot strip of land they share. First, one, then the other, crawls through his fence. They meet in this grassy neutral area where they shake hands and share a plug of chewing tobacco.

They visit until it is so dark you can barely see them. Only from the sound of their soft laughter and low voices can you tell they are standing back there somewhere in the middle of Friendship Lane.

*The wealthiest man in the world is not the one who still has the first dollar*

*he has ever earned. It is the man who still has his best friends.*

*P*

# Chapter Thirty-Seven

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## EMOTIONS:

**J** OYFUL LAUGHTER  
ROSE AND LINDA

THE TERRY JOYCE LAUGH

Why Tamp and Grind is so friendly.

It's Amanda's laugh.

It's contagious.

It's infectious.

The worker's baristas

The coffee drinkers.

It just spreads.

**DON'T FEAR TEARS**

He's one of my dear friends. During one of my bouts with depression, he called me every night.

Every night.

I call him Kev.

And he's a man's kind of man.

He's a big, beefy man.

A real Pineywoods man.

He works in the woods as a forester.

He pastors a rural church.

Best of all, Kev has a tender heart.

His emotions are always ready to leak out as tears.

Manly tears.

Whether he's talking about the beauty of sunrise in a duck blind,  
his children, or the Lord, he'll cry.

That's not a weakness.

I've lived long enough to see the earth turn around where manly  
tears are admired.

I grew up in the "Big boys don't cry" generation.

Men were expected to stoically endure life without showing emo-  
tion.

No tears of joy.

No tears in sorrow.

How sad.

A release. Harvard squall

I've had a dry soul with no tears.

I'll take being weepy with gratitude.

They're the barometer of a tender heart

Joseph wept in deep emotion

JESUS wept

Jess the Junk Hauler

A dry soul has no tears

## **ANGER**

"Title" is from the book *Where I Come From*

### **CHAPTER Pa's Enduring Lesson on Anger**

They've both been gone for nearly half a century.

I was seven and ten, respectively, when my paternal great-grandparents died.

We called them Pa and Doten, and they were the center of our family's solar system.

They each left an enduring lesson that still reverberates in my heart.

As I pass each of these two brief stories on to you, I feel as if they're alive again.

Their influence sure is.

Like the nighttime stars that astronomers assure us burned out millennia ago, the wisdom of our ancestors lives on.

In this chapter, I'm sharing an enduring lesson modeled by my great-grandfather.

Frank Iles, or as we called him "Pa," was a teacher. In his later years, he taught me a lesson I'm still learning.

I was his oldest great-grandchild.

Son of his oldest grandchild.

I was probably about seven or eight years old, playing in the front yard of our beloved Old House in Dry Creek.

Pa was on the front porch reading a Zane Grey western.

Something made me mad, and I threw a fit in full view of my great-grandfather.

Most folks with a short history with me are surprised to hear I have a fierce temper.

They never saw me coach.

It's something I've had to work on all of my life.

Most of all, it's something the Lord has "worked *on me*."

Or maybe He's "worked *in me*."



That long ago day in Dry Creek is when I believe the Lord began smoothing off my rough-edged temper.

As I finished my tantrum, "Pa" called me over, set down his book, and adjusted his green reading visor. "Son, I've been around young people all of my life. I can see you've got a strong temper. You'll need to work on that, or it'll rule your life."

That was it.

I'm sure I returned to playing.

He probably wondered if this young Iles had heard a word of it.

Pa, I'm sixty-two now, and I still remember your words.

Because you were so loved in our family, I respected anything you said.

I listened, and I learned.

In fact, I'm still learning. Thank you for your enduring wisdom.

I now wish to pass this along to my grandchildren: self-control is the ability to react coolly and calmly to any situation. Flying off in anger toward others will result in a trail of broken relationships. Words spoken in anger are often regretted later and seldom come out right.

When anger strikes, it's best to walk away and give yourself some space and minutes (or even hours) to calmly look at the situation. This is especially true in a working marriage. Many times, I've been angry with my wife but found the grace to walk away and go outside or take a walk.

It's amazing that I nearly always realize I'm the source of the problem. I return later to DeDe, and instead of saying angry words earlier, I start with, "You know, I was wrong ..."

It's amazing how this changes an angry tirade into a chance to grow and learn.

Anger has its place in life, but it should never be used as a weapon. The mature man (or woman) will control and channel the anger to

produce something productive. Many of the most significant events in our history began with someone becoming angry at some injustice or wrong.

But it was a slow-burning anger that didn't attack individuals but instead went after the real problem.

Pineywoods men will become angry. The mature ones control it, pray over it, and channel that anger in the direction it can do the most good.

Or a Pineywoods man will also, after he's cooled off, say, "I'm sorry. I was wrong."

That takes a real man to speak those words.

A strong Pineywoods kind of man.

"Am I the kind of man

That you think is strong,

But stand up in a crowd

And say, "I was wrong."

- "Am I the Kind of Man" Toy Caldwell/Marshall Tucker Band

# Chapter Thirty-Eight

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## RUTS

### CHOOSE YOUR RUT CAREFULLY

Choose your rut carefully: you'll be in it for the next thirty miles.

-Sign on Alaskan wilderness road

### GRAVEL PIT ROAD

It's true. I learned in African bush driving that the rut you chose is very difficult to get out of. During the rainy season, dirt roads became paths of deep mud. Whatever rut I decided to follow would pretty well guide me through the next section of the road. With difficulty, you could change ruts, but there was a much greater risk of bogging down or sliding off the road.

It's also true in life. The ruts, or pathways, we choose for our life set the pattern for our direction and movement forward. All of us are prone to get stuck in ruts of habit and comfort.

It's been said that "A rut is a grave with both ends open."

As I'm slowly coming out of my depression, I'm working on some ruts in my life. Please pray that I'll be learning, growing, and changing

as God leads. During the dark times, I still hear the small, powerful voice of God saying, "I'm not through with you."

In addition to these thoughts on avoiding ruts, I want to mention another aspect that I call the rut of influence. It can be a positive or negative force in our lives and especially the lives of others.

I'm reminded of a story from my time coaching high school baseball. The father of our shortstop asked his son, "Why are you wearing your cap low on your forehead?"

The son answered, "Because that's the way my coach wears his."

This sobering thought is a reminder that our influence is both subtle and broad. Others are choosing to follow our lead. What a challenge to make sure our rut of influence leads in the right direction. We can only do this with God's help and power.

This is especially true with our children and family members. Without words, they are adjusting their ballcap to what they see in our lives. That is why a daily growing relationship with God is essential. By following God, others can follow us in a positive direction.

We don't have to be perfect; we are just committed to growing and learning and leaving a rut worth following.

"Lord, help me set the right example for those who are following after me. I need your power and guidance to do this. Amen."

*"You are the light of the world . . . let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."* -Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:13-16)

I grew up down Clayton Iles Road.

Notice I said down, not on.

Our road turned off Hwy 113, several miles south of Dry Creek.

It was a dirt, one-mile-long dead-end road. That's significant to who I am.

In my boyhood, it was an unmarked, unsigned road.  
A simple one-mile dirt road.  
Muddy during wet weather rutted  
One of my uncles once put up a hand-lettered sign,  
“Choose your rut carefully because you’ll be in it for the next mile.”  
That sounds like the start of another good story: *Choose your rut carefully.*

To really understand me, we’ll travel to the end of Clayton Iles Road.

A dead-end road has its own personality. When we’d hear traffic crunching along the gravel, we knew one of two things was true: they were coming to see us or were lost.

Living at the end of a dead-end road gives one perspective. It’s where it all started for me.

At the end of the road is the

# Chapter Thirty-Nine

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WHO ARE YOU,  
MAN?

# Chapter Forty

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## T.O.B. TRANSFER OF BLAME.

**M**y friend, Warren Morris, shares about Coach Skip Bertman's favorite acronym: T.O.B.: "Transfer of Blame."

That's when the apology explodes. "I'm sorry. Please forgive me, **but . . .**"

Transfer of blame often has the dangerous *but* lurking in the apology.

"But you made me do it." No one can make you do anything. Look in the mirror!

**I've waited all day to say this: "Get your butts out of here!"**

Don't do it, man. Put a question mark at the end of your apology, not a comma.

T.O.B. Transfer of Blame. It's human nature to want to blame someone else. It goes back to the Garden, but that doesn't make it right.

No "But" "No T.O.B."

Do this: "I am so sorry. Will you please forgive me?"

## END OF TOB

“TOB” comes from my short story collection,

*I hope it will encourage you to never have a loser's limp.*

T.O.B. Transfer of Blame

r apology, not a comma.

T.O.B. Transfer of Blame. It's human nature to want to blame someone else. It goes back to the Garden, but that doesn't make it right.

No “But” “No T.O.B.”

Do this: “I am so sorry. Will y

“You made me do it.”

## The Loser's Limp

If it's to be.

I was amused when I described a facet of Ugandan phrases.

“That coffee of coffee? It fell off the table.”

They'd knocked it off with a careless elbow, but it was still,

“It just fell off the table.”

Don't get too haughty; Africans don't have the corner on T.O.B.

It exists everywhere

But that doesn't make it right.

**Nobody likes a whiner.**

Someone who's always complaining about something.

As my Paw Paw would say, “Some people would complain if you hung 'em with a new rope.



Don't be a whiner.

Don't be a SERIAL complainer.

Both whining and complaining are habits.

Bad habits.

Whining is also contagious, just like chickenpox.

If possible, I avoid compulsive whiners.

If I can, I run.

What is a loser's limp?

I told you before that I am reading a book called "SEE YOU AT THE TOP."

I encountered the actual situation in my life that I think is in everybody's life

Zig Ziglar called it loser's limp; here is the story:

**Zig Ziglar:**

*"You know what the Loser's Limp is if you've ever attended a football game or watched one on television. [Incidentally, the last time I saw the local team play, I knew they were in trouble when the punter signaled for a fair catch on the snap from center.] The offensive player slips behind the defensive player, reaches up, pulls in a pass, and heads for the end zone. The defensive man quickly recovers and takes out in hot pursuit. When the offensive player gets about 20 yards from the end zone, the defensive player realizes he's not going to catch the man with the ball. Everybody in the stands knows it, too. So, the defensive player frequently pulls up limping, and the people in the stands say, "Well, no wonder the poor guy couldn't catch him." Look, he's crippled." Now that is his Loser's Limp. What is yours?"*

**From the Free Dictionary:**

loser's limp

1. *sports*: An affected limp in one's gait that is done to disguise the reason why one has failed or made an error.

*The wide receiver let the ball slip through his fingers, tumbled to the ground, and got up with a loser's limp.*

2. By extension, an excuse or source of blame that one provides, either to oneself or to others, in order to justify one's inability to achieve something or perform to the highest possible standard.

*A: "Look, I'd love to pursue a more meaningful career, but I just don't have time to learn the skills I would need." B: "Don't start leaning on that loser's limp. Everyone has time to learn something new—but you've got to have the motivation and determination to do it."*

# Chapter Forty-One

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## GRATITUDE

**R**ead and glean this  
Read through all gratitude posts

-Willie Nelson

"When I started counting my blessings, my whole life turned around."

INSERTED GRATITUDE COMPLETE FILE AS OF 10 FEB

THANK YOU

I'M MUCH OBLIGED

I APPRECIATE IT

THIS MEANS THE WORLD TO ME

WRITE A NOTE

**I love this quote:**

**"Lord, you've given me so much. I ask You for one more thing:  
a heart of gratitude."**

**Thanksgiving.**

**A Word from Curt at The Old House.**

**As we approach Thanksgiving, my goal is to live gratefully.**

**Living Gratefully involves:**

- 1. Being aware of the people who make our lives so rich and returning this love to them.**
- 2. Realizing that every good gift we have comes from God and thanking Him.**
- 3. Having a grateful heart and therefore cutting others slack.**
- 4. Remembering that Thanksgiving is not a day, but an attitude.**

I'm so thankful for readers and friends who allow me to write and publish independently. Although I've yet to receive a "traditional contract" from a large publishing house, I've been privileged to write twelve books that have sold thousands of copies and touched so many folks. I am grateful to God for this.

This video is how I feel about those of you who are helping publish which is going to be our best book yet!

Today is a good day to "jump start" an entire month of gratitude to God through Christmas Day.

It need not be limited to the fourth Thursday in November.

It's an attitude.

It's much more than a day.

It's Thanksgiving.

Jailbird-Apostle Paul wrote from a Philippian prison:

'In everything give thanks . . .'

And:

"Every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father above . . ."

You'll enjoy my brief YouTube video on "My Most Memorable Thanksgiving."

The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the Lord has made them both. Proverbs 20:12

Every blessing we have is from God, including our five senses. Thanking Him for these things is part of living a Gratitude-Filled Life.

My vision and hearing are not what they were when I was a younger man, but I'm so thankful to have them both (and I'm grateful for reading glasses.)

I'll never forget the look on the faces of tsunami survivors in Indonesia when they tried out the eyeglasses we brought. There was a look of delight and joy. They were thankful in spite of their significant losses. I want to live that Gratitude-Filled Life.

I want to be more thankful that I can see sunrises and my grandchildren.

I want to be more thankful for hearing birdsongs and the wind in the pines.

I want to appreciate that I can feel both pain and the rough bark of an oak tree.

I want to thank God for the gift of smell. What are your favorite odors?

Mine are mown hay, plowed dirt, bread cooking, my wife's hair, and the complex smells\* of a little baby.

\*Baby powder, baby shampoo, milk, and other unmentioned smells/odors that are still blessings.

I want to thank God for taste. From the burning of a Coca-Cola, the pleasure of biting into shrimp, to the taste of that morning coffee, God is worthy of our gratitude.

Wishing you a gratitude-filled day.

**XXXX**

Small dirt-floored church in a northern Kenyan refugee camp.

Hundreds of South Sudanese crowded in for worship.

It's time for the offering. In African culture, you come forward to give your offering.

A long line of mostly women and children (the men are off in the war or trying to protect their homes and farms from the fighting).

Several women pour grain into a pot by the offering plate.

My Sudanese pastor friend whispers, "They don't have money, so they give part of their grain allotment."

I'm touched because I know something: the UN gives refugees a computed 80% of caloric needs for the month. You get your sack of grain, and it has to last until next month.

Watching these ladies pour out their grain offerings to the Lord, I'm humbled, touched, and ashamed.

This is the picture of sacrifice.

The widow's mite.

How can I ever return to the land of 55-inch televisions, \$20,000 weddings, and the long pet aisle at Walmart?

I'm not implying that any of the above American extravagances are wrong.

Just that I'll never be able to enjoy them again.

Without reflection.

Without reflecting on the grain offerings at Kakuma 2 Baptist Church in the barren desert of northern Kenya.

A word to live by: Gratitude.

Today, I'm thinking about gratitude.

It's such a powerful word.

It's more than simply being thankful for one event or blessing.  
 It is an attitude that should permeate every second of our lives.  
 It's an attitude of gratitude.

A thankfulness that flows out of the heart and examines every detail  
 of our lives in the bright light of gratitude.

Gratitude is a first cousin once-removed from grace.

Like grace, gratitude humbles us and helps us realize that "every  
 good and perfect gift is from above..." (James 1:17.)

**The best lesson** I was ever taught on living with gratitude wasn't  
 learned in a book or sermon.

It came from my lifelong friend Vance Gill. (I always tell my guitar-playing friend Vance that he is only one vowel from being famous.)

Vance related this: 'Once I had a water leak at my well. I spent all morning digging and repairing the pipe. As I knelt there in the mud, I just stopped and thanked God I had running water.'

Now, that is gratitude.

It's an attitude.

Thanks, Vance, for the lesson.

Like Vance, we're to look for blessings in every event. Paul, who wrote from many a jail cell, said, "In everything give thanks." (I Thess. 5:18)

Theologians are divided as to whether this means we're to be thankful for (seemingly) bad things or to maintain thankfulness in spite of our circumstances. (Did he mean "in everything" or "in every thing?")

I think they're both right.

Just like any good habit, living with gratitude takes practice.

I'm going to be practicing the art of thankfulness today.

Why don't you join me?

**Thankfully,**

Curt Iles

*Giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Ephesians 5:20. -Unknown*

"Let us remember that as much has been given us, much will be expected from us, and that true homage comes from the heart as well as the lips and shows itself in deeds." -Teddy Roosevelt.

### **A Prayer for Thanksgiving**

I thank Thee, Lord, for blessings, big and small;

For spring's warm glow and songbird's welcome call.

For autumn's hue and winter's white snow shawl.

I thank thee for a harvest rich with grain

For tall trees and quiet shadowed lane;

My country's land, the mountains and the plains.

I thank thee for each sunset in the sky

For sleepy nights, the bed in which I lie;

a life of truth and peace, a woman's hand,

Her hand in mine until the day I die.

I thank Thee, Lord, for all these things above;

but most of all, I thank Thee for Thy Love.

**-Ralph Gaither**

**Written while a POW in North Vietnam**



# Chapter Forty-Two

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**EMOTIONS:  
LAUGHTER/TEARS**

# Chapter Forty-Three

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## Receiving and Giving Gifts/Compliments

**I**t's simple.

With appreciation.

With joy.

With gratitude.

Don't fiddle around with "Oh, you shouldn't have . . ."

Or "How much did that cost?"

Or, the joy-killer, "I've already got one of these."

Just say thank you.

Tell them how much you appreciate their gift,

**I will cherish this and place this ... because it's from you.**

**Accept that gift with grace and gratitude.**

*I learned so many valuable lessons living in African cultures  
for three years.*

*I learned that among the dozens of tribes we worked with, there was a RITUAL:*

*If you were given a gift, you must accept it with a sense of gratitude.*

#### RECEIVING COMPLIMENTS

*"Oh, it's nothing."*

*"Aw. Anybody could do it."*

*DeDe learned this firsthand as we traveled into the Ugandan bush.*

*Every roadside policeman drooled when they saw our white faces approaching in our Toyota Land Cruiser.*

*They'd flag us to the roadside and begin the subtle African dance of squeezing a bribe.*

*DeDe found a unique method to deal with these uniformed bandits,*

*She'd bake a basketful of banana bread.*

*When the policeman was in stride with his bribe spiel to the Mzungus, she'd hand him a loaf of saran-wrapped banana bread.*

*The reaction was always memorable.*

*The policeman, holding his loaf in his hand, struggled for words. In African culture, it is a maxim that you must accept every gift with grace and humility.*

*He'd glance at his bread and shout, "Men, open that gate and let Mzee (Elder) through."*

*As we hustled away, DeDe wryly said, "Yep. He wanted bread but not the kind we gave him."*

*We laughed for the next ten dusty miles.*

*Yes, there's only one way to accept a gift: with gratitude and an open palm.*

*Different version*

Knowing we'd be stopped when we traveled up-country, DeDe devised a novel plan: We carried three things in our vehicle: bottles of water, Bibles in several dialects, and fresh banana bread.

It's another part of African culture: you cannot refuse a gift.

A loaf of DeDe's homemade banana bread always did the trick. We enjoyed the surprised look of a policeman holding a loaf of fresh banana bread in his outstretched hand, motioning with his free hand, **"Open the gate and let Mzee through."**

He had his bribe, and I was on my way north. I thanked him as we sped away.

I'd glanced in the rearview mirror. Five policemen were standing at the gate, hands on their hips. One had a loaf of banana bread in his right hand.

As they say in Swahili, Kwaheri.

# Chapter Forty-Four

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## FRIEND- COLLECTING

### **F**RIEND-COLLECTING

I've always been a friend-collector.

It's who I am.

More importantly, I've been a friend-keeper.

Some of my best friends today I MET AS A CHILD.

I learned it at the feet of two of the most important people in my life: Clayton and Mary Iles.

"Curt, you can't have too many friends."

Enjoy meeting people. Everyone has a story to tell. Tell me more.

A stranger is a friend you haven't met yet.

It's how you view people.

Each season and step of my life, have friends.

You cannot have ongoing friendships with everyone you meet, but there should be friendships you've kept from every stage.

Dry Creek

The African bush

Alexandria

EXCERPT FRIEND-COLLECTING JOE CHANEY

There was a fine crowd at Joe Chaney's funeral and just as many at his wake the night the night before.

And both crowds consisted of country people.

Camp Tabernacle

That's because Joe Chaney was a country man,

And that's no sin. Being country.

As I left the wake, I noticed there were many more trucks than cars.

I was among my people.

I had the privilege of giving an eulogy at Joe's service.

It was a fine funeral replete with many fine stories and laughter.

It's the only funeral I've been to where rooster fighting was mentioned.

Only in Dry Creek.

Joe's stepson Trey shared how Joe had assured him that Jesus was his savior. I was deeply moved.

From the podium, I scanned the large crowd. "If I'm correct, there's not one man here today with a necktie.

A whisper of laughter

Except Joe.

Laughter.

"Now, let me make it clear. Joe's not wearing a tie in the casket. He's got his work shirt on."

I no at the large portrait of Joe to the right of his casket. "He's got a necktie on. Joe Chaney's the only one here with a tie.

His wife Linda told me the portrait came from a photo taken of Joe on a cruise. You had to wear a tie to get to the buffet.

I closed my remarks. Looking at the crowd of men and women, I said, “Joe Chaney had lots of jobs in his life, but his real job was collecting.

He was a friend-collector.

I’m going to miss Joe Chaney when this book is published. He was an avid reader of my works.

I always ensured that he got one of the first copies.

In the following week, he’d comment on his favorite stories. I took his words very seriously. Joe came from two legendary branches of the finest Louisiana country storytellers, the Chaney and Cady families.

Yes, he was my friend.

A real friend-collector.

One of my priorities is being a friend-keeper.

To my knowledge, I’ve never lost a friend.

That’s a lot to say for a former principal and Mzungu.

If you like people

It’s the most effective billboard I’ve seen.

It’s so effective that I’ve never forgotten.

It profoundly affected me.

**End of FRIEND COLLECTING**

# Chapter Forty-Five

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## LIFTING THE BARN COMBINE WITH GIVE-AND-GO

**H**ey, I've got to do this myself, and I can't do it alone,  
Herman Ostrey's barn

**Lifting the Barn. Together, we can do it.**

**Is my favorite "Pamoja" story:**

Herman Ostrey's barn floor was under twenty-nine inches of water because of a rising creek. The Bruno, Nebraska farmer invited a few friends to a "barn raising." He needed to move his entire 17,000-pound barn to a new foundation more than 143 feet away. His son Mike devised a latticework of steel tubing and nailed, bolted, and welded it on the inside and the outside of the barn. Hundreds of handles were attached.



After one practice lift, 344 volunteers slowly walked the barn up a slight incline, each supporting less than fifty pounds. In just three minutes, the barn was on its new foundation.

Pamoja.

Together.

**It is summed up in this statement: I have to do this alone, and I can't do it by myself.**

As a writer, I've learned to hand off tasks that I'm not very good at.

I can spend a frustrating hour on my laptop when the problem can be solved with only two keystrokes.

They're helping me lift the barn.

Writing a book is always a team effort. I live by the wise words, "A writer needs friends before he needs readers."

One, two, three, lift.

Delegate

Allow others to help. It's incredible how many people are willing, able, and talented and love to be in on different steps in writing a book.

I gladly pay for some essential steps. I want quality in anything I turn out.

Recently, I read this, "A well-made and well-written book can change the world around it."

I can do neither without fellow lifters.

One, two, three, heft.

Pamoja,

Curt

End of barn

GIVE AND GO

# Chapter Forty-Six

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## LEADERS EAT LAST

“Service is the price we pay for breathing air on this planet.”  
Thoughts on Servant-Leadership

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” Mark 10:45

I’ve recently discovered a fascinating book, ‘Leaders Eat Last’ by Simon Sinek. The book’s premise comes from the United States Marine tradition, where officers will wait until the enlisted men are served.

Leaders eat last.

I’ve been fascinated with leadership for my entire adult life. It’s a subject that shapes families, organizations, sports teams, and even countries.

It’s challenging to define effective leadership. Suffice it to say that when you see good leadership, you know it.

Authentic leadership is not some boss or head honcho lordling it over others. Good leadership is inevitably about servant leadership.

As in, leaders eat last.

A true leader puts the team ahead of themselves. This results in a connection and commitment where the team will follow that leader anywhere.

It's servant-leadership.

I recently read a deeply touching passage from *The History of Israel* by Martin Gilbert. The setting is the 1948 Israeli-Arab War. Superior Arab forces were overrunning an Israeli platoon when their leader, Simon Alfasi, issued an order, "All privates will retreat while commanders give covering fire for their withdrawal."

The enlisted men all escaped to safety. Captain Alfasi and his fellow leaders were killed while protecting their comrades.

His order, "All privates will retreat; all commanders will give covering fire," became the watchword for the young Israeli army. It is still baked into the DNA of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF).

Privates to the rear. Commanders give covering fire.

That's servant leadership in the most profound sense.

A willingness to lay down one's life for the man beside you in the fight.

In its most profound sense, Servant-Leadership is what Jesus lived and taught.

Many scholars view Mark 10:45 as his mission statement:

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Over and over, Jesus taught about servant-leadership: the first shall be last, love one another as I have loved you if anyone would follow me . . . .

One of my favorite passages is from Jesus's words in the Gospel of John, "Greater love has no man than to lay down his life for his friends."

Jesus lived out his teaching on servant-leadership when he willingly laid down his life as a ransom for our sins.

A true servant-leader is never about getting.

It's always about giving.

It's never about looking out for number one.

It's always about serving those around you.

Giving and serving. Probably two of the finest verbs in the English Language.

Yes, Servant-Leadership.

How do you recognize this type of servant-leadership?

You'll know it when you see it.

Surround yourself with good people, including these three key people on your team.

# Chapter Forty-Seven

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## PART 5 SWAMP SPIRITUAL things

### PART 5 CROOKED BAYOU SWAMP

I grew up in an unusual part of Dry Creek.  
The Old House porch steps

wandering the swamps

the Bible was meant to be read outdoors

# Chapter Forty-Eight

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## Take a Knee

I 'm gonna fall down on my knees  
And praise The Lord for bringin' me peace

I'll lift my hands in His company

For you know, I am grateful

For what He has done for me.

– “On My Knees”

Red Clay Strays

I'm not talking about prayer. I'll cover that later.

The purpose of taking a knee is for a quiet time of meditation.

Silent,

Alone. Shut the door.

Taking a knee is a very private time.

Don't do anything.

Just be silent.

Take it in.

Meditation gets a bad rap.

It has nothing to do with navel-gazing or Hindu mysticism.

Meditation is simply about being still and quiet. Letting the inner stillness in you silently speak.

There's no time limit on taking a knee, but I'll warn you: when you start doing it daily, your time in meditation will become longer.

It's habit-forming.

I like how King David said this, "Be still and know that I'm God."

That's coming from a man who spent the early years of his life alone as a shepherd.

Be still.

Here's my second maxim: when you really get silent for a period, you'll sense God's presence.

Be still and know

It's a private and personal thing for each man and woman.

And when you feel God's presence, don't think you've got to start babbling.

A big part of prayer is listening. Listening to that still small voice.

Then, pray to God. Tell him what's on your mind, no matter what. He's a Big Boy and can take on anything you bring to him. He's also a Big God who works in our lives when we pray.

Before we move on, A word on posture.

Taking a knee is the best posture for prayer. It brings humility. Submission. You're acknowledging there's Someone much more significant than you.

But there's no requirement for the posture of prayer.

You can be walking,

Behind the wheel of your vehicle.

In a deer stand.

Standing over the sink washing dishes,

*Be still*

*And know that I'm God.*

There's an extreme posture scattered through the Bible.

Getting prone before God.

Laying your face on the floor prostrate before God.

The young people call it a "sucking carpet."

It's the most humbling and intimate way to come into God's presence.

Getting prone hasn't been a regular occasion habit in my life.

Maybe it should be.

Each time when I've been prone, it's been in the midst of significant movement in my soul.

Often times of great distress.

Disaster. Tragedy.

But I've also fallen prone in times of great joy and thankfulness. At the moment, it felt like the only thing to do,

Before we leave taking a knee and praying, I want to walk you through the steps of growing prayer. These are best started as a child but are applicable at any season of a man's life.

Praying aloud alone.

It does create intimacy when you speak aloud. If you're a single young person, pray for your future spouse. While you're doing that, pray that God will prepare you to be worthy of him or her when your paths finally cross.

Begin the practice of praying with family.

A blessing at each meal.

A bedtime prayer with a precious child.

Then there's the big step: praying in a group.

Praying aloud among a congregation or small group.

It's a big step but a powerful part of your journey.

In the days of old church Dry Creek, men were often called to pray with no prior warning.



“Brother Mosley, would you dismiss us in prayer?”

Men, being caught unaware, might mumble, “Beg to be excused.”

As I grew up, I learned to keep my gun loaded just in case I was called on.

I remembered the adage, “No one’s ever complained about a short sermon or short.

Finally, there’s the most challenging yet rewarding prayer.

It’s praying with others.

Not just, “I’ll be praying for you.”

It’s the next step.

“Do you mind if I pray with you right now?”

“Right here?”

Yep. Right here and now.

I’ve never been refused, and I’ve never seen a person unaffected by a personal public prayer.

Jess was Dry Creek’s junk man. I’d often see him plodding along in his old truck, muffler dragging, and his truck bed piled high with scrap metal.

I knew Jess through his daughter, who had been a student when I was principal. He was a single parent struggling to raise a teenage daughter.

On a blustery March day, we pulled alongside each other in the post office parking lot. We did what Dry Creek people always do at the center of our community: the local rural post office . . . we visited at zip code 70637

As Jess and I leaned on the fence, I asked about his daughter. His face dropped. She’d chosen a wayward path after high school, and they were estranged. He wasn’t even sure where she was living.

His face was a mask of pain, A deep look of dejection and despair.

I felt stirred, but I hesitated. I wasn't sure how this might go with this rough-living man,

"Jess, do you mind if we pray for her right now?"

He glanced around the parking lot. "Right here?"

"Yes, Sir. Right now. I bet God can hear a prayer from a Dry Creek parking lot.

Jess nodded, "Sure."

I put my arm around his shoulder. I don't remember what I prayed. I know it was brief and moving.

When I said, "Amen," Jess looked up.

He had a look on his face that I'll never forget.

Tearful dark eyes bored into my soul.

Tears coursed down my cheeks.

Neither of us was ashamed.

It created an unbreakable bond between me and the junk dealer.

I learned my first lesson about the power and privilege of personal prayer. It doesn't have to be in aisle 15 at Walmart or in the midst of a dusty African village.

Take the courageous step of praying with a hurting person. They're everywhere if we just take time and look around.

P.S. And don't forget to start a knee to start your day.

Brennan Manning is a great speaker and writer. The Ragmuffin Gospel Abba's Child I heard him relate the following story about fifteen years ago. I've never forgotten it:

**Brennan Manning's best quote:** The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable."

TAKE A KNEE The Empty Chair

Brennan Manning is a former Catholic priest living in New Orleans.

A true story from Brennan Manning in the book *Abba's Child*:

Once, a woman asked me to come and pray with her father, who was dying of cancer. When I arrived, I found the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows and an empty chair beside his bed.

I assumed the old fellow had been informed of my visit. "I guess you were expecting me,"

I said. "No, who are you?"

"I'm the new associate at your parish," I replied. "When I saw the empty chair, I figured you knew I was going to show up."

"Oh yeah, the chair," said the bedridden man. "Would you mind closing the door?"

Puzzled, I shut the door.

"I've never told anyone this, not even my daughter," said the man, "but all my life, I have never known how to pray. I abandoned any attempt at prayer," he continued, "until one day about four years ago my best friend said to me, 'Joe, prayer is just a simple matter of having a conversation with Jesus. Here's what I suggest. Sit down on a chair, place an empty chair in front of you, and in faith, see Jesus on the chair. It's not spooky because He promised, 'I'll be with you all days.' Then just speak to Him and listen in the same way you're doing with me right now."

"So, Padre, I tried it, and I like it so much that I do it for a couple of hours every day.

I'm careful, though. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she'd send me off to the funny farm."

I was deeply moved by the story and encouraged the old guy to continue on the journey.

Two nights later, the daughter called to tell me that her daddy had died that afternoon. “Did he seem to die in peace?” I asked. “Yes. But there was something strange. In fact, it’s beyond strange—kinda weird. Apparently, just before Daddy died, he leaned over and rested his head on a chair beside his bed.”

From *Abba's Child* by Brennan Manning

I'm gonna fall down on my knees

And praise The Lord for bringin' me peace

I'll lift my hands in His company

For you know, I am grateful

For what He has done for me

Well, I praise The Lord

Well, I praise The Lord

Well, I praise The Lord

Yeah, I praise The Lord.”

# Chapter Forty-Nine

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## Burned, Yet Blessed/Tough Not Hard

*A Longleaf Pine in the grassy straw stage.*

Driving down Highway 113 toward the community of Reeves, I'm heartbroken by a scene on the west side of the road. A large field of Longleaf Pines has been the victim of a forest fire.

It must have been a hot fire because it completely burned the smaller trees and blackened the bark of the more mature trees up to over ten feet high. It's a sad sight to see acres of pines with blackened trunks and brown straw. It appears this entire stand will need to be replanted.

But there is a fantastic story behind the fire in the longleaf pines. Here it is: The history of the Longleaf Pine, *Pinus Palustris*, must be understood to truly grasp this story. This native tree, also called the yellow pine, ruled the virgin forests of the South from Virginia to East Texas. Because of its hardiness, adaptability, and ability to grow

in shallow, sandy soils, it covered much of the acreage of the southern United States.

These beautiful pines existed in vast tracts called pine savannahs. These were upland areas where the pines were scattered throughout grassy areas. Because of the tall grasses, fire was always a reality during the dead of winter, when frost had killed the surrounding vegetation.

The first to burn the woods were the native Indians. They burned the savannahs to be able to see game animals better and lessen the chance of their enemies hiding nearby. Then, white settlers burned these same grasslands to make better grazing for their cattle and sheep, as well as to kill pests such as redbugs and ticks.

No matter the reason for these fires, the Longleaf Pines continued to grow. Even though non-native pines such as Slash and Loblolly are easily killed by wildfire, the Longleaf seems to thrive because of fire.

Looking at the charred trees along the Reeves-Dry Creek highway, I remembered how Longleaf Pines need fire to grow properly.

Longleaf Pine grows much slower than the other pine species. Because of that reason, most replanting of pines has favored the faster-growing species, such as Loblolly or Slash pines.

The early stage of a Longleaf Pine is called the grassy stage. The tree has hardly any trunk above ground, and the long green needles more nearly resemble a wild type of grass than a tree. The pine will stay in this "long straw" stage indefinitely until a fire sweeps through.

During this stage, the tree will remain dormant in growth due to what is called Brown Spot Needle Blight. This fungus attacks the top growth area of the young pine, called the candle bulb.

The combination of the tall grass around the tree competing for sunshine and nutrients and the Needle Blight keeps the young pine tree from growing upward. The surrounding grass keeps the area moist, which is the condition the Needle Blight needs to attack the

small pine's topmost candle bulb. The result is that the Longleaf sapling will stay in this grassy stage indefinitely - still alive but never growing upward.

A Longleaf Pine will never reach its potential until a fire rushes through, killing the grass and other trees competing with it for water, sunlight, and nutrients. Additionally, the Brown Spot Needle Blight is killed by the heat of the fire. Now the bushy Longleaf Pine is freed by the fire to grow to its intended height and size...And doesn't a Longleaf grow tall and beautiful!

One of the reasons I love these pines is because of their resilience. Looking across the tract along the Reeves highway, I see pines of all sizes blackened and charred. The needles have been burned off the smaller trees, leaving a pitiful stump.

In the succeeding weeks, I inspect the field to see any new growth. Finally, in March, the tops of the trees begin to show new green growth. Soon, a healthy candle bulb, some nearly a foot long, begins to reach upwards. Over the coming weeks and months, this candle bulb turns into a tree trunk and sprouts fresh pine straw, and this once dwarfed Longleaf Pine will never again have to compete with the grass for water, sunlight, or food.

Knowing about this species, I also understand that this same growth is taking place underground. If you've ever seen the exposed tap root of a Longleaf Pine, you know that it has a deep, strong foundation for growth.

There is a spiritual application to the story. We all experience being in the fire at various times in our lives. None of us are exempt. Your fire will probably be much different from mine. Regardless, God wants to

use this fire to shape you and use you. Throughout history, the people God has used the most have been those who have worked through challenging circumstances to grow to their “maximum” height for Him to use.

Are you in the fire? If so, remember that God has not abandoned you. Just as Shadrach and his two partners were joined by God in the Babylonian fire, you are not alone. And you can rest assured that your faithful Father is using this fiery trial to shape you and use you as never before.

If you are ever driving along La. 113 between Reeves and Dry Creek, take a look west at about mile marker 3. You’ll see a field of Longleaf Pines of all sizes. Some are in neat rows, while others are wild pines that have come up on their own.

And remember that these same pines have been burned by the hot fire. In fact, they are purposely burned yearly for continued maximum growth. Looking at them, I hope you recall the story of how these Longleaf pines have been burned, yet blessed, by the fire.

END OF 86 BURNED YET BLESSED

Tough or Hard—The Choice is Yours

In front of me are three objects: a hammer, a brick, and a flat piece of leather. They make for a wonderful lesson we all can learn from.

It’s amazing observing folks as they go through difficult times. Periods of trial, adversity, and sadness distill out what is really inside people. What’s revealed often surprises, as well as shocks, us.

The human spirit and corresponding attitudes are amazing to observe. It comes down to this: Life will make you either hard or tough.

Let’s look now at our three objects: the hammer, the brick, and the piece of leather.



Put the piece of leather and the brick on a sidewalk side by side. Now, take the hammer and hit each one of them hard several times. The brick will be broken into pieces by the hammer blows. The piece of leather may show the indents from the hammer, but it will not break or crack.

Here is why: The brick is hard, while the leather is tough.

In life, circumstances will make us either hard or tough. These circumstances are the hammer blows. It doesn't matter whether the hammer blows are self-generated or due to chance or fate. They may be due to family circumstances, what we call rotten luck, a cancer diagnosis, a hurricane, or any trial. The hammer blows of life are limitless.

The hammer of life's troubles hits all of us. No one is immune.

However, some people will only become tougher when the hammer falls. They take the blows; their lives even show the imprints of the hammer, but they are supple and flexible. They come out of this experience tougher and still standing.

Under the same circumstances, others, like bricks, crack and crumble under the same blows. That is because, like bricks, they have become hard. However, hardness does not ensure toughness.

Let it be said of us that we're tough as leather but not hardhearted.

Tough or Hard

I'm handing you a brick.

In front of me are three objects: a brick, a piece of leather, and a hammer. These make for a wonderful lesson.

However, this story is not about the hardness of a brick, the toughness of leather, or the pain of a hammer blow. This is a story about somebody. Objects don't move us—but people do.

Watching folks go through difficult times is revealing. Periods of trial and adversity serve to distill what is really inside people. What's revealed often surprises and shocks us.

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita did that for us in Louisiana. The whole world saw the worst side of humans—you saw it on television with the looting, abandonment, and loss in New Orleans.

Then again, this storm blew in and exposed the best sides of humankind. Strangers reaching across all sorts of lines—racial, cultural, or geographical—to help others in need.

Observing it, I was amazed watching how our storms, and the ensuing difficulties that followed, elicited utterly different responses in people. Some folks, comfortable living their lives as victims, continued blaming the world for their troubles. Others in exactly the same circumstances quickly got back up, dusted themselves off, and went to work, choosing to be a victor instead of a victim.

The human spirit and corresponding attitudes are amazing to observe. It comes down to this: Life will make you either hard or tough.

You become either bitter . . . or better.

# # #

Let's look at our three objects: the brick, the hammer, and the strip of leather. Place the piece of leather and the brick on a sidewalk side by side. Now, take the hammer and hit each one of them hard several times. The brick will be broken into pieces. The piece of leather may show the hammer's indents, but it will not break or crack.

Because bricks are hard, but leather is tough.

What happens to us—it's called circumstances—will make us either hard or tough. These situations are the hammer blows. It doesn't matter whether the blows are self-included or due to chance or fate. They may be due to family circumstances, what we call rotten luck, a cancer diagnosis, or a hurricane

The sources of life's hammer blows are limitless.

These blows come to all of us. No one is immune.

Some people will become tougher when the hammer falls. They take the blows, their lives showing the imprints of the hammer, but they are supple and flexible. They come out of this experience tougher and still whole.

Under the same circumstances, others, like bricks, crack and crumble under the same blows. That is because, like bricks, they have become hard.

Sadly, hardness does not ensure toughness. There are hard-to-miss traits that exemplify hardness in life: bitterness, an attitude of apathy toward the needs and pain of others, or a selfish callousness that strives to isolate oneself from the world. Add to this list the telltale symptom of cynicism toward others, God, and spiritual things.

Under the hammer blows of life—who we are, as well as what we really believe—will always be revealed.

Here's a good question: How do you recognize a tough heart? The short letter below explains the tough heart. It's from my aptly named friend Joy Tanner:

2005 was a tumultuous year of storms for Jack and me; the fiery fatal plane crash in which our daughter lost her life; the people with whom we spent twenty years in Cameron Parish who lost it all because of Hurricane Rita; the news that our deceased daughter's only child is going to Iraq; my husband Jack's Lou Gehrig's disease.

In spite of the significant losses, we've become better instead of bitter. It's a peace that comes from the inside, from inside the heart, where the mold cannot grow.

And the water cannot flood.

And the hurricane-force winds cannot reach.

And the flames of the plane crash cannot burn up.

Amen and amen,

Joy Tanner

Her letter reveals the heart of a brave and tough woman who has not allowed her spirit to be hard.

Her name—Joy—says it all.

Joy—unlike happiness—comes from inside and cannot be taken away by situations, storms, or even tragedies.

Joy Tanner was hammered repeatedly in 2005, but she came out of it better, not bitter.

Tough, not hard.

Tough as leather, more useful and usable for God—as well as for others.

Tough, but not hard.

May the same be said of each of us.

I think it's worth another look at The Red-Headed Stranger's wise words:

-Willie Nelson

"When I started counting my blessings, my whole life turned around."

"Count your blessings,

Name them one by one

And what the Lord has done will surprise you.

# Chapter Fifty

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## TOUGH OR HARD

# Chapter Fifty-One

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## In the Word

If you asked me about one of the essential habits I've cultivated, one would be daily time in the word.

That's the Bible.

As in Bible study.

Now, hear me out.

Teenager

First of all, start smart.

Many readers start out with the purpose of reading through the whole Bible cover to cover. All 66 books, Genesis to Revelation.

They begin with Genesis. Lots of solid stories about who we are.

Exodus is a fascinating story of how God rescues and takes care of his people, the Hebrews.

Then you hit the vast tracts of the Sahara: Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—

They consist mainly of the intricacies, laws, festivals, and traditions.

It's tough sledding.

Honestly, I've never done an extensive journey through Leviticus, even though my son teaches Hebrew and Old Testament at a New Orleans seminary.



# Chapter Fifty-Two

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## ONE STEP AT A TIME

*I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye.*

*Psalm 32:8*

I grew up on a one-mile stretch of gravel road in Dry Creek.

Our house was the only house at the dead end of this narrow country lane. My Dad always said that when a car came down our road, they were either coming to see us or they were lost.

This hilly Louisiana road was lined with pine forests. As a teenager, I loved taking nighttime walks on it. The only sounds would be the crunching of gravel underfoot, the sound of the wind in the pines, and the occasional call of an owl.

These nighttime walks were times of solitude. I'd look up into the clear night sky at thousands of glittering stars. *How can anyone not believe in God after looking into the night sky?*



Many times, my walks were to mull over a decision or pray about a problem. One particular instance stands out in my mind:

During my first three semesters of college, I had not declared a major. I was unsure of what career to pursue and had reached the point where I had to choose an area of concentration.

As a 19-year-old young man, the magnitude of this decision scared me. I felt as if I was standing on a road with several forks, and it was time to choose.

I desperately wanted God's will in my life. If only He would show me . . . I was willing to follow.

During this time of indecision, I took a long walk on a cold and clear moonless night. Walking along with only the starlight to guide my path, each step was a step of faith. I prayed, "Lord, guide me. Show me what to do."

Then, in the quietness of the moment, God spoke to me. Not in an audible voice, but deep down in my heart—right where He speaks to all of us:

*You can't see to the end of this gravel road. However, by taking one step at a time in the darkness, you will reach the end. There is just enough light for each step—no more, no less.*

I then realized that God was not going to lay out His plan for my entire life or even the next five years. Instead, He would wisely lead me step by step . . . moment by moment.

My responsibility was simply to take it one step at a time in the light I had. I didn't need to see all the way. God knew my life's road all of the way to the end. He would guide me without fail.

Now a lifetime later, God is still, when I listen, giving the guidance I need—one step at a time. A lifetime of small steps has guided me as a young teacher/coach, a school principal, and a camp manager all the way to Africa and back and to a fulfilling career as an author.

He has been faithful one step at a time.

“I was first called to the sphere of government at the age of 7, even though I didn’t know fully what that meant,” Jones said. “I would encourage college students to explore the things God has laid on their hearts and trust that the Lord will open the right doors in His timing. Reach out to every person you know who works in that profession. Ask for their recommendations. But also trust the process. If God isn’t opening doors immediately in that area, continue to work with excellence and stay faithful where you are. And remember, you are called to faithfulness in every area of your life – you aren’t necessarily called to always  
get what you want immediately.”

# Chapter Fifty-Three

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## WAYNE KEEP YOUR FEET ON THE GROUND

**W**HEN A MAN LOSES HIS WAY

**Mission drift Game Slippage**

### **MISSION DRIFT**

My friend Wayne

You'd enjoy meeting my friend, Wayne.

He's one of the most unique men I've met.

I hope Wayne won't be offended when I also describe him as unusual.

Unique, Unusual. Innovative. A very successful business.

I think of my poetic hero Thoreau's words,

"If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."

Wayne's distant drumbeat has led to great success in his business as well as his personal life.

But my favorite thing about Wayne is that he's kept his feet on the ground.

His feet are on the ground.

It's a Pineywoods term for a person who's become successful but has not left their values, morals, and xxxx behind.

They've not floated off or up with their success.

They've kept their feet on the ground.

That's my friend Wayne.

Once again, I use that term, "He's kept his inner compass on true north."

He hasn't lost his way.

Being the son of a land surveyor, compasses, maps, and xxxx are part of my jargon.

That's why a compass on a lanyard hangs on my rearview mirror. I always wear it when I'm back home.

Sometimes I'll wear it in Alexandria. It's a great conversation starter.

"Why are you wearing a compass around your neck?"

I shrug and grin, "So I won't get lost."

"Well, I guess that makes sense.

From observation, I've noticed some things Wayne does and others he doesn't

His family

Heather

His children

He works hard

He's creative and willing to get out on a limb.

A visionary

A man of quiet faith.

Grounded

Heather

Lunch

Ugly Mug

Don't be afraid to march to that different beat.

Never ignore your heart when making worldly decisions.

Keep your feet on the ground.

FROM WAYNE:

3T Wayne Mullins

Here are a few thoughts:

1) Mirror Leadership: don't hold others to a standard you're not willing to hold yourself to

2) One way: my way isn't "the" way; it's only "one" way

3) Servant Leadership: a true leader never has anyone "under" them.

A true leader knows their role is to serve those on their team

4) Curiosity: when furious, get curious

# Chapter Fifty-Four

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## DON'T FORGET WHERE YOU CAME FROM

### **G** LEAN EARLY CHAPTERS OF BOOK WICF A word from Curt

Today's story will be part of a speech I've given Tuesday night to the 150 Honor Graduates in my home parish of Beauregard. My short talk will consist of three parts:

1. Remember where you came/come from.
2. Remember you didn't get here by yourself.
3. Remember that this is just the beginning of your journey.

Today, I'm sharing about the Pineywoods art of remembering from whence you came. You may move to Nashville, Boston, or even Alexandria, but your roots are still deep in the sandy soil of the pines.

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Remember where you come from

I walked through the small rural cemetery, looking for the grave of my hero.

I was on a business trip through SW Mississippi and veered off I-55 at McComb to visit East Fork Cemetery. It was where Jerry Clower was supposedly buried.

To a younger generation, the name Jerry Clower may not be familiar. Still, he stood large (literally and figuratively) in my upbringing. During the 1970s, he rocketed to fame as a storyteller of yarns from growing up in Amite County, Mississippi.

Jerry became a member of the Country Music Hall of Fame, Grand Ole Opry, had his own television show, and died a wealthy man. All from telling stories about characters like the Ledbetter family, coon hunts, chainsaws, and life as a poor fatherless boy during the Great Depression.

As I drove to the cemetery, I took note that Amite County looked just like my home parish of Beauregard. It was Pineywoods. Exactly like where I come from. More like East Texas than New Orleans or the flat Cajun country. That's why I loved Jerry's stories. They were about people just like the ones I grew up around, and they were funny and clean. His storytelling set the template for the type of writing I would eventually put into my books. Jerry Clower was, and is, my hero.

But I couldn't find his grave in East Fork Cemetery. I was reasonably sure he'd been buried in the community he came from, although he lived most of his adult life in Yazoo City, Mississippi as he traveled the world.

But there wasn't a headstone in the cemetery that seemed worthy of where a famous star was buried. The markers were the two-foot-tall granite double headstone, which was standard for the rural South.

I finally found his grave. It was simple and the size of the others around it. It read: Gerald Wayne Clower. 1926- 1998. The adjoining headstone was the future grave of his wife, Homerline. (I am not making up names. I have an Aunt Lloydell and Aunt Marjorie Nell.)

At the foot of Jerry's grave was his military marker from his service in the Navy during World War II.

And that was it. No sign or marker that this was the grave of a famous American.

And then it hit me. *Here is buried a man who never forgot where he came from.*

Jerry Clower came from the pines of rural Mississippi. When he returned home (he and Homerline built a nice home on the land she inherited from her parents), he kept his bearings.

He remembered from whence he came.

I call it the sin of the Pineywoods: to forget where you come from. To move away and be changed by time, fame, money, or distance. I don't think that happened to Jerry Clower. He knew it would be obscene to erect a tall edifice denoting who was buried there. Beyond all of the fame and money, he was still a Pineywoods man buried among others like him.

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I brought my three sons up to always be proud of being from Dry Creek, Louisiana. Now, I've heard every joke and remark about my native home. I nearly gag when someone snidely says, "Well, how dry is it in Dry Creek?."

When our youngest son Terry found himself backing into a Harvard education, I reminded him that he was traveling to a foreign territory and they'd make fun of Louisiana and where he was from. I wondered if he'd put down "Lake Charles" as his hometown. It's a little wetter and sounds more cultured.



Terry told me this story of his first class at Harvard, where he is getting his doctorate in Hebrew and Middle Eastern Languages. (That's an oxymoron in itself. A Dry Creekian studying Hebrew in Cambridge, Massachusetts.)

"Daddy, everyone introduced himself and their hometowns. Chicago. Tel Aviv. California. Madison, Wisconsin. When they came to me, I said, 'I'm Terry Iles, and I'm from Dry Creek, Louisiana.'"

Terry continued. "There was a pregnant pause before the entire class, led by the professor, burst out laughing."

The Professor asked, "Is there really such a place named *Dry Creek* in Louisiana?"

Terry, who has a fine self-deprecating wit, took it in stride. I could not have been prouder that he stood his ground. *I'm Terry Iles and I'm from Dry Creek, Louisiana. Period.*

Later in the semester, there was a bonus question on an exam. "What would the past perfect participle be in Hebrew if a *creek* could really be *dry*?"

Terry passed that test, but he'd already passed the test that meant the most to his Dad. Like my hero Jerry Clower, he hadn't forgotten where he came from.

It's the mark of a true Pineywoods man.

May it always be so.

# Chapter Fifty-Five

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PART 6

LANGIAGAPPE

10 WORDS

**PART 6 LANGIAPPE 10 WORDS**

# Chapter Fifty-Six

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## 1. INTEGRITY HARD DAY'S

### **T**houghts on a Big Word

Integrity is who you are when no one is looking,  
and what you will stand up for even if you're standing alone.  
—John Maxwell

There's a word that keeps popping up in my heart.

I hope I never forget its importance.

It's integrity.

A large part of integrity is being honest and telling the truth. Being a man (or woman) of your word.

This Thomas Jefferson quote sums up the slippery slope of lying:

*He who permits himself to tell a lie often finds it much easier to do it a second and third time, till at length, it becomes habitual; he tells lies without attending to it and truths without the world believing him. This falsehood of the tongue leads to that of the heart and, in time, depraves all its good dispositions.*

-Thomas Jefferson 1785

This slippery slope can be avoided by simply always telling the truth. Being honest.

Telling the truth is a habit just as much as habitual lying.

If I'm going to be a man of integrity\*, I must be truthful.

**Lord, help me to instantly and habitually be a person of truth. Poke me when I have the urge to avoid or doctor the truth.**

**In Jesus' name. Amen**

My favorite definition of integrity comes from John Maxwell: "Integrity is who you are when no one is watching, and what you're willing to stand up for, even if you're standing alone."

COMBINE

"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might."

-Solomon in Ecclesiastes 9:10

If it's worth doing, it's worth doing right, especially if it's for God, and when it comes down to it, everything we do is for God.

In the Louisiana Pineywoods, we believe in working. Many of my friends work in various aspects of the timber industry. Whether it's "working in the woods." i.e., cutting, loading pulpwood, hauling it to the mills, or actually working the D shift at the mill or refinery, helping Fort Polk keep our military ready, or working in the white-collar world in the classroom or office, we believe in working.

Charlie Daniels said it well, "I ain't askin' nobody for nothin' if I can't get it on my own."

It's not good English, and we should realize that it's all right during a hard season to ask for help, but we try to carry our own load.

In return, we expect to be treated fairly and safely and receive fair pay in return for the sweat of our brow.

As usual, I have a story on this.

Dr. Charles Frusha of DeRidder related this story about his father, Hollis Frusha.

“One summer when I was in college, I worked with Dad building houses. He was an expert carpenter known for doing things the right way.

“One day, we slipped up and took an extra fifteen minutes off for lunch. We worked the rest of the afternoon, and when it was quitting time, I laid my hammer down.

“Daddy said, ‘No, Son. We owe these people the fifteen minutes we lost at lunch.’

“We worked those extra minutes, then shut down and went to the house.

“I learned several things from that experience: do the right thing even if no one else will know. Have integrity.”

I call Mr. Hollis’s example, “An honest day’s work for an honest work’s pay.”

Whether you’re in the corner office or sawing 2 x 4’s, it’s a maxim to live by.

An honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay.

As in, “If you’re ten minutes early, you’re already late.”

I mentally compare them to the men and women who always arrive an hour early for their shift at the mill. I asked one about it, and he said, “I like to get here early, allow for car trouble, get settled in, and then do my twelve hours of honest work.”

An honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay.

It’s the Pineywoods way.

It reminds me of the words of a song (as most things do). “Working Man’s Blues” by Merle Haggard,

“I ain’t never been on welfare,  
And that’s one place I’ll never be.  
I’ll keep on working.”

An honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay.

It’s the American way.

Find what you love to do, and then do it with all of your hands and heart.

It’s the Pineywoods way.

She works hard for her money.

End of an honest day’s work

#### A.J. WAGNON AND THE GRAVEDIGGER

“The one thing that doesn’t abide by majority rule is a person’s conscience.”

—Atticus Finch, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Chapter 11

Integrity is who you are when no one is looking and the things you’ll stand up for, even if you’re standing alone.

What’s right isn’t always popular, and what’s popular isn’t always right.

IN THE RIGHT WAY, EVERYTHING DOESN’T CUT CORNERS

#### 2 LESSONS FROM THE CEMETERY

The small crowd disperses from a gravesite in Dry Creek Cemetery.

My friend Larry Singleton and I are the last to leave.

We stand over the grave marker of my great-great-great grandfather, Andrew Jackson Wagon.

“Larry, it was the right thing to do.”

He nodded, “It was definitely the right thing to do.”

I feel so much better now that we've done this. It was the right thing to do.

It was.

A small group of Wagnon descendants and Dry Creek neighbors had gathered to place a memorial grave marker for Andrew J. Wagnon.

It was placed beside the small grave marker for his wife, Nancy Wagnon.

The grave site beside Nancy Wagnon had been open since her death in 191xxx.

She'd been a war widow for xx years.

Her husband, AJ Wagnon, had died of typhoid fever in 1863 in an army camp near Opelousas, Louisiana. More Civil War soldiers died from disease than bullets. RESEARCH.

He was buried in an unmarked grave.

There was no physical evidence that he'd ever lived or died.

Until 2024,

My friend Larry Singleton took it upon himself to get a memorial marker for my 3x grandfather.

It was a simple marker.

A.J. Wagnon

C.S.A.

But it proved he'd lived and now had his spot next to his wife.

We'd brought a Dry Creek soldier alone.

This had nothing to do with the Southern cause or the Confederacy.

It was about a Dry Creek soldier finally coming home.

It was about doing the right thing.

We'd done the right thing.

Always do the right thing.

As we walked away, I recalled an earlier trip to this cemetery xx years ago with two of my grandsons.

“Don’t go off down to Dry Creek with PawPaw. You’ll spend the whole time/day with dead people.”

### **Lessons from a Gravedigger**

Today’s Proverb: Proverbs 18:9

“The one who is truly lazy in his work is brother to a vandal.”

It was the first trip to the cemetery for my two grandsons, Noah and Jude. I knew it wouldn’t be their last. Life is full of trips to the cemetery. Ages five and three may be young, but it’s a good time to realize that *life* involves *death*.

We made a side trip to the grave of their great-great-great-great-great grandmother, Nancy Wagnon. I explained that her husband, Andrew Jackson Wagnon, wasn’t buried here because he’d died in the Civil War.

We walked to the SW corner of the cemetery, where a grave was being dug for a burial. Noah and Jude stared down into the yawning hole as I tried to explain how the body of Mr. John Hunt would be lowered in a coffin into that grave.

The head gravedigger, Kevin Kingan, explained to the boys how he did his job. His words probably will be forgotten by my grandsons, but not by me. “Boys, I dig about four hundred graves each year, and I always try to remember one thing: I try to do it as if it was the grave of my mother.”

He shoveled a scoop of red clay aside. “It takes me about thirty extra minutes to do it right, but I put in the extra time. It’s worth it.” He tamped down the dirt around the concrete vault. “I just pretend it’s my mother’s grave, and that helps me do it right.”

I recalled the wise words of Solomon in, “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.”



I spend my days around what the world would deem simple people: pulpwood haulers, single moms, meat cutters, dairymen, carpenters, and gravediggers. These hard-working blue-collar workers have so much to teach us if we stop and listen.

The value of an honest day's work. The pride of a job done well. This is a reminder that digging a grave is not just a job but an act of love toward a family of strangers.

Completed as if it was done for your mother.

Thanks, Kevin, for your lesson.

“Whatever you do, work at it with all of your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.”

Colossians 3: 23-25,

**Prayer: Lord, help me approach every task as a holy assignment from you. Help me assign it so you may say, “Well done . . .” Amen.**

# Chapter Fifty-Seven

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## KINDNESS COMPASSION

**K**indness- an attitude  
Compassion- an action

Define empathy

"There are three ways to ultimate success:

The first way is to be kind.

The second way is to be kind.

The third way is to be kind."

-Fred Rogers, aka Mister Rogers

### **On Kindness**

Always be kinder than necessary.

It's a trait that both blesses the receiver and the giver. It leaves both with a spring in their step.

All of my life, I've been the recipient of so much grace and kindness. The old Dry Creek I grew up in was awash in kindness. It wasn't a

perfect place, but folks, especially the older ones, always showed me kindness.

I'm sure it was partly due to my family's deep roots in the community. Clayton and Mary Iles' son was always treated kindly. In a rural community where we called almost every older person uncle and aunt, I received extraordinary kindness from these folks.

As I began branching out from Dry Creek, I still encountered kindness, often in unexpected places. I learned that those with the least worldly goods frequently showed the most kindness to others.

The twin hurricanes of Katrina and Rita in 2005 brought out the best and worst in my home state of Louisiana. I came to believe that disasters and tragedy don't create character but rather reveal it. What is inside a person comes pouring out just like the water that rushed through the 16th Street Canal levee breach in New Orleans.

Dry Creek Baptist Camp, where I served as manager, became a hurricane shelter for a revolving door of about three hundred evacuees for the weeks after Katrina. They came from all walks of life, each with a different story of how they ended up in our rural Pineywoods community.

Our surrounding area responded to this invasion, not with resistance but with kindness. I'll never forget a precious couple who had recently lost a teenage son, counting out thirty-one hundred-dollar bills and saying, "You use this to help these people and do it in memory of our son."

I had no words to say, and even now, I am moved by the remembrance of this event.

When sister Hurricane Rita hit us squarely in late September, I saw amazing kindness among my neighbors. Everyone got up from the storm, brushed off, and went to work helping each other.

Genuine kindness costs something. It is given freely but costs the giver time and money, and it may be inconvenient. However, it is such a freeing event.

However, it seems natural to be kind to neighbors.

Kindness to strangers is what most amazes me. I saw it after the hurricanes, even as I stood in a Red Cross food line receiving a hot meal cooked by fellow Baptists who'd come to our aid in SW Louisiana.

Our three-year sojourn in Africa opened my eyes to this kindness to strangers. Once again, DeDe and I saw the best and worst in people. We were thrust into a civil war in South Sudan and saw the ignorance of tribalism and greed.

At the same time, we saw such kindness. Nowhere was this more evident than along the borders of South Sudan, where thousands of refugees fled. I asked a Ugandan why they so quickly opened their hearts to these strangers. He smiled. "Baba, we've all been refugees ourselves at one time or another. How could we not return the kindness shown to us in the past?"

I saw kindness shown in hundreds of unique ways. Most were simple but life-changing. Most involved sacrifice on the part of the giver. Africans have few material possessions, but I never ceased to wonder about those who had so little showing such kindness.

A final word on kindness.

It is not a weakness.

The world will often scoff at proffered kindness as naive.

I believe kindness is one of life's greatest assets. It's an investment that, as you give it away, only grows inside you. Always be kind.

And always be kinder than necessary.

**Kindness: a language the blind can see, and the deaf can hear.**

**-Unknown**

“Hey, I don’t care how much you know until I know how much you care.”

“Be ye kind one to another.”

-Paul in Ephesians 4:32

### TRAIL MAGIC

Frank and I climbed up a steep ridge on the north Georgia part of the Appalachian Trail. We were on a remote and dry portion of the Trail and were parched on this warm day.

Our water bottles were empty, so we consulted a guidebook for the next water source. It was several miles ahead. We’d be thirsty for that trek.

Then we came upon a sight I still see vividly in my mind: An orange five-gallon Igloo water cooler with a printed sign: “Trail Magic. Enjoy the water! From a former hiker.”

The water was ice cold. Probably the most satisfying drink I’ve ever gulped down. We filled our water bottles with clear cold water, raising a toast to the kind soul who left the cooler there.

It was indeed Trail Magic.

I’d better explain what Trail Magic is since I’ve been the recipient of it so many times when hiking.

It’s unexpected kindness on the Trail, most often from a stranger.

A cold drink of water.

Two RVers atop Fontana Dam cooking pancakes for hungry hikers.

A ride to a nearby store.

Candy bars left at a highway crossroads with a sign, “Help yourself!”

I was once on the Trail in North Carolina along the Nantahala River. I walked to a trailside hiking store where an employee worked for most of an hour on my balky camping stove. He gave me a primer on the care and use of my small stove. When I tried to pay him, he waved me off, “It’s Trail Magic, pass it on.”

That's the thing about Trail Magic. It's good to receive and even better to pass it on.

I'm still trying to pay it forward on that excellent cold water that Frank and I enjoyed years ago.

I had a message recently from a fellow hiker. He said, "Do you think Trail Magic still exists during our current Coronavirus crisis?"

He and I both agreed that it is still alive and well, even in a time of social distancing. We simply need to be creative in how we reach out and show kindness to fellow travelers, who, like all of us, are carrying a heavy load.

It happened last week. DeDe and I were in the drive-through line at a coffee shop. When we got to the pay window, the cashier said, 'You don't owe anything. The car ahead of you paid for your order.'

I watched that car pull out onto Jackson Street Extension.

I'm still trying to figure out who it was. Was it someone we knew or simply a person passing along a little anonymous Pandemic kindness?

Yes, the thing about Trail Magic is that it's best passed on.

I'm going to be kind to everyone I meet, even at six feet apart. I never know if that masked stranger I pass at the grocery might be the person who paid for my coffee and donuts.

Trail Magic.

Let's pass it on.

#### POSTSCRIPT

Kindness When it comes to showing kindness to someone who has proven themselves to be an enemy, a clarification is vital: kindness does not mean the absence of discernment.

What Kindness Is Not

Kindness is not being a doormat. Kindness is consistent with toughness and shrewdness.

Therefore, when the disagreement you are facing is with an evil person who is seeking to harm you, it is right to protect yourself. You matter to God. You should take

# Chapter Fifty-Eight

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## ENCOURAGEMENT

**E**ncouragement is something that doesn't cost anything to give,  
yet the outcome is priceless!

-May Hill

Everyone needs it.

Encouragement!

It's a word describing what we all need.

If there's anything I'm learning, it's that folks need encouragement.

Hope.

Courage.

Inspiration.

Where seldom is a discouraging word heard. . .



Recently, I shared a Denver taxi ride with a fellow writer. Her specialty was using social media and blogs to impact our world. We had a fascinating conversation and I learned a great deal from her expertise and passion.

She asked a question that has reverberated in my brain and heart. "Curt, what one word describes your writing. Better yet, what one word describes you. Who you are. Why do you write?"

Before we arrived at our destination, she'd helped me discover my word: it's encouragement.

My life, my writing, and my words are about encouragement.

This revelation has helped me focus more on what my written (and spoken) words are about: to encourage my fellow journeymen on our shared life road. This world throws a great deal of discouragement at all of us. Like you, I need a good dose of good news.

It's a shame how many people dread work as a four-letter word.

The Dignity of any work

She works hard for her money, so you better treat her right.

-Donna Summer

Isbell Something to Love

# Chapter Fifty-Nine

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## Faithfulness

# Chapter Sixty

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## GENE ORTIS ON GENEROSITY

Give generously.  
You can't outgive God.

Gene Ortis' Laws of generosity

# Chapter Sixty-One

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## Relationships

Everything rises and falls on relationships  
I'm sharing my six favorite words this week. So far, I've written about compassion/passion/integrity/gratitude, and resolve.

Today, the word is relationships

Relationships

"Everything rises and falls on relationships."

I'll be adding to this blog as the day goes on.

In the end, it's all about relationships.

When it's all said and done, the people around us are all that matters.

No one ever asks to be surrounded by their material possessions on their deathbed. However, the stories are legion of men and women calling for their family-- especially estranged family-- at that critical moment.

There are several directional relationships we'll look at, and as always, several stories illustrating this word.

When you break it down, whatever you do is built on relationships. It doesn't matter if you're a working mom, salesman, CEO, teacher,

pastor, or the greeter at Walmart-- you're in the business of building relationships.

Those who spend a lifetime nurturing friendships and relationships are the happiest people.

We were created to have bonds and bridges with others.

In his excellent book, *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell defines a group of people called "connectors." These are folks who seem to know everyone and go through life making friends and contacts.

One of the joys of their lives is connecting people together, as in "I've got a friend whom you must meet; they're also interested in \_\_\_\_\_."

Connectors are relationship builders.

In my estimate, the most important relationship is the vertical one between me and my God.

I don't view it as "religion" but a relationship.

This relationship with God is very personal and an intimate part of my daily life. It should influence every decision and action in my life.

This relationship with the Creator God of the universe is cemented through my relationship with His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Notice I use His full name. He's that important. The Lord Jesus Christ.

All of the other relationships of my life should take a back seat to that one. As Jesus himself commanded, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you."

"All these things" are all of the other vital things in my life, including family and friends.

This has nothing to do with neglecting or ignoring my other relationships. I firmly believe that "seeking the Kingdom of God first"

only makes a man or woman a better mate, parent, worker, and human being.

Relationships.

It's a powerful word and must be a priority in our lives.

In every direction.

In every way.

Connecting

When it is all said and done, our success in camp ministry will rise or fall according to our ability to build and maintain healthy relationships with our guests, staff, board, and donors. John Maxwell calls this ability to build relationships "The Law of Connection." Maxwell wisely counsels, "You can't move people to action unless you first move them with emotion. The heart comes before the head." There are many ways to build relationships by connecting with the hearts of others, and one of the best is the habit of writing short handwritten notes.

"High tech, yet high touch"

In our camps and conference centers, we should strive to be on the cutting edge of all communication technology. However, in trying to be "high tech," we should never neglect the importance of personal communications or being "high touch." This "high tech/high touch" balance is essential in our ministries.

In his excellent book, *The Tipping Point*, author Malcolm Gladwell shares how the explosion of e-mail and computer-generated communication has created a need for personal correspondence. He writes, "The fact that anyone can e-mail us for free... creates immunity... and makes us value face-to-face communications all the more."

Even in the New Testament we see examples of the power of the handwritten note. The Apostle Paul evidently dictated his letters. At the end of each letter, he would add his personal signature and a

closing remark. An example of this is found in the closing words of 2 Thessalonians 3:17-18 (NIV): *I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.*

I communicate primarily through e-mail and the telephone, which are quick and efficient ways to stay in touch. However, when I really want to thank someone or express a deep thought or inspiration, I get out a pen, a small card, and an envelope. A note connects with people, and the result is, many times, both a deeper relationship and a cherished item that will be re-read over and over.

The time taken to personally encourage and thank others is not time wasted but, instead, time invested. Some may say they cannot afford to spend this time. My reply is that they cannot afford not to. Time invested in connecting with others is never wasted.

At Dry Creek Baptist Camp, where I served as the director for the past fourteen years, we learned about the power of concise handwritten notes. During this period, the camp went from being deeply in debt to having donor gifts averaging over \$200,000 for the past five years. Our staff realizes this is entirely due to God's blessings and the generosity of friends who believe in Dry Creek's ministry.

However, this tremendous growth in giving correlates to when we began personally signing every donor receipt and memorial gift. The time taken to jot a short note of appreciation on a typed letter is a straightforward way of saying thanks. In doing this, we are not writing notes to ask for more funds but to show our appreciation for the giving of our friends and supporters. It is simply common courtesy mixed with gratitude.

The innovative book *Permission Marketing* by Seth Godin is written on this premise: *"In business, we are seeking to turn strangers into friends, and friends into customers."* Personal communication helps

the wise camp leader make this leap from stranger to long-time customer/guest/donor. Notes of appreciation show folks that we value their involvement.



# Chapter Sixty-Two

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## STEWARDSHIP

**A**T THE POND

I don't think there's a better place to talk about stewardship than the levee of my pond.

DEFINE

It's dusk, and a pair of squealing wood ducks splash into the trees on the north end of my pond.

The purple martin colony is tucked into their bed in their nearby boxes.

I take a last glance toward the trees I'm tenderly tending. To the west are the oaks and hickories growing wild.

Past the pond, to the east, the longleaf pines I've planted wave softly in the wind.

Then I shake my head at saying "My pond" or the "Pines I planted. I've just been a steward of this spot of family land I own.

The deed at the Assessor's office lists "curt and DeDe Iles" as owners, but I view Clayton Iles Pond as belonging to all of us. All of the descendants of Clayton and Mary Iles, including my cousins. It's our

pond, and each of the generations has a specific area of stewardship. I like that.

A caretaker.

I recently read that a man was arrested for having shot twenty-seven wood ducks.

That's no stewardship.

That's greed.

I hope the judge throws the book at that fellow. Take his shotgun and four-wheeler.

Fine him a couple of thousand dollars for each of those twenty-five ducks over the limit.

It wouldn't hurt to give him a little jail time.

I digress, but you can see my point.

Stewardship is connected to humility. We don't own it, but we are responsible for it.

For me, it's much more than my land and Clayton Iles Pond.

It's all of the material possessions I've been given.

Yes, it's about my finances. I have several credos:

I've been blessed.

God owns it all.

I've tried, but you cannot outgive God.

TIME

I value the ticking time I have.

That's why I don't make left turns on Alexandria's main thoroughfare.

It is a timewaster

And it's dangerous to hurry over four lanes.

I turn right, then pull into a left-sided parking lot, wheel around, and head right.

It seems like a timewaster, but there's a reason UPS drivers are not allowed to turn left onto busy streets or highways.

I'm a steward of my family.

I am the leader of a family.

A clan.

A tribe.

I want to be faithful.

A faithful steward in every area of my life.

What is a steward?

Jesus' parable

stewardship

Caretakers

Landlords

That original pond washed out a generation ago. LeLe and I put in a wildlife pond. That's what's become. A wildlife pond. Canadian geese pay a visit from a nearby pond. A long egret each evening.

Purple Martins, who love being near water, water, twitter, and TWIRS above the pond.

A pair of squealing woods swing into the wooded north end. It's ours.

STEWARDSHIP OF MONEY PROACTIVE

STEWARDSHIP ON TIME

STEWARDSHIP ON ENERGY

End of STEWARDSHIP

# Chapter Sixty-Three

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## EPILOGUE: WHY I WRITE

### INCLUDE WHY I WROTE THREE TREES

The purpose/mission of Creekbank Stories is to write/share moving stories that encourage and inspire readers.

REACH

INFLUENCE

IMPACT

AMBITION to Reach

Isbell Something to love

**My Writing Manifesto**

Curt Iles

July 2024

1. I write and tell stories that connect with people's hearts.
2. I write about what I know: the unique and fascinating stories

of Louisiana's people, places, culture, and history.

I am a writer who is very comfortable in my own skin.

I am a Southern writer/storyteller who lives in Louisiana and tells stories from the Pineywoods section of Louisiana's "No Man's Land." It's where branches of my family have been since 1818.

I'm a Southern Indie writer and proud of it. While my works may never reach a national audience, I'm comfortable with who I write for. They are my people.

I love my home state. Everything I write celebrates, criticizes, reveals, makes fun of, and analyzes my love of Louisiana.

My writing heart is grounded in Dry Creek, Louisiana, on the porch of The Old House on the edge of Crooked Bayou Swamp.

My goal is to have reach.

What is "Reach?"

I write for both influence (how wide) and impact (how deep) so I can reach the hearts of my readers/listeners.

I want extended reach.

I believe in the power of the story.

I write/tell stories that move me. "No tears in the writer; no tears in the reader."

I write Poignant stories.

**Poignant means "painfully affecting the feelings, deeply affecting, or sharply effective."**

My stories aren't necessarily painful, but they do move people. Many times in the same story, they're moved to laughter, tears, and investigation.

I've been given the gift of "Speaking into people's souls."

I humbly work to be a good steward of this privilege.

I am a proud Southern Indie writer and a curious historian who also writes and speaks.

I write memorable books and stories that I'm comfortable for my grandchildren to read.

I worship when I write, and I write when I worship.

I'm a committed writer who takes speaking seriously. I have honed the art of capturing a reader or an audience.

I am a professional writer.

I write every day

I have a set-aside space(s) where I write

I am a lifelong learner. LLL

I seek daily to hone my craft of writing.

I have an important job: I'm making flesh and bone come alive in my characters and a heart connection in all of my stories.

In summary, I write because it's who I am.

It's my calling.

It's my mission.

*"Do all the good you can,*

*In all the ways you can,*

*In all the places you can,*

*At all the times you can,*

*To all the people you can,*

*As long as ever you can."*

John Wesley

I believe Wesley was referring to the ripple effect we can all have.

That's why I write.

I want to have a ripple.

I want to have reach.

\

tHE SHORTEST DISTANCE

I'm a storyteller

I'm a storyteller.

AND THESE are stories

“If you’re able to quit writing, you probably should.” -Cec Murphey.

“A writer is someone who wrote today.”

I write for the simple joy of expression. I have fifty-one journals that I’ve filled with stories, dreams, ideas, and the journey of my life since age seventeen.

If I never published another single word, I’d still write. It’s what I do. I guess it’s who I am. I have one final story that expresses the reason that I publish and share my writing:

The man’s voice was so soft that I shifted the telephone receiver to hear better. “Sir, you don’t know me, but I’ve read your book.”

He sounded older than me, and I was struck by the strange blend of sadness and calmness in his words. “I read your book in Angola Prison.”

He had my full attention. “Which book?”

*“Stories from the Creekbank”*

“How’d you get my book in Angola?”

“I don’t know how it got there, but God used it to change my life.”

I listened carefully. In spite of being a speaker, I had nothing to say.

“I made a promise that when I was released, I’d call and thank you. I’m keeping that promise.”

I’m ashamed to say I didn’t get his name. I was too touched to respond.

That was four years ago. I’d just started writing and speaking full-time and had inner doubts if we’d make it. The gift of his call was what I needed to move forward and take any necessary risks to write, share, and grow.

I write for the two “I” words: Influence and Impact. I want my words to have a broad ripple effect of influence. I want them to travel to places I’ve never been.

Like Angola Prison, or maybe Angola, Africa.

I wish for my writing to have a *deep-rooted* reverberation in the hearts of readers. That’s impact.

I’ve thought about my Angola friend’s call many times. A humorous critic told me, “I know how your book got to Angola. Someone gave it to Goodwill.” He added with a wink. “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.”

He’s right—I have another faithful reader in Colfax who first “discovered” my books on top of a dumpster at the Grant Parish Landfill.

Where will this book that you’re to?

I hope it first lingers in your heart. I wish for impact and encouragement for you. Who knows where it will go next? Feel free to keep it and re-read it over the years. But you have permission to pass it on if you’re *finished* with it. Share it with a friend . . . or send it to Goodwill.

Who knows where it’ll end up?

Like the fluttering pine seeds that *helicopter down* from the cones, our words—written or spoken—can travel on the wind far beyond where we are rooted.



We never know where they'll take hold, sprout, and reach downward into fertile soil.

That's why we call it deep roots.

Still digging, still growing.

Curt Iles

I wanted to vocalize my life beliefs.

MY PINEYWOODS MANIFESTO

THE PINEYWOODS MANIFESTO

What is a manifesto?

What is a Manifesto? What is a manifesto? A manifesto is a written declaration of the intentions, motives, or views of the issuer, be it an individual, group, political party, or government.[1][2][3][4] A manifesto usually accepts a previously published opinion or public consensus or promotes a new idea. Manifestos relating to religious belief are generally referred to as creeds or confessions of faith. What is a credo 6 CURT ILES Wikipedia "Manifesto"

*Field Notes* is a Manifesto.

"A **manifesto** is a written declaration of the views of an individual which often goes against the status quo."

Yes, *Field Notes* is a manifesto. A Pineywoods Manifesto.

**Why did you write Three trees?**

**Because I had something I wanted to say,**

This is my Manifesto.

My Pineywoods Manifesto.

These are my field notes.

I just feel better getting it off my chest.

That's where a book starts.

Not in the brain, but first in the heart.

Yes, that's where my books have originated.

# Chapter Sixty-Four

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## When are you going to write your book?

/ thoughts on writing  
MaMa Pearls

I never remember her writing. he was too busy cooking, cleaning, and taking care of three generations of Iles.

But she left behind a gift.

A book.

A memoir of her remarkable.

Written in the simple but way country folks can write or speak.

Listen to these two stories from her childhood life in the rice fields near Oberlin.

Mardi Gras

Uncle Quincy

Then she painted a beautiful picture of how she left behind that life to marry Lloyd Iles and move to Dry Creek.

She gave us a gift.

### TO BE WRITTEN

I write when I worship.

I worship when I write

Muir

memoir of

Who's going to write that book if you don't.

No one can write this book unless you do.

Most men (and women) go to their grave with their songs still in them.

I believe that's even more true with stories.

I didn't say books.

Stories.

We are all called to be storytellers.

We decide who our audience.

Long before I had a readership, I had an audience of three.

They were named Clay, Clint, and Terry.

I told them stories.

Funny stories.

Scary stories.

We traveled the long trek with Bilbo, Frodo, and a band of dwarves.

But most nights, I just told stories.

Big Black Daddy. The meanest boar in Dry Creek Swamp.

Scores of dog stories, wild brahmqn bulls.

Most of it was made up on the fly.

But I did what fathers have always done: pass on stories.

That's your job too.

Tell your stories.

Vocalize your life.

Stories passed from my ancestors.

The Westport Fight.

No Man's Land.

The years of the timber ccutting of the longleafs.

My dad's stories about when the "soldiers came to Dry Creek." The huge Army maneuvers that sprawled across No Man's Land.

It's fine to write for the pure joy of expression.

I have a hundred journals to prove. Most contain sketches and notes that'll never see the light of day.

# Chapter Sixty-Five

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## FINISH STRONG

“**F**inish your food. Don’t squander the opportunity. Don’t just get to the championship. Win it.”

Lebron James to A.J. Brown before Super Bowl 2025

John Stephen Akhwari.

1968 Olympics

**It’s a story worth retelling.**

His name is John Stephen Akhwari, and he had the dubious honor of finishing last in the Marathon at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics.

John Stephen, a Tanzanian runner, finished more than one hour after the winner had circled the track at the Olympic Stadium.

Most of the crowd had left, and the sun had set when John Stephen limped into the stadium for his last lap. He was the 57th runner and the last to run the entire 26.2-mile race.

However, there’s more to his story than simply finishing last. During the race, John Stephen took a nasty fall, injuring both his knee and shoulder. In spite of this, he ran on.

When he reached the stadium, the sparse crowd, recognizing his determination to finish, cheered him on as he finished the race.

Afterward, he told a reporter, “My country didn’t send me 5000 miles to start the race. They sent me 5000 miles to finish it.”

Thanks, John Stephen, for a lesson in perseverance and commitment.

Finishing is such a wonderful word.

We find the same dedication in the Bible’s description of good King Hezekiah, the king of Judah:

“For he held fast to the Lord . . . “\*

Holding fast to the Lord.

Not giving up.

Finishing the race.

### **Finishing Strong**

Ted Williams is generally considered the greatest hitter in the history of Major League Baseball.

Two events from his career speak about the concept of “finishing strong.”

In 1941, Williams entered the last day of the season with a batting average of .3995. This would qualify him for a rounded-off average of .400 and make him the first hitter in seventeen years to achieve that mark.

His team, the Boston Red Sox, had a meaningless doubleheader that day, and by sitting out these two games, Williams could end the year at .400.

However, that wasn’t the Ted Williams way. He played in both games and when the dust had settled, he’d gotten 5 hits in 7 at-bats to finish with an average of .406. No one has hit above .400 level in the seventy years since 1941.

# # #

Ted Williams retired at the end of the 1960 season at the age of forty-two. In his last at-bat in the final game of the year, he hit a home run. Old news footage shows Williams rounding the bases with a skip in his step and joy on his face.

He hit a home run in his last at-bat. That's finishing strong.

Finishing strong. We're remembered not by how we started but by how we finished.

Like Ted Williams, the Apostle Paul was a man of passion. He had an unyielding love for the Lord Jesus. In many of his writings, he expresses a strong desire to finish the work assigned to him by God.

Paul understood that *how we finish is how we are remembered*. Living in a day where his listeners understood about athletes, he compared it to striving to finish the race and win the prize. The first runner out of the blocks isn't always remembered. It's the one who finishes first.

Paul's words speak to this:

"But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy . . . ." Acts 20:24

###

"If it's worth doing, it is worth doing right- especially if it is for God!"

###

P.S. One of my favorite anecdotes involves a baseball discussion. "What do you think Ted Williams would hit if he was playing against today's pitchers?"

"Well, he'd be about ninety-four years old, so I don't expect he'd do too well."

May it be said of us all.



\*II Kings 18:6

# Chapter Sixty-Six

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## LEAVE SOME unfinished work behind

**T**IE IN WITH FINISH STRONG  
SLIDE IN DAMN, WHAT A RIDE.

I know it seems counterintuitive to follow a chapter on Finishing Strong with an admonition to leave behind someone's unfinished work.

But it needs saying.

My dad's brother, Bill Iles, is one of my heroes.

Uncle Bill has been one of my greatest encouragers and mentors.

He is arguably Southwest Louisiana's most renowned artist.

At age 80, he still paints every day.

His studio features several works in various versions and xxxx.

I remind him that God has given him three gifts: a steady hand, good eyesight, and a strong mind.

He was born to paint.

Somewhere in his vast collection is one of his earliest teenage works.  
It's watercolor on a rough sheet of plywood.

It depicts a pioneer on the plains returning to his wagon with a  
pheasant in hand.

He used the knothole in the plywood as part of the painting.

He's never stopped painting.

He never will.

And that's why he'll probably leave some unfinished work on his  
easels when it dies.

It's OK to leave unfinished artwork behind.

It's the sign of a man who used God's gift to him: he painted every  
day.

I can understand about unfinished work.

Like Uncle Bill, I'm an artist.

My brush is a pencil, and my canvas is my journey.

I practice my art every day.

I write.

I write something.

A writer is someone who wrote today.

When my life ends, I'll definitely leave some unfinished work be-  
hind.

Some half-written novels.

Outlines of stories and books in my journals or in my mind.

I have entire folders entitled "Future Books" and "Story Ideas."

I won't get around to them all.

That's OK. If I'm writing every day, there'll be loose threads hang-  
ing.

I've never been bothered about unwritten stories, books, and words  
I've left behind.

It doesn't matter if someone finishes them or not.

That won't be my problem.

My assignment is to write every day.

To follow my writing credo, "Sharing moving stories that encourage and inspire readers."

Sharing

Moving stories

Encouragement and inspiration.

That's my daily calling.

A writer is someone who wrote today, and an honest writer will leave some unfinished work behind.

I'd better get busy. I don't mind leaving unfinished work behind, but I've got some books burning a hole in my heart.

I need to be writing.

A writer is someone who wrote today.

# Chapter Sixty-Seven

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## Epilogue: Why I Wrote This Book

# Chapter Sixty-Eight

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## Sample Chapter "The Regret-Free Life

**T**he Regret-Free Life: Venus and Jupiter Came Out  
Monday, April 15, 2004

I've purposely waited until a week since the eclipse to write about it. I wanted to let the dust settle from the event and my soul.

I won't try to describe how it looked when our moon completely covered our sun. You've seen the photos, and the images are stunning.

Instead, I want to share *how it felt*.

I want to describe how it felt standing beside four of my grandchildren in an Oklahoma crossroads town called Haworth as the sun went dark.

It had been mostly cloudy on our four-hour drive north. We agreed to forge ahead regardless of the conditions. When you're living The-Regret-Free-Life, you'll take chances.

But as if out of respect, the clouds broke apart as the partial escape began.

The sky went smokey as the moon continued covering the sun, and the air felt cooler.

As onlookers counted down to the actual total eclipse, we took off our glasses.

I thought: *The absurd idea that our measly satellite plans to block out our nearest star.*

Then it happened. I won't try to explain how it looked.

It was so sudden, as if a galactic-sized light switch had been pulled.

I stepped away and gave my best Dry Creek hoot owl call. It felt appropriate at the moment.

Besides, words weren't adequate..

It sounds strange, but I felt the eclipse as much as I saw it.

I thought of the fear and awe past civilizations felt when an unannounced solar eclipse occurred.

I bet they felt it deep within them.

Most of the Oklahoma observers didn't take their eyes off the eclipse during its short four-plus minutes of totality.

But I did. I had this strong desire to glance around as the seconds ticked down.

I looked around and listened.

The sky went dark. Not black- midnight, but after-dusk-dark.

The streetlights came on.

The dogs stopped barking.

Even the birds hushed in awe of what was occurring.

Then I saw it—the one thing I'd most wanted to see other than the eclipse itself.

The stars came out.

The patchy clouds obscured most of them, but I picked out Venus and its fellow traveler, Jupiter, as they followed the Sun in their eternal orbits.

Seeing Venus and Jupiter appear in mid-afternoon impressed me the most. It was my biggest takeaway.

That's what I really came to see. The stars come out in the middle of the day.

And yes, I saw it, but I also felt it.

The total eclipse ended as quickly as it began, and everything returned to normal, more or less.

As the partial eclipse waned, most of the onlookers packed their lawn chairs and left. Anything after a total eclipse is anticlimactic.

I stood beside my four grandchildren. "Guys, don't forget to tell your grandkids about this."

The next day, I asked each of them to give me a one-word response about how it felt.

Noah said, "Incredible."

Jude added, "Jaw-dropping."

Luke said it well. "Awesome."

Maggie "Indescribable."

Me? I chose one of my keywords: *Amazing*.

My life credo is,

1. Be curious.

2. Be amazed.

3. Share about it.

And that's how I felt at the eclipse. *Amazed*.



I was simply amazed.

Postscript:

On the way home we stopped to eat in Natchitoches, A group of young eclipse groupies from New Orleans, clad in their eclipse shirts and caps. stood in line.

As I brushed by them, I said, "I'll see you guys in 2044."

They laughed good-naturedly at the old man.

But I was serious. I plan to see it.

Tuesday, August 23, 2044.

I'll be eighty-eight earth-years old.

I'll see it either from below in Bullhead, South Dakota, or from above in a front-row seat.

But I'll be there. I wouldn't miss it for the world.

# Chapter Sixty-Nine

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## END NOTES

"A book needs friends long before it needs readers.  
A well-written book always has so many fingerprints all over it:

Here are some of my special friends who helped in bringing *The Three Trees* to life.

Keep a sharp Google sheets list of all helpers

About

Curt Iles writes from his hometown of Dry Creek, Louisiana. He is the author of fifteen books celebrating the people, culture, and history of Louisiana's Pineywoods. He and his wife DeDe live in Alexandria, Louisiana near their nine grandchildren. Curt can be reached at [creekbank.stories@gmail.com](mailto:creekbank.stories@gmail.com).

Noah Iles is a graduating senior at Alexandria (Louisiana) Senior High. He plans to attend Louisiana Tech and major in Mechanical Engineering. He is the oldest grandson of Curt and DeDe Iles. He can be reached at [doofus56@aol.com](mailto:doofus56@aol.com)

Curt Iles and Creekbank Stories have published fifteen books. They are all available in various formats at Amazon

Coming Soon

Fall 2025 *A Love of the Land* A new short story collection featuring xx new stories.

As a gift to our loyal readers, here's a sample chapter.

Stay tuned at [www.creekbank.net](http://www.creekbank.net)

# Chapter Seventy

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## back flyleaf

**B** ACK FLYLEAF

{Back cover large longleaf pine sketch by Tim Conner}

Landmark longleaf pine

Iles Homestead

Dry Creek, Louisiana [www.creekbank.net](http://www.creekbank.net)

# Chapter Seventy-One

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## Back Cover

As of 5 March TREE BACK COVER

**Back Cover**

**THE THREE TREES**

**CURT ILES**

There are three trees on the front cover, and each has a story to tell.

“The small longleaf pine in the foreground has spent most of its young life in a grassy stage with little visible growth. However, it has steadily grown a strong and deep tap root. At some point, when conditions are right, it will begin its long skyward journey.

“Behind it is a majestic mature longleaf pine. This native Louisiana tree can live for over 150 years. It’s the Father Tree for most of the surrounding younger pines, which have come from the big pine’s cones and seeds.

“I’d like to think I’m at that tall, mature longleaf stage. I know there’s plenty of sap in me as well as a deep tap root. I plan to be around for a while.

“There’s a third tree on the cover. It’s the thin skeleton of a dead red oak, ready to be toppled by the next storm. The dead oak has completed its job with acorns, resulting in a stand of healthy red oaks along the fencerow.

“This blackened tree reminds me of my Dry Creek ancestors and mentors who passed on their common sense wisdom. They’re gone, but I’m here to continue on the journey they left behind. It’s a deep calling that compels me to speak, write, and share.

I want to speak to those grassy-stage pines. I believe I have some stories that will help them on their journey.

*The Three Trees* contain stories of values and habits a young person needs to know as they step out into life.

It’s also a valuable guide for leaders of all ages who want to maintain their priorities and follow their inner moral compass. *The Three Trees* contains stories that transcend age, gender, culture, and background.

Written in the warm, engaging style loved by his readers, Iles takes READERS on a journey through the memorable people, stories, culture, and values of the Louisiana Pineywoods.

**Stories such as:**

The Law of Eye Contact: 10-4-2.

Always be kinder than necessary.

Stay curious and be amazed.

Always expect the best from yourself and others.

The Happiest Sled dog.

Go to the funeral.

Live the gratitude-filled life.

Shake hands like a man.

The power of a personal hand-written note.

The generous life: giving and accepting gifts

Dream stealers and joy killers

Shut that gate behind you.

The burned-but-blessed-life.

If you borrow it, bring it back.

When are you gonna write your book?

Don't forget where you came from.

Finish strong, but leave behind some unfinished work.

A strong word called Integrity

**AUTHOR PHOTO**

Curt Iles is the author of fifteen books, all of which were written in his hometown of Dry Creek, Louisiana. He and his wife, DeDe, live in Alexandria, Louisiana, near their three sons and nine grandchildren.

Learn more at [www.creekbank.net](http://www.creekbank.net).

