

A Father's Last Heartbeat

A Reflection by Barry Hills

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Dedication

To my wife, children, and grandchildren, who share the inheritance of my father. And to my siblings, who grew up alongside me and knew our dad in their own special ways.

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Prologue

This is a story about Harry Hills, my father.

Details carried across a lifetime often soften at the edges. Memories shift, records blur, and family stories lose fidelity in their retelling. Even so, the pages ahead rest on truth as lived, remembered, and documented; shaped with care to preserve the essence of each moment.

A life like my father's cannot be understood in isolation. His character reveals itself through the people who crossed his path; family, friends, coworkers, in-laws, and occasionally strangers, all of whom carried away quiet impressions of him. Taken together, their experiences yield the fullest and most accurate picture of the man.

My presence in these pages is only one vantage point among many. My encounters, lessons, and shared moments provide a narrow lens through which his life becomes visible. But the focus remains on my father, and it is the shadow he cast that gives his story dimension.

Where documented facts yield to recollection, the narrative leans on the residue that truth leaves behind, the feelings that survive after dates fade. It is in those remnants that true meaning unfolds.

Knowing my father requires moving through the forces that shaped him. The chapters ahead trace the family he came from, the work that formed his habits, the convictions that guided his choices, and the way faith lived quietly beneath his actions. The years when responsibility pressed hard, when

discipline towards money was paramount, and the later seasons when age softened his pace, frame the outline of his story. Each chapter holds a part of his story and reveals what steadied him.

My father's story stretches beyond a single lifetime. It rises from a lineage of people who built more than they received, who measured worth through effort, loyalty, and quiet persistence rather than applause. His last heartbeat may have stilled, but its rhythm carries forward in the lessons he lived and the values he handed down. These pages seek to give shape to that rhythm of life.

Portions of this manuscript were edited with the help of an AI based editorial tool used primarily to strengthen structure and correct errors. The experiences, reflections, and memories remain entirely my own, drawn from family records and lived events.

In the space between recollection and fact, his story begins to take form. Each memory becomes a pulse, sometimes faint, but always insistent, marking the places where work, affection, and duty met. The shape of his life rises from that steady cadence and continues in the people who bear his name today.

“My relationship with him was never loud. It rested on presence, shared work, and a quiet dedication that spoke more clearly than words but was seldom heard for its true meaning.”

Chapter 1

The Final Hours

It was April 29th, 2013. The phone rang; it was my brother. Today was his birthday; we sent him a card, but I neglected to call.

His voice was steady but hollow. “The nurse doesn’t think dad will make it through the night,” he reported.

“OK. We’ll be there as soon as possible.”

My wife and I made the drive from San Jose to Walnut Creek in record time, the highway stretching ahead as the sun headed for the horizon. By the time we arrived, it was approaching dinner and darkness was starting to consume the skyline.

Upon arrival we found dad in bed, motionless. The nurse said he was in an induced coma; the terminal stage of a ten-year battle with liver cancer. Strictly speaking, it wasn’t a coma in the medical sense, but his stillness carried the same finality. The room smelled faintly of antiseptic and oxygen. The lights were too bright for the mood. The oxygen machine at the foot of his bed growled in rhythm, adding an obnoxious mechanical pulse to the air making the otherwise silence heavy.

Finding him this way was a surprise. We had lunch together with him and mom just two days ago. When my brother called I assumed we would find him in some semblance of consciousness and aware of our presence. But a final goodbye was clearly not in the cards. There would be no

smile, subtle wink, or nod. No final words of love and respect exchanged. We were apparently too late. “Can we wake him up?” I thought to myself but knew better than to say the words aloud. I wanted to blame someone. Why had they waited so long to call me? He was not in a coma yesterday. We need more time! Not so deep down I knew I had nobody to blame but myself as I tamped down my judgments. My narcissistic tendencies were getting the better of me at exactly the wrong time.

Dad’s cancer had been a long campaign of defiance; three minimally invasive procedures, each one buying him roughly three more years. By medical standards at the time, such survival was extraordinary. In earlier times, liver cancer meant a swift end. Regardless, the fight had run its course. Hospice had begun managing his pain with morphine, and the medication’s steady tide drew him inward, beyond reach.

Every few minutes, the nurse would rise to clear the fluids gathered in his throat, each intervention breaking the uneasy quiet. His breathing would steady for a while, then a gurgle would return. Every half hour like clockwork, she administered more morphine. It was unclear to me why. Dad had not requested it; he wasn’t showing any sign of distress. It was impossible to not wonder whether she was quietly hastening what was already certain. Did we understand this was what “comfort care” meant when we brought hospice into his home?

In the adjoining room, most of my siblings, some in-laws, and grandchildren gathered in low voices. They lived nearby so when the call went out they were able to gather quickly. They had been there for a while by the time my wife and I arrived.

Our middle brother arrived shortly after me with his daughters. Before joining the others in the other room he leaned over dad to whisper his personal and final message. I wondered what he said to dad and if dad heard him.

The mood in the adjoining room was less somber than I expected, more matter-of-fact, as if waiting had become its own ritual. Maybe the roar of the oxygen generator drove them away from his bedside; maybe distance was its own emotional shield. My own social awkwardness made it difficult for me to discern the meaning. Coming from a family of six siblings spread over thirteen years, and being the oldest, I've often seen the world slightly differently than them.

Mom was asleep in her room in another part of the building; her own body and mind weakened by strokes, her spirit fragile. There was no reason to wake her at this late hour unless something changed, and we had no idea how long we would be gathered. None of us knew what to expect next.

I sat beside him, facing his still frame. Both my hands wrapped around his right hand, my index finger resting along his wrist where I could feel the familiar rhythm of his heartbeat. His pulse was strong, deliberate, and unwavering.

Thump, thump, thump.

How I came to this position I can only guess, but I think it was simply my way of knowing dad was still ok. "Good", I remember thinking as I monitored his pulse, feeling for any signs of frailty. I was fixated on dad and his condition as I prayed in silence.

At the head of the bed sat one of his favorite granddaughters. She sensed my pain and confusion as much as she shared in her grandfather's fading presence. Her quiet strength was contagious to the rest of us in the room with dad; gentle, steady, and loyal; a special form of youthful energy and life.

After more than an hour beside the obnoxious growl of the oxygen generator, I became anxious. I asked the nurse if she could switch him to bottled oxygen, if only to bring a little peace to the moment. She nodded and made the change without complaint. The room softened and more time passed.

More clearing of his throat with suction.

More morphine.

Repeat.

By now it was well past dinner time and nobody had eaten. Regardless of food, I had evening medications I needed to take, so my wife who was at my side the entire time, graciously left to get my pills from the car.

Thump, thump, thump.

Our father's heartbeat continued strong.

Then, suddenly, nothing.

No slowing, no fading, no faltering, no warning. Just absence.

"This can't be right," I thought.

One second passed. Nothing.

I adjusted my grip.

Two seconds passed. Still nothing.

I struggled to catch my breath.

Death had won. He was gone.

Unable to hold back the wave of emotions, I wept aloud.

My father was dead at the age of 79.

That was my fathers last heartbeat.

His death brought the room to silence, yet the memory of his heartbeat stayed vivid beneath my fingertip. In the quiet I began to feel the shape of what survives when the body fails.

In the stillness of that moment my journey of discovery began.

Chapter 2

The Funeral

My wife returned to the room with my medications and found me bent over my father's quiet body, sobbing uncontrollably. She was upset to have missed his passing; internally I was relieved she had not witnessed it. She embraced me, as did my niece. Their comfort was authentic, but nothing softened the weight of the moment. My distress drew the attention of the family in the adjoining room. They gathered around dad, each expressing grief in a way that reflected their own relationship with him.

Mom's room was separate from dad's, one better suited to her condition and the care she needed. "Do we get mom, or tell her in the morning?" The discussion was brief. Some of us stayed with Dad while two of my brothers left to bring mom to dad's bedside. She and Dad had shared 58 years of marriage and over 70 years of friendship.

"What do we do now?" we asked the nurse. She explained that a local service would come for the deceased and later transfer him to the funeral home at our direction. Hearing her say "deceased" jolted me. She was talking about dad.

When my brothers returned, they brought mom to dad's bedside. It would be the last time she saw him before the funeral. The moment was quiet and simple, almost perfunctory. We hoped it might give her peace. It did not.

The next two hours passed slowly while we waited for the mortuary service. It was late, long after business hours. The waiting was miserable, though not nearly as difficult as

watching them prepare and remove his body. The details add nothing to the story except the memory of how final it all felt.

The days that followed dissolved into a blur of logistics that felt both necessary and hollow. Because of the size of our extended family and Dad's enormous circle of friends, the funeral became a major undertaking. It was a "full" Roman Catholic affair with Mass, music, homily, and sacramental proceedings. Siblings and in-laws shared the planning, which helped, but there were decisions to make at every step: the funeral home, the rosary the night before, the casket, the obituary, the music and singers, the Knights of Columbus, headstones, holy cards, programs, priests, and finally the reception with food for the hundreds who would attend.

It felt as if Dad's passing had been announced on the evening news. The church, built for a thousand people, was nearly full. We were all stunned by the attendance.

People drove hundreds of miles to say goodbye. Among them were childhood friends, high school classmates, teachers, coworkers, distant relatives and more church friends than I could count. A large number of my colleagues and friends drove from San Jose for the funeral. Their presence humbled me. They had come to support me and my siblings despite never having met my father.

My eulogy was heartfelt and authentic, but in hindsight it missed the mark. It felt incomplete. I wish I could go back and say what I understand now about dad. I also have a stubborn blind spot when it comes to thanking people simply for being present and the eulogy was no exception.

For the recessional, the entire center aisle of the church, nearly two hundred feet long, was lined with officers of the Knights of Columbus in full regalia, forming an honor guard as the casket was carried through the church. My brothers and I served as pallbearers. At the cemetery, surrounded by family and friends, the five of us boys lowered Dad into the ground.

I have never fully understood funeral receptions. Are we done mourning already? My sister in law created a beautiful picture board filled with photographs from Dad's life. My wife ensured there was more than enough good food for everyone. The large hall we rented was full. By all accounts it was a successful gathering. I met many people there for the first time, people who had been genuinely close to Dad and carried stories I had never heard. I tried in vain to remember them all.

Only in hindsight, standing in the quiet after that day, did I begin to understand who my father had been to his family, his friends, and his community. I saw the measure of a man I had known all my life but never fully comprehended. In his death I began to sense the scale of his life and realized too late how much of him I had missed.

As the crowd thinned, one question kept rising. Who was this man so many came to honor? I suspected the answer began long before I was born, before the Hills family came to America. What should have been closure was the start of discovery. In every handshake, hymn, and shared tear, a fragment of him surfaced again, his influence moving quietly through the living in ways I had never recognized until the day we gave him back to God.

Chapter 3

The Migration

In 1638 Joseph Hills left England and sailed to Newburyport, Massachusetts. We do not know what compelled him to undertake the dangerous journey, only that he chose Newburyport as the place to build a new life. He was not an aristocrat. He established a thriving dairy farm through his own labor, providing for his family and setting a course for his descendants. The Newburyport farm endured for more than a century, passing down lessons of hard work and family responsibility. Generations of Hills family members are buried in the local cemetery, a place where the legacy of those early settlers can still be visited today.

The Hills men have always defended America and taken public service seriously. They never sought the spotlight, but they never hesitated to step forward. Although there is no evidence of a formal military tradition, Hills men served in the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Civil War, and both World Wars. My father served in the National Guard during the Korean War.

Civic service also runs through our history. My grandfather was a sheriff, and there are records of Hills men holding city, county, and township leadership positions dating back to the 1700s. For a while my father served on the Pacheco town council.



In 1860 the family left Massachusetts and drove the herd to Wisconsin, where they resettled the dairy business. Ten years later, in 1870, they continued west to Iowa. Then, after a brief interlude in New York after selling the dairy, the family resettled in Nebraska in 1875. In Nebraska the men shifted into a mix of trades. Farming still played a big role, but no longer as the primary source of economic stability. With each generation the family added skills, sharpened old ones, and adapted to the changing world. When skilled laborers were needed for the industrial age, Hills men stepped into the work without hesitation.

In 1925, at the age of eighteen, my grandfather Larry left Nebraska and moved to Richmond, California. He struck out on his own during one of the most difficult economic periods in American history, determined to shape his own future. In Richmond he found work as an oil company laborer, gaining a financial foothold to anchor the next chapter of the Hills story. Two years later, in 1927, he married my grandmother Cora, whom he met in Richmond. They built a family together, two sons and one daughter. Their youngest child, my father, was born in 1934.



When dad was five, Larry and Cora moved the family to Pacheco, a small town just outside Martinez, California. It was 1939. This tiny unincorporated town would become a focal point for my father's identity for the rest of his life.

With more than ten generations of Hills experience behind him, my grandfather arrived in the West ready to make his mark. He carried the skills of many trades, the instincts to navigate uncertainty, the stamina to persist, and the values that had been handed down since 1638. His highest priority was his family. This was his moment to build something lasting.

The story of departure is also the story of creation. Each generation built not from inheritance but intention, carrying forward a discipline of work and faith that never sought applause. Their steady movement westward was an expression of curiosity and endurance, and its echo shaped the man whose heartbeat would one day rest beneath my fingertip.

Chapter 4

Young Life

In the 1800s Pacheco was a bustling town with a working waterway for commerce and large farms circling its commercial and residential core. Over time, neighboring cities expanded and annexed its land, carving away pieces of Pacheco until it was only a shadow of its former glory. By the time my family arrived in 1940, Pacheco had been squeezed into a small patch of ground, surrounded on all sides by the fast growing cities that once depended on it.

A small rental apartment above a local family store became home for my grandparents and their children. Across the street was a dairy, run by a widow who owned hundreds of acres in



the county. The economy was weak, and after her husband's death the widow began selling the land in small parcels to survive. My grandfather Larry purchased a one acre plot of land that came with a large barn and silo. To him, that land was another step towards the larger dream he carried for his family.



As with many small towns at the time, the local children attended school in a one room schoolhouse. Separate grade levels existed only on paper. It was there, at the age of seven, my father met his future bride for the first time. She was six.



Fifteen years later I would be born, but the casting of the story was set in 1940.

My mother was born to Etta and Herbert Vlach in Bay Point, California, one year after my father, in 1935. Herbert died young, when my mother was 3 years old. Etta inherited significant pasture land in Pacheco and moved the family there when my mother was five. Etta was the widow who sold the barn and one acre lot to my grandfather Larry, long before either family imagined they would someday share grandchildren. A practical real estate transaction became the first thread that joined the two family bloodlines.

Life was not easy for either family. Times were hard, work was constant, and money was scarce. In Pacheco, my grandfather took a job as a county sheriff, which provided enough to get by but little more. Even with my grandmother working as a librarian, dental care was a luxury, and by the time my father was eighteen, he had lost most of his teeth. He would wear full upper and lower dentures for the next 60 years.

Life centered on work and survival, not movies or restaurants. Vacations meant a day at the lake or a night camping under the stars. These were the values my dad grew up with. When he went to high school in the city, he enrolled in every shop class offered. Metal shop, wood shop, drafting, auto shop, electronics, plumbing. The school was well equipped, and he seized every opportunity. Many of his shop projects are still among my most cherished keepsakes. Electronics



became a lifelong interest he would later pass on to me. His prize possession in high school was an old Ford with a rumble seat that he restored and drove proudly. Aside from a brief flirtation with a motorcycle in the fifties, Ford became his preferred brand for the rest of his life. He loved cars and spent weekends at the local dirt track, watching sprint cars tear around the oval in clouds of dust with engines roaring.



A shallow river ran through town, wide enough in earlier generations to support riverboat commerce. One of the old riverboats was grounded and abandoned, my industrious grandfather dismantled it board by board and carried the lumber uphill to the parcel he had purchased from my eventual maternal grandmother. From those salvaged remains, he and his sons built a home. It was another step toward the dream my grandfather had carried since he left Nebraska at eighteen. My father understood the significance of the moment and threw himself into the work. They built everything by hand from the salvaged riverboat.

Riverboats were not built from the neat dimensional lumber we use today. The house that rose from its planks was a patchwork of odd pieces and repurposed hardware. The wiring, plumbing, windows, doors, cabinets, and fixtures all came from the boat. Its charm would become a source of

headaches in the decades that followed, but at the time it was simply home. Father and son had created it together.



From the tiny rental apartment above the local store, the family moved across the street, roughly two hundred feet, into what would become known as the “White House” simply because of its eventual color. A few years later, my father and grandfather built a detached garage with an apartment above it. With the addition of an apartment, my grandfather became a landlord, and the added income made life a little easier. They built the garage much the same way as the house, drawing from the endless pile of leftover riverboat lumber. The barn and silo from the old dairy were no longer needed and were eventually torn down, making way for the next chapter.

By then my father was nineteen, finishing high school and dating my mother steadily. He graduated first, then she a year later. My mother was academically driven and dreamed of college. After graduation from high school she attended San



Jose State for a year. Her relationship with my Father continued across the distance, and while I cannot say for certain, I suspect the separation only deepened their bond. After one year of college, my mother returned to Pacheco. She married my father in 1955.

Nine months and three days later, I was born.

In those early years, the pattern of my father's life took root; build, mend, persist. Labor was not a burden but a form of prayer, the hands speaking what words could not. The boy who learned to salvage a riverboat became the man who built a family with the same quiet devotion, crafting a life from whatever materials were given and never asking for more.

Chapter 5

Adulthood

Since the age of nineteen my father worked for Shell Chemical Company in Martinez. It was a union job with strong protections, steady pay, healthcare, a pension, and profit sharing with Shell. For a young man starting a family, it was exactly the foundation he needed. His income covered family needs, and he took quiet pride in being the sole provider. In the months leading up to my birth, my parents secured a mortgage on a 1100 square foot pre-owned home in Concord for \$5000 at 5% interest. It was a modest home, but it was another major step towards economic stability.



We outgrew the house quickly as 3 more brothers arrived every year after me. With the shrinking space and my

kindergarten year approaching, my parents had decisions to make. City life was more expensive than the rural world they had come from, and financial pressure was building.

A few years prior, my grandfather's heart began to fail. His doctor recommended a quieter life, so my grandparents left Pacheco and moved to Happy Camp, a small logging town on the Klamath River. The first thing my grandfather did was build a cabin on a mountainside for my grandmother. Although I was only four when my grandfather died, I still carry memories of him. My grandmother remained in Happy Camp, living simply. She worked at the Happy Camp post office long enough to earn a pension and relied on rental income from the Pacheco houses my grandfather had built. In the years that followed we visited Happy Camp at least once a year.



Because of my father's deep connection to the Pacheco property, my grandmother offered him the land and both homes. She would hold the \$10,000 loan, and dad's payments would replace her lost rents. I still remember being in the room as a very young boy while the adults sat in the living room negotiating the loan terms and the purchase price. It was serious and deliberate, nothing like a typical family gathering. Even then I sensed it mattered. It was the moment responsibility for the property passed from one generation to the next.

We lived in the White House for two years. I turned 5 and attended kindergarten at Pacheco Elementary. Meanwhile, my father had a custom home built on the site of the old dairy barn and silo. It was small, but with enough bedrooms to fit six children and two parents. The year was 1961. For my father, the land, the homes, and the sense of continuity they represented were sacred. Except for the few years in Concord



right after he married, he lived his entire life on the property his father had purchased in the early 40s. With a third home built, the White House and the apartment became rentals again. Their income covered the payments to my grandmother and eased the economic strain on our family. Being rooted to land was normal in 1638 when the first Hills arrived, but more rare in modern life. Yet that same ancestral pull was alive in dad.

My father's job at Shell was to operate catalyst crackers. These tall cylindrical towers take crude oil in at the bottom and, through superheating with steam and a series of catalysts separate lighter oils from heavier ones. The lighter oils rise and are collected at different levels inside the tower and pumped out. The crackers never stop running. Day, night, holidays, weekends. My father operated them from a 10 by 10 metal shed positioned near the towers. The work was done on a rotating shift schedule: one week of days, one week of swing, one week of graveyard, then the cycle repeated. Operators worked seven days a week with one day off before the next rotation. Staffing shortages were common, forcing the on duty operator to work "a double." The schedule was unrelenting. The word inhumane does not exaggerate it and he did it for his family for 42 years. One of the rare nuggets of candid advice dad gave me as a young adult was to always do work you loved. He worked in a 10 by 10 shed for 42 years out of love for his family not love of the work.

Because of dad's schedule, we often went weeks without seeing him because of opposing sleep schedules. It never felt like absence or neglect, it was simply the reality of our world. When his days off aligned with weekends or school breaks, he was fully present. Camping, fishing, visits to the zoo, trips to San Francisco, the Fun House at Playland, Fisherman's Wharf, Chinatown, 49er games at Kezar Stadium. Vacations meant tent camping on the delta or trips to Dillon Beach, Muir Woods, Lake Berryessa and Clear Lake, or longer drives to places like Fort Sutter and Yosemite. Dad's days off were almost always spent creating fond memories.

My parents were avid card players. When my father's schedule allowed, they played with the tenants who lived above the garage next door. As the oldest child with the latest bedtime, I

was allowed to stay up and play with them occasionally. Their raucous fun, laughter, and easy storytelling left a lasting imprint. Dad surrounded by friends, relaxed and gregarious, was a version of him I treasured and did not see often. He knew how to have fun.

Longer vacations were typically a once-a-year event, planned many months in advance due to the refinery schedule. In the early 1960s we toured ALL the California missions and spent two days in Disneyland. By then there were five children, my sister still in a stroller. My vacation memories are warm, though I was oblivious to the stress dad carried driving a massive Ford Country Squire wagon, loaded with children and towing a utility trailer or with a massive roof rack.

After the '35 Ford coupe with a rumble seat (dad's first car) my father bought only Fords. We went through one Country Squire after another, the first was a true "woody", the later ones fake wood-paneled versions. When those stopped being made, he moved to a Ford Econoline van with extended rear space. Every vehicle leaked oil. All needed constant service. He did the work himself.



Our garage was his shop, and there was nothing he wouldn't tackle: engine rebuilds, suspensions, carburetors, crank seals, drive trains, transmissions. I held the flashlight. We spent countless days working on cars in silence. He didn't give lessons. He worked and expected me to keep the light steady. Only now do I wish we had talked more, but at the time it simply felt normal. Those silent hours became the blueprint for our relationship. He was teaching me without words. Independence, patience, self reliance, persistence. Even at that early age, I was learning without understanding.

Like my grandfather salvaging a riverboat for its lumber, my father was thrifty, creative, and occasionally seized by surprising ideas. One day he came home from a military surplus store with a box containing five hundred military hats he purchased for \$5. He believed he could sell them for a \$1 each. The sales never happened, but it was worth it just to see nearly everyone he knew eventually wearing one of those ridiculous looking hats.

Dad's largest adventure was when he found a candle factory going out of business. He filled the massive Country Squire Station Wagon with wax, dyes, molds, vats, and stoves until the car sagged inches from the street. We unloaded the haul into our garage, stacking wax bricks and chips everywhere. For years, my brothers and I made candles of every color and shape imaginable. If a batch failed, we remelted it and tried again. We sold candles from our little red wagon throughout the neighborhood. Christmas candles were especially profitable. At the time we thought our father was a little eccentric. Candle making was not my dad's project, he left us boys alone with fire and vats of hot wax to figure it all out. In hindsight he was giving us a hands-on education in discovery,

creativity, commerce, quality, and perseverance. We learned to work together, something not always common among siblings. Fifty years later, while cleaning out our parents garage, we still found blocks of wax from the great wax adventure of 67.

The refinery's relentless hum set the cadence of my father's adult life. What he built in those years was more than stability. It was identity. Precision, resilience, and quiet pride were not values he talked about. They were values he lived. In many ways the rhythm of the plant became the rhythm of our home.

Steady. Enduring.

And without knowing it, I was learning the language dad spoke best.

Chapter 6

The Landlord

Once the loan was paid off, the White House and the small apartment my grandfather built in the 40s became additional income for my parents. The rent helped cover our family expenses, but as the buildings aged and tenants came and went, the cost of upkeep became relentless. Dad carried the entire burden himself, even while juggling his demanding schedule at Shell.

There was always something failing. Pipes leaked. Drains clogged. The main sewer line to the septic tank backed up frequently. The old knob and tube wiring with cotton-wrapped steel wire was dangerous and had to be replaced whenever it burned through. In the 50's my grandfather had added a small laundry room to the back of the White House, but its foundation was never tied into the rest of the structure. Over time it pulled away from the main house, opening gaps in the roof, breaking pipes, and inviting endless problems. When the roof needed replacing, Dad did it. When the trees needed pruning, he climbed the ladder. When the fence rotted, he tore it out and built a new one. Eventually even the septic system reached its limit, and the massive redwood structure had to be dug out and reburied, by hand.

During the various maintenance projects I would illuminate the work area with my flashlight. I saw the frustration in his face each time something broke. I often wondered why he held onto properties that demanded so much from him, though at that age I had no real sense of our financial situation. I only knew the work never seemed to end. In the weeks after a

tenant moved out work was especially difficult. The entire unit had to be cleaned, cabinets fixed, carpets scrubbed, walls repainted. Some renters left behind more than routine wear. I still remember one man rebuilding engines in the living room, motor oil soaking the carpet and floorboards only a few feet from the floor furnace.

The structure of the White House was always serving up new surprises. When Dad tore open the front porch, we saw that the deck was supported by huge creosote soaked railroad ties. They were solid and termite free, but far from anything that resembled current code.

Beyond maintenance was the constant struggle to find good tenants. Dad refused to charge market rates for rent, insisting instead on what he thought of as break-even. But his calculations never included the real cost of repairs or turnover. The rentals drained my parents financially. He understood this, but he believed more deeply in offering housing people could afford without government help. His commitment to that principle ran so deep that when family members reached adulthood, he rented to nieces and nephews at rates even lower than he charged outsiders. When any of family member needed more space or a roof over their heads, he moved them into the White House. And when someone in the family fell on hard times, he let them live there free of charge, sometimes for years.

At the time, I did not grasp what he was doing. Only later did I understand that his decisions had nothing to do with spreadsheets or budgets. He cared about people more than he cared about profit. Those houses were vessels for generosity, even when it cost him dearly. I am deeply

embarrassed it took me so long to see it, but grateful that I learned the lesson from him.

With all his sons having moved out on their own, maintaining the rental properties by himself became too much for dad. Then came his cancer diagnosis. I urged him to sell the old houses to relieve the weight he carried. He refused. Those buildings were not simply structures; dad had grown up in them, worked on them his whole life, and treated them as monuments to where his family began.

When the small upstairs apartment finally failed beyond repair, he accepted that it had to come down. True to form, he dismantled it himself. It was his way of saying goodbye to



something he had helped build and loved, despite its humble construction.

When dad died, relatives were still living in the White House rent-free. Only under the direction of his last will was the property sold. The new owners razed the house and built a

beautiful home that would have filled my dad with joy. The old foundation from my grandfather's time remained to qualify the project as a remodel rather than new construction. What rose from the foundation was remarkable in its design and craftsmanship. It stands today as an unexpected tribute to the men who started it all. I am certain they would see it and smile, knowing their work continues in another family's life.



I still question whether selling was the right choice. Should we have kept the property together and preserved it as a legacy for our generation? Perhaps.

For my father, ownership was never about building wealth. It was about stewardship. Every leaking pipe, every sagging beam, every late-night repair was a test of endurance and of heart. Beneath the dust and rust lived a quiet lesson. Duty mattered more than comfort. Generosity mattered more than gain. The houses he mended were, in many ways, reflections of the man himself: imperfect, sturdy, giving, and honest.

Chapter 7

Retirement

When dad entered retirement my life was consumed 60 miles away as a tech executive, the father of 2 teenage daughters, husband to a loving wife, a mortgage and a dog. Oblivious at the time, I had inadvertently stepped into a life template cast by my father and his father before him. Preoccupation with my life at the time resulted in even fewer touch points into dad's life, but I have a few.

Retirement brought a fulfillment of dreams to dad. He was a self-described armchair sailor and dreamed his whole life of owning a boat. He bought a used, mid-sized sail boat almost immediately upon retirement. It was no gem but it was his dream. He took it out on nearby lakes enjoying the freedom of the open waters and perhaps more importantly the solitude and quietness. It had no motor but it took only one lesson of being stuck with no wind for him to get a little trolling outboard motor for emergencies. This was his bliss. Decades of hard work and now peace on the open water, fishing.

Retirement rejuvenated the explorer in dad. Years of camping, fishing, and driving up and down California were not enough. It was now time to explore beyond state lines in the same fashion, so he bought an RV. I can't name all the places they went but mom and dad were in their element. They traded in their first RV for a bigger one with more comfort and range. They explored further from home taking in the natural wonders of the west. My younger siblings who lived close to mom and dad would often go camping with them, developing their own unique and personal bond with mom and dad.

At some point mom and dad joined an RV camping club. Fellow campers went on organized caravans to various off grid locations to imbibe the natural wonders of California. They made lots of friends in the group and enjoyed their company both on and off the trail. They were in their element; they were happy.



Then came dad's cancer diagnosis and his first surgery. After a brief recovery my folks resumed their activities albeit at a slower pace. We knew cancer would likely be dad's end but nobody knew how well his body would fight, how aggressive the cancer would be, or how effective the treatments would be. Then out of nowhere mom had a stroke. She survived but she was never the same. More strokes would follow as well as breast cancer. Retirement was over. The boat and RV collected leaves and dust in the back of the house.

Freedom did not still his hands; it merely changed their purpose. The tools of labor became instruments of reflection. On calm waters and quiet roads, he practiced a new kind of work; the art of being. What he once built with effort, he now measured by peace, the same heartbeat, softer now, guiding him home.

Chapter 8

Money

Money was always tight for our family of 8 but like everything else it was just the way things were for us then. I didn't dwell on the situation and we siblings knew better than to ask for too much. My parents seldom fought but when they did it was always about money. They never argued in front of us kids, but late at night I remember laying in bed listening to my parents arguing about money in the false privacy of their bedroom. Money conversations were always a private conversation until they retired and reached out to me for help.

As a child and teen dad grew up dirt poor. He knew what the hard life was like and developed the skills to navigate poverty. Mom's family was slightly better off but only a tiny bit; after all her mother had to sell off all of her family dairy properties to make ends meet during the post depression era. But it's every parent's ambition to create a better life for themselves and pass those improvements on to their children. So it was with our parents as well.

The post WWII economy was a good time but by the end of the 60's a single income was no longer enough to make ends meet. Mom went to work as a secretary at the school district offices but the economic stress continued to grow.

My father made some very difficult decisions during 2 different strikes at work. These were massive and violent strikes lasting many months. Our family, living paycheck to paycheck, needed money, so dad chose to cross the picket lines and work. This meant living in a trailer inside the chemical plant

behind locked gates so that he could avoid crossing picket lines daily. The union was extremely strong and violence was common not only at the plant but also towards the homes of scabs. At the peak of the violence we actually had a window shot out in our home.

When the second big strike came dad took a different approach. Instead of crossing the picket lines dad took a part time job with an appliance repair shop. He did in-home service for washers, dryers, HVAC, and refrigerators. Where he learned about freon and how to charge cooling systems is a mystery to me but he handmade his own set of tools, gauges, etc to service appliances. The work was good and dad enjoyed working with his hands but the job was part time so he needed more to make ends meet. He took a second job working for a mobile locksmith. Again, not a craft he knew but he learned fast. He drove around in the company van, loaded with keys, rescuing people locked out of their homes and cars. I rode with him one day and watched him work. I was amazed. Who was this guy? My dad wasn't a locksmith. But "yes" he was, because that was who his family needed him to be at that moment in time. Several years later my dad bought one of those trucks and opened his own locksmith business as a side hustle to his job at Shell.

When the strikes eventually ended dad always returned to his job at Shell. Despite his lifetime of living month to month Shell was home to his retirement fund and corporate profit sharing which he was counting on for retirement. Mom also had retirement with the school district. By the time they reached retirement age they had 6 sources of income including the rentals. They had survived the financial trials of raising a family in modern times and were able to breathe.

College presented a huge financial challenge. Fortunately my adjacent sibling and I were able to offset the costs with scholarships. The next sibling went to junior college and the one after that joined the navy. My sister, second to youngest, got training as a phlebotomist. With the first 5 siblings out of the nest and on their own, mom and dad were able to fund college for our youngest brother. Everything worked out.

During the worst of times we had clues things were tight. When dinner was toast with gravy we knew something was not right. One Christmas all our gifts came not from our parents but from the church. But through it all my father was always the calming force, the anchor point that reassured us things would be ok. He did this not through words or family talks, but through his quiet presence. And everything did turn out ok. Even though my parents never had savings of consequence, when they retired the mortgage was mostly paid off, and the multiple retirement income sources covered their monthly needs well enough.

Scarcity revealed his truest currency: integrity. Each compromise refused, each burden carried, was another lesson in value. He proved that worth is not stored in accounts but in constancy; earning through action, saving through restraint, investing through love. His balance sheet was written in endurance.

Chapter 9

Faith

My dad was not raised in a family that practiced any formal religion. My mother's family were extremely devoted Roman Catholics. Before getting married, dad was expected to get baptized, otherwise marriage in the church was not possible. Dad's conversion to Catholicism was not forced or shallow, his core values were consistent with those of the church. Nobody treated him as a "convert".

Sunday Mass was a staple growing up and whenever dad was home he was with us as a family regardless of what shift he was working. Sleep was a second priority. Dad went on several meditative weekend retreats throughout the years. These are quiet and prayerful escapes from the grind of daily life, giving participants an opportunity to reset their moral compass.

In the 70's mom and dad became active with a more evangelical group at church called Cursillo. The group became very active in the parish and dad's circle of friends grew with every Cursillo event he attended. Unlike the retreats which were quiet and prayerful, the Cursillo opened up dialogue among participants; working together as friends with the common goal of applying the scriptures to the challenges of modern life. Over the years dad attended many Cursillo weekends. Some were for men only and other for couples only. Dad never talked about what he did on Cursillo but each time he came home with a positive and refreshed disposition.

Mom and dad sent all 6 kids to parochial school for 8 years. There were family discounts but there were no free rides, no grants. It was important to my parents to give us a strong education aligned with their Christian values. The financial burden was real. At no time was parochial school assigned a reduced priority. We ate toast with gravy for dinner instead of compromising the strong education.

Dad joined two more organizations at church. The first was the Saint Vincent DePaul Society and the second was the Knights of Columbus. The DePaul society ran a food bank for the church, collecting and distributing food to the poor. Dad managed the distribution end, the “store” if you will. The Knights primary focus leaned more towards relief efforts for the homeless. Dad would take empty tuna cans, fill them with cardboard then fill the cans with hot wax (we still had plenty of wax). Dad would distribute these as mini stoves to the homeless to use for heat and cooking. Dad poured himself into the Knights and DePaul after his cancer diagnosis making them a nearly full time jobs. He spent his days serving others.

My parents donated to the church; not a lot in absolute terms but like tuition, donating to the church was a priority above virtually everything. Despite economic challenges at home giving to others in this way was more important.

Faith was his compass, not his claim. He found divinity in discipline, grace in service, and community in small, faithful gestures. His belief was never loud; it worked like gravity; quiet, unseen, impossible to escape. Through it, his heart kept its true rhythm.

Chapter 10

Patterns

As I near the end of my story there are a few random vignettes that give further insight into my father.

My dad's only brother was in the Air Force and based in Southern California. We saw him rarely and the first time I remember seeing him I was 7 years old. I was playing in the street. As my uncle walked towards the front door and my father came outside to greet him. They met halfway and embraced each other. I was shocked and confused. Who was this guy? Why were they hugging? It seemed wildly out of character for dad. I absolutely don't remember dad hugging me like that before, after, or since that moment. I simply did not understand. Of course my dad and I have hugged each other but it's always been a "guy hug" with a perfunctory pat on the back. Maybe it's my imagination but this just seemed different, deeper. Regardless, it revealed to me, perhaps for the first time, a soft side to my father I was too young to understand at the time. His family meant everything to him.

When dad decided to sell the RV he sold it to a guy named John. When I showed to up help him with the DMV paperwork and insurance changes I came unglued. "John"? Is that really all you knew about the buyer? Did John have a last name? Was dad nuts? Who has the pink slip? Where are the proceeds of the sale? Dad was simply not interested in such details. John had convinced dad about the gravity of his situation and his promise to come back later with payment. Dad cared more about John's plight than the money or

paperwork; they had a handshake on the deal after all. The handshake is all dad needed. John followed through and everything worked out. John was homeless and dad's RV became John's primary residence.

Mom's first stroke was in Sacramento at a family Christmas celebration. She was in the ICU for over a week, in an a coma for the bulk of her stay. Despite her comatose state, the siblings maintained vigil in the waiting room for days; taking turns checking in on mom. At some point I left for food or something and came back to discover dad had left the hospital. "Where is dad?" I asked. My siblings told me he had things to do at home and left. Home in Pacheco is 90 minutes from Sacramento where mom was in the ICU.

"What, nobody stopped him?" I got in my car speeding towards Pacheco to find out what was going on. This would be the second and last time I came unglued with my father. When I arrived at the house I found him installing a dryer in the garage. "What are you doing? Mom is probably dying in Sacramento and you're installing a dryer." My self righteousness was second to none. Despite my frustration he calmly explained he could do nothing to help mom, she was in a coma, and the dryer had been previously scheduled for delivery today. They needed the dryer installed so he did it. He wasn't wrong although I still had a difficult time swallowing the logic. Once again, he demonstrated his commitment as family provider and his ability to take in the big picture in a way I consistently missed.

It may seem like a small thing but we ALWAYS ate together as a family at the dining room table. Any meal, not just dinner. Not just Thanksgiving and Christmas; all meals, 7 days a

week. If dad was home and awake he sat at the head of the table. It didn't matter if we were eating Sunday fried chicken or toast and gravy; we ate as a family. And we cleared our plates before being excused. Family was important. Wasting food was not allowed.

When I was in high school I had the chance to own my own computer. In 1972 this meant bringing home a mainframe computer and dad let me set it up in the garage. He let me hook it up to the main electrical panel and run my 4000 watt beast whenever I wanted. This went on for several years without any complaints from my parents about the huge footprint equivalent to 5 refrigerators in the small already crowded 2-car garage or the electric bill. I learned a lot about computers from my mainframe adventure and went on to college earning a degree in Computer Science. It never occurred to me this was my equivalent to dad's wax adventure.

Across the fragments of a lifetime, a single design emerges; steady hands, deliberate purpose, unshakable character. The details differ, the pulse remains. What I once mistook for habit was, in truth, devotion: the disciplined art of living well without asking to be seen.

Epilogue

When I was 17 my father took me fishing, just the two of us, leaving my brothers behind. Time alone with dad like this was rare and precious. His favorite spot lay where the Sacramento River mixes into the San Francisco Bay; where fresh water and salt water touch and hesitate before becoming one. The river is almost 2 miles wide, hundreds of feet deep and impossibly still, a quiet giant that absorbs every sound. We walked in single file through a peat moss bog that yielded several inches with each step, the earth soft and uncertain. At the edge of the river stood a weathered wooden platform, nothing more than planks settling into the mud. Beyond it, tules rose in a dense green wall, stretching another fifty feet into the current, their tops swaying in the tidal breath. We fished the way he always did, dropping a red-and-white bobber into the dark channels between the reeds, where catfish fed in the shadows. The smell of clams and anchovies clung to our hands, the bait of choice and the reason I still avoid eating either to this day.

We settled in without discussion, side by side, facing the same horizon. Hours slipped past. The river moved in slow, calm, and deliberate rhythms; a mirror of the man beside me. We caught no fish that day. We exchanged no advice, no questions, no lessons for the future I was about to choose with college. Only the water spoke, brushing quietly against the tules. Father and son, together in silence. A whole day of it, and somehow, it was enough.

This was his way. It had become our way.

Growing up, we went fishing often, and I truly enjoyed it. Having caught plenty of fish over the years I always assumed fishing would follow me into adulthood. But as my career accelerated, fishing became a foggy memory. My plan was to

revive fishing in retirement, where I could return to the riverbanks of my childhood and reclaim something essential and neglected during my working years. In retirement, I went all in and re-outfitted myself with every piece of gear I had once imagined owning. And yet, even with the Feather River less than a mile from my doorstep, the rods remained untouched. A year passed, then several more, until a full decade went by and the new gear still hadn't tasted water.

At last I understand, fishing had never truly been about the catch. It made me look back at my father with a different question: was he really fishing all those years, or was he seeking something else, the presence, the connection, the almost-brotherhood that forms when a father and son stand together in the same cold dawn? I suspect it was that quiet bond he cherished most.

There is a narrow but important distinction between *what* we do and *why* we do it. Growing up, I paid close attention to what my dad did. I watched him fix things, build things, solve problems, and keep our family steady. But I never looked beneath the surface to understand why he lived the way he did. As reflected throughout these pages, it was just the way things were, normal for me, for us. But I was learning his actions, not his intentions.

Only after his final heartbeat did I begin to see the deeper question was not about his skills, but rather about the man he *chose to be*. The hours I spent studying his hands at work taught me the mechanics of things, but not the motive behind them. At the time, I didn't have the perspective to ask. I simply assumed the work was the point.

It has taken me years to understand the work was an expression of his character. His choices were quiet ones: to

be dependable, to be steady, to show love through effort rather than words. None of that was clear to me before his death. Children absorb the visible and miss the invisible; maybe that is how it has to be.

Words can only go so far in explaining the reasons behind a life. What matters most is lived, not spoken. My regret is not that he failed to teach me, but that I failed to recognize what he was showing me until long after he was gone. Only with distance could I assemble the pieces and understand the man beneath the actions, the man he *chose to be* every day.

So who did my father *choose to be*? For the psychologists and anthropologists, how much did he choose and how much did he inherit? I don't know. Regardless, I can confidently say my father was kind, humble, quiet, firm, resolute, hard working, skilled, happy, honest, loving and loved, supportive, dedicated, empathetic, protective, clever, friendly, fun and occasionally funny. He valued God and people over things and money. My father led his life in a manner consistent with the highest level of values and ethics imaginable. Dad was an honest man, slow to anger. Always authentic and humble.

My father's life is a benchmark I can aim toward but will never completely reach. He moved through the world with a steadiness and quiet conviction I only began to understand after he was gone, when emulation became far harder than observation. Even so, reaching toward the man he *chose to be* has become its own compass for me. If I can choose a path with even a fraction of the authenticity and integrity that came so naturally to him, then whatever I pass on to the next generation will benefit from the foundation he left behind for us.

Years after his death, I finally understood that my fathers silence was not a gap between us but his pure way of loving; as steadfast as his heartbeat.



(Four generations, great grandmother, grandfather, dad, and me)