

EVERY LIFE IS A BATTLE.
NO ONE WAS MEANT TO FIGHT ALONE.

THE TRENCHES

*A Field Guide
for Those Who
Shape the Lives
of Others*

ISIAH ANDERSON

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Details of some individuals and events have been changed to protect privacy.

READER DRAFT — for feedback only. Not for distribution. Please excuse the working notes at the back; they're part of the process.

Preface

The phone rang on a hard day.

I knew who it was before I looked. A young woman I coach — I'll tell you about her later. She wasn't calling for plays. She wasn't calling for advice. It had taken me years to understand what calls like this one really were.

She was checking to see if someone was still there.

I didn't give a speech. I didn't offer five steps. I said what I've learned to say:

"I'm glad you called. Stay here. We're going to get through today."

Not next year. Not forever. Just today.

And when I hung up, I sat there thinking about a truth it took me fifty years and a lot of scars to learn:

Sometimes people don't need another expert.

They need someone willing to step into the trench with them.

I know something about trenches.

I was a boy nobody was watching. I'll tell you that story too — the armor, the wounds, the therapist whose tears finally made me see it. I built a school that saved lives and watched it die in a courtroom. I buried a nineteen-year-old point guard whose last words to me were a plea to get him out. I moved my three teenage sons and everything we owned in a U-Haul and started over from nothing. I sat alone in a hospital room during COVID with a heart that was quitting on me, shaking too hard with fear to stand, held up by a nurse's kindness and the mercy of God.

None of that made me an expert.

It made me a witness.

And here is what I witnessed, in gyms and classrooms and courtrooms and hospital rooms, over thirty years of coaching, teaching, counseling, and crisis work:

Every environment where people are shaped is a trench.

A basketball court is a trench. A classroom is a trench. A counseling office is a trench. A church is a trench. A living room is a trench. A hospital room is a trench.

Every day, coaches, teachers, parents, counselors, pastors, and mentors step into places where people carry invisible wounds, hidden fears, broken dreams, and untapped potential. We often meet them on the worst days of their lives.

For years, this book existed as a basketball manual — practice plans, culture, accountability, how to build a program. But the more life I lived, the more I realized those pages were pointing at something much bigger. So let me be clear about what you're holding.

This is not a basketball book. It's not a parenting book. It's not a leadership book. It's not a counseling book.

It is a field guide for anyone entrusted with another human being.

And it is built on one conviction, earned the hard way, that you will meet on nearly every page:

People become best in safe relationships.

Not relationships without truth, accountability, or challenge. Relationships where grace and truth walk together — where people are known, challenged, forgiven, corrected, and loved. Environments where growth is possible because fear is not in control.

In these pages you'll find my stories — the real ones, told with the bark still on them — alongside what I've learned from psychology, neuroscience, attachment research, and most importantly Scripture, which has been teaching all of this far longer than science has been measuring it. God has always been in the business of restoring hearts before changing behavior.

The question is not whether you're making an impact on the people around you.

You are. Every day. Every interaction.

The question is what kind.

Welcome to the trenches.

Introduction

The Trench You're Standing In

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." — Galatians 6:2

When most people hear the word *trenches*, they think of war. Dirt, danger, exhaustion, survival.

They're not wrong. The trenches are where battles are fought, where courage is tested, where people discover who they really are.

But the longer I've lived, the more I've realized that not all trenches are made of dirt. Some are classrooms. Locker rooms. Homes. Churches. Hospital rooms. Workplaces. Some are the quiet places

where people carry burdens no one else can see.

I've spent much of my life in trenches. Some I chose. Some chose me.

For years I thought my responsibility in them was to fix people.

Then I learned — slowly, and at cost — that people are rarely transformed because someone had all the right answers. They're transformed because someone was willing to stay. To listen. To understand. To believe. To walk with them.

That realization changed how I coached, how I taught, how I parented, how I led, and how I read Scripture. Because when I looked closely, I discovered that's exactly how God works.

He didn't shout instructions from heaven.

He entered our trench.

Jesus didn't remain distant from human suffering. He stepped into it. He walked dusty roads, touched lepers, wept with grieving friends, welcomed children, restored the forgotten. He confronted sin without rejecting sinners, and He demonstrated that grace and truth were never meant to compete. They were always meant to walk together.

So this book isn't primarily about leadership strategies. It's about people. Before we can build healthy teams, we have to understand healthy people. Before we can build healthy organizations, we have to build healthy relationships. Before we can change behavior, we have to understand the heart.

Here's how the journey runs.

We'll start in the trench itself, and with the person you bring into it — because you are the curriculum, and the people you lead experience who you are long before they hear what you say. Then we'll go beneath the surface: why every behavior has a story, what actually forms a human heart, and what presence and safety do that no program ever will. From there we'll walk through the harder ground — doing hard better, becoming before doing — and then outward, to the ecosystems that shape whether people rise or fall, and inward, to guarding your own heart so you have something left to give. We'll end with legacy, and with a commissioning.

Along the way you'll meet the people who taught me all of it. A point guard named Boo. A little brother with a sketchbook. A man named Seth who prayed for me when I couldn't pray for myself. A weeping therapist. A daughter in a clothing store. A nurse who helped me stand.

You won't find a formula. People are too complex for formulas. You'll find principles, stories, research, Scripture, reflection, and practical tools — and one consistent invitation:

Become the kind of person others feel safe following.

You don't have to be perfect. You don't need an impressive title. You simply need the courage to enter someone else's trench and remain there long enough for hope to grow.

So before you turn the page, one question.

Who has God entrusted to you?

Maybe it's a son or daughter. A classroom. A team. A congregation. A business. A neighborhood. A single friend who is quietly struggling.

Whoever comes to mind, remember this: they don't need you to have all the answers.

They need someone willing to step into the trench with them.

Let's begin.

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Chapter 1

The Trenches

Where People Become

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." — Galatians 6:2

Where Are the Trenches?

When most people hear the word *trenches*, they think of war. They picture soldiers huddled together beneath the surface, surrounded by uncertainty, exhaustion, fear, and danger. The trenches are where battles are fought. They are where courage is tested. They are where lives are forever changed.

Life has taught me that not all trenches are found on battlefields.

Some are found in classrooms. Some are found in locker rooms. Some are found around kitchen tables. Some are found in counseling offices. Some are found in churches. Some are found in hospital rooms. Some are found in boardrooms. Some are found in homes where no one else sees the tears after everyone else has gone to bed.

The trenches are anywhere people wrestle with becoming.

And whether we realize it or not, every one of us steps into those trenches every single day.

The Battle Beneath the Surface

One of the greatest mistakes we make is believing that the battles people fight are visible.

They're usually not.

The student acting out in class may be carrying shame. The athlete with the bad attitude may be terrified of failure. The parent who seems angry may actually be overwhelmed. The employee who has stopped caring may have quietly lost hope. The teenager who keeps pushing everyone away may simply be waiting to see if anyone will stay.

Behavior is visible.

The heart is not.

That's why leading people is never as simple as correcting behavior. Before we can influence actions, we must first understand the person behind them.

Let me show you what I mean.

The Phone Call

There's a young woman I coach. I'll call her Nia — that's not her name, and I've changed the details that would tell you who she is, because her story belongs to her. But what I learned from her belongs in this book.

On the court, Nia is everything a coach hopes for. Focused. Competitive. A worker. When the season is running — practices, film, travel, games, goals — she thrives. If all you ever saw was the gym, you would think she was one of the most put-together young people you'd ever met.

But something happened to Nia that no young person should ever have to carry. And I've learned that her hardest days don't come during the season.

They come after it ends.

The gym gets quiet. The structure disappears. The distractions fall away. And the empty spaces get louder.

I've also learned that pain keeps a calendar. As the anniversary of what happened approaches, her body and mind begin reacting before she even consciously knows why. The dark days get darker. That's not weakness. That's how wounds work. Trauma gets quieter when life has structure — and it speaks up when the structure is gone.

For a long time, I thought my job was to keep her in the gym. Keep her playing. Keep her busy. Keep the structure running.

Then one day it hit me: basketball had become her lifeline — and a lifeline is not the same thing as a life. The goal was never just “keep Nia playing.” The goal is helping Nia build a life that still has meaning when the season ends. More pillars. Faith. Gratitude. Friendships. Mentoring younger players. A future she's walking toward. One pillar can crack. Five pillars hold a roof.

But here's the moment I want you to see.

Around that anniversary, Nia calls me.

She doesn't call for plays. She doesn't call for advice. It took me a while to understand what those calls really were.

She was checking to see if someone was still there.

And I've learned to stop trying to fix the phone call. I don't give a speech. I don't offer five steps. I say some version of this:

“I'm glad you called. Stay here. We're going to get through today.”

Not next year. Not forever.

Just today.

Sometimes you have to slow life all the way down and just take care of today. Be grateful you opened your eyes. Be grateful your toes touch the ground. Remember the people who love you — the family, the teammates, the mentors who will always be there.

Let's just take care of today.

That's the trench. Not the gym. Not the wins.

The phone call.

My First Lesson

Nia is not the first person to teach me this. She's the most recent in a long line.

Early in my coaching career, I thought my job was to teach basketball. If players worked hard, listened, and executed, everything else would take care of itself.

Sometimes it did. Often it didn't.

Over the years I began noticing something. The players who struggled the most on the court were rarely fighting basketball problems. They were fighting life.

Some lacked confidence. Some didn't believe they belonged. Some had never experienced consistent encouragement. Some carried wounds they couldn't explain. Some had learned to protect themselves by pretending they didn't care.

Basketball simply revealed what was already happening inside.

Eventually I realized I wasn't coaching jump shots. I was coaching human beings.

And human beings always bring their hearts with them.

Jesus Entered the Trench

When God chose to rescue humanity, He didn't do it from a distance.

He came near.

Jesus didn't simply teach truth. He lived among people. He touched those everyone else avoided. He listened. He wept. He healed. He forgave. He challenged. He loved.

He entered our trench.

That changed the way I understood leadership.

Leadership isn't standing above people. It's kneeling beside them. It's entering someone else's struggle without losing hope. It's helping carry burdens that were never meant to be carried alone.

It's answering the phone.

The Call

Every person reading this book has influence.

You may never coach a state championship team. You may never preach to thousands. You may never lead a large organization.

But someone is watching you. Someone is learning from you. Someone is becoming because of you.

Influence isn't reserved for people with titles. It's the responsibility of anyone entrusted with another human being.

Will people become more fearful because of your presence, or more courageous? More ashamed, or more hopeful? More isolated, or more connected?

Every interaction is shaping someone's story.

The Trench Is Sacred Ground

I've come to believe something that has changed the way I see people.

The trench isn't a place to conquer. It's a place to serve.

It isn't a place where we prove how much we know. It's a place where we demonstrate how much we care.

People don't need perfect leaders. They need present leaders. They don't need someone who has all the answers. They need someone willing to stay when life gets hard.

Nia doesn't call me because I'm wise. She calls because I answer.

That's what makes the trenches sacred. Because it's often in the hardest places that the deepest transformation begins.

Reflection

Take a moment and think about the people God has entrusted to you.

Who immediately comes to mind? A child? A spouse? A player? A student? A coworker? A friend?

Now ask yourself:

- What battle might they be fighting that I cannot see?
- Have I been reacting to behavior instead of trying to understand the heart?
- Does anyone in my life keep a calendar of pain I've never noticed — a season, a date, an anniversary when they go quiet?
- How can I become a safer person for them this week?
- What kind of trench am I building through my words, attitudes, and actions?

Remember: people rarely remember every word we say. They never forget how we made them feel.

Trench Tools

This Week's Challenge

Before correcting someone's behavior this week, pause and ask yourself one simple question:

"What story might I not know?"

Lead with curiosity before judgment. Listen before speaking. Seek to understand before trying to be understood.

You may discover that what looked like rebellion was actually fear. What looked like apathy was actually discouragement. What looked like disrespect was actually hurt.

And one more: the next time someone reaches out to you at an odd time — a call, a text, a knock — for no clear reason, don't rush to find out what they want. They may not want anything. They may be checking to see if someone is still there. Say the words: "I'm glad you called." Then help them take care of today. Just today.

The trench begins the moment we choose compassion over assumption.

Closing Thought

This book isn't about fixing broken people.

It's about becoming the kind of person who can walk with them toward healing.

Because every heart has a story. Every story has a battle. And every battle deserves someone willing to step into the trench.

Sometimes the trench is a gym. Sometimes it's a classroom.

And sometimes it's a phone that rings on a hard day — and gets answered.

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Chapter 2

The Person in the Mirror

You Are the Curriculum

"First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." — Matthew 7:5

Before We Lead Anyone Else

One of the greatest misconceptions about leadership is that influence begins when someone gives us a title.

Coach. Teacher. Pastor. Principal. Parent. Counselor. Manager.

We think leadership starts the moment we're placed in charge.

It doesn't.

Leadership begins long before anyone follows us. It begins with the person we see in the mirror every morning.

Every day we walk into classrooms, locker rooms, offices, churches, and homes believing we're shaping other people. The truth is, who we are is shaping them long before what we say ever does.

People don't simply hear our words.

They experience our character.

The Man in My Mirror

I have to be honest with you about the man who used to look back at me.

For years, I judged being a "good man" by what I didn't do. I never used drugs. I never got drunk. And somewhere in my mind, that scorecard gave me permission to be mean and nasty when things didn't go my way.

A bully.

I was a good provider. A hard worker. Respected in my community. And I was one triggered moment away from crashing out, almost all the time. The people closest to me received the worst of me — while everyone else got the coach, the counselor, the leader.

Here's what makes that so dangerous, and why this chapter comes second in this book, before all the chapters about how to lead others:

I was teaching the whole time.

Not with my words. With my life. My sons were studying me. My players were studying me. And what they were learning wasn't in any lesson I planned.

You cannot hide your curriculum. You can only choose whether to change it.

You Cannot Give What You Do Not Possess

I've met coaches who understood every offense but couldn't connect with players. Parents who desperately wanted patient children while living with constant impatience. Pastors who preached peace while privately living with chaos.

I've been several of those men myself.

Eventually people receive not what we intend to give — they receive what we consistently live. Leadership is always an overflow. Later in this book, I'll tell you what it cost me to learn that; for now, just carry the question:

What is overflowing from your life?

The Hidden Curriculum

Every school has a curriculum. Every coach has a practice plan. Every church has a sermon. Every family has rules.

But there is another curriculum that's rarely written down.

It's called your life.

Children are always studying it. Players are always watching it. Employees are always noticing it.

You teach humility by how you respond when you're wrong. You teach forgiveness by how you handle conflict. You teach integrity by what you do when no one is watching. You teach emotional health by the way you respond under pressure.

Your life is always speaking.

The question isn't whether people are learning from you.

The question is: what are they learning?

David Before the Crown

When Samuel anointed David, he wasn't standing on a battlefield. He wasn't sitting on a throne.

He was tending sheep. Hidden. Forgotten by his own family.

Yet Scripture tells us something remarkable: “The Lord looks at the heart.”

God wasn’t impressed by appearance. He wasn’t searching for the strongest résumé. He was looking for a formed heart.

Before David ever led a nation, God was shaping a shepherd.

That pattern hasn’t changed. Before God entrusts us with influence, He often works on our character.

The public assignment is usually preceded by private formation.

Your Wounds Will Lead — or Your Healing Will

Every leader has a story. Every leader has wounds. Some are obvious. Some are invisible.

The question isn’t whether you’ve been hurt. The question is whether your wounds are driving your leadership.

Unhealed rejection often creates controlling leaders. Unhealed fear often creates anxious leaders. Unhealed shame often creates perfectionistic leaders. Unhealed pride often creates defensive leaders.

Whatever remains unexamined eventually leaks into the people we lead.

I’ll tell you my whole story in the chapters ahead — the wounds, the armor, the years of anger I couldn’t explain, and the work it took to heal. For now, just know this: the mean and nasty man I described a few pages ago wasn’t a character flaw.

He was an unexamined wound with a whistle around his neck.

That’s why self-awareness isn’t optional. It’s stewardship. Healing isn’t just for you.

It’s for everyone your life will touch.

The Rue 21 Report Card

I want to tell you how I found out the curriculum had changed.

Not long ago, my wife Tricia took my little daughter shopping. They were standing in a Rue 21 when my daughter — unprompted, in the middle of a clothing store — started talking about how loving and sweet I am.

And then she started to cry.

The sweetest man she’s ever met, she said. The things I say to her are so loving and kind.

When Tricia texted me about it, I stared at my phone and typed the only thing I could:

“I don’t know what to say.”

Because I knew the man in the old mirror. The one whose own childhood taught him that feelings were weakness, that a man’s word meant nothing, that anger was just who he was. That man’s daughter would not have cried those tears.

For my child to say that — my girl child, who means everything to me — undid me.

And I finally texted back the truth about what I've actually been doing all these years, without ever calling it a curriculum:

"I want her to see how she should be treated."

That's it. That's the whole strategy. She's not learning what love looks like from my lectures about boys and respect and worth. She's learning it from watching how I treat Tricia. How I speak to her. How I apologize. How I stay.

She's studying the hidden curriculum.

And for the first time in my life, I'm not afraid of what she'll find.

One more thing — and the men reading this need to hear it. Somewhere in that text thread I added, "And I'm still manly."

I was half joking. But only half. Because I spent decades believing tenderness was weakness, and I need you to know what I know now: the sweetness cost me nothing. Not my strength. Not my edge. Not my manhood.

The armor cost me everything. The sweetness gave it back.

Looking in the Mirror

The mirror tells the truth.

It doesn't flatter us. It doesn't condemn us. It simply reveals what's there.

Scripture says God's Word functions the same way. It exposes our motives. Our fears. Our pride. Our selfishness.

Not to shame us — to transform us.

Healthy leaders learn to spend as much time examining themselves as they do evaluating others. The safest leaders are usually the most self-aware.

And every once in a while, if you do the work, God lets you see the new curriculum reflected in someone you love — crying happy tears in a clothing store.

Reflection

Take an honest look in the mirror. Ask yourself:

- What qualities do people experience most consistently when they're around me?
 - What wounds still influence the way I lead?
 - Where am I asking others to do something I'm unwilling to do myself?
 - If the people closest to me described me to someone else — unprompted, when I wasn't in the room — what would they say? Would it undo me in the good way, or the hard way?
 - If someone followed my example for the next ten years, would I be proud of who they become?
 - Who am I becoming when no one is watching?
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Trench Tools

This Week's Challenge

Choose one person you trust. Ask them one question:

"What's one thing you see in me that helps people grow, and one thing that might unintentionally make it harder?"

Don't defend yourself. Don't explain. Just listen.

Growth begins where defensiveness ends.

Then spend time praying David's prayer:

"Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Psalm 139:23-24)

Closing Thought

You are the curriculum.

Not your practice plan. Not your lesson. Not your sermon. You.

The people entrusted to you are studying your life every day, and they will learn what you live long before they learn what you say.

That used to terrify me, because of what I was living.

It doesn't anymore — not because I became perfect, but because I let God rewrite the curriculum. Slowly. Honestly. One examined wound at a time.

And the report card doesn't come home from school.

It comes home from a Rue 21, in tears, saying: *this is the sweetest man I've ever met.*

Do the work. Somebody is watching.

Make sure what they're learning is worth becoming.

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Chapter 3

Every Behavior Has a Story

Learning to See Beneath the Surface

"Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." — 1 Samuel 16:7

The Iceberg

One of the first things I learned as a coach was that behavior is easy to see.

Attitudes. Effort. Body language. Words. Choices.

They're all visible.

What isn't visible are the reasons behind them.

Imagine an iceberg floating in the ocean. Only a small portion rises above the water. The massive foundation remains hidden beneath the surface.

People are much the same.

The words we speak. The choices we make. The anger. The anxiety. The withdrawal. The confidence. The arrogance.

Those are the parts everyone sees.

Underneath are experiences. Relationships. Loss. Fear. Shame. Hope. Dreams. Trauma. Love. Identity.

The heart.

Most of life happens beneath the surface.

I know this is true, because for most of my life, I was the iceberg.

The Boy in the Armor

Let me show you what the surface looked like on me.

No smiling — that's weakness.

Fists balled up. Face locked. Always ready for a fight at the drop of a hat.

Feelings are the enemy. Feelings make you vulnerable, and vulnerable means prey.

Every man for himself. No one gets in. No one gets close.

If you had met me as a boy — if I had walked into your classroom, your gym, your youth group — that's what you would have seen. And if you only responded to what you saw, you would have called it an attitude problem. Defiance. Disrespect. A kid looking for trouble.

You would have been wrong.

Because underneath the surface, there was a story.

Where the Armor Came From

I grew up in West Philadelphia, the son of a father who was almost never there — and when he was, there was drama. I rarely remember any peace.

He would disappear for weeks and resurface like nothing happened. I'd be outside riding my bike, see him heading for the door, and beg him to take me with him.

He'd say, "Next time."

It was always "next time" and never "get in."

So I learned early that a man's word meant nothing. And that lesson didn't stay contained to him. It attached itself to everyone — teachers, coaches, anyone — regardless of their intentions. Remnants of it remain today.

My brother and I walked to our games alone, all across West Philly. No one showed up. If it was too far, we caught a ride with the coach — or we didn't go. We figured it out. We always figured it out.

Because we had to.

Then one day — I was still in elementary school — my father took my brother and me somewhere we had never been. An apartment across town. He walked into a bedroom and changed into comfortable clothes, like it was home. Nothing was said. No explanation. He was answering a question we hadn't asked yet: where he goes when he says he'll "be right back." Where he goes when he says "next time."

And then he took us outside to watch another woman's son.

The boy started doing flips in the yard, like some kind of Olympic champion. And my father — this man who did not cheer, who did not show up, who did not stay — started cheering him on with an enthusiasm I had never heard before. A joy in his voice I did not recognize and had never been able to locate when it came to me.

Standing there, watching my father cheer for someone else's son, something in me went quiet in a way that took years to name.

That's when the armor went on.

Survival Dressed Up as a Personality

Here is what I need you to understand about the difficult people you lead.

Trauma is survival dressed up as a personality.

The armor I wore wasn't rebellion. It was protection. The locked face, the balled fists, the refusal to smile, the wall against every adult who tried to get close — every piece of it made perfect sense given what my heart had learned about the world.

A man's word means nothing. Showing up isn't for you. Feelings get you hurt.

My behavior wasn't the problem. My behavior was the *evidence*. It was my heart's honest report about what life had taught it so far.

And here's what breaks my own heart looking back: the adults who only saw the surface confirmed the story. Every "what's wrong with you" told me I was right to keep the armor on. It took the rare adult — the coach who kept his word, the teacher who saw something in me — to make me wonder if the armor was still necessary.

The kid in your world with the locked face and the attitude?

That armor made sense somewhere.

Your job isn't to punish the armor off of him. It's to become safe enough that he starts to wonder if he still needs it.

The Mistake We All Make

When behavior frustrates us, our instinct is to correct it.

The player rolls their eyes. The student talks back. The employee misses deadlines. The child throws a tantrum.

We immediately ask, "How do I stop this?"

A better question might be, “What is this behavior trying to communicate?”

Behavior is often communication before it’s rebellion. Not always. But often.

Sometimes anger is protecting hurt. Sometimes withdrawal is protecting disappointment. Sometimes perfectionism is protecting shame. Sometimes control is protecting fear.

And sometimes a locked face and balled fists are protecting a boy who watched his father cheer for someone else.

Healthy leaders learn to become students of people before becoming judges of people.

The Starting Line Isn’t the Same

I used to believe that if I could motivate people enough, they would change. Work harder. Try harder. Focus harder.

Eventually I realized something.

Not everyone starts from the same place.

One athlete may come from a home filled with encouragement. Another may have never heard the words “I’m proud of you.”

One student may go home to peace. Another may go home to chaos.

One child may believe they are deeply loved. Another may spend every day wondering if anyone notices them.

The assignment may be the same.

The starting line isn’t.

I know, because I ran my whole childhood from a starting line most of my teachers never saw. That realization changed the way I coached forever.

David’s Story

When Samuel came to anoint Israel’s next king, Jesse didn’t even invite David.

His own father assumed someone else was more worthy.

Imagine that for a moment. Before David ever defeated Goliath, before he ever became king, he knew what it felt like to be overlooked. Forgotten. Undervalued. Left in the field while his father presented other sons.

I don’t have to imagine it. I stood in that yard.

Scripture never tells us exactly how being overlooked shaped David. But it reminds us that every hero has a story. And it tells us what God did with it:

While everyone else looked at appearance, God looked beneath the surface.

God didn’t ignore David’s heart. He saw it.

That’s still how He sees people today.

Looking Like Jesus

One of the most remarkable things about Jesus was His ability to see beyond behavior.

When everyone saw a tax collector, Jesus saw Matthew. When everyone saw an impulsive fisherman, Jesus saw Peter. When everyone saw a woman caught in sin, Jesus saw a daughter worth restoring. When everyone saw a thief on a cross, Jesus saw a man capable of faith.

Jesus never minimized sin. But He refused to let a person's worst moment become their entire identity.

That's the invitation for us as leaders. Not to excuse behavior. Not to ignore accountability. But to remember that every person is more than the worst thing they've ever done.

And more than the armor they walked in wearing.

Curiosity Before Judgment

One of the greatest gifts we can give another person is curiosity.

Curiosity slows us down. It keeps us from making quick assumptions. It reminds us we don't know the whole story.

Judgment asks, "What's wrong with you?"

Curiosity asks, "Help me understand."

Judgment closes doors. Curiosity opens conversations.

People who feel understood are far more likely to accept correction than people who feel condemned.

Nobody ever asked the boy with the balled fists what he was protecting. I'm asking you to be the one who asks.

The Goal Isn't Better Behavior

This may surprise you.

The goal of leadership isn't behavior modification. It's heart transformation.

Behavior matters. Choices matter. Accountability matters.

But lasting change rarely happens because someone was forced to comply. Lasting change happens when the heart begins to change.

That's why Jesus consistently addressed the heart first. Because whatever fills the heart eventually shapes behavior.

Healthy fruit grows from healthy roots.

The armor didn't come off of me because someone punished it off. It came off — slowly, over decades — because a few people showed up, kept their word, and stayed. It came off because the story my heart had learned was finally contradicted by evidence.

You can be that evidence for someone.

Reflection

Think about someone who has been difficult for you to lead.

Now ask yourself:

- What part of their story might I not know?
- What might their behavior be protecting?
- Have I been trying to fix behavior without understanding the heart?
- How might curiosity change my next conversation?
- Have I ever worn armor of my own — and who helped me take it off?

Remember: everyone you meet is carrying a story you cannot fully see.

Lead accordingly.

Trench Tools

This Week's Challenge

Before reacting to difficult behavior this week, pause.

Take one deep breath. Ask one genuine question. Listen longer than feels comfortable.

Don't rush to solve. Don't rush to correct. Simply seek to understand.

Then try this: the next time a young person shows you their armor — the attitude, the silence, the locked face — say nothing about the armor. Instead, keep one small promise to them. Then keep another. Armor comes off in the presence of kept promises, not in the presence of consequences.

Because sometimes the greatest gift you can give another person isn't advice.

It's feeling seen.

Closing Thought

The people you lead don't need someone who assumes the worst about them.

They need someone willing to look beneath the surface. Someone who believes behavior is only part of the story. Someone who understands that every heart has been formed by experiences, relationships, wounds, and hope.

I was the boy in the armor.

Someone looked beneath mine.

That's how God sees us.

And perhaps that's the greatest invitation of all — to learn to see people the way He does.

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Chapter 4

What Forms a Human Heart?

Understanding the Invisible Architecture of Becoming

"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."
— Proverbs 4:23

We Are All Becoming Someone

Whether we realize it or not, every day is shaping us.

Every conversation. Every disappointment. Every victory. Every relationship. Every loss. Every word spoken over us. Every word we speak to ourselves.

No one stands still.

We're either becoming more hopeful or more cynical. More trusting or more guarded. More compassionate or more bitter. More courageous or more fearful.

The question isn't whether we're changing. The question is: *Who are we becoming?*

To answer that question, we first have to understand something the Bible has been teaching for thousands of years.

The heart is the center of human formation.

The Heart Is More Than Emotion

When Scripture speaks about the heart, it isn't talking about feelings alone.

The biblical heart is the control center of a person's life. It's where we think. Choose. Believe. Hope. Fear. Love. Trust. Worship.

Jesus said, "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks." He wasn't describing emotions. He was describing identity.

Everything we do eventually flows from what fills our hearts.

That's why Proverbs doesn't say, "Guard your schedule." It doesn't say, "Guard your reputation."

It says, "Above all else, guard your heart."

Because everything else flows from there.

We Are Formed Long Before We Perform

One of the greatest mistakes our culture makes is confusing performance with formation.

We celebrate achievement. Awards. Scholarships. Promotions. Championships. Followers. Degrees.

But God seems far more interested in something deeper: character.

A player may perform well while secretly believing they're never enough. A student may earn straight A's while battling anxiety every night. A pastor may preach powerful sermons while feeling completely alone.

Performance can hide formation.

That's why success is such a poor measurement of health.

I know this better than I wish I did.

Because for almost four decades, my performance hid my formation — even from me.

The Tears That Stopped Me

I was around thirty-eight, sitting in a therapy session in the middle of what I can only call a midlife crisis.

Outwardly, I was successful.

Inwardly, I was one triggered moment away from crashing out.

I was a good provider. A hard worker. Respected in my community. And for years, I judged being a "good man" by what I didn't do. I never used drugs. I never got drunk. As if that gave me permission to be mean and nasty when things didn't go my way.

A bully.

I chalked my anger up to just being an angry Black man. I wasn't even curious about it. The only thing I knew was that something wasn't right, because things weren't going right.

I stuck with therapy, peeling back the layers little by little. And the whole time, I was grading myself on a curve. My best friends had been abandoned, beaten, left fatherless — every single one raised by mothers, aunts, grandparents. Compared to them, I thought I was doing pretty good.

That was my arrogance. I couldn't see it. I wouldn't see it.

Then one day, my therapist began to weep.

I was telling her about my childhood. I told her about a cousin who tied me down on a table, forced me to have an erection, and put a knife to my private parts. I told her how afraid I was. I told her how young I was — under ten. Just a little boy. I had never told anyone that story because I was so embarrassed by it.

I told her about another cousin who stripped in front of me and tried to make me perform sexual acts with her. I didn't know what was going on. I was just a sweet little boy.

I was talking in a matter-of-fact way, no emotion at all, like I was recounting someone else's life.

And tears rolled down her face.

It stopped me in my tracks.

My first thought was that it was unprofessional. It wasn't. She was a mother having a human response. She saw a sweet little boy, alone far too long, and she was asking the question I had never let myself ask:

Who was watching me?

How could I be gone that long and no one come to check on me?

My wife doesn't let much time pass without knowing exactly where our four-year-old is — and he's right there in the house with her. That's how it's supposed to be.

It wasn't until that moment, sitting across from a weeping therapist, that I realized something for the first time in my life:

Maybe this isn't normal.

I tell you this story in full — not softened, not summarized — for one reason. The people you serve will one day tell you their stories in full. And when they do, they will be watching your face. You need to have already decided what they'll find there.

The Architecture I Couldn't See

Almost everything in my life had been a trauma response. And I didn't know. I really didn't know.

I didn't know what trauma was. I didn't know what ACEs — Adverse Childhood Experiences — were. I didn't know my score was through the roof.

Understanding that didn't excuse my behavior. Not in the slightest.

It's not an excuse. It's lived experience. It's recognizing patterns. It's being curious enough to search for answers instead of passing the pain down.

Because that's what almost happened. My father was abandoned by his own mother, left with an absent father who was murdered. He grew into a man who was absent, abusive, and addicted — an active participant in the family curse, passing it right down to his children.

I was becoming the next chapter of that story.

And I didn't even know a story was being written.

That is what forms a human heart. Not just what happens to us — but what happens to us that no one ever sees, names, or heals. The wound goes underground. The behavior comes up somewhere else, years later, wearing a different face.

So when I tell you in this chapter that every heart has an invisible architecture, understand: I'm not describing a theory I studied.

I'm describing a house I lived in for forty years without ever seeing the blueprints.

Five Forces That Shape Every Heart

After years of coaching, studying, and walking with people through life's hardest moments — and after finally studying my own — I've come to believe that every human heart is shaped by five primary forces.

1. Relationships

Before we learn facts, we learn people.

Long before children understand theology, they understand whether someone consistently shows up.

Relationships teach us whether the world is safe. Whether people can be trusted. Whether we're worthy of love.

The greatest predictor of healthy development has never been perfection. It's the presence of safe, consistent relationships.

I had talent, work ethic, and drive. What I didn't have was a single adult who knew where I was.

2. Experiences

Life leaves fingerprints on every heart.

Some experiences expand us. Others wound us. Celebration. Failure. Divorce. Victory. Abuse. Loss. Friendship. Success.

None of these disappear. They become part of the story we carry.

Experiences don't have the final word. But they always have a voice.

Mine spoke through my anger for decades before I ever learned its name.

3. Beliefs

Eventually, experiences become beliefs.

"I matter." "I'm not enough." "People always leave." "I have to earn love." "God is trustworthy." "No one can be trusted."

Many of these beliefs were never consciously chosen. They were quietly formed. And unless they're examined, they continue directing our lives.

Nobody sat me down and taught me that feelings were dangerous and no one was coming. I learned it the way children learn everything — from what happened, and from what didn't.

Jesus consistently challenged false beliefs before changing behavior. Because truth sets people free.

4. Community

No one becomes alone.

Families shape us. Friends shape us. Teams shape us. Churches shape us. Schools shape us. Culture shapes us.

We slowly become like the environments we spend the most time in. That's why healthy cultures matter.

Communities either reinforce healing or reinforce hurt.

5. Purpose

Human beings aren't simply trying to survive. We're trying to answer a deeper question: *Why am I here?*

Purpose gives suffering meaning. Purpose gives hardship direction. Purpose gives ordinary moments eternal significance.

Without purpose, people drift. With purpose, people endure.

I have tried to turn my pain into purpose. It's the reason this book exists.

Why Attachment Matters

One of the most important discoveries in psychology isn't actually new. It's something God demonstrated from the very beginning.

People are created for relationship.

Attachment theory teaches that children develop through secure relationships with trusted caregivers. Scripture teaches something remarkably similar. God consistently describes Himself as Father. Shepherd. Refuge. Rock. Abiding place.

Why? Because before He asks for obedience, He offers relationship.

The Gospel begins with belonging. Not performance.

That changes everything.

It changed everything for me. The little boy no one was watching grew into a man who discovered a Father who never stopped watching. That's not a preacher's line. That's the only explanation I have for why the family curse stops with me.

Jesus Didn't Just Teach Truth

He embodied it.

He ate with people. Walked with people. Cried with people. Celebrated with people. Corrected people. Restored people.

Transformation happened through relationship. Not merely information.

Truth spoken without relationship often produces resistance. Truth spoken within trusted relationship often produces transformation.

My therapist's tears did more for me than a decade of advice could have. That's what this looks like in practice: truth arriving inside a relationship safe enough to receive it.

Becoming

I've spent years asking one question: *What changes people?*

I've watched players transform. Students heal. Families reconcile. Leaders mature. Churches grow. Organizations flourish. I've also watched the opposite.

The difference was rarely intelligence. Rarely talent. Rarely resources.

More often than not, the difference was whether someone experienced a relationship that helped them believe they could become more than they currently were.

That's why I believe this with all my heart:

People become best in safe relationships.

Not relationships without accountability. Not relationships without truth. But relationships where grace and truth walk together.

The same way they did in Jesus.

Today, I take my medication every day. I do my work. I keep my distance from the people who hurt me — not out of hatred, but out of healing. Some people think I'm crazy for that. But do I need to walk

into a room with my abusers? Do I need to make another therapist cry?

Or do I just keep healing, the best way I know how?

I can be a sweet and loving man today — just like that sweet little boy I've been trying to heal all along.

And every time I stand in front of a student who's acting out, an athlete with an attitude, a kid everyone else has given up on, I remember that somewhere behind that behavior there may be a child no one was watching.

Now I get to be the one who watches.

Reflection

Think about your own life.

- Who shaped your heart the most?
 - What experiences still influence the way you see yourself?
 - What beliefs are helping you grow? Which ones need to be challenged?
 - Is there a part of your story you've only ever told in a matter-of-fact voice — like it happened to someone else?
 - Who was watching you? And who are you watching now?
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Trench Tools

Draw Your Formation Map

Take a blank sheet of paper. Write "My Heart" in the center. Around it, write five circles:

- Relationships
- Experiences
- Beliefs
- Community
- Purpose

Now begin filling them in. Who influenced you? What moments changed you? What messages still echo in your mind? Where have you experienced healing? Where do you still need it?

Don't do this to dwell on your past. Do it to understand your present.

Because what we understand, God can transform.

A word of care: if this exercise touches something you've never spoken aloud, don't carry it alone. Find a counselor, a pastor, a safe person. I sat across from a therapist for years. It is not weakness. It is how the architecture gets rebuilt.

Closing Thought

Long before anyone notices our behavior, our hearts are being formed.

Every conversation. Every relationship. Every joy. Every disappointment. Every act of love. Every wound.

The beautiful news of the Gospel is this: your story has shaped your heart, but it does not have to define your future.

In Christ, the heart can be renewed. Relationships can be restored. Beliefs can be redeemed. Communities can be rebuilt. Purpose can be rediscovered.

Because the greatest force shaping the human heart isn't trauma. It isn't success. It isn't failure.

It is the transforming love of God, experienced through His presence — and often through the faithful presence of His people.

Sometimes that presence looks like a mother who always knows where her four-year-old is.

Sometimes it looks like a therapist who wept.

And sometimes, if you'll let it, it looks like you.

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Chapter 5

The Power of Presence

Why Showing Up Changes Lives

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." — John 1:14

Presence Before Performance

Think about the people who have shaped your life the most.

Maybe it was a parent. A teacher. A coach. A pastor. A grandparent. A friend.

Now ask yourself: what do you remember most?

For most of us, it isn't a speech. It isn't a lesson. It isn't even a single conversation.

It's that they were there.

They showed up. Again. And again. And again.

Before they ever changed our lives with their words, they changed them with their presence.

I know the power of presence better than most.

Because I grew up in its absence.

Next Time

In Chapter 3, I told you about the armor I wore as a boy, and the day it went on — watching my father cheer for someone else's son. Now I need to tell you the rest, because the rest of that story is what this chapter is about.

My father would disappear for weeks and resurface like nothing happened. I would be outside riding my bike, see him heading for the door, and beg him to take me with him.

"Next time."

It was always “next time” and never “get in.”

There was a woman named Rosalind. When we were in elementary school, she would show up in random places — our schoolyard, our grandmother’s block — and just stand there, staring at my brother and me. Not hiding. She wanted us to see her looking. I didn’t know who she was, but I knew something was wrong. My father was driving a strange car in those days. The same car I later saw her driving away in. I overheard my parents arguing about her, my father insisting she was crazy.

But crazy people don’t show up that deliberately. Crazy people don’t stare at children like they’re delivering a message.

Then came the day he took my brother and me to her apartment. He walked into a bedroom and changed into comfortable clothes. Like it was home. Nothing was said. He was answering a question we hadn’t asked yet — showing us where he goes when he says he’ll “be right back.” Where he goes when he says “next time.”

She wasn’t crazy. She was just tired of being invisible.

And then, in that yard, her son did flips like an Olympic champion while my father cheered with a joy I had never been able to locate when it came to me.

I’ve turned these memories over for more than forty years. They still show up like unwanted guests. Sometimes in dreams. Sometimes a movie triggers it. Sometimes I’ll hear men on a podcast talking matter-of-factly about their other women — almost proudly — and it comes rushing back.

I thought for a long time that Rosalind was the story.

She wasn’t. She was just the thread. And when you pull a thread long enough, the whole thing unravels.

The real story is about a boy who watched his father cheer for someone else — and spent the better part of his life trying to figure out why he wasn’t worth cheering for too.

The Hunger Has a Name

My brother and I walked to our games alone, all across West Philly. If it was too far, we caught a ride with the coach — or we didn’t go. We figured it out. We always figured it out. Because we had to.

I was a pretty good athlete. My brother too.

No one showed up.

For years afterward, I went looking for what I didn’t get from him. I found it — or tried to — in coaches who pushed me, teachers who saw something in me, bosses who gave me a shot. I didn’t fully understand what I was doing. I just knew I was hungry for something I couldn’t name.

It turns out the thing I was hungry for had a name.

Validation.

The simple, steady message that you are enough. That you are seen. That someone who was supposed to show up — showed up.

Hear this, whoever you are: the young people in your gym, your classroom, your church, your home are hungry for the same thing. Some of them are walking to their games alone right now. Some of them are scanning the stands. Some of them stopped scanning years ago, and that's worse.

You cannot fix their families. You cannot rewrite their fathers.

But you can show up. And you would be amazed at what showing up does to a hungry heart.

I'm evidence.

We Remember How People Made Us Feel

Years after graduation, very few athletes remember every play. Students rarely remember every lecture. Children often forget the gifts they received.

But they almost never forget how someone made them feel.

They remember the teacher who believed in them. The coach who refused to give up on them. The pastor who called after everyone else disappeared. The parent who sat beside them during the hardest nights.

I can still hear the sound of my father cheering — for someone else. Forty years later. That's how long presence and its absence echo.

Presence creates memories that information never can.

The Ministry of Showing Up

One of the greatest gifts we can give another person is our attention.

Not half our attention. Not what's left after checking our phone. Undivided attention.

In a world that constantly competes for our focus, attention has become one of the purest expressions of love.

When you look someone in the eye, listen without interrupting, remember their story, follow up days later — you're communicating something powerful.

You matter.

Sometimes healing begins long before solutions. Sometimes it begins when someone finally feels seen.

God Came Near

The entire Gospel can be summarized in one incredible truth.

God came near.

He didn't send another list of rules. He didn't remain distant. He entered our world.

Jesus walked dusty roads. He shared meals. He laughed. He cried. He attended weddings. He touched lepers. He held children. He stopped for people everyone else hurried past.

Think about that. The Creator of the universe wasn't too busy to be interrupted.

Maybe interruptions weren't interruptions at all.

Maybe they were the ministry.

This is what saved me, by the way. My earthly father said "next time." My heavenly Father said "I am with you always." One of those promises held. And the people God sent me — the coaches, the teachers, the ones who kept their word — were how He kept it.

The Difference Between Fixing and Being Present

As leaders, we often feel pressure to solve every problem.

Someone is hurting — we offer advice. Someone is grieving — we search for the right words. Someone is struggling — we immediately begin planning solutions.

I've learned something over the years.

People don't always need answers first. Sometimes they need company.

Job's friends made their greatest contribution before they spoke. For seven days, they simply sat with him. Their ministry was their presence. Unfortunately, they eventually replaced listening with explaining.

Many of us make the same mistake.

Sometimes the greatest act of leadership is resisting the urge to fix.

Nobody could have fixed my childhood with advice. But every adult who simply stayed put a crack in the lie my father taught me.

Presence Creates Safety

People rarely reveal what's happening in their hearts until they believe it's safe. And safety doesn't happen because we demand honesty. It happens because we've earned trust.

The people we lead are constantly asking, *Will you still be here tomorrow?*

I asked that question of every adult in my life until I was grown. Most of them never knew they were being tested. The ones who passed didn't do anything spectacular.

They just came back.

Consistency answers that question better than words ever will.

Slow Enough to Notice

Jesus was never in a hurry.

Crowds surrounded Him. People interrupted Him. Children ran toward Him. Blind men cried out. Women reached for His garment.

He always seemed to have time. Not because His schedule wasn't full — because people were never interruptions to His mission.

They were His mission.

How often do we miss what God is doing because we're moving too fast? How many conversations end before someone feels safe enough to tell the truth? How many cries for help are disguised as inconvenience?

A boy begging to get in the car is not an inconvenience.

Sometimes slowing down is one of the most spiritual things we can do.

Presence Before Platform

Our culture celebrates influence. Followers. Views. Platforms. Recognition. Jesus modeled something different: presence before platform, relationship before reputation, faithfulness before fame.

You don't need thousands of people listening to your voice. You need one person who knows you'll never stop showing up.

Reflection

Think about the people who have consistently shown up for you.

- What made them trustworthy?
 - Who in your life needs your presence more than your advice?
 - Who might be scanning the stands for you — at a game, a recital, a hospital bed, a kitchen table?
 - Have you ever said "next time" to someone who was really asking, "Do I matter to you?"
 - If someone described your leadership in one word, would they choose *present*?
-

Trench Tools

The Ministry of Fifteen Minutes

This week, choose one person. Give them fifteen uninterrupted minutes.

No phone. No agenda. No fixing. No teaching.

Just listen. Ask questions. Be curious. Stay present.

At the end of the conversation, ask one final question: "Is there anything else you'd like me to know?"

Then simply listen. You may be surprised by what comes next.

And one more: think of the last time you told someone "next time." A child. A player. A friend. This week, make it *this* time. Get in the car. Go to the game. Sit in the stands where they can see you.

You may never know what lie your presence just contradicted.

Closing Thought

People rarely heal because someone had the perfect answer.

More often, they heal because someone stayed. Someone listened. Someone remembered. Someone refused to walk away.

That boy in West Philly, scanning the stands?

He was worth cheering for. He just needed time to find out for himself.

So is every person you'll ever lead.

That's exactly what God has done for us. And perhaps that's what He's inviting us to do for others — to become people whose presence reminds others they are not alone.

Because sometimes the greatest gift we can offer another human being is simply ourselves.

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Chapter 6

Building Safe Relationships

The Environment Where People Become

"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear..." — 1 John 4:18

The Greatest Gift You Can Give

People often ask me what the most important quality is in a coach. Or a teacher. Or a parent. Or a pastor. Or a leader.

Some say knowledge. Others say discipline. Vision. Communication. Experience. Character.

All of those matter.

But after years of coaching, working in schools, walking alongside families in crisis, and studying both Scripture and human development, I've become convinced that the greatest gift we can give another person is something deeper.

A relationship where they feel safe enough to become.

Not comfortable. Not entitled.

Safe.

There's a difference — and I want to show you what it looks like. Not with a theory.

With a list I wrote for my firstborn son.

Free Styling

When my oldest son Brandon left for Penn State, I missed him so badly it surprised me. I didn't think his absence would affect me like that.

And in those first weeks, I kept going back and rereading something I had written him before he left — a Dad's Top Ten list — checking it over and over, making sure I hadn't missed anything.

You have to understand why I was checking.

Fatherhood was never modeled for me. You know my father's story by now. And it wasn't just my house — none of the boys I grew up with had fathers in their lives either. In my world, we called what we were

doing “free styling.” Making up manhood as we went. No sheet music. No coach. No example in the next room.

So where did I learn what a father was?

Honestly? From television. From Cliff Huxtable — *The Cosby Show*, Thursday nights. A whole generation of fatherless boys like me sat in front of that screen taking notes on a father who showed up, who joked with his kids, who corrected them without crushing them, who was *there*.

I know how complicated that sentence is to write now. The man behind that character caused real harm to real women, and I won’t soften that or explain it away. Both things are true at once, and I’ve had to sit with both: the example on that screen helped raise me, and the man who played him broke trust in ways that can’t be excused. That’s not a contradiction I can resolve for you. It’s just the truth of where a fatherless boy in West Philly found his blueprints — and a reminder that people are never as simple as the roles they play. We are living in complicated times, and honesty requires holding complicated things.

Maybe that’s the deepest reason I wrote Brandon a list.

Because I didn’t want my son learning fatherhood from a screen. I wanted it in his own house, in his own father’s handwriting. I asked a question in those years that I’ve never stopped asking: *How do we break the cycle of fatherlessness in our communities?*

I broke mine the only way I knew how.

I wrote it down.

The List

The list was funny, because that’s how I talk to my kids. It told him not to take anything that didn’t belong to him — not his friend’s food, not his friend’s girl, not that drink, and not anybody’s disrespect either. It told him that if he needed money, the campus had job openings. It warned him about girls (“everything that glitters ain’t gold — love them a long time before you decide to love one of them forever”). It told him to get up and go to class — and that I had his schedule and was crazy enough to show up. Please don’t test me in this.

It told him not to let fear rob him of the life he was supposed to have — that sometimes fear shows up to steal your moment long before the moment arrives. It told him to be true to himself, to choose his own path, because on that path is where he’d find himself — and where he’d find God for himself.

But two items on that list are the reason it belongs in this chapter. Because without knowing it, I had written down the two sentences that define a safe relationship.

Number two said:

“Don’t call me when things are totally screwed up. Call me when they’re just a little screwed up. I work better under those conditions.”

And number one said:

“Know that you are loved and supported. Know that there is nothing I wouldn’t do to help. Know that I’ve always been there, and I always will be.”

Hold on to those two. The whole chapter lives inside them.

Call Me at “A Little Screwed Up”

Here is the truest measure of safety I know, and it’s not how much someone loves you.

It’s how early people bring you their problems.

Think about it. People in unsafe relationships hide things. They manage their image. They wait. They let a little screwed up become totally screwed up in the dark, because the cost of telling you — the anger, the lecture, the shame, the disappointment — feels higher than the cost of the problem growing.

People in safe relationships call early. At “a little screwed up.” While there’s still time to help.

Every kid you coach, every student you teach, every child in your home is constantly running that math: *What will it cost me to tell them?* Your reaction to the last small confession set the price of the next one.

I’ve sat with teenagers who hid a failing grade until it was an expulsion. Families who hid a debt until it was a foreclosure. Young people who hid a hurt until it was a crisis. Almost every time, the hiding wasn’t about the problem.

It was about the relationship.

So here’s the question that will tell you more about your leadership than any evaluation ever will:

At what stage do your people call you?

Safe Doesn’t Mean Easy

Now — some people hear the phrase *safe relationship* and assume I mean avoiding conflict.

I don’t. Go back and read that list. It’s full of expectations. Get a job. Go to class. Don’t take what isn’t yours. I will show up on your campus.

Jesus loved people deeply. He also challenged them honestly. He confronted Peter. He corrected the Pharisees. He called Zacchaeus to repentance. He told the rich young ruler the truth he didn’t want to hear.

Love without truth becomes enablement. Truth without love becomes condemnation.

Safe relationships hold both together. People know they’ll be challenged. But they also know they won’t be abandoned.

That’s why number one on the list is the foundation under everything else. Every expectation from ten down to two sits on top of *I’ve always been there, and I always will be*. Requirements without relationship produce rebellion or performance. Requirements inside relationship produce becoming.

Fear Changes the Brain

Fear is a powerful teacher. It teaches people to survive. To hide. To pretend. To protect themselves.

But fear is a terrible environment for growth.

A child who is constantly afraid spends more energy surviving than learning. An athlete afraid of mistakes stops playing freely. An employee afraid of failure stops taking initiative.

Fear narrows our world. Safety expands it.

The brain functions differently when people feel secure. Curiosity grows. Creativity grows. Learning grows. Connection grows.

God designed us that way. "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear." That's not just theology. It's neurology. I lived the fear side of it for four decades — you've read those chapters. I know exactly what fear does to a developing mind, because it built mine.

That's why I refuse to lead with it.

The Ministry of Consistency

Trust is rarely built through one extraordinary moment. It's built through hundreds of ordinary ones.

Being where you said you'd be. Doing what you promised. Showing up again tomorrow. Keeping your word. Apologizing when you're wrong. Listening before reacting.

People don't trust perfection. They trust consistency.

Every time we keep a promise, we quietly tell someone, "You can depend on me." Over time, those moments become the foundation of every healthy relationship.

My father taught me "next time." I spent Brandon's whole childhood teaching him "every time." Neither of us said the lessons out loud. We didn't have to.

Consistency is the sermon.

Grace and Truth

John describes Jesus in a beautiful way. He came full of grace and truth.

Not half grace. Not half truth. Full of both.

Some leaders lead almost entirely with truth. Rules. Expectations. Correction. Others lead almost entirely with grace. Understanding. Patience. Compassion.

Healthy leadership refuses to choose.

Grace says, "You're loved." Truth says, "You're capable of more." Grace without truth leaves people stuck. Truth without grace leaves people ashamed.

Jesus offered both. So should we.

That list I wrote Brandon is grace and truth in ten items. Nine of them are truth, delivered with jokes. The tenth is grace, delivered straight.

Both, or it doesn't work.

Every Person Is Asking the Same Questions

Whether they're five years old or fifty-five, people quietly ask the same questions.

Am I safe here? Do I matter? Will you leave when I fail? Can I tell you the truth? Will you still believe in me when I struggle?

The answers aren't determined by our speeches. They're determined by our relationships.

People decide whether they're safe long before they tell us what's really happening — and they announce their decision by *when* they call.

Creating a Culture of Becoming

Healthy cultures don't happen by accident. They're built intentionally.

People encourage one another. Mistakes become opportunities to learn. Accountability exists because people care, not because they control. People celebrate growth, not just achievement. Everyone understands that becoming matters more than performing.

That's true in families. Schools. Teams. Churches. Businesses.

Healthy culture isn't something we hang on the wall. It's something we practice every day.

Imagine a school where every student believed at least one adult truly knew them. A team where mistakes became learning instead of embarrassment. A family where children never questioned whether they were loved. A church where hurting people didn't have to hide.

Would problems disappear? No.

But they'd surface at "a little screwed up" instead of "totally screwed up."

And that changes everything.

Reflection

Ask yourself honestly:

- Do people feel safer after spending time with me?
 - At what stage do the people in my life bring me their problems — a little screwed up, or totally screwed up? What did my past reactions teach them about the price of telling me?
 - Am I easier to approach when someone fails?
 - Do I correct with dignity?
 - Where did I learn my blueprints for fathering, mothering, leading — and which parts need to be examined instead of repeated?
 - What kind of emotional environment follows me wherever I go?
-

Trench Tools

Build One Safe Relationship

Choose one person this week. Ask them, "How can I become a safer person for you?"

Then don't argue. Don't defend yourself. Simply listen.

You may discover that safety isn't created by having the perfect personality. It's created by humility. People feel safest with leaders who are still growing themselves.

And one more — Write Your List:

Think of one person entrusted to you — a child, a player, a student heading into a new season of life. Write them your own Top Ten. Make it sound like you; if you're funny, be funny. Fill one through nine with your honest expectations and hard-won wisdom.

But whatever you write, make your number one unmistakable:

You are loved. I have always been there. I always will be.

Then give it to them. Written words survive — and so does the safety they create.

Closing Thought

The world doesn't need more impressive leaders. It needs more trustworthy ones.

People don't become because they're intimidated. They become because someone creates an environment where truth can be spoken, mistakes can be made, grace can be received, and hope refuses to disappear.

A fatherless boy who learned fathering from a television show grew up and wrote his son a list — and the son grew up knowing exactly when to call, and exactly what waited on the other end of the phone.

The cycle breaks where safety begins.

That's the kind of relationship Jesus offers us. And that's the kind He's calling us to offer others.

Because at the end of the day...

People become best in safe relationships.

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Chapter 7

Doing Hard Better

Growth Doesn't Come From Avoiding Difficulty

"Life doesn't get easier. We learn to do hard better." — Kara Lawson

"Consider it pure joy... whenever you face trials of many kinds..." — James 1:2-4

We Have Been Lied To

Somewhere along the way, many of us began believing the goal of life was comfort.

If we're doing things right, life should get easier. Relationships should become effortless. Leadership should become less demanding. Parenting should become less stressful. Faith should eliminate suffering.

But life doesn't work that way. Neither does Scripture.

Jesus never promised an easy life. He promised His presence.

There's a difference.

The absence of difficulty is not the evidence of God's blessing.
Sometimes difficulty is exactly where God does His deepest work.

I can say that with a straight face because of what I'm about to tell you.

REPS

You already know about my cave — the season after the school I poured my life into came apart. What I haven't told you yet is what came after. Because the cave wasn't the end of the hard.

It was the beginning of the reps.

When I left York, I went to Florida to work as a dean of students and athletic director. Here's the thing about me: I know schools, and I know young people. You can drop me anywhere in this country and I'll start over. That's the easy part.

The hard part was that my heart was broken. My wife didn't follow me to Florida — she went to New Hampshire. And after six months of trying to convince her to come south, I made a decision.

I dropped everything and moved north, to try to save what was left of broken relationships.

Me, my three teenage sons, and everything we owned in a U-Haul.

Each move cost me more of my finances. Memories lost in storage units I could no longer pay for. We landed in Bristol, New Hampshire — a different world from anything I'd known, with not many opportunities for a man like me.

I was in a dark place.

At some point I mustered enough strength to volunteer at the local community center that was doing amazing work. That turned into a part-time job.

And then one day I made a decision that changed everything. I said to myself: *I built my reputation once in York — as a school counselor, as a basketball coach. I'll just build it again. From nothing.*

So I started training kids in the community.

My first session? My own three sons. That was the whole program. A broken man, a borrowed gym, and his own children.

One rep.

Then another kid came. Then a few more. One session at a time. One family at a time. One season at a time.

Five years later, it had grown to fifteen teams. The training led to coaching at a local high school. The coaching led to the work I do now as a crisis interventionist — walking with young people through the worst days of their lives.

Brick by brick. From the inside out.

I'm still not where I want to be. And honestly? I'm kind of old to be starting over. But I follow what I've learned in Scripture, and here's the truth: God worked with a lot of old guys. Abraham. Moses. Caleb.

I figure I'm in good company — as long as I don't quit.

Heck, I even had a heart attack in the middle of all this. During COVID, I thought I had pneumonia. If my wife Tricia hadn't insisted I go to the hospital, I'm not sure I'd be writing this book. It turned out I was in heart failure. There's a defibrillator in my chest as I write these words. I'll tell you that whole story in a coming chapter, because it deserves its own.

But notice something: even the heart got the same treatment as everything else.

I turned it around. Lost fifty pounds. Changed my diet completely. Today, with great doctors, medication, and that device standing guard, my heart is strong again.

One rep at a time.

Life didn't get easier.

I learned to do hard better.

Every Great Story Has a Hard Chapter

I've never met someone I admire who had an easy story. Not one.

The people with the deepest compassion usually know suffering. The strongest leaders usually carry scars. The wisest parents usually learned through mistakes. The most patient teachers usually struggled before they succeeded. The coaches who change lives usually lost games that taught them more than championships ever could.

Growth almost always comes disguised as difficulty.

David's Cave

When we think about David, we usually picture him defeating Goliath. Or becoming king.

But David wasn't formed on the battlefield.

He was formed in the cave. Hiding. Waiting. Questioning. Praying. Running. Learning to trust God when nothing made sense.

The cave wasn't a detour. It was the classroom.

And here's what I want you to notice: David didn't leave the cave and walk straight into a palace. There were years between the cave and the crown. Years of reps. Battles nobody recorded. Faithfulness nobody applauded.

Sometimes God prepares us in hidden places before He entrusts us with visible influence. A community center in a small New Hampshire town is a hidden place. So is a borrowed gym with three teenage boys in it.

God does some of His best work in rooms nobody is watching.

The Wrong Goal

As leaders, parents, teachers, and coaches, we often want to protect people from hard things. Because we love them.

But protection can quietly become prevention.

If we remove every obstacle, how will resilience grow? If we solve every problem, how will wisdom develop? If we rescue every struggle, how will courage emerge?

Love doesn't remove every challenge. Love walks beside people while they face it.

Jesus calmed storms. He also led His disciples directly into them.

Resilience Is Built, Not Born

No one is born resilient.

Resilience is formed. One challenge at a time. One disappointment. One failure. One difficult conversation. One season of waiting.

Each moment becomes another opportunity to discover: *I can do hard things.*

Confidence doesn't come from avoiding difficulty. It comes from surviving it.

That's why athletes improve through resistance. Muscles strengthen under stress.

Character does too.

That's what reps are. Nobody gets strong lifting a weight once. You lift it again. And again. And on the days you don't want to. Starting over in Florida was a rep. The U-Haul was a rep. Volunteering when I had nothing left was a rep. The first session with my sons was a rep. Fifteen teams was five years of reps that each looked, on the day itself, like almost nothing.

You don't have to do something heroic today.

You have to do a rep.

Your Presence Matters More Than Their Comfort

When someone we love struggles, we naturally want to make the pain disappear. Sometimes we should. Sometimes we can't.

The greatest gift isn't always removing the burden. It's refusing to let them carry it alone. God doesn't promise a life without valleys. He promises His presence in them — and He calls us to offer people the same.

Redefining Success

Success isn't raising children who never struggle. It's raising adults who know how to struggle well.

Success isn't coaching athletes who never fail. It's coaching athletes who get back up.

Success isn't building organizations without problems. It's building cultures that face problems with courage.

The measure of maturity isn't avoiding hardship. It's responding to hardship with faith, hope, wisdom, and perseverance.

By the world's measure, my story reads like a fall: from founding a school to volunteering at a community center. By Heaven's measure, I suspect it reads differently. The man in the borrowed gym was healthier than the man with the title. He just didn't have the résumé to prove it yet.

Reflection

Think about the hardest season of your life.

- What did it teach you that success never could?
- Who walked beside you?
- How did God meet you there?
- Is there something in your life right now that needs to be rebuilt brick by brick — and have you been waiting for a crane instead of picking up a brick?

Now think about someone you're leading. Are you protecting them from growth, or preparing them for it?

Trench Tools

Reframe the Challenge

This week, when something difficult happens, stop before asking, "Why is this happening to me?"

Instead ask:

- What might God be forming in me?
- What strength is this struggle developing?
- How can I walk through this with faith instead of fear?
- Who needs me to model perseverance right now?

Write your answers down. Over time you'll begin seeing difficulty differently. Not as punishment — as preparation.

And one more — the Rep: identify one thing in your life that feels too big to rebuild. A relationship. A career. A dream. A body. Now shrink it to one rep — the smallest faithful action you could take this week. One conversation. One workout. One application. One session in a borrowed gym.

Don't commit to the comeback. Commit to the rep.

Then do another one next week.

Closing Thought

Life doesn't get easier. Kara Lawson is right.

But I would add one sentence.

We learn to do hard better because we don't have to do hard alone.

God is with us. People are with us. That's why relationships matter. That's why the trenches matter.

I know, because I've started over from nothing with three boys and a U-Haul — and God met me in a small town gym, one rep at a time.

Courage isn't the absence of fear.

It's choosing to keep moving forward while someone faithful walks beside you.

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Chapter 8

Becoming Before Doing

Character Is the Greatest Legacy You'll Ever Build

"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." — Romans 12:2

We Live in a World Obsessed With Doing

From the time we're young, we're asked the same question.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

What people usually mean is, "What do you want to *do*?" What career? What degree? What title? What salary? What accomplishments?

Our culture measures success by production. By numbers. By trophies. By followers. By wins. By promotions. By platforms.

The problem is, you can accomplish extraordinary things while becoming someone you never wanted to be.

I've seen successful coaches lose their families. Successful pastors lose their integrity. Successful business leaders lose their souls. Successful parents lose relationships with their children.

Success and becoming are not the same thing.

God has never been impressed by success alone. He has always been concerned with the condition of the heart.

I want to show you what becoming actually looks like. Not in a famous person. Not in a case study.

In my little brother.

Ivann

Ivann is a sweet man. Five years younger than me. The cutest little dude I had ever seen.

You've already met him in this book, though I didn't name him. He's the other boy walking to games across West Philly. The other son at Rosalind's apartment. He grew up in the same house I did, with the same father who said "next time," in the same neighborhood that taught survival as a first language.

I don't ever remember him being anything other than good. And hear me: you can struggle, have flaws, and still be a good dude. It's a heart thing. Not a perfection thing. A striving thing.

But here's what I need you to understand about where we came from.

Sometimes you put on armor that isn't yours. You wear it anyway. It's like running a race in shoes twice your size — you're moving, but you aren't going to win a thing. You're just out there, looking around at every crazy example of manhood the world puts in front of you. You only go as far as what you're exposed to. You don't know what you don't know.

If you're from the hood — that place called survival, the Hunger Games, *just enough* — it will have you fighting over things you don't even want. Like an assembly line. A bad play with a bad director and absolutely no budget.

Good men aren't necessarily nurtured in the hood. Especially when there's no one there to protect you, shield you. Quite the opposite. They want you to join in. Adopt you into it. *This is what we do. We survive together.* If you're lucky enough to get to the other side, so be it. If you die or get locked up first — consider yourself a man with a story to tell. Consider yourself one of the lucky ones if all you have is an addiction to overcome. Children to love.

So how does a sweet man get to the other side?

Oh, but by the grace of God. Oh, but the fervent prayers of a mother. The seeds of the South. The seed of the slave. It beats in you like a beacon from a lost plane — a black box in your frame, in your gut, beating through the pain.

My little brother responded to the beacon in his heart.

He said he was going to be an architect — while loading two-ton containers. The Marine. The warrior. The one with the sketchbook instead of the gun.

Look at him now. Still with the sketchbook. Drafting for a major construction company.

He took on Goliath.

Not with a sword.

With a pencil.

[ART PLACEMENT — full page: Ivann's sketch of David and Goliath, drawn from David's perspective — the giant filling the sky, the boy standing before him with staff and sling. Artwork by Ivann Anderson. Suggested caption: "He took on Goliath. Not with a sword. With a pencil." — drawn by the author's brother.]

While everyone else was teaching him survival, he chose creation.

He didn't become what the world expected.

He became who he already was.

God's First Question

That last line matters more than it might seem. *He became who he already was.*

Because when I read Scripture, I'm struck by something. God rarely begins with assignments. He begins with identity.

Before Moses led Israel, God met him at the burning bush. Before David became king, he learned to be a shepherd. Before Peter preached at Pentecost, Jesus restored him on a beach. Before Paul

planted churches, he spent years being transformed. Before Jesus began His public ministry, the Father declared, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Notice the order. Identity came before ministry. Relationship came before responsibility. Being came before doing.

We often reverse it.

Earlier in this book I showed you David the overlooked boy — the son his own father didn't call in from the field. But David's becoming didn't stop there. He was the warrior *and* the shepherd. The writer and the worshipper. The artist who played the harp and wrote the Psalms. The one who laments.

If you know that David, you know my brother.

The world hands young men from places like ours one script: warrior only. Survival only. Armor only. David refused the single script, and so did Ivann. The Marine who sketches. The warrior with the pencil.

Becoming means refusing to let the world flatten you into what it expects.

Your Character Will Eventually Catch Up to Your Talent

Talent can open doors. Character determines what happens once you're inside.

I've coached gifted athletes who never reached their potential because they lacked humility. I've watched average athletes exceed expectations because they refused to quit.

Talent gets attention. Character earns trust. And trust is the foundation of lasting influence.

Your gifts may introduce you. Your character will either keep you there or quietly remove you.

Nobody handed Ivann a shortcut. He loaded containers and kept drawing. The dream and the discipline rode in the same truck for years before anyone paid him to be what he already was.

Fruit Doesn't Lie

Jesus never said, "You will recognize them by their achievements."

He said, "You will recognize them by their fruit."

Fruit grows slowly. Quietly. Consistently.

Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Goodness. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control.

These are not personality traits. They are evidence of a life being transformed.

The question isn't, "Am I successful?" The better question is, "Is this fruit becoming more visible in my life?"

Because people experience our fruit long before they admire our accomplishments.

Let me tell you what Ivann's fruit looks like.

When I was terribly ill — a season I'll tell you about in a coming chapter — he drove several hours to check on his older brother. Then he picked up his disabled nephew, drove him ten hours home, got back in the car, drove ten hours back, and went to work.

No announcement. No platform. No post.

That's fruit. My little brother became the glue that keeps everyone close.

Integrity Is Who You Are When No One Is Watching

One of the greatest tests of becoming is hidden faithfulness.

What do I do when no one will know? How do I treat people who cannot advance my career? Do I tell the truth when it costs me? Do I keep my word?

Integrity isn't built in public. It's revealed there.

It's built in the thousands of unseen decisions no one applauds — twenty-hour drives included.

The Slow Work of Becoming

One of the hardest truths I've had to learn is that becoming cannot be rushed.

We live in a culture that promises instant results. Quick fixes. Life hacks. Overnight success.

But the deepest work God does is usually slow.

Trees don't grow overnight. Neither do people. Neither did an architect who spent years loading containers with a sketchbook in his bag.

Character is formed one decision at a time. One apology. One act of courage. One difficult conversation. One temptation resisted. One act of kindness. One quiet moment of obedience.

Transformation is rarely dramatic.

It's usually faithful.

Your Life Is the Loudest Sermon You'll Ever Preach

People may forget your presentations. Your practices. Your lessons. Your speeches.

But they'll remember your life.

They'll remember whether you loved well. Whether you listened. Whether you admitted mistakes. Whether you forgave. Whether you stayed.

Leadership is never just something we do.

Leadership is someone we become.

I've preached a lot of words in my life. My brother has preached mostly with a pencil and a car with a lot of miles on it.

His sermon is louder.

Reflection

Take inventory of your life.

If someone spent one month following you closely, what would they learn about God? About relationships? About integrity? About courage? About grace?

- What fruit is growing in your life? What fruit still needs attention?
- What script has the world handed you — and which parts of it have you accepted without question?
- Is there something you've been saying you'll become "someday" while faithfully doing something else? What would it look like to carry both, the way a man loads containers with a sketchbook in his bag?
- Who are you becoming?

Trench Tools

The Becoming Audit

This week, don't evaluate your productivity. Evaluate your character.

At the end of each day, ask yourself:

- Did I love well today?
- Was I fully present?
- Did I tell the truth?
- Did I extend grace?
- Did I show courage?
- Did I become a little more like Christ?

Keep your answers in a journal. Don't measure success by accomplishments. Measure it by transformation.

And one more: think of a young person you lead who is carrying a "sketchbook" — a gift or a dream that doesn't match what their environment expects of them. This week, ask them about it. Name it out loud. Sometimes becoming begins the day someone else acknowledges who you already are.

Closing Thought

At the end of your life, people won't gather around your trophies.

They'll gather around your character. They'll remember how you treated them. How you loved them. How you made them feel. How faithfully you pointed them toward Christ.

Because in the Kingdom of God, the greatest achievement is not what you've built.

It's who you've become.

My brother taught me that — the sweet man who got to the other side.

He is my brother's keeper. And I am his.

Interlude

The Cave

There was a season when I thought I knew exactly what God had called me to do.

Build schools. Develop leaders. Change outcomes for kids everyone else had overlooked.

For a while, it was happening.

We built something special. Students who had struggled were succeeding. Attendance improved. Graduation rates climbed. College acceptance became the expectation instead of the exception.

But understand what the school actually was. It was born out of funerals. Out of years of watching this city eat young men alive — the players I lost, the ones locked up, the ones I couldn't get to stay in school. Don't get confused by the hype. There was only one purpose, and it was to save lives.

Relationships were at the center of everything we did. We believed every student deserved to be known before they could be challenged.

For a season, it felt like watching a vision come to life.

Every June, our kids crossed a stage at the Strand-Capitol in red caps and gowns while their families stood and hollered. Kids the district had written off. Kids who were told they'd never make it to that stage at all.

Then everything changed.

Not because the philosophy stopped working. Not because the students stopped growing.

People happened.

Politics. Pride. Power. Fear.

Relationships fractured. Trust eroded. The culture disappeared long before the building ever changed.

Eventually I found myself leaving something I had poured years of my life into.

I can tell you the exact moment I knew.

It was a letter. The school district wrote to tell us our charter would not be renewed. We fought it for two years — appeals, hearings, courtrooms. I showed up to every battle. But the day I opened that letter, something deep down already knew it was likely over.

Sometimes you keep fighting a war your heart has already grieved.

And I need you to see what those two years looked like, because our kids fought too.

One morning in Harrisburg, our students stepped off buses and walked toward the Judicial Center, one by one, wearing white T-shirts. The front said #SAVENEWHOPE.

The back said SAVE MY LIFE.

Nobody scripted that. The kids knew exactly what the school was, even if the adults deciding its fate didn't.

That same year — with the charter dying in the courts — our boys won the school's first District 3 championship. They clapped and chanted in shirts that carried the same message, and at the trophy presentation I stood there with tears running down my face. Not just for the title.

Because for now, they still had their school.

Then came June. The final class. Red caps and gowns one last time, drivers honking their horns as our graduates walked to the ceremony. The front page of the paper the next morning read: FINAL CLASS.

And our valedictorian stood up and told the crowd what New Hope had taught her. Perseverance. Sticking together. And that sometimes "how you lose is just as important as how you win."

A teenager preached my whole theology of the trenches at the funeral of her own school.

I just couldn't hear it yet.

At first, I was angry. Then disappointed. Eventually, bitter.

If I'm honest, I wasn't just questioning people.

I was questioning God.

I couldn't understand why He would let something that was helping so many kids unravel. This wasn't a program dying. In my mind, it was a lifeline being cut — in a city where I already knew, by name, what happened to young people without one.

I thought I had failed.

Looking back now, I realize I had entered my cave.

David had one. Elijah had one. Moses had one. Jesus sought lonely places.

The cave isn't where God abandons us. The cave is where He strips away everything we've built our identity on.

In that season, I wasn't writing books. I wasn't dreaming about ecosystems. I wasn't thinking about the future.

I was trying to survive.

Some days I could hardly get out of bed. I had been an earner my whole life — and now I wasn't earning, just living off what little was left after the legal battles. If I had quit ahead of time, I would have been better off financially. But I couldn't do it. I took care of everyone I could, and I didn't downsize my life until all hope was gone.

No one teaches you how to fail at that level.

You just have to go through it.

And God didn't waste it.

Instead of sending me back to build another school, He started teaching me how hearts are formed. He slowed me down. He put students in front of me who were carrying invisible wounds. He taught me to listen more than I spoke. He showed me that behavior is often the language of pain.

He led me to study trauma. Attachment. Neuroscience. Scripture. Leadership.

Not so I could become smarter.

So I could become gentler.

Over time, I understood something I hadn't before.

Healthy schools don't change lives. Healthy people do. Healthy people build healthy relationships. Healthy relationships build healthy cultures. Healthy cultures build healthy ecosystems.

The school had never been the mission.

People were.

Today I wouldn't choose to relive that season. But I wouldn't erase it either.

Because the cave changed me before it changed my calling. It taught me God was never asking me to build an organization. He was forming the kind of man who could help build people.

And when I finally walked out of it, I realized something.

The vision hadn't died.

It had matured.

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Chapter 9

Building an Ecosystem of Becoming

Healthy People Build Healthy Communities

"The body is not made up of one part but of many." — 1 Corinthians 12:14

No One Becomes Alone

One of the greatest myths in our culture is the myth of the self-made person.

We celebrate individuals.

The star athlete. The CEO. The gifted teacher. The visionary pastor.

But look closely at every meaningful success story and you'll find something else.

People.

Parents. Mentors. Friends. Teachers. Coaches. Communities.

No one becomes alone.

We are formed in relationships. But we flourish in ecosystems.

And I need to tell you about the young man who taught me that — because he also taught me what happens when the ecosystem is broken.

Boo

Not too much time goes by without me thinking of him.

I first saw Ricardo “Boo” Banks at the Vonnie Grimes gym when he was in seventh or eighth grade. I was coaching a middle school team for Crispus Attucks, and he had his crew from Parkway — a YMCA team, I believe. I don’t even know why they had a coach, because Boo was the coach on the floor. He ran his team, dominated every aspect of the game, and talked to me the entire time.

At that point in my life, I hadn’t seen anything like it.

He killed us. And I walked out of that gym and said, “That joker is a general.”

Instead of being salty, I was asking myself: *Who is he? Where does he live?* Because I was never going to play another game in that city without him on my team.

He was next.

I worked hard to build his trust, because even then he had his own guys. If you got Boo, everyone else would follow. There was nothing flashy about his game — he didn’t outrun you or outjump you — but he almost never lost. His handles, his court vision, his basketball IQ, his leadership, his toughness. All elite. I’m not exaggerating, and coaches are prone to hyperbole.

I would pick him up first in the old blue Crispus Attucks van — the one with more dents and miles on it than you could imagine. We went everywhere. Philly. Anywhere we needed to go to get him ready. Back then, almost no one left the city. Everything was played in your park, near your house.

And there was one more thing about Boo that I loved.

Whenever I told him what we needed to get done, where we needed to be, what I expected from him, he would look at me and simply say:

“I got you, Coach.”

That was it.

No long conversation. No excuses. No speeches.

And once he said it, you never had to think about it again. His word was his word. I could put it in the bank.

Just like his name.

The Water He Grew Up In

But you can’t tell Boo’s story without telling a little of York’s.

York, Pennsylvania is probably the most racially divided city you’ll find north of the Mason-Dixon Line — and I say that as someone who came from West Philadelphia and thought I had seen it all.

The neighborhoods didn’t just happen to be separated. They were designed that way. Redlined. Engineered for poverty to stay put and opportunity to stay out.

Good jobs were scarce. Transportation was scarce. Every now and then someone landed a position at Caterpillar or Harley-Davidson and people saw it as a way out. But too often the gravity of those neighborhoods pulled them right back.

The establishment had it figured out: give just enough opportunity to a few people to quiet the noise, but never enough to create meaningful change.

I watched that dynamic play out for more than twenty years. When resources are scarce, hope is thin, and young people see few paths forward, violence fills the space. Young men end up fighting over what little is available.

It isn't random.

It is the predictable outcome of generations of neglect, disinvestment, and failed leadership.

That was the water Boo grew up in. That was what was already working against him before he ever made a single decision of his own.

In all my years going into every neighborhood in that city, outside of one man — Mr. Brown — I never saw a father. Not one. I barely saw moms either. Mostly aunts, cousins, and grandmothers doing the heavy lifting.

I was an outsider. Lived there over twenty years, but always the outsider. In York, it means something if you were born there — and depending on who you ask, you're not a Yorker even if you were, unless your grandparents were born there too. For most of my time there, I was proving I wasn't a carpetbagger — that I wasn't there to take from the community and leave it worse than I found it. Respected by the kids because I was Coach, and because I kept my word in every neighborhood. Tolerated by the adults — and that never really changed. I was controversial because I was calling things out.

But here's what I finally settled on, and I wrote it publicly back in 2011: I was born in Philadelphia. I became a man in York. My children were born there. My family history started there — with me. Belonging isn't always granted. Sometimes you claim it with your roots.

Where is he taking them? Who does he think he is? He's recruiting.

Yeah, you're right. But not like you think.

I was recruiting hearts and minds.

Chester

Before I tell you the rest, I have to tell you about Boo Banks the player. Just one story.

It was one of the great seasons in York High history. We were peaking at the right time. After losing in the second round of the district playoffs, we fought our way into the state tournament — only to be rewarded with a first-round matchup against the number one ranked team in Pennsylvania.

Chester High School.

In Chester.

With Jameer Nelson sitting in the front row.

Boo had earned minutes on varsity, but as a sophomore he wasn't a full-time varsity player yet. In practice, though, he was showing he was ready.

I knew we needed to do something different. We were not going in there to run with Chester — they had at least three high-major recruits and they would have run us out of the building. I needed someone fearless. Someone with a warrior's spirit. The guy I could trust to stick to the game plan.

I needed the guy who said, "I got you, Coach."

And just as I had hoped, Boo set the tone. He was our heart and soul that night as we shocked the world of big-school Pennsylvania basketball. We carried that momentum all the way to a Final Four appearance.

He was the only kid I ever let run an entire practice.

No one has been able to do that to this day.

Thrown to the Wolves

I believe with all my heart that Ricardo "Boo" Banks was thrown to the wolves.

He was cycled through the juvenile justice system and came out hardened. Like so many young people after that experience, in that community, you come back different. Boo was still Boo — he was that talented — but I could see his light had dimmed.

I always told my guys that if anyone got in trouble, I wouldn't write them.

But I wrote Boo every chance I got.

And when he came back to the community, I embraced him with open arms. No judgment. Just love. It never left. We stayed connected.

York has a way of suffocating the youth who are on the fence, leaving no room to breathe or find your way.

And Boo knew it.

The last thing he ever said to me was this:

"Coach, get me off these streets. I'm ready to get out of York."

He saw it coming. He asked for the door.

Just a few years after Chester, at nineteen years old, Boo was gone from us altogether.

Murdered.

His case remains unsolved — one of two dozen unsolved murders in York County in recent years. That is tragic all by itself. And in communities like York, no one seems to care.

What about closure for his family? His brothers? His sisters? His mother? His aunts and uncles?

What message does that send to his nieces and nephews? To his coaches, teachers, and teammates?

We still want justice for Boo.

The Forest, Not Just the Tree

For years after losing Boo, I wrestled with a question.

The relationship was real. The trust was real. The love was real. He even asked for the way out.

So why wasn't it enough?

Here is the hardest truth in this book:

One healthy relationship can change a life. But one relationship cannot always outrun an unhealthy ecosystem.

A healthy tree planted in unhealthy soil will struggle. A struggling tree planted in healthy soil often begins to recover.

The same is true of people.

Boo had a coach who believed in him. He did not have a city built for him to become. The redlined neighborhoods, the absent opportunity, the justice system that hardened instead of healed, the violence that filled the space where hope should have been — that was the soil.

I used to spend all my time trying to help individual people grow. That work still matters. It always will. But Boo taught me to ask a bigger question:

Why do some healthy people thrive while others struggle to survive?

The answer often isn't the individual.

It's the environment.

That's why changing one life is beautiful — and why it can never be where we stop. Changing an ecosystem multiplies impact for generations. Failing to change one buries potential for generations.

I've seen both.

Culture Is Always Teaching

Whether we intend it or not, every environment teaches something.

Some teach fear. Competition. Perfectionism. Survival.

Others teach belonging. Courage. Integrity. Service. Hope.

Culture isn't what we write in a handbook. Culture is what people experience every day. The conversations in the hallway. The way mistakes are handled. The way conflict is resolved. The way leaders respond under pressure.

A city can have a culture too. York taught its young people something every day — about who mattered, about what was possible, about whether anyone was coming.

People rarely remember mission statements.

They remember environments.

Now imagine the opposite. A school where every adult shares the same mission. A program where every coach teaches the same values, older athletes mentor younger ones, and winning matters — but becoming matters more.

That's no longer just a healthy relationship.

That's an ecosystem.

The Kingdom Is an Ecosystem

When Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God, He rarely focused on individuals alone. He described vineyards. Fields. Flocks. Families. A body with many parts.

The Apostle Paul expands the picture in 1 Corinthians. The eye needs the hand. The hand needs the foot. No one thrives in isolation.

God never intended His people to compete for significance. He designed us to complement one another.

And here is what that means for the trenches: no single coach, teacher, parent, or pastor was ever meant to carry a young person's becoming alone. I could not be Boo's coach, father, neighborhood, school system, and justice system all at once. No one can.

That's not an excuse to do less.

It's a summons to build more — together.

Collaboration Over Competition

One of the greatest obstacles to healthy ecosystems is competition.

Schools competing instead of learning from one another. Churches competing instead of serving together. Programs protecting territory instead of sharing resources. Leaders guarding influence instead of developing other leaders.

Competition asks, "How can I get ahead?"

Collaboration asks, "How can we accomplish more together than we ever could alone?"

I'm not preaching hindsight here. I was writing this publicly back in 2011 — asking why sixteen school districts each needed their own pool, proposing that neighbors share what they'd built, asking, "How can I work with my neighbors to achieve better results than I'm getting alone?" The cave didn't give me this idea.

The cave taught me why it matters. It moved the idea from my head to my scars.

While the adults in a community compete, the kids in that community pay. I watched it happen. The Kingdom has never advanced because one person did everything. It advances because many people faithfully do their part.

Multiplication Is the Goal

Healthy ecosystems don't create dependency. They create multiplication.

Healthy teachers develop future teachers. Healthy coaches develop future coaches. Healthy parents raise adults who know how to parent. Healthy leaders create other healthy leaders.

The goal is never to make ourselves indispensable. The goal is to make ourselves reproducible.

That's exactly what Jesus did. He didn't simply gather followers. He developed disciple-makers.

And I've seen the fruit of that even in York. The young men I recruited — hearts and minds, one van ride at a time — are grown now. Many of them are stabilizing that region today. Coaching. Teaching. Fathering. Building.

The ecosystem failed Boo.

The men who loved him are still building a better one.

Building Your Ecosystem

Wherever God has placed you, ask yourself:

Who are the people already doing good work? Who shares the same values? Who could I encourage instead of compete with? What organizations should be partners instead of rivals? What gifts are missing from my own team?

Healthy ecosystems are built with humility.

No one has everything.

Everyone has something.

Reflection

Think about your own environment.

What kind of culture are you helping create? Do people experience hope when they enter? Do they feel valued? Are people working together or protecting themselves?

Now think harder:

- Who is the "Boo" in your world — the young person with everything it takes, planted in soil working against them?
 - What part of their ecosystem is beyond your reach alone?
 - Who else loves them? Have you ever spoken to those people?
 - What would it look like if the adults around that young person acted like one body instead of many parts?
-

Trench Tools

Map Your Ecosystem

Take out a piece of paper. Write your mission in the center. Around it, write the names of people, organizations, churches, schools, businesses, and mentors who share similar values.

Ask yourself:

- Who do I need to meet?
- Who have I unintentionally viewed as competition?
- Who could strengthen this mission?
- How can we become better together?

Then reach out to one person this week. Not because you need something. Because the Kingdom grows through relationships.

And one more: pick one young person you serve. Write down every adult in their life you can name. If the list is short, that's not a judgment — it's a map. Your job this month is to make it longer.

Closing Thought

One healthy relationship can change a life. One healthy family can change a generation. One healthy school can change a community. One healthy organization can change a region.

That's how the Kingdom grows. Not through bigger personalities. Through healthier ecosystems.

I believe that with everything in me.

And I believe it most because of the young man who had the relationship but never got the ecosystem.

Next August will mark twenty years.

Love you, Boo.

I pray for justice for you and your family.

I have not forgotten you.

And every trench I build for the rest of my life is built with you in mind.

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Chapter 10

Guarding Your Own Heart

You Can't Lead Others Beyond Where Your Own Soul Has Been

"My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." — Psalm 73:26

The Leader No One Sees

Every leader has two lives.

The public one everyone sees. And the private one that only God truly knows.

People see the practice. They don't see the preparation. They see the sermon. They don't hear the prayers. They see the calm response. They don't know about the sleepless night. They see the championship. They don't see the tears after the loss.

The greatest battles of leadership are almost always invisible.

And if we're not careful, we'll spend our lives caring for everyone else's heart while quietly neglecting our own.

I have to tell you how I learned that.

I learned it the most literal way a man can.

The Hospital Room

It was during COVID, and I thought I had pneumonia. Maybe bronchitis. I was tired in a way I couldn't explain, but I had spent my whole life pushing through tired. That's what I did. That's who I was.

My wife Tricia insisted I go to the hospital.

If she hadn't, I'm not sure I would be writing this book.

Because it wasn't pneumonia. My heart was barely functioning. I was in heart failure — and I hadn't even known it.

Think about that. I had spent decades reading other people's hearts. Players. Students. Kids in crisis. I could see beneath anyone's surface.

And I could not see my own heart failing inside my own chest.

Because of COVID, no one could come in with me. No Tricia. No sons. No brother.

I was completely alone.

And I have to tell you the truth about that room, because this book has no business in your hands if I'm not going to be honest in it.

It was one of the worst days of my life. I was afraid. Not movie-afraid. Shaking-afraid. I was calling out to God from a hospital bed with a heart that was quitting on me and nobody I loved allowed in the building.

At one point, a nurse helped me stand. Not because my body couldn't do it.

Because I was shaking too hard with fear to do it alone.

I wish I could tell you I was brave.

I wasn't.

I was a broken man being held up by the kindness of a stranger and the mercy of God. That was the whole list. And here is what I learned in that room: sometimes that's the whole list for all of us. Sometimes the trench is a hospital bed, and the person entering it is a nurse who steadies a grown man's shaking legs and doesn't say a word about it.

I've spent this book telling you to be that person for others.

That night, someone was that person for me.

How My Heart Got There

The doctors could tell you about my heart in medical terms. Let me tell you how it actually got there.

You know most of my story by now. The cave. The U-Haul. But there's a piece I've been holding back, and this is the chapter where it belongs — because this is the chapter about the leader no one sees.

I moved to New Hampshire to save my marriage.

It didn't work. I divorced.

If I'm being honest, it's still embarrassing to write. I did not want to be divorced. I had spent my whole life trying to be the opposite of my father — the man who stays, the man whose word is good — and here

I was with a marriage I couldn't save. I stayed in New Hampshire to be close to the daughter my ex-wife and I share, and I told myself: *no more broken pieces*.

But I was a broken piece.

I was carrying the school. The moves. The finances. The storage units full of memories I lost because I couldn't pay for them. The divorce. Three sons watching me start over. A reputation being rebuilt from nothing. And I carried all of it the way I had always carried everything — quietly, alone, pushing through tired.

For years, I was pouring into everyone. Kids at the community center. Players. Families in crisis.

Nobody was pouring into me. I made sure of that. I didn't let them.

My heart didn't fail overnight.

It eroded. One loss at a time. One disappointment at a time. One long season without rest at a time.

The cardiologist has his explanation. I have mine. They're both true.

Invisible Erosion

Most leaders don't wake up one morning completely burned out.

It's much slower than that. It happens one disappointment at a time. One betrayal. One unanswered prayer. One criticism. One conflict. One long season without rest. One more responsibility.

Like water slowly wearing away stone, the soul begins to erode. Not dramatically. Quietly.

Until one day we discover we've become cynical. Short-tempered. Emotionally numb. Spiritually dry.

Not because we stopped caring.

Because we never stopped carrying.

Friend, hear me — from a man with a defibrillator in his chest: the erosion is real, and it does not announce itself. Mine got all the way to my heart muscle before I noticed. Yours may show up somewhere else. But it will show up.

You Cannot Give Away What You Do Not Possess

As coaches, parents, teachers, pastors, and leaders, we spend our lives pouring into others. Encouraging. Correcting. Listening. Comforting. Teaching. Serving.

But eventually every leader reaches a moment when they realize something uncomfortable.

You cannot give away what you no longer have.

If peace isn't growing in me, I cannot consistently give peace. If bitterness fills my heart, eventually bitterness leaks into my leadership. If I'm exhausted, people begin feeling my exhaustion.

Leadership is always an overflow. People don't simply receive our knowledge.

They receive our emotional health.

Even Jesus Withdrew

One of the most overlooked rhythms in the Gospels is this: Jesus often walked away.

Not because He didn't care. Because He did.

After healing crowds, He withdrew. Before choosing the disciples, He prayed. After feeding thousands, He sought solitude. Before the cross, He went to the garden.

If the Son of God needed silence, what makes us believe we don't?

Rest isn't weakness. It's worship. It reminds us that God is God — and we are not.

I used to read those verses and keep scrolling. Now I read them like a prescription. Because I've learned what it costs to skip the dose.

The Danger of Living for Applause

One of the subtle temptations of leadership is allowing our identity to become attached to our usefulness.

People need us. Depend on us. Thank us. Applaud us. Slowly, without realizing it, we begin believing our value comes from what we produce.

Then something changes. The applause fades. The position ends. The season closes. The children grow up. The team moves on. The church calls someone else.

If our identity was built on being needed, we'll eventually feel lost.

Our identity must be rooted somewhere deeper.

We are loved because we belong to Christ. Not because we're indispensable.

I learned this lying in a bed where none of my titles could visit me. Coach couldn't come in that room. Founder couldn't come in. Counselor couldn't come in. The only identity that made it past the COVID restrictions was *child of God*.

It turned out to be enough.

Who Pastors the Pastor?

Who coaches the coach? Who encourages the teacher? Who counsels the counselor? Who parents the parent?

Every leader needs someone who knows the person behind the position. Someone who can ask, "How is your heart?" Not, "How's the program?"

Healthy leaders refuse to live in isolation. They invite trusted people to speak truth into their lives. Not because they're weak. Because they're wise.

God has given me those people now. Tricia — the love of my life, who gets the best version of me, and because she does, everyone else does too. My brother, who drove hours just to lay eyes on me, then drove

my disabled nephew ten hours home, turned around, drove ten hours back, and went to work. My therapist. My doctors.

It took heart failure to teach me to let people carry me.

Learn it cheaper than I did.

The Courage to Be Honest

David has always encouraged me because he refused to pretend.

Read the Psalms. He celebrates. He doubts. He fears. He rejoices. He grieves. He repents. He questions. He worships.

He tells God the truth.

Somehow we've convinced ourselves that strong leaders never struggle. Scripture tells a different story.

Strong leaders struggle honestly.

That's why I told you about the shaking. About the nurse. About the divorce I didn't want and the fear I couldn't hide. I could have written this chapter as the comeback story — heart attack to healed, fifty pounds down, hero of my own recovery.

But God cannot heal the parts of us we continue pretending don't exist.

Healing begins where honesty begins.

Mine began in a hospital bed, out loud, alone with God.

Guarding Your Heart Isn't Selfish

For years I thought guarding my heart sounded self-focused.

Now I see it differently — and now I mean it in both senses of the word.

After that hospital room, I turned everything around. I lost fifty pounds. I changed my diet completely. I take my medications. I keep my appointments. Today, with great doctors, medication, and a device in my chest, my heart is functioning far better than it should have any right to.

But I guard the other heart just as deliberately now. The rhythms. The rest. The honesty. The people who ask how my heart is and wait for a real answer.

Because if my heart is becoming hard — or failing — my family will feel it. My players will feel it. My students will feel it. My coworkers will feel it.

Guarding my heart isn't just about me. It's about everyone God has entrusted to me.

Healthy leaders create healthy environments because healthy hearts naturally overflow into healthy relationships.

Both kinds of hearts.

Reflection

Slow down for a moment. Ask yourself:

- When was the last time I was truly still?
- What has been draining my soul lately?
- Am I leading from abundance or exhaustion?
- Who knows the real me — and who would insist I go to the hospital?
- Where have I begun performing instead of abiding?
- What warning signs have I been explaining away as “just tired”?
- What do I need to surrender back to God?

Remember: the condition of your heart today will become the culture of your leadership tomorrow.

Trench Tools

A Daily Rhythm

At the end of every day, sit quietly for ten minutes. Ask yourself four questions:

1. Where did I experience God’s presence today?
2. Where did I experience stress or discouragement?
3. What am I carrying that God never asked me to carry?
4. What am I grateful for today?

Write your answers. Pray honestly. Leave what isn’t yours to carry with God. Then begin again tomorrow.

And one that could save your life: make the appointment you’ve been putting off. The physical. The bloodwork. The conversation with a counselor. If someone who loves you has been insisting — that’s not nagging.

That’s God sending a Tricia.

Go.

Closing Thought

One day, every title you hold will belong to someone else.

Someone else will coach your team. Teach your class. Lead your organization. Pastor your church. Raise the next generation.

But before that day comes — guard your heart.

Because long after people forget your accomplishments, they’ll remember the person you became.

I wish I could tell you I was brave in that hospital room. I wasn’t. I was afraid, and I was held — by a nurse’s kindness and by the God who was the strength of my heart when my heart had almost none of its own.

My flesh and my heart may fail.

They nearly did.

But God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever.

And the healthiest gift you’ll ever give the people you lead is becoming someone worth following — with a heart, in every sense, that still works.

Chapter 11

Leaving More Than You Found

The Measure of a Life Is What Continues After You're Gone

"And the things you have heard me say... entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others." — 2 Timothy 2:2

Everything We Build Has an Expiration Date

Every championship fades. Every building eventually needs repairs. Every organization changes. Every title belongs to someone else. Every career comes to an end.

One day someone else will coach your team. Teach your classroom. Lead your church. Run your business. Sit in your office.

That's not depressing. That's reality.

The question isn't whether someone will replace you.

The question is: what will they inherit because you were there?

Success Is Temporary

When I was younger, I measured success by outcomes. Wins. Growth. Recognition. Opportunities.

Those things aren't wrong. They're simply incomplete.

Over time I realized something.

Success is something you achieve. Legacy is something you leave.

Success asks, "What did I accomplish?"

Legacy asks, "Who is becoming because I lived?"

The older I get, the more that second question matters.

And I want to tell you about the day legacy came back and found me.

Seth

I've known Seth since he was eleven or twelve years old.

I coached him through high school. I helped him get into college to play basketball. After college, he came to work with me at the charter school. I stood in his wedding. He is the definition of *my guy* — and honestly, it's beyond loyalty with Seth. It's devotion. The Greeks had a word for it: *philia*. A brotherly love.

In his early years, I spent a lot of time telling Seth what he would become. Truthfully, I was just reinforcing what his amazing parents, Marshall and Darlene, had already spoken over him before he was even born. That's what legacy looks like when it's working — voices agreeing about a young man's future until he starts to agree too.

That's the part of the story you'd expect from this chapter. Coach invests in kid. Kid becomes a man. Beautiful.

But that's not why Seth is in this book.

Atlantic City

A few years ago, I was headed to Atlantic City for a girls' exposure event. I told Seth I'd be close — and I'm rarely close. At that point in my life I barely left New England. So I got him a room, and he spent the weekend coaching with me.

It was the end of the summer AAU grind, and that summer had been rough. I was dealing with a group of ungrateful teenagers who were costing me money and not winning any games. Their idea of commitment didn't kick in until the game started, and that just wouldn't cut it. I told them about themselves — and let's just say that didn't go well.

But the losing season wasn't really the problem.

I was exhausted from a long year of coaching with very little to show for it. My personal life wasn't going well. No one was happy with me, and I sure as hell wasn't happy with myself. I felt like a fraction of the man I used to be — a guy I didn't know so well either. I had turned away from organized faith. I felt rejected and disappointed. Sounds like ego. Feels, looking back, like a silent man-tantrum. Just struggling, with no end in sight.

I couldn't pray for myself.

Read that again, because I want you to understand it. The coach. The mentor. The man who had spoken life over hundreds of young people.

Wouldn't. Couldn't. Pray. For himself.

And Seth — hanging out with me between games — could tell I wasn't okay.

I kept wondering: what would make this man, with his own life, his own family, his own obligations, come see about me?

Then Seth started pouring into me. Speaking life into me. Encouraging me not to give up. Telling me God wasn't done with me — in a moment when I felt completely done.

He was doing for me exactly what I had done for him at twelve years old.

Word for word. Spirit for spirit.

And when I told him I couldn't pray, Seth prayed for me.

As he prayed, tears rolled slowly down my face. And I remember feeling something I hadn't felt in a long time.

Hopeful.

The tables had turned. The boy had become my peer. My friend. My brother.

Since that day, I began to dream again — quietly practicing my faith, differently than before. Much more authentic. A lot less performative.

Seth, I just appreciate you, man. Thank you for being there when I needed it most.

The Full Circle Is the Point

Here's what I need you to see in that story.

Everything I ever gave Seth came back to me in an Atlantic City hotel — with interest.

The words I spoke over him at twelve became the words he spoke over me at my lowest. The faith I modeled became the prayer he prayed when I had none. The showing up I taught him became him showing up.

That's not a coincidence. That's how legacy actually works.

We tend to picture legacy as a monument — something we leave behind that people admire after we're gone. But legacy is alive. It moves. It circulates. And if you invest long enough and deep enough, you will live to see the day your legacy turns around and carries *you*.

Jesus washed feet — and told the disciples to wash one another's. Paul poured into Timothy — and from a prison cell, near the end, it was Timothy he asked for.

The harvest doesn't just feed the next generation.

Sometimes it feeds the farmer.

Jesus Built People

Jesus could have built the greatest organization in history.

Instead, He spent most of His time with twelve ordinary people.

Think about that. The Savior of the world invested His life in relationships. He walked with them. Ate with them. Corrected them. Encouraged them. Trusted them. Prepared them.

He wasn't simply gathering followers. He was preparing future shepherds. Future teachers. Future leaders. Future disciple-makers.

His ministry wasn't measured by what He accomplished while He was here.

It was measured by what continued after He returned to the Father.

Paul and Timothy

Paul understood the same principle.

He didn't just preach. He poured himself into Timothy. He shared his victories. His failures. His suffering. His wisdom. His life.

Eventually Timothy became the leader. Then Timothy invested in others.

That's the Kingdom. Not addition. Multiplication.

Healthy leaders create more healthy leaders — and if you do it right, one of them will one day pray over you in a hotel between games.

Write It Down

There's one more piece of leaving more than you found, and it's something I've believed since I was a young man.

Sometimes your dreams will outlive you.

Think about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He was a prophetic dreamer who dreamed of a society that didn't exist yet. He died before it became reality. And in my opinion, his dream stayed alive for one reason.

It was written. Documented. Memorialized.

If you have a dream and it's not written down, it's just a fantasy. It has no chance of outliving you.

The same is true of everything you want to pass on. The values you want your children to carry. The culture you want your program to keep after you retire. The words you want a young person to remember at forty.

Speak them — and then write them. Letters. Notes. Journals. A book, if God puts one in you.

Marshall and Darlene spoke Seth's future over him before he was born, and I reinforced it out loud for years. But I also want you to notice what you're holding: this book is me writing mine down. Long after I'm gone, some coach or teacher or parent I'll never meet may read these pages and enter someone's trench because of them.

That's the plan, anyway.

Dreams that are written can outlive the dreamer.

Multiplication Is Slow

We live in a culture that celebrates immediate results. God usually works differently.

A seed disappears into the ground before anyone sees growth. A tree takes years before it provides shade. Children take decades before they're raising families of their own.

Healthy culture grows slowly. Healthy leaders are patient — not because they're passive, but because they understand that deep roots take time.

I started speaking over Seth when he was eleven. The prayer in Atlantic City came more than two decades later.

Don't become discouraged if you don't see immediate fruit. The greatest harvests are often enjoyed by someone else.

Plant anyway.

What Are You Reproducing?

Whether you realize it or not, you are reproducing something. Your attitudes. Your habits. Your responses. Your character. The people closest to you are learning what leadership looks like by watching your life.

Leadership isn't just what we teach. It's what we reproduce.

I know what I reproduced in Seth, because I've been on the receiving end of it.

We Aren't Designed to Do This Alone

One more thing this chapter has to say, especially to the men reading it.

They say men don't live as long as women in part because when men lose a spouse, many of them haven't nurtured any other relationships. Nothing else holding them up.

We aren't designed to do this alone. We do better with help.

A man without help is a wild beast with no accountability — likely not treating the people around him well, and not even knowing it.

I don't want to be that guy.

I have a few men in my life now who just check on me — Seth among them — and we have a lifetime together. That's not weakness. That's the legacy circulating. The people you build become the people who hold you.

If you have no one like that, start today. Legacy begins with one relationship — and so does survival.

Living Open-Handed

One of the greatest signs of maturity is learning to release what we've built.

Parents release children. Teachers release students. Coaches release athletes. Pastors release leaders.

Healthy leaders don't cling to influence. They celebrate watching others exceed them.

John the Baptist understood this beautifully: "He must increase; I must decrease."

That's not insecurity. That's Kingdom confidence.

And here's the secret nobody tells you: releasing Seth into manhood didn't cost me a player.

It gained me a brother.

Reflection

Think about the people who invested in your life.

- Who believed in you before you believed in yourself? What did they leave behind?
- Who are you intentionally preparing? Who could do your job one day?
- Has anyone you invested in ever turned around and poured back into you? Did you let them?
- Who checks on you — and who do you check on?
- What dream of yours is still unwritten?

Legacy begins with one relationship.

Trench Tools

Invest in One Person

Choose one person. Not because they're the most talented — because they're teachable.

Meet with them regularly. Ask questions. Share stories. Invite them into your life. Let them see not only your strengths but your struggles. Teach them everything you know.

Then encourage them to teach someone else.

That's how movements begin.

And two more:

Write one down. This week, put on paper one thing you want to outlive you — a value, a dream, a blessing over a specific person. A letter to a child. A note to a player. Written words survive.

Let someone pour back. If a person you once mentored reaches out — takes you to lunch, asks how you're really doing, offers to pray for you — don't deflect. Don't perform strength. Receive it. The circle isn't complete until you let it come back around.

Closing Thought

Years from now, people probably won't remember every speech you gave. Every practice you planned. Every meeting you led.

But someone will remember that you believed in them. Someone will remember that you made time for them. Someone will remember that because you invested in them, they had the courage to invest in someone else.

And if you're blessed — truly blessed — someone you built will one day find you at your lowest, in a hotel in Atlantic City or somewhere like it, and speak your own words back over you.

That's legacy.

Not leaving behind something impressive.

Leaving behind someone transformed —

who transforms you right back.

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Chapter 12

Go Build a Trench

The World Doesn't Need More Experts. It Needs More People Who Care.

"Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." — Matthew 5:16

The Work Begins Now

If you've made it this far, thank you.

Not because you've read another book. But because you've been willing to ask difficult questions. Questions about your heart. Your leadership. Your relationships. Your purpose. Questions that don't have quick answers.

My hope has never been that this book would simply fill your mind with information. Information alone has never changed the world.

People do.

People whose hearts have been transformed. People who choose faith over fear. Grace over judgment. Presence over performance. Service over status. Love over control.

That's how the Kingdom has always moved forward.

One life at a time.

The Soldier

Before I send you out, I have to tell you one last story about myself — because it explains why I'll never stop fighting for the things in this book.

In high school, I ran track, and my dream was to be the next Carl Lewis. But by my junior year, reality kicked in. I wasn't getting faster. If I had kept chasing that dream, I wouldn't have been dreaming anymore — I would have been living in a fantasy, drifting further from my true destiny.

So I released it, and I locked in on a new dream: becoming a Second Lieutenant in the United States Army.

I was a leader in JROTC — second in command of the Corps of Cadets. I got accepted into a military academy with an early commissioning program. And I earned my commission. Gold bars on my shoulders.

My dream was Second Lieutenant.

My destiny was becoming a leader.

I didn't understand the difference at the time. I do now. Dreams are the vehicles God uses to carry us toward destiny. Sometimes the dream is the destination. More often, the dream is the training ground.

Because here's what happened to that soldier.

I was trained to fight. Paid to fight. And when my time in uniform ended, God didn't discharge the soldier. He redeployed him.

I'm from the hood, but I ain't from the streets — and I have spent my life fighting a different war. Not against people. Against the hate, the neglect, the hopelessness, and the indifference that eat young people alive in communities like the ones that raised me and buried Boo.

You've read this whole book. You know the battlefield now. The invisible wounds. The armor kids wear. The ecosystems designed against them. The kids scanning the stands. The ones checking to see if someone is still there.

That is the war.

And every coach, teacher, parent, counselor, and pastor reading this page is already standing on the battlefield — whether you’ve enlisted or not.

This chapter is your commissioning.

Your Trench Is Waiting

When you close this book, life won’t suddenly become easier.

Your students will still struggle. Your children will still test your patience. Your team will still lose games. Your church will still have conflict. Your organization will still face challenges. People will still disappoint you. You will still disappoint yourself.

None of that changes.

What changes is how you enter the trench.

You no longer enter believing your job is to fix everyone. You enter believing your job is to faithfully love the people God has placed in front of you.

That’s different. One creates pressure. The other creates purpose.

Dream From the Inside Out

A soldier needs a mission, and a mission begins with a dream. So before you go, let me teach you how to dream — because the trenches you’ll build start there.

“As a man thinketh, so is he.” Dreams start with a thought. Your thoughts become your words, your words become your actions, and your actions shape your life. Scripture says that without vision, the people perish. Without a dream — without direction — something in us surely dies. It’s a quiet death. But it’s death nonetheless.

Two things I’ve learned about dreams.

First: dreams are not fantasies. When your dream becomes a fantasy, you need a new dream. I had to release Carl Lewis to find the gold bars. Releasing a fantasy isn’t quitting. It’s steering.

Second: some people dream from the outside in — limiting their dreams to what they see others doing, to what their environment says is acceptable. I want you to dream from the inside out. From the depths of your soul. Because people who don’t dream are limited by culture, race, sex, religion, and economics.

Dreamers have no limits.

Langston Hughes wrote a short poem called “Dreams” that I have carried with me since I was young — the image of a life without dreams as a bird with a broken wing that cannot fly, as a field gone barren and frozen over with snow. [PUBLISHER NOTE: “Dreams” (1923) is in the U.S. public domain; verify rights for full reproduction here, or retain this paraphrase.]

Hold fast to your dreams. Because I’ve seen what Hughes saw:

Is your life a barren field, frozen with snow?

We live in communities that are barren fields. There's no hope because there are no dreamers. A lot of fighters — not enough dreamers.

Will you be one?

The slave dreamed of his freedom. I am the hope of the slave. My dream has led me to the freedom I have today — and every young person you serve is somebody's dream waiting to be watered.

You Will Never Know the Full Impact

One of the beautiful frustrations of leadership is that you'll rarely see the whole story.

You'll encourage a student who remembers your words twenty years later. You'll pray with someone who tells their grandchildren about that moment. You'll coach an athlete who someday becomes the kind of parent they never had. You'll listen to someone who was quietly deciding whether life was worth living.

You may never know.

That's okay.

Farmers don't dig up seeds every morning to see if they're growing. They plant. They water. They trust.

Leadership is much the same. Faithfulness comes before fruit.

The Small Things Are Never Small

Don't underestimate ordinary moments. A smile. Learning someone's name. A note. A phone call. Showing up at the hospital. Sitting quietly beside someone who has no words left.

Jesus spent thirty years preparing for three years of ministry — and even then, much of it looked ordinary. Walking. Listening. Eating. Praying. Loving.

Never confuse ordinary with unimportant.

Don't Build Your Kingdom

One of the greatest temptations in leadership is believing the work belongs to us.

It doesn't. These are not our children. They're God's. Not our players, our church, our school, our organization. His.

We're stewards, not owners — and that sets us free. Free to serve, to celebrate someone else's success, to release what we've built, because it never belonged to us in the first place.

I learned that one in a cave. I wouldn't wish the lesson on you. But I wouldn't trade it either.

Become the Person You Needed

As I look back over my own life, one question keeps coming back to me.

What kind of adult did I need when I was younger?

Someone who listened. Someone who believed in me. Someone who told me the truth without making me feel worthless. Someone who came to check on me. Someone who stayed.

You know my story now. The boy no one was watching. The boy scanning the stands. Maybe that's why this book exists.

Because every generation has the opportunity to become the adult they once needed.

Imagine what would happen if enough of us chose to do that. Families would change. Schools would change. Churches would change. Communities would change.

Not because of a new program.

Because of transformed people.

The Invitation

So here's my invitation. Here are your orders.

Go notice the kid everyone overlooks. Go encourage the teacher who's ready to quit. Go call the parent who's carrying more than anyone realizes. Go mentor the young coach. Go apologize when you're wrong. Go forgive someone who doesn't deserve it. Go ask better questions. Go slow down. Go become more curious than critical. Go choose grace without abandoning truth. Go build relationships that make people stronger. Go create environments where people don't have to pretend. Go remind people that failure isn't final. Go help someone discover hope again.

Go build a trench.

Reflection

Before you close this book, ask yourself one final question.

Who has God placed in my life that needs me to enter their trench?

Write down the names. Pray over them. Commit to them.

And one more, from a soldier to a soldier:

What is the dream God has planted in you — the inside-out one, the one your circumstances have been telling you to shrink?

Write it down. A dream that isn't written is just a fantasy. A dream that's written can outlive you.

Then begin.

Not someday.

Today.

Final Trench Tools

Before you begin another meeting, another practice, another school year, another season of parenting, pray this simple prayer:

Lord, help me see people the way You see them. Help me love them the way You love them. Help me tell them the truth with grace. Help me become the kind of person who makes others feel safe enough to

become who You created them to be. And when my own heart grows weary, remind me that You entered my trench long before You asked me to enter anyone else's.

Amen.

Final Words

If you've forgotten everything else in this book, remember this.

People are not projects. They are image bearers. Behavior is not the whole story. Every heart is being formed. People become best in safe relationships. Leadership is stewardship. Character matters more than reputation. Presence changes people.

Healthy hearts build healthy relationships. Healthy relationships build healthy cultures. Healthy cultures build healthy ecosystems. And healthy ecosystems help people become.

So wherever God sends you next — into a classroom, a gymnasium, a church, a counseling office, a boardroom, a neighborhood, or around your own kitchen table —

Go with courage. Go with humility. Go with compassion. Go with truth. Go with grace.

I was trained to fight. I chose my war.

Now choose yours.

And wherever you go...

Go build a trench.

Afterword

The Trench I'm Building Now

As I finished writing this book, I realized something that took me years to understand.

I thought my calling was to build successful teams. Then I thought it was to build schools. Then I thought it was to build organizations.

Today, I believe God has always been asking me to build people.

Not perfect people. People who know they are loved. People who tell the truth. People who carry hope. People who enter the lives of others with courage and compassion.

And I don't want to leave you with the impression that these are just reflections from a man looking backward. So let me tell you what I'm building right now — because I would never ask you to build a trench I'm not building myself.

For fifteen years, I've kept a blog called BECOMING. Its banner reads: *The Process is the Purpose*. Everything in this book was written there first, in real time, before I understood what it meant — the collaboration essays in 2011, the grief in 2012, the graduations in 2014, the healing in the years since. I didn't know I was writing a book. I was just becoming, out loud, over time.

That process has now become an organization.

It's called the Ascend Basketball Network. Its position is three words you've read all through this book: collaboration over competition. Programs connecting instead of competing. Every partner keeps its own identity, its own coaches, its own culture — what we share is a standard, for development, for character, and for the doors we open together. My own training organization sits inside it. It's called REPS — and if you've read Chapter 7, you know that name isn't branding. It's biography.

And here's the detail that means the most to me. One of the partner organizations is led by Seth — the man from Chapter 11, the twelve-year-old I once spoke life over, who found me in Atlantic City and spoke it back. He built something of his own, and now we're building side by side.

The legacy didn't just come back around.

It signed on.

Now, about the size of it. We're not trying to gather hundreds of organizations. We want twelve.

Why twelve? Because Jesus chose twelve. Not because He couldn't attract more — crowds followed Him everywhere. Because becoming happens in relationships, and relationships have a limit. You cannot know a hundred partners. You can know twelve. You can eat with twelve. You can enter the trenches of twelve.

And I go in knowing something else about that number, because Jesus knew it too.

Among any twelve, there will be a Judas. There will be a Peter — someone who denies you in the hard moment and needs restoring afterward. Jesus chose His twelve knowing exactly that, and He built His church on that roster anyway.

So will we.

You cannot let the fear of something going wrong prevent you from doing right. Betrayal, denial, disappointment — that's not a flaw in the plan. That's the human experience. It's part of every trench there has ever been. The only way to avoid a Judas is to love no one, trust no one, and build nothing.

That's not an option for people like us.

If this book has encouraged you to become one of those people — someone who builds anyway, loves anyway, enters anyway — then every lesson learned in my own trenches has been worth it.

Thank you for walking this journey with me.

Now...

Go help someone become.

Notes & Sources

(Scaffold for the endnotes section — to be completed with the editor. Listed by chapter, these are the research-based claims in the book and the primary sources that support them.)

Epigraph, Ch. 7 — “Life doesn’t get easier. We learn to do hard better.” Kara Lawson, Duke University women’s basketball, remarks to her team, 2022 (widely circulated video). Confirm quotation and secure permission or verify fair use for epigraph.

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Ch. 12 — Langston Hughes, “Dreams” (1923). First published in *The World Tomorrow*, 1923; U.S. public domain. Verify for territories outside the U.S. if rights are sold internationally.

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