The View from Here

Reflections of an Imperfect Traveler

A Protector and a Fixer

Somewhere early in life, I learned that love could both comfort and wound. In my home, alcohol and abuse turned safe moments uncertain. I watched the air in a room change when tension rose. I saw people who loved each other still hurt each other deeply. That is a hard thing for a child to understand, so I did what children often do. I started watching.

That is where the protector in me was born. I became alert to faces, moods, and tones before words were spoken. I learned to read the room before the room admitted what was happening. I tried to shield my mother and brother. I tried to step between trouble and the people I loved, even when I was too small for the weight I carried.

No one gave me that job. There was no ceremony, no badge, and certainly no instruction manual. I simply took it because it felt like someone had to. I became a fixer too.

I smoothed things over, distracted, negotiated, and carried adult-sized concern on a child's shoulders. That role does not retire easily. Even now, people bring me their broken situations — family trouble, church trouble, business trouble, life trouble — and something in me still reaches for the toolbox. Sometimes I help. Sometimes I overstep. Sometimes I fight battles that are not mine and try to repair people who do not want repairing.

Over time, I have learned that caring is not the same as carrying. Helping is not the same as rescuing. Love does not require me to stand in every storm with duct tape in one hand and a wrench in the other, although duct tape has saved more than one situation. The best protection is often quieter than that. Sometimes it is listening. Sometimes it is creating safety. Sometimes it is sitting beside someone in their pain without trying to explain it away.

That understanding is why church became so important to me — not as performance, not as polished spirituality, and not as a place for people to compete over who sounds the most holy. I mean church as sanctuary. A place where wounded people could breathe and grace could have the final word. I needed that refuge, so I spent years trying to help create it for others.

Learning the Hard Way

School was a struggle. I repeated third grade, and it felt like a public brand of failure. When you are a child, something like that does not feel like a small academic delay. It feels like a sign hung around your neck.

I remember my father telling my mother to have me tested "to see if I was stupid." Those words landed heavy. I was not stupid. I was struggling. There is a difference, but it took me years to understand that and even longer to believe it.

I survived by becoming the class clown. Humor gave me a way to control rooms where I felt behind. If I could make people laugh, maybe they would not notice where I was struggling. Humor could get me out of trouble. Humor could get me into trouble. Sometimes it managed to do both before lunch, which takes either talent or poor judgment.

That was also when I found sarcasm. Sarcasm was quick, sharp, and useful. It could make people laugh before they realized someone had been cut. I learned how to use humor like a knife, not always because I wanted to hurt anyone, but because it helped me feel less helpless. It took me a long time to learn that a joke that protects the teller can still wound the listener. I have had to surrender the weaponized part of my humor while keeping the healing part. Humor has saved me more times than I can count, but sharp humor needs a careful hand. I have not always had one.

Because traditional learning did not come easily, I adapted. I learned by watching, doing, repeating, and connecting ideas to real life. I learned through people, pictures in my mind, observation, humor, and experience. Life itself became my classroom. Sometimes it was a hard classroom, but it taught well.

That struggle gave me empathy for people who do not learn, remember, speak, or heal the same way as everyone else. It also made me suspicious of titles, degrees, and religious credentials when people use them as thrones.

I respect honest learning. I respect earned responsibility. But I do not worship framed paper, important offices, or church language dressed up to sound deep.

I have known wise, gracious people with little formal education. I have known arrogant people with walls full of diplomas. A title can tell me what someone has done. It cannot tell me who they are.

Sanctuary

Church mattered because I needed a safe place. Not a perfect one. Churches are full of cracked people like me, and cracked people have a way of bringing their cracks with them. Sometimes they bring casseroles too, so it balances out a little.

But I needed sanctuary. I needed a place where hurting souls could be honest. A place where a person did not have to be impressive to matter. A place where God could meet broken people without everyone pretending they were not broken.

I served as a youth pastor for eleven years. Part-time on paper, full-time in my heart. Those years were filled with retreats, late nights, bad pizza, laughter, prayer, music, van rides, and moments of real breakthrough. They were also filled with deep pain — suicide, grief, broken families, and young people carrying more than they knew how to name.

Those years taught me that ministry is not mostly about platforms or programs.

Sometimes ministry is staying present when the room is heavy and words fall short. Sometimes it is listening. Sometimes it is crying with people. Sometimes it is saying very little because the situation is too painful for easy answers.

God showed up in the chaos more often than in the polished plans. Camp Lee and Ichthus Youth Retreat mattered deeply to me because they became sanctuary in motion. There was music, laughter, exhaustion, prayer, confusion, grace, and teenagers discovering that faith could be real without being stiff and lifeless.

There were probably moments when everything looked organized from the outside. That was an illusion.

Youth ministry has a way of reminding you that control is mostly theoretical. You can plan the schedule, print the forms, line up the speakers, and still end up solving some crisis involving missing shoes, hurt feelings, van logistics, and somebody who forgot every instruction they were given in the last ten minutes. And somehow, God still shows up.

I made plenty of mistakes. I pushed too hard sometimes. I carried too much sometimes. I tried to fix things that needed more prayer and less Dale. But I hope some young people found breathing room. I hope they knew they were seen. I hope they found a little safety, a little laughter, and a little grace.

Because that is what I was looking for too.

When the Road Became Real

The road became real for me in 1988, on my first mission trip to Costa Rica. I went with a dental team. I was not the dentist, and I was not the preacher. I mostly held lights, filmed video, entertained kids, and stayed in the background. In other words, highly specialized mission work.

That is where I met Shirleny. She was eight years old. After the dentist fixed one of her front teeth, she smiled the kind of smile that changes the whole room. Her face lit up, and all her friends wanted to see.

The next day, I asked how her mother liked her new tooth. Her face fell. I did not know she had no mother. I did not know she was an orphan. I had asked a simple question and walked straight into a deep wound.

Later, I walked her to her grandmother's home and saw where they lived. It was a small two-room place with a tin roof and a dirt floor. The walls had spaces where the boards did not meet. You could see through places in the house. That night, the complaints we had been making about our hotel suddenly felt embarrassingly small. I woke up around two in the morning crying harder than I had ever cried before. It was not self-pity. That was what made it different. My heart was grieving for someone else.

God used that little girl to break something open in me. I saw my own selfishness more clearly than I wanted to, but I also felt God softening something in me.

Before we left, I gave Shirleny five dollars. She took my hand and led me across the road to a little store, where she used that money to buy me a Coke. I had so much, and she had so little, and she gave back to me. At that moment, I was the one with less. She was the teacher.

That trip changed how I saw poverty, generosity, missions, and myself. I saw Jesus in Shirleny's smile, and I have never been able to completely unsee Him there. It was not just a trip. It was a turning point.

Finding Peace

For most of my life, I knew how to keep moving. I knew how to work. I knew how to fix. I knew how to show up. I knew how to be useful. What I did not know was how to rest. A fixer can run on being needed for a long time, but it is exhausting. Being useful is not the same as being loved. Being needed is not the same as being known. Being the fixer is not the same as being safe.

Later in the journey, God brought Fanny into my life. With her, I found something I did not fully know I needed: peace. Not a trouble-free life. There are still distances, paperwork, delays, frustrations, hard days, and the occasional urge to fuss at an entire immigration system. But underneath all that, there is peace.

Fanny's presence lets my soul unclench. She does not demand performance. She brings laughter, steadiness, trust, and emotional rest. For a man who learned early to watch every room, it is no small thing to be with someone who feels safe. For a lifelong protector and fixer, it is healing to be loved without having to earn it by solving everything.

I still try to fix things. That part of me did not disappear. I am still learning where helping ends and carrying begins. I am still learning that not every burden has my name written on it, even if someone hands it to me with great confidence.

But with Fanny, I have learned something about resting. To laugh. To trust. To breathe. To be a man, not just a toolbox with opinions. And at this stage of the journey, peace is not a small thing.

Still on the Road

I am not finished yet. I am still an imperfect traveler. The boy who watched the room and carried too much still shows up in me. He shows up when I overthink. He shows up when I over-fix. He shows up when I use humor to deflect pain. He shows up when I replay a moment and wonder if I could have handled it better. But God has been patient with that boy. God has been patient with the man too.

Looking back, I see His hand in places I once missed: in the hard rooms of my childhood, in the classrooms where I felt behind, in the sanctuary of church, in Shirleny's smile, and in the quiet peace I have found with Fanny. I see Him in the laughter. I see Him in the losses. I see Him in the mistakes. I see Him in the grace that showed up anyway.

The view from here is clearer than it used to be, but it is still filtered through a cracked vessel. My life is not a trophy case, a résumé, or a finished monument. It is a long road carried more by grace than by strength.

I keep walking — still learning, still laughing when I can, still grieving when I must. I know now that love does not have to be dangerous. Struggle does not mean failure. Humor can heal when it is not being used to cut. Titles matter far less than fruit. Grace meets us while we are still becoming.

I am not the man I was. I am not yet the man I hope to be. And I am not traveling alone.