BEFORE THE DAY GETS LOUD

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Notes to a family I happen to work with

He Died Rich

A tribute to a father who chose people over position, and built the culture everyone is chasing. And why I believe it belongs right where we work.

by Dean Griffith

A story about my dad. The personal stuff is how we carry our humanity into the work, so stay with me to the last line. These are the most practical things I know about how average teams become exceptional, and whole organizations start to outperform.

My father died rich. Not by the world's scoreboard. He was passed over for promotions more than once, always for the same reason, that he kept choosing people over the climb. Family. Faith. Being home. He took good care of his own, and my mom has lived comfortably on what he built for all eleven years since. But nobody who knew him would ever tell you the account balance was the fortune.

Because there are two kinds of rich. The first kind you spend a lifetime amassing, and then you die, and every dollar of it stays behind and belongs to somebody else anyway. The other kind you pour into people, and that kind does not stay behind at all. It gets up and keeps walking around in the lives you changed, for years, for generations. My dad built the second kind, and eleven years after he is gone, it is still compounding.

Enjoy It. Just Do Not Worship It.

Now, let me be clear, because this would be pretty rich coming from me otherwise. This is not a knock on money, or on making a lot of it and enjoying every bit of it. I have spent almost thirty years in finance. I believe in getting paid well for the value you bring, and I will be bold about it. If you are creating real value, you ought to be paid for it. That is not greed, it is a principle as old as time. Even the oldest faith traditions land right there, the worker is worthy of his wages. And with six kids, trust me, I've got a jar on my dresser with a little savings in it, and I'd love nothing more than to fill that jar up. Maybe start a second jar. So go get yours. Build it, earn it, enjoy it. This is not a shot at any of that.

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> ***Enjoying money has never once been the problem. Loving it over loving people, that has always been the real issue.***

The thing that actually lasts is free, available to everyone in equal measure. So if you amass more than most, do not apologize for it. It just means you have more to pour into the only thing that was ever going to outlive you. My dad lived that math to the end. When he retired, he could have cashed in as a consultant and finally made real money. Instead he took almost nothing to help small faith based groups serve their communities, and gave his advice away free. One last shot at the first kind of rich, and he shrugged, because he had been getting the other kind his whole life.

"Just Because It Is Their Reality Does Not Mean It Is Ours"

Of everything he ever gave me, one line has outlasted them all, and I have never stopped preaching it. I would come to him as a kid, airtight case in hand, ready for my sympathy. Everybody else gets to do this. I could not help it, it was because of this, because of him, because of them. And he would let me finish, and then, calm as ever, he would say, *"Just because it is their reality does not mean it is ours."*

He said it at home too, every time someone on the outside had an opinion about how he and my mom were raising us. Same calm answer. That is their reality. It does not have to be ours.

It took me years to feel the full weight of it, because he was handing me two things at once. Own it, because the only thing I can ever really control is me. And refuse it, because I did not have to accept the ceiling anybody handed me. Ownership and defiance, braided together. Stop blaming the reality, then go change it.

Now sit with that where you actually spend your days. Every team I have ever been part of has its own version of the reasons.

The industry does it this way.
It has always been done this way.
That is just the way it is here.
And my personal favorite, that is our policy.

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That last one gets me every time, as if it came down on stone tablets and not from someone three desks over who would change it over lunch if we asked. We wrote it. We could rewrite it tomorrow.

We recite these reasons until they calcify into walls, and then we lead as if the walls were load bearing. Most of them are not.

? *What is one thing about our culture we treat as permanent, when the truth is it could change the moment someone decided to challenge it?*

That is their reality. It does not have to be ours. My dad was that voice for me. I am trying to be that voice for the people I lead, and I am asking you to be it for yours. Everyone leads somewhere, so nobody gets a free pass here. And honestly, the person without the title is often the best suited to challenge these things anyway.

The One That Did Not Annoy Me. It Scared Me.

There was one more thing he used to say, and this one never annoyed me. It just scared me, because it was so completely true there was nowhere to hide from it.

> ***Do not organize your life around the people who critique the way you walk. Organize it around the people who will be standing at your bedside at the end.***

Feed the bedside, not the crowd.

And my dad did not just say it. He bet his life on it, promotion after promotion, and never blinked. They passed him over again and again. He is remembered by thousands. Tell me again which one was the better return.

Now be honest about the scoreboard most of us actually play to. The quarter. The promotion. The approval of people who will not remember our name in five years. We pour our best into the crowd and hand the bedside the leftovers.

He has been gone eleven years, and my mom still talks about him like he just stepped out of the room for a minute. A love so real it refuses to become past tense. Eleven years, and I still catch myself wanting to call him. To tell him something. To ask his advice. To let him hear what I am doing with all of this. Just to hear his voice. And then it lands all over again

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that he will not pick up.

And I've had more people than I can count tell me he changed the entire trajectory of their life. People carrying him around in their chest years after he is gone, still steering by something he said or did. That is what the second kind of rich looks like. It does not sit in an account. It walks around in people, and it gets handed down.

And my mom is the proof. She did not just keep his memory, she kept his way of living. Widowed all these years, she never folded inward. She has spent them pouring into everyone within reach, in a way that humbles me. That is the thing about this fortune. You cannot divide it up and spend it when you die. It gets inherited, and lived, and passed on again.

How He Spent It

Let me tell you how a man like that spends his fortune. Not in words. My dad was not a say-it-to-your-face, I love you kind of man. His actions did all the talking, and they never stopped.

I watched him put his arm around homeless men buried so deep in shame they could barely lift their eyes, and let them know, somehow, that they were loved. He handed dignity to exactly the people the world had written off, and he was not soft about it. Tough as nails against someone is just hard. Tough as nails for someone, clearly in their corner, is one of the most loving things a person can be. That was my dad.

And I will tell you, I was on the receiving end of that same grace more times than I would ever care to admit.

How We Spend It at Work

That was a rescue mission, and you and I go to an office. But do not let the setting fool you. It is the exact same move, just dressed in business casual. Because there is someone in your building the room has quietly given up on. The underperformer, the difficult one, the person everyone has learned to route around. My dad would have walked straight at that person, not with a pass, but with belief and the backbone to go with it.

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And that same courage points up the ladder too, not just down it. Sometimes the most loving thing a leader can do is sit across from another leader, even one above them, and offer the honest feedback nobody has ever cared enough to give. Done with love and real nerve, that is not insubordination. It is a gift, and it is terrifying, and most of us talk ourselves out of it every single time.

And then there is the one we never think to love. *The leader who looks bulletproof.* The one who carries the weight, absorbs the hits, and never lets you see the crack. We assume the armor is real. It is not. That person has just been handed a reality where being human is not allowed, and they need someone to remind them it does not have to be that way. So look at them, really look, and ask how they are doing, and mean it. Pour back into the person everyone else only draws from. You may be the only one who ever does.

Humility and Service

I think of one man in particular. He had fallen from grace in a very public way, and everyone piled on, not one of them someone he had actually hurt. My dad went the other direction. Quietly, with no fanfare, he walked toward that man and his family and handed them dignity and respect when the whole world was handing out judgment. Unconditional love, and not a soul watching.

That is where I learned what a great leader actually is. It is the work done in the shadows, with no post, no award, no recognition. Just love, poured out on someone who could do nothing for you in return.

? *Who could we serve right now, quietly, with nothing in it for us, simply because they are human and they need it?*

"Deano, I Think You Got It"

I used to call my dad for one reason above all. To find out where I was going wrong, what I was missing. He could always see the thing I could not. And in what turned out to be our last conversation, neither of us knowing he would be gone the next week, I called with the same question I always asked. Where am I messing this up? For the first time I could remember, he had no correction, nothing to fix. He just said five words I will hear for the

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rest of my life. *Deano, I think you got it.*

Deano was his name for me. My mom calls me Deanie. You can probably guess which one of those the rest of you are cleared to use.

In the moment it almost annoyed me. I had called for wisdom and he handed me a blessing instead, neither of us knowing the clock had run out. But it was the most important thing he ever did for me, and it is the exact thing I keep begging leaders to do. He lit my torch, told me I had it, and let me go, long before I actually had anything figured out.

And here is what I have learned since. None of us has it figured out. Not me, not you, if I am honest, not even him. He did not say it because I had arrived. He said it because believing you can is most of the way to becoming. *Light the torch. Tell them they have it. Then let them go, long before they have it all figured out.*

"An Inside Job"

One more thing about my dad, and it is the one that gives me the nerve to say what I am about to. If he saw something broken, he said so, out loud, and plenty of people did not like him for it in the moment. But so many of them came back years later to admit he had been right, and that the honesty had changed everything. Because underneath the bluntness they could feel the only reason he bothered. He cared. *He only ever told you the hard truth because he could not be bothered to lie to someone he loved.*

So let me be my father's son for a second, and say the plain thing. This is not a lecture, and it is not me handing anyone a program. It is me asking people to be who I already know they are. A place where we own our part before we point, and where we look at the industry average, the ceiling everyone else settled for, and say, with love and without apology, that is their reality, not ours. Let us make ours better. And let us be the ones who lead that.

My dad had a phrase for exactly this. When something was hard and nobody from the outside could fix it, he would say, *"This one is an inside job."* Just us, in here, with what we have. Culture is an inside job. It cannot be installed or handed down. It can only be built by the people already living in it who decide it is worth building.

It starts with one person choosing to put love at the root, and it catches, and it spreads like wildfire. The places where it spreads do extraordinary things. The numbers come too. They

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just stop being the point. *Love at the root. Everything else is fruit.*

The Khakis

Let me tell you one last thing about my dad. He grew up with nothing. The kind where you put cardboard in your shoes to make them last another six months. He worked four years before he could even afford to start college, then earned his MBA in night school, full time, married, four kids under five at home (and yes, my mom is a superhero, thanks for asking, she was running that whole circus mostly on her own). And still, my mom tells me, he would come home from work and find a way to hold us or get down on the floor and play, before turning right back around to go sit in a night class. He had every reason to spend his life clawing back what he never had. He never did, not for one day.

When he died, I was going through his closet and found seventy-two pairs of khakis. Seventy-two. On my drive home I stopped at the rescue mission near and dear to his heart, where he had put his arm around so many broken men and handed them dignity they had been told they did not deserve. And I dropped off every one of those pairs of pants.

And I stood there and could not stop wondering. How many men would walk out of that place in a pair of my dad's khakis, with a straighter back and a new chance, all because somebody finally looked at them the way my dad looked at me, and said, *"I think you've got this."*

> ***Somewhere out there, a man is walking around in my father's pants, with a new life. That is what he left behind. Tell me again which kind of rich you want to be.***

? *Picture the people you lead a few years from now. Whose back is straighter, whose confidence is bigger, whose whole trajectory bent because of how you chose to lead them this week?*

That is the fortune. The only one that was ever real. You cannot put it in an account or leave it in a will. You can only pour it into people and trust it to keep walking around long after you are gone.

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Why I Do This

So maybe now you understand why I cannot be quiet about any of this. My why is just the inheritance of his, handed down from a dad who spent a good part of his life in the same kind of environment we all do, and made it count.

Because I was that man. For years I was obsessed with climbing, chasing a title I could not even have named, convinced that if I got it I would finally have some worth. From the outside I looked like a man who had it figured out. Inside I was lost, and it took some hard, necessary lessons to learn what my dad already knew long before I did.

And here is the thing nobody expects me to say. The pulpit would have been the easy road. A clean title, a clear lane, a stage built for this exact message. The harder road, the one I actually needed, was to stay right here and live out my failure in front of the very people I work with. To let them watch me lose it and find it, and bring the whole messy thing to the place nearest me instead of running somewhere safer.

I ran to easy long enough. So now I run to my family. And yes, that includes my work family.



So where are we running to easy, instead of staying and pouring into the hard thing right in front of us?

And I was not the only one. Plenty of people I pass every day are carrying the same quiet lostness I was, and the same the men my dad put his arm around were. We are all just better at hiding it than they were. This is exactly the place love was always meant to show up, so this is where I bring it. And here is the cool part. I do not need a title to do it. And neither do you. None of us do.

I know how all of this sounds. Hopelessly idealistic. Head in the clouds. Love, as the answer to the thing you actually get paid to deliver. And yes, that is exactly what I am saying. Love is how we outperform, how we stop being at the mercy of the market and start controlling our own destiny.

Love. Yep. That is the whole strategy.

And no, I cannot hand you a clean model with a dashboard and a rollout plan.

But tell me this. Think of every great thing you have ever truly admired.

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The team that overachieved.
The family that stayed close through anything.
The organization nobody ever wanted to leave.

Go look underneath any of them, and you will find the same three things, every single time.

- **Ownership.** They took the blame and gave away the credit.
- **Defiance.** They refused to settle for average.
- **Love.** The kind you run through walls for.

That is not the soft version of anything. It is the version that wins, at work, at home, anywhere human beings gather. And at the root of all three, holding the whole thing up, is the same thing every time. **Love. Always.**

> ***Nobody has ever fixed a We problem with a Me-first mentality.***

And it is the same wherever you spend it. Where you work. Where you live. Those are not two separate compartments, no matter how much we pretend. It is the same heart in both, and when one starves, the other usually does too. So build it in both.

None of this is a pitch. But I will always make time for the conversation with anyone who wants to build a place like this. Not for what it does for the numbers, though I've watched it produce the results everyone chases. For what it does to people's actual lives. The results are the symptom. The changed lives are the point.

So call it clouds if you want. My father lived up there too, and I will take his legacy, and his kind of rich, any day of the week. He died rich. Go, and do the same.

Eleven years, Dad, and I finally get it. Now it is ours to carry. Whoever your people are, at work and at home, go be rich the way he was. I love you. Period. ❤

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