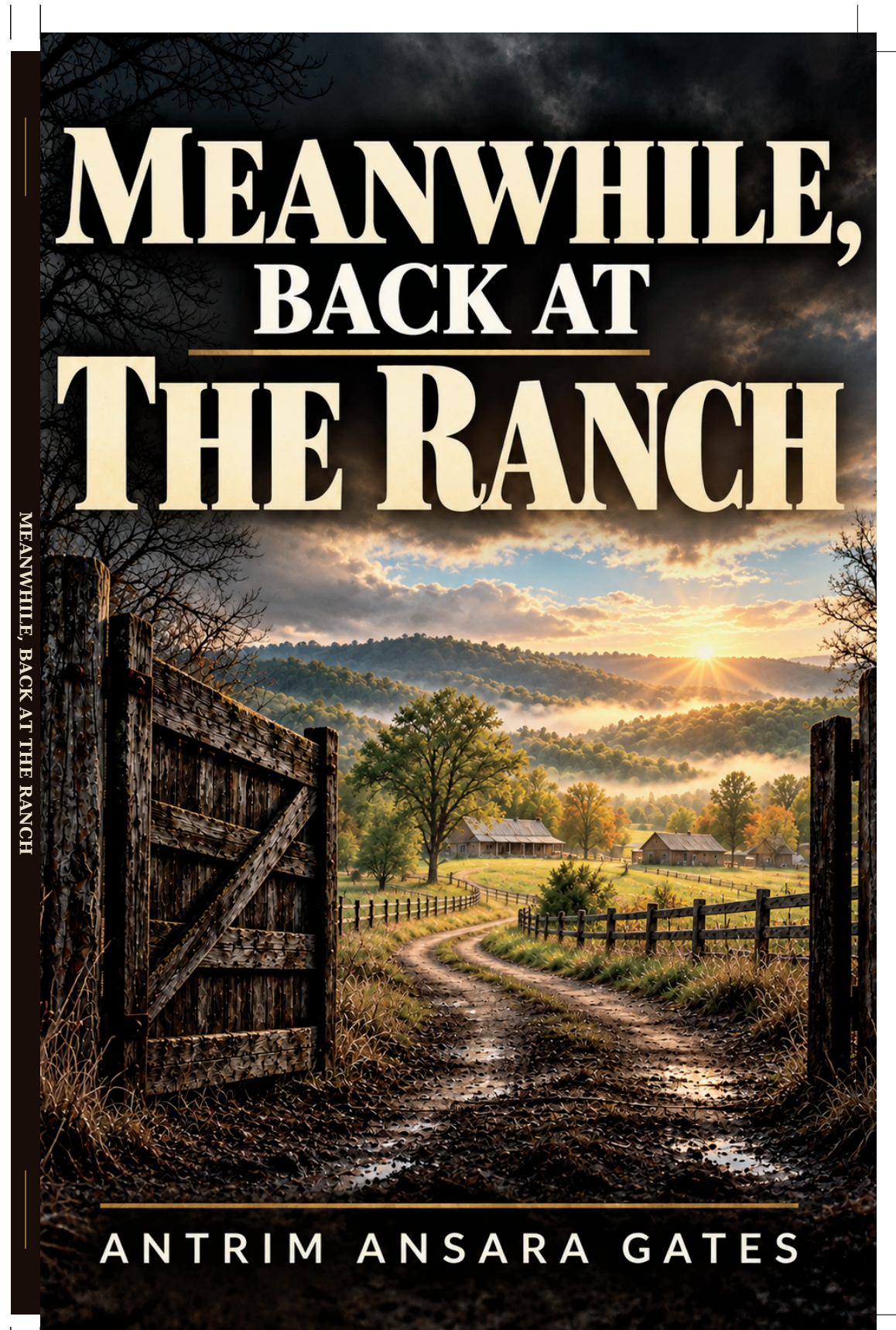




MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE RANCH

ANTRIM ANSARA GATES

FOREWORD

When I first met Antrim A. Gates, I immediately recognized in him a deep and genuine burden for people. His remarkable desire to witness, combined with a rare courage and compassion, was unlike anything I had ever encountered. It was not merely something he spoke about—it was something he lived.

Over the years, I have watched him turn ideas into action and challenges into opportunities. I have also witnessed seasons when, seemingly without warning, much of what he had built appeared to be taken away. Yet even during those difficult times, something greater was being formed beneath the surface.

Meanwhile, *Back at the Ranch* is a reflection of that journey—a journey marked by ministry, sacrifice, disappointment, perseverance, and ultimately, transformation. It looks honestly at what happens when something that began with a sincere purpose begins to change, while never losing sight of the people, the lessons, and the grace of God found along the way.

These pages will not only teach you; they will cause you to feel, reflect, and grow, challenging you to refuse to let difficulty go to waste.

What you hold in your hands is a lived testimony. It contains truths deeply rooted in the heart of a man who has experienced what he now shares. This is not theory. It is about confronting the truth and refusing to be crippled by what once tried to destroy you.

Perhaps you are searching for answers. Perhaps you are still holding on to something that has held you back for far too long. I believe that within these pages, you may find answers—even to questions you did not know you had.

I do not believe you have come across this book by chance. If you are reading it now, perhaps something within these pages has been divinely appointed for you.

So take your time. Let these words settle deeply within your heart. Allow them to challenge you, to heal you, and ultimately, to change you.

Pastor Darrel L. Levy

Friend and Brother of Antrim A. Gates

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PROLOGUE

I CAN SEE CLEARLY NOW

I hesitated to begin my next book. Not because I doubted the truth of what I lived, but because telling it felt costly. Fear has a way of disguising itself as prudence, and for a long time, I listened to it.

Then something settled in me. I realized I had already done the hardest part. I lived it. I was there. The confusion, the silence, the loyalty, the disappointment—none of that is theoretical to me. It already exacted its price.

What remained was a simpler question: would I allow the difficulty to go to waste?

There is never a wrong time to tell the truth. There are only wrong ways to tell it. Grace and dignity do not dilute honesty; they discipline it. They require restraint, precision, and the willingness to speak without the need to be vindicated.

Today I faced something I had been putting off. I finally went to the doctor. My lower back has been hurting for some time now—enough to make walking difficult. I ignored it longer than I should have. I told myself I could push through, that acknowledging weakness was somehow failure. I was wrong.

I refuse to be crippled by what has crippled much of my life already: fear. Fear of appearing weak. Fear of consequence. Fear of saying what others would rather remain unspoken.

I have come to terms with my shortcomings. I know my limits more clearly now. But one thing has remained constant—I am honest. Honest with myself. Honest about my failures. Honest about what I witnessed and how it shaped me.

I may pay a price for ignoring symptoms, and I may pay a price for speaking plainly about things some would prefer stay hidden. I accept that. Silence also has a cost, and I have paid enough of it already.

This is not an act of defiance. It is an act of clarity.

I can see clearly now.

CHAPTER 1

SACRIFICE WITHOUT ILLUSION

Ministry was never meant to be comfortable. I understood that long before I ever arrived at the Ranch, and I did not romanticize the cost once I was there.

The pay was low. Privacy was scarce. Days off were often postponed or quietly absorbed into the needs of the work. Personal convenience faded, one small concession at a time. None of this struck me as unjust. I had chosen the work, and I believed the work mattered. Sacrifice, when freely given, carries its own dignity.

At that stage of my life, I did not confuse hardship with mistreatment. I had known real adversity long before ministry ever entered the picture. Difficulty alone did not offend me. In fact, I expected it. Scripture never promised a life free from hardship; it promised refinement.

What mattered to me was why the sacrifice was required.

In those early days, the answer seemed clear. The Ranch existed to help restore broken men, not to present an impressive image of success. It was not polished, but it appeared sincere. The work demanded presence, patience, and a willingness to stand close to other people's struggles without pretending to be above them. That kind of work costs something, and I willingly accepted that cost.

I believed—perhaps too simply—that shared faith implied shared integrity. That those entrusted with authority were guided by the same reverence for God that had drawn the rest of us there. I assumed sacrifice flowed in one direction because calling did. At that time, I had not yet considered that sacrifice itself could be interpreted or applied differently depending on who was asking for it.

Looking back, I can see that my willingness to endure hardship delayed a different kind of clarity. Because I did not see myself as entitled, I was slow to question the structures around me. Because I

expected difficulty, I overlooked early signs that burdens were not always shared equally. And because obedience had always been something sacred to me, I did not immediately recognize how easily it could be redirected once loyalty subtly shifted.

I was not naïve about life.

I was, however, unguarded about systems.

That distinction matters.

Sacrifice offered to God enlarges the soul.

Sacrifice required within human institutions demands more than that—wisdom, humility, and accountability.

At the time, I had not yet learned to recognize the difference. I knew that I was willing to give what was asked— and sometimes more—as long as the work remained what it claimed to be.

That assumption would, over time, begin to change.

CHAPTER 2

WHEN MINISTRY WAS STILL HONEST

There was a time when the Ranch did not need defending.

It was not impressive, and it was not efficient, but it was sincere. What gave it credibility was not its structure or reputation, but its proximity to brokenness. The work happened up close, without polish, without distance, and without the illusion that anyone involved had already arrived.

In those early days, the line between staff and residents was thin—sometimes indistinguishable. That was not a failure of professionalism; it was the heart of the mission. Men who were still fighting their own battles were helping other men fight theirs. Weakness was not hidden. It was acknowledged. And grace was not a slogan—it was a necessity.

No one pretended the work was clean. It wasn't. Restoration rarely is. The days were long, the setbacks frequent, and progress uneven. But there was a shared understanding that no one was above the process. Authority existed, but it felt accountable—to God first, and then to the people it was meant to serve.

Correction, when it came, was personal. Patient. Grounded in the belief that people were more than their worst moments. Discipline existed, but it was measured. Its aim was restoration, not removal. Failure was treated as something to be addressed, not exploited.

At that stage, ministry still felt human.

What governed the culture was not fear of exposure, but hope for change. Men were encouraged to tell the truth about themselves because the truth was believed to be the doorway to freedom. Confession was not currency. It was trust. And trust, once given, was handled carefully.

The Ranch did not yet feel like an institution. It felt like a place.

Scripture was present, not as a tool, but as a guide. It was used to illuminate, not to corner. The authority of God's Word was assumed to be higher than any internal policy, and no one had yet learned how to selectively apply it for advantage.

People still believed the goal was transformation, not preservation.

Looking back, that is what I miss—not the hardship, not the simplicity, not even the camaraderie. What I miss is the absence of calculation. Decisions were not yet filtered through optics or liability. There was room for mercy without suspicion, and space for growth without constant surveillance.

The Ranch had not yet confused order with righteousness.

What eventually unraveled was not the mission itself, but the trust that sustained it. And trust does not collapse all at once. It erodes quietly—when consistency gives way to expedience, when accountability becomes selective, and when preserving the system begins to matter more than serving the people within it.

At the time, I could not have named that shift clearly. I only sensed that something essential was being displaced. Ministry was still happening, but it was no longer resting on the same foundation.

Christ had not been rejected.

He had simply stopped being central.

And when Christ moves from the center to the periphery, everything else begins to rearrange itself—slowly at first, then all at once.

That is when ministry stops being honest, even if it continues to look successful.

CHAPTER 3 THE DREAD OF SILENCE

The change did not arrive with alarms. It settled in quietly, almost imperceptibly, during a season that felt more like a lull than a rupture. Distinctions began to appear—not overtly harmful ones, not at first—but they were noted, then normalized.

Language shifted.

Those of us who once shared proximity to the work were no longer described in the same way. We had been called counselors. Then advisors. Meanwhile, the residents' identities became more narrowly defined, more fixed. The words themselves were not cruel, but they introduced separation where there had once been shared ground.

At first, these distinctions seemed practical. Clarifying roles. Establishing order. Nothing that immediately raised concern. But language does not merely describe reality—it shapes it. And slowly, the way we spoke began to affect the way we saw.

Narratives formed.

Residents were no longer treated as men in process, but as men whose words were inherently suspect. The assumption took hold—spoken openly, even casually—that they were all liars. That none of them could be trusted. Their stories were no longer weighed; they were dismissed before being heard.

This was not framed as cruelty.

It was framed as wisdom.

But the effect was devastating.

I had seen the look of hopelessness on a young man's face when he tried to confess that an unspeakable crime had been committed against him—and the shame and disgust that followed because we both knew he would not be believed and that I, for having heard him, would be marked as part of the problem.

After that, many residents chose silence over honesty rather than risk embarrassment, public correction, or the stigma of being labeled. In time, even some staff learned to measure their words carefully—not because they had nothing to say, but because they understood how easily intent could be assigned and how difficult it was to shed a reputation once it had settled.

When a man knows that nothing he says will be believed, silence becomes safer than honesty. Confession loses its purpose. Growth stalls. And a place meant for restoration quietly begins to teach concealment instead.

What troubled me most was not the discipline itself, but the certainty with which distrust was applied. Nuance disappeared. Discernment was replaced by generalization. And silence—once a space for reflection—became something else entirely.

It became dread.

Not because truth was unwelcome, but because it no longer mattered.

And when silence becomes safer than speech in a ministry built on repentance, something essential has already been lost—even if no one yet knows how to name it.

CHAPTER 4 THE VALLEY OF THE FOURS

Dating at the Ranch was always a complicated subject. In the early years, there were very few women around, and relationships between staff and residents were strictly prohibited. That was the official rule, and in most cases, it was enforced.

But over time, things became more complicated. Some former residents eventually became staff members, and in at least one case, a former resident later married a staff member and became a staff member herself. As long as everything was age-appropriate, these situations were sometimes accepted, though they would have been considered completely off-limits at another time.

It was one of the first times I began to notice something that would become a recurring theme: rules at the Ranch were not always fixed. They evolved. And sometimes they seemed to evolve in ways that benefited the very people responsible for enforcing them.

One of the advantages of being on the rule committee, I suppose, is that, when necessary, the rules can develop in directions that are very convenient for the rule committee.

Around the same time, as more female staff began to arrive, I thought perhaps the odds were finally improving for the rest of us. What I did not anticipate was what I jokingly referred to as the Ranch Effect. In a small, isolated environment with a heavily male population, social economics take over. Supply is low, demand is high, and confidence levels adjust accordingly.

I used to joke—only half-joking—that when the new group of female staff arrived, the rule makers somehow managed to clear out all the fives and sixes, leaving the rest of us to dwell in what I dramatically referred to as the Valley of the Fours.

That may have been slightly exaggerated and perhaps a little sour grapes on my part. But in a small, closed environment, perception changes quickly, and the hypocrisy of the situation was not entirely missed by those of us living down in the valley.

At the time, I laughed about it and blamed my situation on bad odds and worse timing. And to be fair, some of it probably was just sour grapes on my part. But looking back now, I realize it was also one of the first times I began to understand something important.

Sometimes you do not have the authority to change what is happening around you. Sometimes you do not have the position to confront it. But that does not mean you do not see it. And it does not mean it goes unseen.

Institutions can ignore things for a long time. People can pretend not to notice. But there is always a record being kept somewhere, even if it exists only in the quiet understanding of those who were there.

The Valley of the Fours was a small thing. No one would write a report about it. No meeting would be called because of it. But sometimes you learn more about an organization from its small, quiet inconsistencies than from its major public decisions.

Looking back now, I can laugh about it. But it was one of the first small lessons I received about how institutions really work, how rules change, and how human nature does not change nearly as much as we like to pretend.

And over time, I would learn that the Ranch had more than a few valleys.

CHAPTER 5 SILENCE STALKS

When the dread of silence takes hold, you lose something of yourself. You cannot remove the look of that thirteen-year-old child from your mind. You cannot escape the disgust that comes from watching a beautiful ministry collapse, or from witnessing the erosion of respect for people you once admired.

It haunts you like an apex predator.

You try to comfort yourself with every excuse you can find —small ones, reasonable ones, necessary ones—but they offer no relief. In the end, none of them are enough.

Sooner or later, you wrap yourself in the cowardly robes of silence, scolding yourself for not having done more. Yet you are still not ready to fully face the truth you have been avoiding.

This was the culture of the Lord's Ranch.

No excuses. No surprises. No more lying to myself.

And strangely, that realization was liberating.

The Bible studies were still going on. Basic needs were still being met. Life carried the appearance of normalcy. But the Ranch was drifting from its core values—and, in some ways, I was drifting too. Not because I excused the corruption. I never did. But I didn't press as hard as I should have.

That is the burden silence leaves behind.

CHAPTER 6 I SHALL RETURN

My first departure from the Ranch did not feel final.

I did not know when I would return or what circumstances might bring me back, but something within me remained connected to the place. Despite everything that had happened, I still believed the work mattered.

And in many ways, it did.

The Ranch had become more than a ministry assignment. It had shaped the way I understood calling, sacrifice, and service. Ministry there was demanding, imperfect, and deeply personal. You did not serve people from a safe distance. You lived close to their needs, their struggles, and their pain. You witnessed brokenness up close—and discovered the cost of trying to restore what had been damaged.

That kind of work does not leave a person unchanged.

Eventually, I returned for a second stint.

I came back more cautious than before, but I was still willing to serve. I had not forgotten the troubling things I witnessed during my first stint. Yet I had not abandoned my belief in the value of the ministry itself. I returned hoping that what was good could still outweigh what had gone wrong.

During that second stint, Bud arranged for me to travel to the Philippines for ministry work.

I went alone.

Bud joined me briefly during the trip, but for most of it, I was outside the familiar structure to which I had grown accustomed. For the first time since becoming involved with the Ranch, I was doing ministry beyond its daily reach and immediate influence.

That mattered more than I understood at the time.

The Philippines confronted me with realities I could not ignore. Poverty, hardship, faith, and endurance were no longer abstract ideas. They were visible. They had faces. They had names.

And they did not fit neatly within the framework I had carried with me.

I began to recognize that God's work was not confined to one place, one method, or one man's vision. People were serving faithfully in ways I had never encountered before— without the structure I had once considered essential and without many of the assumptions I had unknowingly accepted.

Something within me shifted.

I did not yet possess the language to explain it, but I could feel it happening.

When the trip ended and I returned to the Ranch, I came back with a broader understanding of ministry.

Outwardly, I continued as before. I served, remained engaged, and fulfilled the responsibilities placed before me. Inwardly, however, my perspective had widened.

Once you have seen beyond a particular environment, it becomes difficult to continue believing that environment represents the whole world.

The Ranch still mattered to me.

The residents mattered.

The work mattered.

But the institution no longer occupied the same place in my thinking.

I could now distinguish the work of God from the structure through which that work was being attempted. They were not always the same thing.

A ministry could accomplish genuine good and still possess serious flaws. It could help people in one moment and wound them in another. A worthy mission did not make its methods unquestionable, nor did it make its leaders incapable of error.

That realization did not arrive all at once. It settled within me gradually as the remainder of my second stint unfolded.

By the time that stint came to an end, the change within me could not be undone.

My first departure had left me with pain and uncertainty.

My second left me with perspective.

And when I departed again, I did not merely leave a place.

I carried away questions I could no longer ignore.

CHAPTER 7 THE DRIFT

My second departure from the Ranch carried a different weight from the first. The first time I left and returned to Ohio, I carried pain and confusion. This time, I carried deep, unresolved questions—and the growing realization that I needed distance.

After leaving the Ranch for the second time, my father asked me to move to West Memphis, Arkansas, and stay with my grandmother. She was living alone, and he believed she needed someone there with her.

I agreed.

For a time, West Memphis gave me somewhere to land. I joined Old St. Paul Baptist Church, became one of its ministers, and eventually founded a ministry of my own. That season provided structure, responsibility, and a measure of stability I needed more than I understood at the time.

Then the losses began to accumulate.

First, my grandmother passed away. Her death left more than an empty place in the house. Her presence had given me a quiet sense of belonging, and without her, I felt increasingly unanchored. West Memphis had originally been the place where I went to be with her. Now she was gone, and one of the main reasons I had come there was gone with her.

Before her passing, the desire to return to the Philippines had begun stirring in me again. My first journey there, during my second stint at the Ranch, had enlarged my understanding of missions. I spoke with my pastor at Old St. Paul, Frederick Anthony, and shared what was on my heart. He agreed to help partially finance the trip.

So I traveled to the Philippines a second time.

While I was there, I met a young woman, but the relationship did

not work out. It remained what it was— meaningful in the moment, but unfinished.

When I returned to West Memphis, however, I came home to a life that was about to unravel completely.

During that period, I allowed myself to become deeply invested in another relationship before it could truly find its footing; however, an old obligation caught up with me.

I was arrested for unpaid traffic tickets and failure to appear in court.

I spent nearly a month in the county jail.

A month is a long time to sit in a cell, but my calling followed me behind bars. Even while locked up, I was still a recognized minister, and I became the block's unofficial pastor. Every night before lights out, we held our own makeshift service.

My unofficial music minister was a man who happened to sound exactly like Al Green. Unfortunately, he seemed to know only one song, which he sang every single night to close the service: Sam Cooke's secular anthem, "A Change Is Gonna Come."

You certainly would not find it in any traditional Baptist hymnal. But in a county jail cell, it was close enough. Besides, the man was well known for his extreme violence, and we did not need any trouble. No one was about to correct his theology.

Our nightly services always collided with the loud reality of the institution. Every evening, a corrections officer we called "Dirty Red" would blast us with his stupid, annoying voice over the speaker, killing whatever spiritual atmosphere we had managed to create.

"Count time! Count time! Count time on the Rock!" he would yell. "If you're at the pisser, stay at the pisser! If you're at the crapper, stay at the crapper! Get on your bunk, not your punk's bunk! Count time on the Rock!"

Every single night, he blasted us with that exact routine. It grew old incredibly quickly.

Years later, I heard that Dirty Red ended up locked in jail himself. I only hope he did not have to spend much time on his punk's bunk.

But the deeper and much heavier sentence began after my release.

When I got out, the “brothers” in the ministry completely turned against me. They used my arrest over the traffic tickets as an excuse to strip away the very ministry I had founded. In the midst of that public betrayal, only one brother remained a true ally: Darrel Levy.

Darrel stood beside me when everyone else walked away. At the time, however, he did not yet have the influence, pulpit, or pastoral position necessary to change the outcome or prevent them from taking what I had built. He was a loyal friend, but he could not fight the entire board alone.

Then the woman I loved left me.

While I was already down, she returned to her former boyfriend. That discovery crushed me. I was embarrassed, wounded, and painfully aware that I appeared to be on a serious losing streak.

Worse still, everyone knew it.

My pastor, Frederick Anthony, was a good man, but he did not know how to navigate a situation as tangled and messy as mine had become. He could not shield me from the fallout.

There is a particular kind of humiliation that comes when private disappointment becomes a public spectacle—when others can watch your ministry being stripped away while seeing the woman you love return to her past. You are left standing in the open, trying to hold together a life that has already slipped from your hands.

Something within me broke.

West Memphis no longer felt like a place where I could remain. Too much disappointment and betrayal had gathered there. Loss, embarrassment, and uncertainty converged all at once until leaving felt less like a decision than a survival instinct.

So I left.

I had no clear idea where I was going to land.

Truthfully, I did not care.

Looking back, the best word I can find for that period is drift. I was not running toward anything in particular, but neither was I anchored to anything. Life moved forward one day at a time, without clear direction and with very little expectation.

I had not abandoned God.

But I had lost any clear sense of where He was leading me.

God, however, was not finished.

Somewhere along that uncertain path, I was introduced to a man who would quietly alter the course of my life. At a time when I felt completely cast aside, he helped anchor me again.

His name was Dr. Julian Russell.

And after I met him, I was never the same.

CHAPTER 8 MY LEARNING TREE

Something remarkable happens when you sit under sound teaching.

Now, I am not saying that everyone I had previously sat under was an Elmer Gantry. That would not be fair. There were sincere men among them who loved God and desired to serve Him faithfully. But there is a difference between sincerity and clarity, and there is a difference between enthusiasm and understanding.

When you are properly taught the Word of God, something inside you settles.

The constant searching quiets. The need to chase every new idea or spiritual novelty begins to fade. The Scriptures begin to speak with their own authority, and the teacher's role becomes something very different from what I had often seen before.

A good teacher does not try to make the Bible say something new.

He helps you see what was there all along.

That was the effect Dr. Julian Russell had on me.

Sitting under his teaching felt less like being impressed and more like being anchored. His knowledge of Scripture was deep, but he never displayed it for effect. He handled the Word carefully and patiently, as though the purpose of teaching was not to elevate the teacher but to illuminate the text.

For the first time in a long while, I felt the kind of stability that comes when faith is not built on personalities or emotional momentum, but on understanding.

Looking back, I often think of that season as my learning tree.

Every believer needs one at some point in life—a place where the

noise quiets and truth is allowed to sink deeply into the roots. Not a place of spectacle or excitement, but a place of steady growth.

Under that kind of teaching, the Word of God is not rushed or forced. It is allowed to take hold slowly, strengthening the soul in ways that may only become visible years later.

Memphis became that place for me.

What made Dr. Russell even more remarkable was where he chose to minister.

He was a highly educated Presbyterian minister, a man with the credentials and ability to preach in wealthy churches and comfortable communities. He could have gone almost anywhere.

Instead, he chose to minister in the heart of the ghetto, in places where few men with his education and opportunities would have willingly gone.

He freely gave me something I had worked so hard to earn in other ministries:

Respect.

I came to Dr. Russell with nothing to offer but need.

I had no position, no influence, and no impressive future to place before him. I was simply a wounded and drifting man who needed help. But the help he offered was not the help you parcel out to a drifter from a safe distance.

It was the help you give to a friend.

No matter how hard I tried, I could never repay his kindness. In fact, whenever I attempted to repay him, I somehow seemed to become even more indebted to him.

That was the kind of man he was.

He certainly lived what he preached.

And boy, could he preach.

That season was not a platform. It was not a movement. It was simply a time when the Scriptures were handled with reverence, and the teacher believed that the text itself carried the authority.

How we view the Word of God becomes the foundation for how we conduct our lives—how we handle our responsibilities, how we treat others, and even how we understand ourselves.

Dr. Russell had a deep reverence for God. For him, the Scriptures were the absolute authority. His presentation of them was not merely academic; it was reflected in the way he lived his life.

Not that he was perfect.

He was not.

But he understood that the Word of God was his standard and that it was not open to private interpretation or manipulation. What struck me most was that his reverence was not something he tried to perform. It simply revealed itself in the way he handled the Scriptures.

The Bible was not treated as a collection of verses used to support personal ideas. It was the authority, and he approached it with a seriousness that made that clear.

He would often remind us that God is not a respecter of persons.

No teacher, pastor, or student stands above the Word of God.

That conviction shaped the way he taught. Questions were not treated as rebellion, and understanding was never forced. The Scriptures were opened carefully, and the text itself was allowed to speak.

Over time, the things God showed me about Scripture—and what Christ revealed about Himself through it—began to shape how I understood truth and how that truth should be lived out.

When we truly see the Word of God for what it is, we cannot

exploit our brother's or sister's weakness to justify treating them poorly.

The book of James speaks directly to that kind of religion, warning that faith which does not restrain the tongue and show mercy toward others is empty (James 1:26–27; 2:13).

What impressed me most was that I truly believed Dr. Russell believed everything he taught.

And I was able to witness that conviction with my own eyes.

After spending time under that kind of teaching, I began to realize that not every ministry approaches the Word of God with the same reverence.

And after the drift I had just come through, that kind of ground felt remarkably steady.

CHAPTER 9 BEFORE THE BOUGH BREAKS

Even as I sat under that sound teaching in Memphis, the Ranch I had left behind was beginning to change.

Sound theology forced me to see certain things differently.

I had always sensed something troubling about the Ranch's reliance on authoritarian dominance. Long before I could explain it clearly, I had noticed the atmosphere—the way authority was exercised and disagreement quietly discouraged.

But instinct alone is a fragile guide. It can be questioned, dismissed, or buried, even by the person who feels it.

Sitting under sound teaching changed that for me. Witnessing a genuine reverence for Scripture lived out in daily life gave structure to concerns I had previously understood only as instinct.

The pieces began to come together.

What I once merely felt, I could now begin to examine.

That growing clarity caused me to look more carefully at the men whose influence would shape the Ranch's future.

When I first met Alonzo, we were in college. He was a resident assistant in the dormitory and happened to be present the day I received the grim news that my best friend Kevin had died.

I had noticed Alonzo around campus before that day, but we had never really spoken.

He was small in stature but solidly built and extremely athletic. He even tried out for the Arkansas State football team. Unfortunately for him, size mattered to the coaches.

That never seemed particularly fair to me.

In those days, I often thought many Christian men came across as soft and somewhat effeminate, and a few of the Christian groups on campus unfortunately reinforced that impression.

Alonzo was not one of those men.

He was bold, direct, and seemed entirely unconcerned with what anyone thought of him. At least, that was how he appeared to me then.

Alonzo took life seriously, especially for someone so young. I suspect much of that came from the way he had been raised. He grew up under the influence of a strong single mother and grounded older brothers who helped shape his character.

He was particularly serious about his faith. He viewed nearly everything through that lens and made little effort to conceal his convictions.

Yet because he lacked deeper biblical training, and because his instincts could be blunt and unrefined, those same qualities sometimes became liabilities. His convictions were strong, but they were not always firmly anchored.

That does not mean Alonzo possessed none of the depth or maturity such a position required. It means he still needed the theological grounding, character formation, and steady instruction that shape a man over time.

I do not say that merely to criticize him. Had I not later encountered sound teaching through men such as Dr. Russell, I might never have recognized that deficiency myself.

One particular issue demonstrates why that theological grounding mattered.

Coming to terms with what must be said is not always easy, but for the sake of my humanity, it is sometimes vital. We risk losing something of ourselves when we refuse to address matters that must be addressed.

Silence can be appropriate, disciplined, and even courageous. At other times, it can be weak and wimpish. On the subject I now feel duty-bound to address, I chose the latter.

Let me make one thing clear from the outset so there can be

no confusion: my worldview comes from Scripture.

Christ is King, and Scripture is sacred.

Everything that follows proceeds from that foundation.

Scripture gives us doctrine—our diligent effort to understand what Christ has revealed rather than simply accepting every spiritual claim because it sounds supernatural.

Concerning spiritual gifts, Christians often distinguish between motivational gifts and sign gifts. The sign gifts include speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues, miraculous healings, and other direct signs and wonders.

Many Christians believe these sign gifts have ceased or, at the very least, no longer operate in the same manner they did during the apostolic age. My stated position is that the sign gifts, in their apostolic form, have ceased. However, I have never made that position a point of public teaching.

Nor do I mean that God no longer heals or performs wonders. I believe people can still be healed, and I believe wonders can still occur. My point is that these things do not necessarily operate today in the same manner or for the same purpose that they did then.

Even if, for the sake of argument, tongues continue today, they must still be governed by order, testing, and accountability. My understanding of Acts and First Corinthians is that a tongue should be a genuine language and that its use in the church must be interpreted and examined.

A spiritual claim should not become immune from scrutiny merely because someone attaches the name of God to it.

At the Ranch, what was called the gift of tongues was frequently misused. Whenever I raised—or attempted to raise —my concerns, I was treated as a spiritual lightweight and dismissed.

Alonzo would speak in tongues even though everyone present spoke English. I wrestled to understand the point. Sometimes a staff member or visitor would offer an interpretation of what Alonzo had said. Yet because no one could identify the original utterance as a

known language, we had no independent means of determining whether the interpretation was accurate—or true.

We were expected to accept the interpretation on the authority of the interpretation itself.

I am not accusing Alonzo or those interpreters of deliberate deception. The problem was not necessarily their motive.

The problem was the method.

Nothing could be independently examined. Nothing could be verified. The utterance supposedly confirmed the interpretation, while the interpretation supposedly confirmed the utterance. Each claim depended upon the other, and neither could be tested.

That should have troubled us.

Instead, asking questions was treated as evidence of spiritual deficiency. Scripture was not being used to examine the experience; the experience was being used to silence questions about Scripture.

That is one of the dangers of handling Scripture carelessly. Strong conviction can begin to substitute for sound doctrine. Confidence can be mistaken for confirmation, and a spiritual claim can become protected from the very accountability Scripture requires.

This did not represent the entirety of Alonzo, nor was it the only problem developing at the Ranch. But it was one sign that the Ranch had begun moving down a steep, slippery, and destructive slope.

None of this erased what I saw in Alonzo: a man of genuine conviction whose strengths could have been developed under the right guidance.

Even with those limitations, he appeared far better suited to succeed Bud than Junior ever did.

Bud seemed to recognize those strengths.

Bud was a man of vision. Whatever faults he possessed, he had a keen instinct for recognizing talent and ability in others. That instinct was part of what first drew him to Alonzo.

From the beginning, you knew where Alonzo stood spiritually. He

did not hide his convictions. If you loved truth, you wanted to hear what he had to say. If you did not, you probably preferred to keep your distance. Bud noticed that quality almost immediately.

Naturally, others noticed it as well.

Somewhere beneath the surface, Junior certainly did.

He understood that a man like Alonzo—direct, respected, and unafraid to express his convictions—could eventually become a problem for him.

Looking back, the signs were already there.

The Ranch had not yet broken apart, but strain was beginning to settle upon the structure. Personalities, ambitions, inadequate theological grounding, and questions of succession were adding weight to something that had not been built to carry it indefinitely.

The bough had not broken.

But it had begun to bend.

CHAPTER X THE TROUBLE WITH TED

In my entire adult life, it has been rare for me to meet someone I immediately disliked.

I have never been a great believer in the primacy effect— the idea that first impressions are always accurate. Too many good people get off on the wrong foot.

But every rule eventually meets its exception.

For me, that exception was Ted Suhl. If there was anything positive to say about Ted, it was that he was Bud's son. Bud was not perfect—he certainly had his faults—but he possessed something Ted never seemed to develop: a core.

Bud genuinely loved God and people. That much I never doubted.

Ted, on the other hand, appeared to love three things: politics, expensive cars, and beautiful women—most of whom were clearly out of his league. But when you have millions of dollars, much of it derived from questionable means, certain aesthetic limitations can sometimes be overlooked.

In Ted's case, they often were.

The first time I met him, he was performing what I can only describe as the bragging-humble routine. He was recounting a story about a girl accusing him of being conceited because he had a thirty-two-inch waist.

I remember thinking that the argument must have taken place in a sandbox.

Either that, or she had accidentally measured his neck and mistaken it for his waist.

Whatever else Ted may have been, he was not the ideal candidate to become the face of the Ranch. He lacked the empathy, compassion, spiritual depth, and genuine heart required to shepherd

broken souls.

Ted may have possessed a measure of financial savvy. In temperament, however, he seemed far closer to Gordon Gekko than to his then-professed hero, Warren Buffett.

But because of who his father was—and because of his fortune—many people held him in high esteem.

They would have been wise to spend more time studying the book of James.

Most of the students, and even many on the staff, were impressed by his toys—the cars, the money, and the appearance of success.

I was not.

From my perspective, he was clearly not ready to lead a ministry.

That is why I long believed Bud preferred Alonzo over Ted. At first, Alonzo demonstrated the discipline and maturity required for such responsibility—at least until Ted arrived.

Now, I cannot see what is in a man's heart. I can only observe what he does.

One Sunday, we were in town for chapel. The boys were staying behind for lunch, but I needed to return to the main Ranch to cover one of the units. I didn't mind going back. I didn't want to ride with Ted.

Ted had a reputation for driving extremely fast, and I wanted no part of it.

Already annoyed, I went to Alonzo.

"Man, just go back with him," he said.

"Fine," I replied, "but you need to tell him not to drive so fast."

So I climbed into the vehicle.

I can't see what's on a man's heart, but I know he drove like a bat out of west Arkansas.

The irony was not lost on me. We were actually headed

north, back to the Ranch in northeast Arkansas.

As he barreled through the curves at nearly eighty miles an hour, I felt like I was riding the Steel Phantom.

No words can describe how disgusted I was.

The incident only deepened my distrust of Ted and further eroded my respect for Alonzo.

Whereas Bud had a vision, Ted had a mission—and not a noble one.

The spiritual aspect of the Ranch never appeared central to Ted. At times, it was useful to him, but it never seemed to be his calling. He did not appear motivated by honoring God. That connection felt more like a footnote—something that could be used when convenient or set aside when it became inconvenient.

Once the Ranch began expanding and creating opportunities for other agencies to send their clients, the name The Lord's Ranch could become a complication. Some agencies might hesitate to send people to a place with such an openly spiritual identity.

Ted understood this.

So he raised the question—not to make an immediate change, but to test the waters and see how much resistance there might be.

But he already knew Bud would object.

That was part of the calculation.

Because with Ted, everything had a price.
Principles. Honor.

Integrity.

Conscience.

Everything could be negotiated.

Even souls.

Ted was always open to changing the name of The Lord's Ranch. Even Alonzo eventually came around to the idea.

That was the moment when I sensed something shifting in Alonzo as well.

And it was not a good shift.

It would be convenient to view Ted's tenure at the Ranch as something trivial or temporary. But his influence was neither. It did not simply fade away. It formed a culture—an attitude that cast a dark cloud, though one that never brought rain.

Ted was not merely a short-term visitor. He was not simply Bud's son passing through the property. He represented a cultural shift that slowly reshaped the very foundations upon which the Ranch had been built.

At first, the change was subtle.

Many did not notice it, and others preferred not to.

But over time, the shift became impossible to ignore.

This year, the Ranch would have marked its fiftieth anniversary. The facility first opened in 1976. A year of jubilee would normally call for celebration.

That celebration will not take place.

I will be the first to admit that the outcome cannot be

blamed entirely on Ted. Institutions rarely fall because of one man alone.

Yet his authoritarian instincts were undeniably the rod that attracted the lightning.

CHAPTER 11

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

One of the great difficulties in speaking honestly about the Ranch is that the level of corruption became so pervasive that nearly every incident is now viewed through that lens.

In many cases, that suspicion is warranted. There were actions and decisions for which no amount of added context could justify what occurred. Gross impropriety does not become acceptable simply because the circumstances were difficult.

But not every situation fits that category, and refusing to apply context where it matters does not serve the truth.

It distorts it.

The Ranch housed boys who were often deeply troubled, volatile, and, at times, violent. This was not theoretical danger. I was attacked myself, and I witnessed staff members being attacked as well—one with his arm sliced open.

These were realities of daily life in that environment.

Students could quickly become a danger to themselves, to others, or to property.

We received annual training in crisis intervention, but in hindsight, that training was not sufficient for the level of instability we routinely faced.

Even so, physical restraints were intended to be used only as a last resort—to prevent a student from harming himself, harming others, or causing serious damage.

They were never meant to be punitive, personal, or a way to settle scores.

That was the design.

That was the expectation.

Still, I will not pretend the lines were always clear. Even in an environment where efforts were made to provide training and

preventive measures, those lines could blur under the pressure of real-time situations.

Some restraints were handled appropriately.

Some crossed the line.

Both realities existed.

The incident involving Alonzo and one of the boys must be understood within that framework.

The boy was out of control at the time, and a physical restraint became necessary. This was not an act of malice or an attempt to injure him.

During the struggle, the boy's arm was broken.

We heard it.

The injury was immediate and unmistakable.

It was not intentional.

Alonzo was visibly shaken and grieved by what had occurred. He was strong enough to have done far worse.

He did not.

To the best of my recollection, the boy had been placed at the Ranch privately by his parents rather than through the state or a court. My memory of those placement details is imperfect, but I remember the distinction being considered significant at the time.

What makes incidents like this difficult to recount now is not denial, but distortion.

Because the Ranch had already lost credibility through underhanded practices, leadership failures, and a culture of corruption, the distinctions among intentional abuse, negligence, and tragic accident were often collapsed into a single narrative.

Context itself became suspect.

None of this absolves the Ranch of its responsibility to report incidents fully and truthfully, provide adequate training, or protect the students entrusted to its care.

The institution failed in many of those duties.

But it is also true that when context is stripped away, an incident can appear indefensible even when the lived reality was more complicated.

A child's arm was broken.

That fact alone is enough to shape public perception—and rightly so.

But the truth, as we experienced it in real time, involved danger, inadequate training, imperfect judgment, and unintended consequences.

Recognizing that complexity does not excuse corruption.

It simply refuses to allow one man's reputation—or one tragic moment—to bear the full weight of an institution's broader failure.

There was more than meets the eye.

CHAPTER 12

THE SIN I WANTED TO KEEP

As I sat down to reflect on this journey, I caught myself smiling.

I found a twisted satisfaction in imagining what Ted might think if he ever read my words. I began wondering what his companions would think, too.

I wanted to see them squirm.

But then, like a faint scream rising through my mind and passing through every cell in my body, a heavy truth settled over me. It made no sound, yet it cut through me like thunder —clear and unmistakable:

You know you're no better than Ted.

I tried to shake it off.

I wanted to return to imagining his discomfort. I wanted to enjoy my anger.

But the Spirit of God rebuked me again:

You're no better than Ted.

I did not want to hear that.

I did not want to accept it.

But I could not outrun it. It would not allow me to feel what I wanted to feel or believe what I wanted to believe.

I was even tempted to bargain with God:

Please, allow me this one enemy. Just this one. Someone I can despise with the passion of a thousand hot suns.

For a moment, I reasoned that another god might let me keep my hatred.

Allah would allow me to despise him, I thought.

But the true God gave me no such permission.

No slack was given.

My only option was complete and total forgiveness.

Ted's corporate greed and Gordon Gekko-like influence helped destroy the Ranch.

But my hatred for him was destroying me.

The institution was already dead and buried, but the bitterness was still breathing inside my own chest, waiting to finish me off.

Forgiveness was not a suggestion.

It was the answer.

It was survival.

Not because I felt ready for it, and not because I believed Ted deserved it, but because I could no longer deny what God required of me.

I had asked God for mercy too many times in my own life to justify withholding it now, even within the secret chambers of my heart.

I was left with no honorable escape.

I could cling to my grievance and call it discernment, or I could submit it to God and allow Him to strip from me one more cherished corruption.

The choice was painful, but clear. I am still walking this out.

Forgiveness is not always a one-time decision. Sometimes it is a daily surrender.

I have surrendered my rights to self-will and pride. If I am to walk honestly with God, then I must surrender even this: my desire to hold

one man outside the reach of mercy simply because I wanted him there.

In the end, the sin was not merely hatred.

I desired to preserve that hatred while continuing to think of myself as obedient.

That, too, had to die.

CHAPTER 13

TROUBLE, NO FRIEND OF MINE

The theme of my life has always been about being unfinished.

For a long time, I thought surviving the trouble meant carrying my anger like armor. I thought keeping my hatred for Ted was a form of justice. But the moment I surrendered that grievance to God, the illusion broke. I realized that hating someone isn't just useless—it's dangerous. It is a slow-acting poison that destroys the vessel that carries it.

The truth is, my life only got better when I finally let go of the bitterness that destroyed so many others.

As I write these words, I am sitting in San Carlos, Philippines, on vacation with my wife. I have two homes back across the ocean. I have two books coming out soon. And the greatest joy of it all is the knowledge that I didn't have to sell out to achieve a single bit of it. I didn't need a house bought with dirty money, or a life negotiated out of the valley at the cost of my conscience.

Look at the beautiful irony of it all. God's sense of humor is unmistakable.

Years ago, Bud arranged for me to go to the Philippines alone. I formed a brief connection with a girl there, but it didn't work out, and it felt like just another loss on my running streak. Yet here I am, decades later, right back in the Philippines on a beautiful vacation, enjoying life, loving my wife, and being embraced by her family.

None of this would be possible without the Ranch. It wouldn't be possible without Bud, Alonzo, or even Ted. Bud's intentions were genuinely good for the most part, even when he was harsh. Ted brought the cold, corporate greed. And Alonzo, by that point, was just a tagalong—a pliable, willing participant standing on the auction block.

But whether their motives were pure, corrupted, or completely

compromised, God overrode all of them. He used every single one of their paths to guide me to my true inheritance.

I have experienced many losses in this life. But releasing that hate is exactly why I am winning today. I am still an unfinished man—but I am deeply blessed, and I love the Lord.

Trouble tried to make itself a permanent resident in my story, but trouble is no friend of mine.

CHAPTER 14

JUNIOR ON THE MOVE

By the time Ted began taking a more active role around the Ranch, it became clear that he had no intention of remaining quietly in the background.

Junior was on the move.

There was never a formal announcement. No declaration that leadership had changed. The shift unfolded quietly, the way most institutional changes do. Responsibilities moved from one set of hands to another. Conversations happened behind closed doors. Decisions that once seemed simple began to carry a different tone.

At first, many of us assumed this was simply the natural evolution of the Ranch. Ministries grow, leadership develops, and younger men eventually step forward. In itself, that was not unusual.

What was unusual was how difficult it became to identify exactly when the shift had occurred.

There was no clear moment when Junior seized control. The change was far more subtle than that—quiet, gradual, and difficult to recognize in real time. Most of the daily activities at the Ranch continued much as they had before, yet his fingerprints began appearing on nearly everything.

Junior loved control and dominance. As long as he possessed those things, little else appeared to matter. Now and then, he would toss a few crumbs to his underlings—just enough to keep them satisfied.

It cost him very little.

But it purchased a great deal.

He was also remarkably skilled at keeping people's eyes off the ball. It seemed that every week he arrived in a different car or with a different lady friend—at least before he eventually married.

And therein lay part of the problem.

People with access to wealth often receive a kind of unspoken pardon. Wealth does not create depth, but it often purchases people's willingness to overlook shallowness. Money has a way of softening judgment. Behavior that would trouble people in an ordinary man somehow becomes easier to overlook when accompanied by confidence, influence, and expensive toys.

To many at the Ranch, those things looked like success.

The cars.

The money.

The confidence.

Some were impressed. Others simply chose not to question what they saw.

I was not impressed.

But even I did not fully understand what those signals represented at the time. Junior was not merely displaying wealth or personality.

He was establishing influence.

And influence, once established, begins shaping the culture around it.

The Ranch continued to function much as it always had. Students still arrived looking for help. Staff members still carried out their responsibilities. Chapel services continued. The outward structure remained familiar.

But beneath the surface, something important was changing.

Junior did not have to announce that he was taking control. He only needed people to begin looking toward him before making decisions.

He did not have to dismantle the old structure immediately. He only needed to place himself gradually at its center.

That was how the movement occurred.

Not through a dramatic takeover, but through proximity, money, persuasion, and the quiet redistribution of loyalty.

The center of the Ranch was slowly shifting.

And when the center of a ministry shifts from honoring the Lord to protecting personalities, the consequences rarely arrive all at once.

They appear gradually.

Almost imperceptibly.

Until one day, the change can no longer be ignored.

Ted was not the whole problem. Institutions rarely collapse because of one man alone.

But Junior was on the move.

And before long, the Ranch was moving with him.

CHAPTER 15

WHAT THE RANCH WAS MEANT TO BE

The longer I live, the more I realize that the Ranch was never meant to become what it eventually became.

The vision carried extraordinary potential, and for a time, it held.

When I first arrived, the place felt new and clean— unorganized, but in a way that felt entirely right. There was a kind of freedom in it. It did not feel manufactured or controlled.

It felt lived in.

It was not unusual to wake up at three in the morning to go looking for a runaway. That was simply part of the work. And yet, even in those moments, there was a sense that what we were doing mattered.

Sundays, especially, felt different. For me, they felt like Thanksgiving—the weight of the quiet and the sense of a shared table. Those are memories I can still feel, even when the words needed to describe them begin to slip away.

We were growing then, even in our naivety. We did not fully understand what we were building, but something genuine was taking shape.

I remember taking a trip to Mexico with some of the most difficult and unpredictable young men one could imagine. By all accounts, it should have been complete chaos.

But there were no real problems.

We were not managing them into submission.
We were living the mission.

Even now, looking back, that feels remarkable.

I can see why it worked at first. It was natural and unrehearsed.

We moved with a sense of purpose that felt honest and pure—and for us, at that time, it was.

It was a real ministry, and I had the privilege of being there during those early days. I am certain that experience shaped who I am and who I am still becoming.

It worked because we were not trying to make a point or build an empire.

We were simply following the Lord.

And for a time, that was enough.

There is an old saying: “If it is not broken, do not fix it.”

I have often wondered what might have happened if we had held to that truth a little longer.

That is not to say structure was unnecessary. It was. Any place like the Ranch requires order, accountability, and clear boundaries.

But somewhere along the way, the scaffolding became more important than the building. What was meant to support the work began to overtake it.

I will say this plainly: what followed was not simply structure, but excess. It was a kind of micromanagement that, in my view, delivered a death blow to something that had once been alive and responsive.

What had once been natural became forced.

What had once been guided by Scripture and sensitivity to

one another slowly gave way to control.

Because the human heart is complex—and, as Scripture reminds us, desperately wicked—it would be easy for me to claim that if I had been the one with influence, I would have led differently and everything would have turned out better.

But I know that is not necessarily true.

We all carry our own issues. If those things are not surrendered, they have a way of shaping what we build, often in ways we never intended.

Without proper guidance and honest accountability, what begins with good intentions can slowly warp into something else entirely.

And yet, God is patient.

His lovingkindness has a way of drawing us back, even when we have wandered far from what we once knew was right. I have seen that truth in my own life more than once.

Restoration may not come in the same form the original work once held. It may not look the way we expect it to look.

But that does not mean it is beyond reach.

Before there can be restoration, there must first be a willingness to see clearly—to examine how we have thought, how we have acted, and exactly where we have allowed ourselves to drift.

God knows our hearts.

And if we are willing to return to what we already know to be true—to His precepts, which have proven themselves trustworthy time and again—then perhaps what was once lost is not gone forever.

We just have to be willing to look up and find the Star again.

CHAPTER 16

FATHER KNOWS BEST

The first time I heard the boys call him “Dad,” an unsettling feeling came over me.

Frankly, I was disgusted.

Something about it did not sit right with me, and apparently I did not hide my reaction very well. Bud noticed. He even suggested that I could call him “Dad” too.

It took everything in me to restrain myself.

Part of what offended me was that I had never been a man searching for a father. I already had one. I did not carry that particular void, and therefore I could not understand why another man would be permitted to occupy such a deeply personal place.

But as time passed, I began to see things differently.

Some of the boys were as young as ten, while many others were older. Most of them carried something I did not—a void created by the absence of a father. It was an emptiness I could not fully understand.

Yet with time, and from a better frame of mind, I began to recognize why they felt such a powerful connection to Bud.

For many of those boys, he was the closest thing to a father they had ever known.

The Ranch provided what had been missing from their lives: food, shelter, clothing, education, discipline, and stability.

Because of Bud’s vision, those things were not merely available.

They were consistent.

So yes, for many residents, “Dad” was not a strange or exaggerated title.

It felt earned.

I say this cautiously because I did not know the full history of Bud's childhood, but I never believed it had been an easy one. Sometimes you do not need to see the original wound to recognize that someone is carrying the scar.

The way he protected those boys—sometimes even to a fault—suggested something to me about the boy Bud himself may once have been.

Bud did not need what the Ranch could provide financially. From everything I understood, he was already wealthy. What drove him did not appear to be a hunger for money.

He carried a burden for souls.

That much was evident.

Although Bud could be tender with the boys, he could also be loud and overbearing with the staff, particularly the male staff. But unlike Ted, Bud gave me a reason to try to understand him.

Ted never did.

With Ted, control often appeared to be an end in itself. With Bud, even when I witnessed what I considered unnecessary harshness, his fierce protection of the boys gave his behavior context.

From my vantage point, his bluntness seemed connected less to ego than to guarding what he believed the mission required.

That did not make every action right.

But it made him understandable.

This same man would put up money to help someone purchase a car. He helped finance my trip to the Philippines and became an instrument God used to redirect the course of my life.

As I began to understand where he was coming from, his bluntness troubled me less.

Bud acted like a father, displaying both firmness and compassion.

At times, he could be unpredictable and difficult, but what he offered those boys was real.

He was not a simple man.

He was a scarred man protecting wounded boys.

And that made all the difference.

CHAPTER 17 WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Names are never merely names.

Sometimes people call you by your name out of respect. Sometimes they use it as an expression of brotherly affection. And sometimes the same name can carry something very different.

It depends on who is calling you—and why.

Names often communicate something about us, even when we did not choose them ourselves.

I knew a man people called Hard Time because of the long prison sentence he had served.

Dirty Red was someone else entirely. He was the corrections officer I mentioned earlier in “The Drift.” He was called Dirty because he was underhanded. The name fit his character.

Another man was known as Streets because of his violent lifestyle.

Those names said something about the men who carried them. They told stories before the men ever opened their mouths.

At the Ranch, names were treated differently. Bud forbade the use of last names. Whatever the reason, the rule was part of the culture. People were not supposed to rely on family identity, reputation, or social position as a badge of importance.

There was also what we called the serious room.

Even that name carried meaning. It suggested that some matters were not to be handled casually, and that certain conversations required a different level of attention.

But names could not be eliminated completely. People still found ways to identify one another. They created nicknames. They remembered reputations. They attached meaning to the way a

person spoke, worked, behaved, or carried himself.

At Arkansas State University, some of my friends began calling me Gates.

I liked it.

It was not a title or a formal position. It was simply the way some of my brothers chose to address me. In their mouths, Gates carried affection because there was a relationship behind it.

Later, however, the name found its way into the mouths of people who had no connection to its origin.

That felt different.

They were using the same word, but they were not saying the same thing.

That taught me something about names. Meaning does not always reside in the arrangement of letters. Sometimes it resides in the relationship between the person speaking and the person being spoken to.

Gates spoken by an old friend could make me smile.

Gates spoken by someone who had simply picked it up from somebody else could sound strangely empty.

The name had not changed.
The mouth it came from had.

My parents, in late July of 1966, decided to name me Antrim Ansara Gates.

I cannot say with certainty what every part of my name was meant to signify. I do not know all the conversations that took place before they settled on it.

But they gave me this name.

Antrim Ansara Gates.

When I wrote my first book, however, I shortened it to

Antrim A. Gates.

My mother noticed.

As she looked at the book, I saw something uneasy in her countenance.

“What’s wrong, Mom?” I asked.

She looked up and said, “I wish you would use your full name.”

“Okay, Mom. I’ll use my full name on my next book—and every book after that.”

And that is the main reason I use it today.

My mother asked me to.

In a way, I understood.

A name is the first gift parents give their children.

I was once invited to a naming ceremony for a friend of mine from Africa. They called it an outdoor ceremony. It was huge. There was celebration surrounding the giving of a name. I remember being struck by how much importance was attached to something most of us receive before we are even old enough to understand it.

A name.

So if it was important to my mother that her gift be known in full, then let it be.

Antrim Ansara Gates.

I have spent much of my life being called many things. Some names were given affectionately. Others were attached to wounds, failures, misunderstandings, or the opinions people formed about me.

But none of those names fully defines me.

Not even the names I earned through my own actions.

The title of my first book is *The Unfinished Man*. That is not my legal name, but it describes something true about me.

I am still being formed.

Still learning.

Still being corrected.

Still discovering how much work God has yet to do in me.

Scripture tells us something remarkable about names.

In Revelation, Christ promises the one who overcomes “a new name written”—a name known to the one who receives it.

I do not pretend to understand everything that promise will mean in glory.

But I love the thought of it.

My parents gave me my first name.

My friends gave Gates a meaning of their own.

My mother reminded me to carry the name she gave me in full.

And one day, God Himself will have the final word concerning my identity.

Until then, I am unfinished, but I am not nameless.

I am not voiceless.

I am not without identity.

I am Antrim Ansara Gates.

And whatever my name may mean in the mouths of other people, God knows exactly who I am.

CHAPTER 18

THE UNOFFICIAL JUBILEE

Perhaps no one can say with certainty what might have been had the Ranch reached its jubilee year.

Had it remained anchored in its early vision—seeing young men transformed by the Word of God rather than managed by men—it might have endured in a very different form.

But history is not written in conditions.

It is written in consequences.

What remains now is not simply the memory of what was lost, but the lesson of how it was lost. When a Christ-centered work becomes shaped more by ambition than by faithfulness, something essential begins to give way.

Growth can replace devotion.

Power can overshadow service.

And slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, the mission itself can be overtaken by the very instincts it was meant to resist.

But we are past the point of dwelling on what might have been.

Now it is time to consider what has been learned—to take hold of it and remain steadfast from this point forward.

My name is Antrim Ansara Gates.

And through a strange providence I cannot ignore, this unofficial jubilee is not the only one I carry within me.

As I write these words, it has been roughly fifty years since I was a little boy sitting in Mrs. Robinson's classroom—awkward, uncertain, and carrying fears and weaknesses I could not yet name.

When I allow my mind to drift back to Alum Crest Elementary, I face a strange reality. The building still stands, but it is not called that anymore.

It is different now.

And so am I.

It was a place that tried to ruin me before I even got started. Mrs. Robinson is long gone now, but by the grace of God, I am still here.

The school changed its name but kept its walls, while the Ranch lost its way entirely and closed its doors ten years ago. One tried to break me before I began; the other broke apart under its own weight.

Yet against both histories, I am still here, boldly celebrating an unofficial jubilee.

I did not understand much about life then. I only knew that something within me longed to rise above what I was. Even now, after all these years, I can still remember pieces of that young boy.

The insecurity.

The sensitivity.

The desire to be seen without being humiliated.

And somehow, by the grace of God, I survived it.

I am here because the God who watched over that little boy never abandoned the man he would become.

There were seasons when I drifted. Seasons when I became discouraged. Seasons when I wrestled with anger, pride, confusion, and disappointment. There were moments when I came dangerously close to losing perspective altogether.

But even then, I never became fully convinced that there was a better path than Christ.

I have seen too much.

I have survived too much.

And I have been preserved through too much darkness to believe otherwise.

In a sense, I stand as an unofficial witness to what would have been the jubilee year of the Ranch.

I served three separate stints over the course of seven years. It was a place where I discovered much about myself. I formed lasting friendships—and lost some as well. I was proud to serve there.

And I am not ashamed.

Ted cannot say that.

Alonzo cannot say that.

There are many others who cannot say it either, left beneath the heavy shadow of what went wrong and ashamed to have been part of it.

But I can say it, and I can say it without hesitation, because my motives were not tainted by ambition, greed, or spineless devotion to a Gordon Gekko prototype.

There is a reason I can look back and still experience the joy of having served there. It is not because the institution was perfect, but because of where the Lord met me within it.

I learned that no matter how much I believed I had grown, I still wrestled with instincts capable of making the hosts of Heaven weep.

I have been removed from the Ranch for many years now. Yet when I think of certain staff members and many of the residents, I sometimes laugh—a deep and genuine laughter.

At other times, that laughter gives way to mourning.

But today, I choose to celebrate—unofficially, perhaps, but no less sincerely.

Not because everything ended well.

Not because every wound was healed.

Not because every question was answered.

But because I can look back and thank God for where He has brought me from.

His grace endured longer than my failures did.

He is not finished with me yet.

My name is Antrim Ansara Gates—the unfinished man— and I remain grateful to have been part of the Lord's Ranch family.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

It was my endeavor to do two things: one, remain truthful without bitterness; and two, offer a warning of what can happen to a beautiful ministry if Christ does not remain the supreme authority.

I do not know whether I have accomplished either perfectly.

After all, I am still the unfinished man.

But I have tried.

The easiest version of this story would have been one in which everyone who disappointed me became a villain and I emerged as the faithful man who saw everything clearly. That would also have been the least truthful version.

I did not always see clearly.

I remained silent when I should have spoken. I carried anger longer than I should have carried it. I sometimes confused discernment with resentment and had to allow the Lord to show me the difference.

That is why I cannot end this story pointing my finger at Ted, Alonzo, Bud, or anyone else without first remembering that three fingers are pointing back at me.

The warning of the Ranch is not simply about bad leadership.

It is about the human heart.

Mine included.

There was something beautiful at the Ranch. I know because I was there. I saw young men cared for. I saw sacrifices made. I saw

people serve when there was little earthly reward for doing so. I remember Sundays that felt like Thanksgiving. I remember searching for runaways in the middle of the night. I remember taking some incredibly difficult boys to Mexico and watching the mission work because, for that moment, we were simply living it.

That is what makes the loss worth talking about.

The tragedy is not that the Ranch was always corrupt.

The tragedy is that it wasn't.

Something genuine existed there.

And if something genuine can drift, then every ministry should pay attention.

No ministry becomes so successful that it outgrows its need for Christ. No leader becomes so important that he stands above the Word of God. No amount of money, growth, influence, property, reputation, or good accomplished in the past can substitute for obedience in the present.

The moment we begin protecting the institution more than honoring Christ, we have already begun losing the very thing we are trying to preserve.

Christ does not exist to serve our ministries.

Our ministries exist to serve Christ.

He must remain supreme.

Not the founder.

Not the successor.

Not the board.

Not the donor.

Not the pastor.

Not the personality everyone is afraid to question.

Christ.

And His Word must remain the standard by which everything else is measured.

That warning is not merely for the Lord's Ranch.

It is for every Christian ministry.

It is for every church.

And it is for me.

Perhaps that is the final lesson the Ranch left me. We can become so busy examining the drift around us that we fail to recognize the drift occurring within us.

So I leave this story neither bitter nor triumphant.

I leave it grateful.

Grateful for the good.

Grateful for the lessons.

Grateful even for some of the pain, because God refused to waste it.

The Ranch did not reach its official jubilee.

But Christ remained faithful.

And after everything I have witnessed, everything I have lost, everything I have gotten wrong, and everything the Lord has patiently corrected in me, I remain convinced of one thing:

Men will fail.

Institutions will fail.

I will fail.

But Christ remains.

And He must remain supreme.

ANTRIM ANSARA GATES

