

Epilogue: Reflections, Connections and Closing Thoughts

As I bring this book to a close, I find myself reflecting on the journey we've shared together. Following me through these pages, you've learned about a life marked by unexpected turns and unconventional choices—a story that unfolded outside the boundaries of the ordinary, often defined by detours more than straight lines.

I remain amazed by the unexpected turns that opened doors I never knew existed. Who could have foreseen that a boy from small-town St. Michael, Minnesota would build a decades-long international career spanning six countries across three continents? Or that in my late sixties, I would experience fatherhood anew, raising a young daughter while my three older children moved through their forties? These unforeseen paths reveal life's capacity for surprise and renewal when we stay open to possibilities beyond conventional expectations.

Wrestling with Heritage and History

Writing this book led me to investigate my origins—something I'd never thought to do before. The process began when I decided this book should include my ancestral roots—understanding where I came from felt essential to explaining who I became. Tracing my ancestry revealed the remarkable journey of my more recent German forebears, who left everything behind to cross an ocean into the unknown. Learning how they endured life-threatening diseases, harsh winters, and years of effort to build a new life in America deepened my respect for their resilience in the face of real hardship.

But that pride is now tempered by a deeper, more unsettling realization when I learned they arrived in the St. Michael area shortly after the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. This conflict erupted when Dakota people resisted forced displacement from lands they had inhabited for centuries. The war directly affected St. Michael and concluded with the largest mass execution in U.S. history in Mankato, Minnesota. My family—white settlers like many others taking advantage of the Homestead Act—settled in this area in the immediate aftermath of these devastating events, directly benefiting from the violent dispossession of the Dakota people from their ancestral homeland.

When I first uncovered this timeline, I was struck by the troubling coincidence. The comfortable narrative I'd grown up with—of hardy pioneers building something from nothing—suddenly became more complicated. This wasn't just about adding context to my family story; it was about recognizing how my family's opportunities were directly connected to others' losses. The revelation left me with an uncomfortable truth: the same historical forces that allowed my ancestors to build new lives were tied to the violent displacement of others. The land they claimed, the communities they established, the economic opportunities they seized—all of this existed because entire peoples had been systematically removed from territories they had inhabited for generations. I am partly the product of historical violence that created opportunities for my family while devastating others.

That doesn't erase my ancestors' hardships—the brutal winters, the crop failures, the smallpox epidemic, the isolation and the uncertainty they faced were real and formidable. But it adds a layer of moral complexity I can't ignore, one that asks me to hold multiple truths simultaneously. Perhaps there's no clean resolution to carrying both stories—the resilience and suffering of my forebears alongside the dispossession and trauma of those who came before them on the same land. Maybe there's just the ongoing work of acknowledging them both, of refusing to let either narrative disappear into comfortable simplification.

The Power of Pivotal Moments

In examining my life's trajectory, I recognize how pivotal moments shaped everything that followed. Genes laid the foundation of my identity at birth, determining traits like physical appearance and potential predispositions, but it was the environment I grew up in and the experiences I lived through that truly molded who I became. Along this journey, I've discovered two distinct types of life-shaping experiences: unexpected events beyond my control—accidents, losses, opportunities that appeared without warning—that forced me to adapt and grow in new directions, and critical decisions I made either through careful deliberation or in spontaneous moments—choices about relationships, career paths, values, and priorities—that fundamentally altered my life's course.

The first of these unexpected events occurred when I was just six months old, though I had no voice in the decision that would reshape my future. My parents had settled in Lansing, Michigan in late 1951, following my father's return from the war in Korea, but after less than a year, they abruptly decided to pack up and move back to Minnesota. I've already speculated that their original move to Michigan was connected to Dad's transition from military to civilian life, but their reasons for the sudden reversal remain unclear to me. This single decision, made when I was still an infant, set the course for everything that followed. Had they chosen to establish roots

in Lansing, my entire world would have been different—different schools and neighborhoods, different friends, different opportunities, and most significantly, different siblings. The brothers and sisters who became part of my life might never have been born, replaced by entirely different family members shaped by different circumstances and timing.

A second transformative event beyond my control occurred in March 1968 when legislative changes forced the closure of the Catholic high school I'd been attending. The Minnesota legislature passed a law requiring public school districts to provide K-12 public education, upending my expectations. Though St. Michael Parish had previously negotiated with the Department of Education to keep the Catholic high school open—with the district having opened in 1967 with only K-9—this sudden change meant everyone in my class living within the district would finish their last two years of education at the STMA District 885 public high school.

The transition proved more disruptive than I anticipated. Until then, my religious upbringing had deeply defined my identity—I served as an altar boy, read Catholic Epistles at Mass, studied Latin, and harbored serious aspirations of becoming a priest. The shift to secular education marked not only the end of my priestly ambitions but the beginning of a turbulent phase. Without the religious structure that had previously guided me, I found myself adrift during these vulnerable adolescent years when one is naturally searching for identity, preoccupied with concerns that had never mattered before.

This disorientation had lasting consequences, particularly regarding my relationship with faith itself. From those last two years of high school onward, I found myself drifting away from organized religion—less an act of rebellion than a quiet philosophical shift, a slow unwinding of assumptions I had once accepted without question. Immersion in any belief system inevitably reveals its contradictions, and my commitment to Catholicism had been deep and sincere. Precisely because it played such a central role in my life, it eventually invited scrutiny once I was exposed to other religions. When

a belief system can no longer keep pace with your evolving understanding of the world, dissonance sets in. Religion demanded total belief; logic demanded evidence. In the end, I couldn't reconcile the two.

While that spiritual transition unfolded gradually over years, the second category of life-shaping experiences—the critical decisions I actively made—crystallized in two career-defining moments during adulthood. The first came when I hit rock bottom in Thailand—broke, directionless, and questioning every choice that had led me there. When I stumbled across a sign advertising an English tutoring job, I made the crucial decision to apply. That choice launched me into a career in international education I hadn't even known existed but soon discovered would become my true calling.

The second pivotal decision came with an unexpected opportunity in Cairo to transition from classroom teaching into educational management. Choosing to accept this challenge wasn't just a job shift—it was the beginning of a leadership path that would carry me to senior positions in international education and redefine my professional identity. Both moments share a common thread: they arrived precisely when I was ready for transformation, even if I didn't recognize it at the time. The first saved me from myself, while the second revealed capabilities I didn't know I possessed.

Thailand: An Unexpected Constant

If there's one place that's woven itself through the fabric of my adult life, it's Thailand. My relationship with this country unfolded in distinct phases: first as a wide-eyed young GI discovering a tropical paradise, then as a fun-loving hippie embracing its freedoms, later as a married man whose Thai wives not only maintained our connection through regular visits but profoundly shaped our family's cultural identity even while we lived throughout the Arab world. Their perspectives, values, and traditions became integral to raising our children—from the Thai cuisine that filled our home to the

deep respect for elders they modeled, from their Buddhist approach to mindfulness and compassion to their emphasis on family harmony. Finally, Thailand became the place I chose for retirement, bringing my journey full circle to where it all began.

Choosing to return to Thailand after my Air Force service was without doubt the ultimate, defining crossroads of my life. It completely shattered all normal expectations. Instead of using the G.I. Bill and following the expected path of college, I chose something unconventional—returning to Southeast Asia. What began as choosing a carefree, wandering life over a structured academic path eventually led to a four-decade international journey. I started in vibrant Bangkok, then spent 35 years across the Arab world—in the strict conservatism of Jeddah, the layered history of Cairo, the rising ambition of Abu Dhabi, and the timeless culture of Amman. Through it all, I stayed grounded in my Minnesota roots even while growing new roots in Thailand—where it all began, and where, in this final chapter of life, I've chosen to stay and settle for good.

Writing this memoir reminded me of the reasoning behind that return to Thailand—a realization I want to highlight in this epilogue. While I genuinely appreciated Thai culture and wanted to continue that foreign experience, I recognize that cannabis also played a significant role in my early connection and return. The country's exotic and relaxed atmosphere, heightened by being in an altered state, created a deeper—though perhaps distorted—relationship with the place. This combination caused me to avoid the realities of my aimless situation over time, ultimately leading to my hitting rock bottom. Acknowledging this doesn't diminish my connection to Thailand but offers a more honest understanding of what drew me to return there.

The Thread of Nonconformity

Throughout my adult life, an independent spirit has shaped my marriages, international career, and overall approach to life. I've made choices that often

fell outside the expected script—spending decades abroad, starting a second family later in life, and navigating personal and professional relationships on my own terms. This nonconformist path has brought me experiences that are rare and deeply meaningful, offering perspectives I couldn't have gained any other way.

My German heritage, with its emphasis on tradition and structure, makes this tendency toward nonconformity seem paradoxical. Perhaps my drive for authenticity—the belief that true fulfillment comes from genuine self-expression—outweighed cultural conditioning. Though I was drawn to ideas that challenged the status quo, those fundamental German values from childhood remain integral to my identity. They paradoxically influenced my unconventional choices by providing the discipline and persistence needed to forge my own path.

When I look back at the pivotal moments that defined me, they were rarely the safe choices or expected paths. They were the decisions—sometimes brave, sometimes forced—to follow my own instincts, even when they led me in directions others couldn't understand. This willingness to forge my own path has shaped a life that, while unconventional, has been authentically mine. Perhaps nowhere is this transformation more evident than in the children who emerged from my unconventional choices. My Thai marriages and decision to raise families across continents stemmed from both personal connection and practical considerations—yet it resulted in something I hadn't anticipated.

Alongside the challenges this path brought, I recognize what it ultimately gave my older children—something a traditional American upbringing couldn't have provided. Born to a Thai mother and raised across continents, they naturally navigate multiple cultural worlds with an ease I had to develop as an adult. While they didn't grow up immersed in Thailand itself, they carry within them the heritage of two very different cultures, each contributing to their unique perspectives and approaches to life. This bicultural foundation, combined with the multicultural adaptability they

developed through constant exposure to diverse international communities, has given them an unusual flexibility in how they move through the world.

My youngest daughter's experience, born from my marriage to my second Thai wife, represents an even more profound expression of this bicultural reality. Living between Thailand and America, she embodies more directly what my older children experienced conceptually—truly belonging to two worlds simultaneously. She switches naturally between languages, customs, and cultural expectations, showing firsthand what it means to be authentically Thai and authentically American. Seeing her greet another Thai person with a "Wai" in deference to an elder is incredibly heartwarming, while at the same time watching her interact and play naturally with her Minnesota cousins and friends demonstrates the beautiful duality of her identity.

My children's lives have been marked by constant adaptation, but this has also given them something rare: they belong to multiple worlds rather than feeling caught between them. Their bicultural, bi-ethnic identity has become a genuine asset, providing them with perspectives and adaptability that will serve them well throughout their lives. In a world that often pressures people to fit into neat categories, my children's cultural uniqueness is something to celebrate, not explain away.

Career Success and Personal Costs

Throughout a career that spanned multiple countries and cultures, I faced new challenges that pushed me beyond my comfort zone and required me to adapt to unfamiliar societies and relationships. Each transition became a catalyst for growth, compelling me to make choices that balanced the needs of both myself and my family. Living in Asian and Arab cultures, far from the familiar confines of an American context, taught me adaptability and resourcefulness—gradually reshaping not just my career, but my entire worldview.

One intriguing question continues to linger: how did I manage to live and work in the Arab world for over 35 years despite never developing the deep cultural connection I experienced elsewhere? While I didn't feel negatively toward the region and found ways to navigate aspects of the culture that didn't resonate with me—including certain elements of Islamic culture that felt foreign or difficult—I never experienced the natural affinity I discovered in Asia. While the Arab world remained a place where I could function effectively and build a successful life, it never captured my heart. Yet despite this lack of profound connection, I not only survived but thrived there for decades both personally and professionally.

When exploring my genetic roots, I discovered something unexpected: a small 1.7% connection to the Bedouin people of the Middle East and North Africa. Though faint, I wonder if this genetic connection subtly influenced my adaptability. Perhaps, on some unconscious level, there was quiet recognition of Arab values like hospitality and community—qualities I didn't consciously relate to but somehow knew how to respond to.

Whether rooted in biology, experience, or something less tangible, adaptability proved to be one of the most important traits in shaping my career. It allowed me to navigate unfamiliar cultures, adjust to different work environments, and connect with people whose worldviews differed from my own. But adaptability alone wasn't enough. Looking back with decades of hindsight, I now see that my success also rested on a foundation of competence. I had strong qualifications, worked tirelessly, demonstrated genuine skill in my field, and, perhaps most importantly, developed the ability to collaborate effectively and build lasting professional relationships. That combination helped establish a reputation that opened doors throughout the international education community.

Beyond these personal qualities, I was extraordinarily fortunate to begin my ESL career in the 1970s, just as the field was emerging as a recognized profession and the world was awakening to the growing importance of English proficiency. This timing placed me at the forefront of a massive

global wave. Demand for American English instruction and Western expertise surged across continents—from the oil-rich nations of the Middle East to countries like Egypt in North Africa and the emerging economies of Asia—and I was well positioned to meet it.

My particular skill set was not only well-matched to this moment; it was precisely calibrated for an era when native English educators with proper training were still rare, and when American economic dominance fueled unprecedented demand for American expertise and cultural knowledge. With hindsight, I recognize that while luck played a part, my success was equally a result of preparation, adaptability, and seizing the right opportunities when they arose. The timing was perfect, and I had the experience, credentials, and determination to capitalize on this remarkable convergence.

Looking back across the decades, I'm struck by how many doors opened at precisely the right moments. Throughout the writing of this memoir, I found myself attributing these fortunate breaks to karma—crediting the universe for somehow guiding my path from one opportunity to the next. It's tempting to believe that larger forces were at work, especially when reflecting on a life that took so many unexpected turns. Yet honest analysis reveals a more practical truth: while chance certainly played its role, those moments of apparent good fortune were often the result of years of preparation meeting brief windows of opportunity. I had to be ready when the right moment arrived.

The Weight of Choices

Yet success in this rapidly expanding field came with choices that would prove far more complex than I initially understood. Looking back, I can see the complexity of the trade-offs I made: decisions that would shape not only my own path but my children's development as well, bringing both meaningful opportunities and significant challenges. Pursuing international work meant constantly relocating our family—twelve moves in total, eight

crossing international borders.

For my children, these moves entailed far more than just managing the details of packing, traveling and settling in. With each transition, they were thrown into new cultural worlds where they had to learn unspoken social rules, adjust to unfamiliar living situations, and build new friendships while quietly missing the friends they'd left behind. For me, the challenge of finding the right school was always at the forefront. I spent hours researching international options, worrying about keeping their education on track, and making sure local institutions offered the rigor needed to secure a spot at a U.S. university after high school.

The choice to raise expat kids provided experiences that money couldn't buy in suburban America. My children developed adaptability and cultural awareness that became second nature. They experienced different languages, celebrated different national and religious holidays, traveled to other countries, and attended international schools where classmates came from dozens of countries. Their formative years were the exact opposite of mine: I grew up sheltered in my St. Michael bubble, culturally uniform and geographically limited, only to discover the wider world as an adult. In contrast, they experienced diversity and constant change from early on, developing global perspectives that would serve them well throughout their lives.

As I advanced professionally and took on increasingly demanding roles, I became aware that I was neglecting other important parts of my life. Even then, I sensed the imbalance—but with time and distance, I now see it more clearly. During the most intense phase of my career, I devoted so much of myself to work that I wasn't always fully present at home. This had consequences: my son Danny faced academic challenges, and my marriage to Miam began to stagnate. My deep focus on work left little room for nurturing a relationship that was already beginning to lose direction. Looking back, these outcomes weren't necessarily the cost of ambition, but part of a broader set of trade-offs that shaped my path. I've come to

understand them more deeply through reflection and time.

Yet alongside the career-driven choices that came with consequences, other personal decisions reflected a deeper wisdom. Writing this memoir helped me recognize that some of my most unconventional actions were rooted in genuine insight about relationships and connection. Certain choices were more closely tied to my evolving identity than I had initially understood.

Reversing my vasectomy at the age of 66, for instance, was not just a practical decision—it reflected a deeper awareness. Given the significant age gap between Gig and me, and knowing she was an only child raised by a single mother who had already passed away, I sensed she might one day need the unique connection that can come from having a child of her own. My nonconformist nature led me to prioritize future emotional needs over social conventions. The choice to father a child in my later years emerged from genuine care and foresight: I wanted Gig to experience the joys of motherhood while creating a lasting bond that would extend beyond my lifetime. This decision reflected both my willingness to challenge conventional expectations and my understanding that the most important choices often come down to ensuring the people we care about have meaningful connections in their lives.

This experience and other fork-in-the-road decisions taught me that the weight of choices isn't always immediately apparent. Some decisions that seemed purely career-driven revealed deeper costs over time, while others that appeared unconventional or even impractical proved to contain unexpected wisdom. The international life I chose for my family came with genuine trade-offs - periods of imbalance, relationships that suffered, and challenges that couldn't be anticipated. Yet it also provided my children with perspectives and adaptability that continue to serve them, and taught me to trust my instincts about what matters most in the long run. Understanding the full impact of our choices often requires the clarity that only comes with time and reflection.

The American Advantage: Privilege and Perspective Abroad

Before concluding, I want to share one final reflection on what living as an American expatriate taught me about my country's place in the world—both the privileges it offers and the blind spots it can create. The global spread of American English as the language of business, technology, and diplomacy made my nationality both a professional asset and a source of unearned advantage. Being American undeniably granted me access and opportunities that I didn't always recognize at the time. In Asia, my height and skin color made me physically stand out, but it was the deference shown to me that revealed the deeper privileges tied to my passport—privileges not extended to others with different backgrounds.

Looking back, I know I was hired for that first English tutoring job in Thailand not just because I spoke the language, but because I fit a certain image: tall, white, and American. In the Middle East, being American often came with the assumption that I was Christian, which placed me in a high social category. I was welcomed and included, but still seen as set apart from Muslims. Yet, my nationality carried a kind of automatic legitimacy, opening doors that might have stayed closed had I come from another part of the world.

For instance, although my professional skills and reputation were primary factors in securing a high-level consulting job with the ADNOC company, I'm certain that being a white American played a role as well. I fit a particular image of Western management that carried significant weight at the time. In many international settings—especially in the Gulf—there was an unspoken preference for Western leadership, often equated with authority and competence. Merit may have opened the door, but appearance and cultural assumptions helped me step through it.

This realization about how my identity aligned with global hierarchies eventually pushed me to think more critically about the broader implications of my American privilege. While my nationality often worked in my favor,

living abroad also exposed me to something more troubling: how deeply insulated many Americans are from the rest of the world. While I witnessed firsthand the struggles, resourcefulness, and growth of societies outside the U.S., it became increasingly clear to me that most Americans don't fully recognize the extent of their comfort, or the differences that separate them from the experiences of others.

What strikes me most is America's unsettling lack of curiosity about the rest of the world—propped up by a quiet, deeply rooted belief in our own superiority. While much of the globe has moved forward—often outpacing us in education, infrastructure, healthcare, and innovation—many Americans still view other nations through outdated, dismissive, even patronizing lenses. Finland's public education easily outshines ours. Universal healthcare is standard across much of the developed world, offering quality care at a fraction of the cost. Cities like Bangkok now feature transit systems and malls that rival or exceed those in major U.S. cities. And yet, the myth of American exceptionalism persists, blinding us to our own shortcomings and dulling any real curiosity about the progress of others. What concerns me most isn't just the lack of awareness—it's the quiet certainty that we're superior and have nothing to learn from others. My decades abroad taught me the value of humility and curiosity—lessons that have shaped not only how I see the world, but what I hope to leave behind.

Legacy and Gratitude

Writing this autobiography revealed unexpected connections that brought new clarity to the patterns and motivations shaping my life. The process of revisiting and organizing my memories uncovered insights I hadn't previously recognized. It's clear from many of these reflections that I remain a nonconformist—unafraid to share views that challenge conventional wisdom or societal norms. I'm reminded of something my father used to say after offering an opinion that made people uncomfortable: "Like it or not, I'm just an old truth-teller." Perhaps that's my legacy too—not the

truth-telling so much, but showing that you can live authentically outside society's expectations, that the unconventional path is not only possible but deeply fulfilling.

As this book draws to a close, I'm struck by how powerful it has been to reflect on and share the full arc of my life—something I wish my parents had been able to do for me. But they lived in an era without the tools we now take for granted—no social media, no video calls, no effortless ways to capture and share the moments that define us. Combined with the physical distance of my expat life, it created a kind of disconnect—conversations that never happened, stories that faded before they were passed down. Those missing pieces are part of what drove me to write this book.

My hope is to give my children something I never had: a window into my life and the events that shaped not only who I am, but also where they come from. Just as my childhood experiences shaped my values and choices, I hope these pages offer my children insight into their own journey—helping them understand the roots of their identity, the unique history of our family, and perhaps even the choices they'll make as they move forward.

I've never been one to follow the usual script. I've spent much of my life feeling out of step with the mainstream—not because I wanted to rebel, but because I saw things differently and couldn't pretend otherwise. Choosing the unconventional route—questioning norms, thinking independently, and carving my own path—hasn't always been easy. At times, it meant feeling misunderstood or out of place. But it also brought growth, creativity, and a deeper sense of fulfillment. Over time, I came to see my differences not as flaws to correct, but as strengths to understand and value. One simple piece of wisdom I hope to pass on to my children is this: Being different isn't something to overcome—it's something to understand and own.

Above all, what I feel most deeply is gratitude—for the people, places, and experiences that have shaped my life, and for you, the reader, who chose to walk this road with me. While this is a personal story, I believe its core speaks to something universal: the need to make sense of our lives, the willingness to change, and the pursuit of a life that feels true to who we really are.