A Grateful Mind

Helping Another Human Being
Is the Best Medicine



John Holien

Foundation Edition

DEDICATION

This book is about helping another, so let me give thanks to the many who have helped me. There are hundreds not on these pages — these are just some of the many.

Mother. Sophia and Thor—my greatest gifts.

As I have succeeded in life, I've always needed my teammates: Mark Fleetham, Toni Malanaphy, Kris Ringler, Carrie Macea, Kitty Mann, Dave Nesberg, Laura Ziegler, Mr. Nett, Sr. Eleanor Granger, Celeste Jibben, Ann Pappenfuss, the one and only Leah Januschka, my AA family, and my Grateful Dead family (extra love to the Wharf Rats).

Living on the edge needs a lot of help.

Always grateful for you all

PROLOGUE — I Couldn't Let Her Bury Me

I was near the end.

Passed out in my parents' house. Again.

Not dramatic. Not cinematic. Just exhausted. Empty. Used up.

I had burned through talent, opportunities, trust, and most of my own self-respect. I didn't know what the next move was. I didn't know if I had one.

And then I had a dream.

In the dream, my mother was at my funeral.

Not someday. Not far off. Soon.

She was dressed in black, standing near a casket that held her son. Trying to be strong. Trying to understand how it had come to this. The heartbreak on her face wasn't loud—it was quiet. Deep. The kind that never leaves.

I woke up shaken.

And when I opened my eyes, she was standing there.

Not in black.

Not at a funeral.

Just a tired mother standing over her grown son, wondering if she was about to lose him.

She didn't yell.
She didn't lecture.

She asked one question:

“What are you going to do, John?”

Something inside me finally broke—or maybe finally softened.

For the first time in my life, I didn’t defend myself. I didn’t blame anyone. I didn’t perform.

“I need help.”

Three words.

Not a five-year plan.
Not a vow to change the world.
Just three words.

I need help.

And when I said them, I saw something in her eyes I’ll never forget—hope. Pure, unguarded hope. After all the years of worry, all the preparing for my funeral, all the grief she’d carried… hope.

She moved fast after that—phone calls, arrangements, action. She had been waiting for those words.

But the real decision had already happened.

I couldn’t let her come to my funeral.

If I was going to die, it wasn’t going to be like that.

I didn’t suddenly become strong that day.

I became willing.

Willing to fight.
Willing to be humbled.
Willing to lose the old version of myself.

That was the beginning.

Everything that came later—the recovery, the rebuild, the setbacks, the Costa Rica rebirth, the foundation—it all traces back to that moment.

A dream.

A mother.

Three words.

I need help.

And the quiet decision that I was going to live.

CHAPTER 1 — Built to Win, Wired to Escape

I grew up with gifts.

Not the kind you earn slowly, but the kind that arrive early and open doors before you understand what they cost. I was tall, strong, coordinated. Sports came naturally. Coaches noticed. People encouraged. Praise arrived before self-knowledge.

Athletics gave me an identity long before I had a sense of who I actually was.

On the outside, things looked good. I was winning. Competing. Advancing. On the inside, something was always restless. I didn't have language for it then, but I see it now: I didn't know how to be still with myself.

Sports solved that problem for a while. Training filled the hours. Competition burned off the edge. Winning brought relief—temporary, but real. As long as I was moving, striving, proving, I didn't have to sit with the quiet discomfort underneath it all.

I wasn't comfortable winning.
And I wasn't comfortable losing.

Winning brought attention—the kind I thought I wanted. But attention confused me. It made me feel exposed. Seen in a way I didn't know how to handle.

Losing felt catastrophic.

Failure wasn't feedback.

Failure was identity.

So I developed what I later understood as "extra gears." When things got tight, I shifted into something else. Fourth quarter. Game on the line. Pressure rising. I got better. Harder. Sharper. I would play through injuries. Not because I loved winning.

Because I feared losing.

There's a difference.

Alcohol and drugs didn't enter my life as rebellion. They entered as solutions.

They did what sports had always done—turned the volume down. They helped me relax, belong, celebrate, escape. At first, they felt earned. Normal. Even deserved. When you're young and talented, very few people stop to ask how you're doing inside.

No one pulled me aside to ask who I was without performance.

I didn't know.

But there was one place where I found something different.

I went to my first Grateful Dead show with some small-town friends. We were sitting in our seats at the back of the venue—the show wasn't sold out, so we looked odd being the only ones way up there. A Deadhead came up to us, welcomed us, gave us the lay of the land with genuine kindness. People were there for us, not wanting anything. Just helping. Being kind.

Then he gave us mushrooms.

I hadn't tripped much. And this time, I was in over my head. I was hanging onto my chair so hard I thought I might float to the

ceiling. My friends went down to see the show. I stayed frozen in my seat, alone.

And then, over the course of that night, around fifty strangers came up to check on me. They brought me water. They brought me food. They sat with me. They made sure I was okay.

Nobody knew me. Nobody owed me anything. They didn't want anything in return.

They were just kind.

That vibration—that feeling of being held by people who didn't need anything from me—stayed with me for the rest of my life. It became something I chased. And years later, when I was trying to name what this work was really about, I kept coming back to that night.

A grateful mind.

Not just gratitude for what you have.

But gratitude as a way of being. A way of seeing people. A way of holding space.

The Grateful Dead taught me that before recovery ever did.

By the time I reached college, my identity was built almost entirely on external validation. How I played. How I was perceived. Whether I was winning. I hadn't learned how to self-regulate, self-reflect, or self-soothe. I only knew how to push harder or check out.

That combination—talent without grounding—is dangerous.

I didn’t wake up one day broken. I drifted off center. I mistook momentum for stability. I confused confidence with self-knowledge. I believed achievement would eventually settle the unease I carried.

It didn't.
It amplified it.

The truth is, I wasn’t wired to escape because I was weak. I was wired to escape because I hadn’t learned how to stay. How to pause. How to listen. How to belong to myself when the noise stopped.

By the time the cracks began to show, I had tied my worth to winning. And when winning stopped working, I had no internal foundation to fall back on.

I didn’t know it then, but this was the beginning of a long education—one that would teach me that strength without presence is fragile, and that the real work of becoming whole begins when performance is no longer enough.

CHAPTER 2 — The Slide (Not the Glory)

I didn’t fall apart all at once.

There was no single explosion, no dramatic decision to throw everything away. What happened instead was quieter and more confusing. I began to drift—away from structure, away from responsibility, away from myself.

I had a free ride to play baseball and basketball in college. A full scholarship. The kind of opportunity most people would protect with everything they had.

But looking back now, I see part of the problem: it came too easy. Anything that came easy, I didn't value. I didn't know how to hold onto something I hadn't fought for.

I was running. From life, from myself, from anything that required me to sit still and feel what was actually happening inside. Alcohol and drugs weren't rebellion—they were relief. They were the only coping mechanisms I had.

As a freshman, I was given an opportunity to travel with the baseball team to Hawaii. For a kid who had never been on a plane, this was everything. A chance to play at a higher level. A chance to prove I belonged.

Then a friend came to town.

We went on a bender. Clear thinking wasn't driving the boat. One thing led to another, and somehow—without planning it, without thinking it through—I ended up in Florida instead.

I found a garage that four of us shared. We partied. We laughed. I was happy in a twisted, oblivious way. Living in my own fantasy of unaccountability.

It wasn't a nice place, but in my delusion, I made it seem fine. I blocked out the reality of what I had done. I didn't think about my mother. I didn't think about the coaches who believed in me. I didn't think about my teammates who were in Hawaii without me.

I just…disappeared.

I had never been on a plane. Hawaii was supposed to be my liftoff—athletically, personally. It represented everything I was working toward.

It took a while before I realized what I had done. On a bender or not, I had a way of creating my own version of reality to suit whatever I needed to believe.

But eventually, even I couldn't avoid the truth.

I had walked away from a free education. I had broken my mother's heart.

Minnesota. Hawaii. Florida.

The distance between those places mirrored the distance growing inside me. And while no one could have convinced me of it then, that moment marked the beginning of the end of the life I thought I was building—and the slow, painful education that would follow.

CHAPTER 3 — When the Floor Gives Way

I ended up back in my parents' basement without a plan, without direction, and without much fight left in me.

It wasn't dramatic. There were no ultimatums or interventions. Just a slow return to the place I had started, carrying the weight of everything I hadn't been able to hold together.

By then, I was tired in a way sleep doesn't fix.

I wasn't actively trying to die. But I wasn't trying very hard to live either. Some mornings, waking up felt like a disappointment—another day I hadn't escaped, another day I didn't know how to face.

That's a hard thing to admit. It still is. But it's true.

My mother saw it before I did.

She didn't lecture me. She didn't threaten me. She sat with a kind of quiet attention that comes from loving someone you're afraid to lose. Later, I would learn that she had begun preparing herself for my death—saving money for my funeral, bracing for the call no parent should ever expect.

At the time, I only felt her presence. Steady. Watchful. Grieving something that hadn't happened yet.

The basement became a place of stillness I couldn't escape. No noise. No performance. No future I could picture. Just the slow reckoning of having nowhere left to run.

The floor had given way.
And for the first time, there was nowhere left to fall.

CHAPTER 4 — Recovery Didn't Arrive All at Once

Recovery didn't come to me as a breakthrough.

There was no moment where everything clicked, no sudden clarity that washed the past clean. What came instead was a series of small, unremarkable days stacked on top of each other.

Early sobriety felt exposed. Without alcohol or drugs, I was left with my own thoughts, my own reactions, my own unease.

I showed up anyway.

At first, showing up was mechanical. I went where I was told to go. I listened more than I spoke. I learned how to be quiet without disappearing.

I went to treatment at Fountain Lake Treatment Center—FLTC (now Mayo Clinic)—in Albert Lea, Minnesota. My counselor Rita saw through me quickly. She was calm. Direct. Not impressed by my athletic history or my intensity.

One day she told me something that offended me deeply.

"You need to learn how to lose."

I told her to jump in a lake.

She let me stew. Then she repeated it.

What she meant wasn't what I thought.

I didn't know how to lose well. I didn't know how to lose without collapsing, without blaming, without numbing.

I had two gears: Win. Or escape.

There was no middle. No humility. No steady ground.

Progress was subtle. Some days, it meant simply not making things worse.

Fourteen days before my one-year medallion, I drove home and broke. Cried harder than I had ever cried. Not anger. Not frustration. Grief.

I was sober. And something happened that hurt so deeply—and I couldn't numb it.

My mother came and stayed with me. She didn't fix it. She didn't analyze it. She sat with me. Held me. Carried me when I couldn't carry myself.

I made it to one year.

And at my AA meeting, she presented my medallion.

Recovery wasn't always about becoming better. It was about understanding who I am—how to sit with what I've been given, how grateful and how blessed this life really is.

Nothing arrived all at once.
But something real had begun.

CHAPTER 5 — The Accidental Discovery

No one told me that helping another human being would help me.

Helping others entered my life quietly. I showed up. I listened. I stayed.

At first, I thought I was doing it for them.
Then something unexpected happened.

When I was useful—not impressive, not accomplished, just present—something inside me steadied.

Helping another person didn't erase my problems.

It made them manageable.

Over time, a pattern emerged. The people who stayed grounded weren't the strongest or the smartest. They were the ones who were connected.

Service didn't inflate me. It grounded me.

For years, my identity had been built on performance. On being the best. On intensity. On proving something.

Recovery slowly introduced me to a different strength.

Consistency.

Instead of winning games, I started building teams. Instead of proving myself, I started showing up for others. Instead of escaping pain, I started sitting with people in theirs.

Early in recovery, my recovery group started a softball team. We were the worst team in the worst league—maybe twelve teams total. We hadn't won all year. We got killed every game. I was one

of the only real athletes on the team, and that didn't matter. We were that bad.

Near the end of the season, with two outs and us down by one run, our worst player came up to bat.

And he was bad. He struck out regularly in slow-pitch softball.

He was shaking. Nervous. Terrified.

Before he stepped up to the plate, I leaned over and told him: "You're a badass. Look at what you've already faced down. The demons you've tamed—it's just a softball. Swing as hard as you've swung at life."

He got a hit.

We scored two runs. Walked it off. Won our only game of the year on his hit.

The purity of that moment—the joy on his face, the way the team mobbed him—it was better than any championship I'd ever won.

Then we went and got ice cream.

That was winning.

Over time, that understanding grew into something bigger.

I had always been good at building teams. In business, I focused more on developing leaders and supporting people than chasing money. That was my real strength. But it wasn't until recovery that all of those experiences—athletics, business, coaching—finally came together in a healthy way.

Years later, I built and served as Executive Director of a holistic 25-bed inpatient treatment center. Applying my life and business experience to the recovery industry was powerful. Within a year, the work we were doing was recognized—we were featured on the cover of the leading magazine in the field.

I hired staff. Mentored counselors. Sat with families. Held the weight of decisions that affected real lives.

For the first time in my life, all of my experiences aligned with my values. The intensity. The competitiveness. The refusal to quit. All of it finally pointed in a direction that helped people.

Nothing was wasted.
Helping another wasn't the reward of healing.
It was the medicine.

CHAPTER 6 — When the World Took the Scoreboard Away

For years, I thought I had rebuilt everything.

Recovery. Reputation. Career. Family. Integrity.

I had built companies. Led teams. Worked in professional sports. Provided for my family. Watched my mother beam with pride again.

She didn't have to come to my funeral.
She got to watch me live.

That felt like victory.

But even when life looked stable, my body was breaking down.

At 45, after a dozen surgeries over the years, a doctor told me what I didn't want to hear: I needed both knees replaced, both hips, neck fused, shoulders repaired. And I needed to stop playing basketball.

I had been playing through pain for so long I didn't know what normal felt like anymore.

I had one knee replaced—without pain medication. Not because I was tough, but because I was scared. Scared that one pill would wake something up in me I couldn't control.

Someone introduced me to yoga.

My first teacher, Kitty, turned me into a new kind of addict—a daily practitioner. Within two years, I was pain-free. The best I had felt in twenty years.

At 47—two years after the knee replacement, and because of yoga—I jumped higher than I ever had in my life. At 250 pounds.

At 50, because of yoga, I threw a baseball 78 miles per hour. These were the same shoulders that at 45 couldn't lift over my head without crazy pain.

Yoga didn't just rebuild my body.

It taught me something deeper.

Presence heals.

Not intensity. Not willpower. Not grinding through.

Presence.

But life has a way of testing whether your peace is attached to outcomes.

At some point, the scoreboard was taken away.

The money went. The structure shifted. The identity cracked.

I had been successful—and then I wasn't.

It didn't happen in one explosion. It unraveled.

I built a business that I failed to grow. But I didn't fail to do it with integrity. That distinction mattered to me then, and it still does now.

And this time, there was no addiction to blame. No substances to point at. No villain to identify.

It was just life.

I remember a stretch where I could barely look at tomorrow. Some days I could barely manage the day I was in.

I couldn't feed my kids.

That was the bottom I thought I'd never hit.

The old wiring whispered: Fix it fast. Prove something. Rebuild quickly. Outwork it.

But something in me was tired.

Not defeated.

Tired of performing.

There's a particular humiliation in losing what you worked decades to build. Especially when people assume you're past that phase of life.

My last act before leaving was to ask for help from a few men I thought of as brothers. We had been to war together. They were also among the most financially fortunate people I knew—I couldn't go to the regular people with this one. I thought the hardest part would be the asking—and I was wrong about that. I could not fathom that they would go silent. No help. No call. Not even a word to see if I had made it.

It was a good lesson, even if it took time to see it that way. I'm a Pollyanna at heart—I tend to believe in people, sometimes past the point of evidence. That's not something I want to lose. But the silence taught me something about what I was still carrying: the belief that if I just asked the right people, the net would appear.

It didn't. And somehow, that was the gift.

Because I got to fail completely. Let go completely. And be reborn completely.

I often say: if I had received everything I wanted, I would have been dead many times over. Every door that closed pushed me toward the one that was meant to open. Every loss cleared the way. Everything—all of it—led me to this day.

I am blessed.

And that's when Costa Rica entered the picture.

Not as a master plan.

As an escape from noise.

I sold what I could. Purged most of what I owned. My kids put the rest in storage.

I had $500 and a plane ticket.

I didn't have a grand strategy.

I had space. And a need to breathe.

What I didn't realize was that the next chapter would test me more physically and spiritually than any business failure ever had.

And it would give me something no success ever could.

CHAPTER 7 — The Walk to the Pacific

Two weeks after arriving in Costa Rica, I decided to leave the farm.

I didn't know Spanish. I didn't know the roads. I didn't know what the next chapter looked like.

I only knew one thing: If I kept walking west, I would eventually hit the Pacific Ocean.

That was my entire plan.

I expected to hitchhike.

What I didn't expect was silence.

I chose one of the steepest dirt and rock roads in the area—a rare path, even by Costa Rican standards.

In the entire day, I saw two cars. Both were full. Both waved. Both kept going.

I was carrying a 70-pound backpack. With every step, the bag felt lighter—not because it weighed less, but because I did.

I started in flip-flops. They didn't cut it.

I switched to brand-new sandals. They were great. And they destroyed my feet. Yet another unexpected gift—the barefoot walking meditation that emerged from that destruction taught me something about being present that I carry to this day.

I had one container of water. I drank it early. I assumed I'd get a ride.

I didn't.

The road was steep. Hot. Relentless.

And somewhere along that climb, something familiar happened.

When the test gets hard enough, the mind disappears.

I learned that in athletics. In fourth quarters. In playoff games. In pushing through injuries.

When the pressure reaches a certain level, there's no future. No past. No narrative.

There is only the next step.

I didn't stop once.

Not because I was strong.

Because I was afraid that if I sat down, I wouldn't get back up.

I left the farm at 6:00 a.m.

At 5:00 p.m., I reached the Intercoastal Highway—the road that runs along Costa Rica's Pacific side.

Fifty-five years old. Nearly 30 years sober.

And strangely…alive.

When I finally stood at that highway, sweating, exhausted, feet bleeding, I asked myself a simple question:

What side of the road should I hitchhike on? Which way am I even going?

I picked a side and stuck my thumb out.

Then it hit me.

I wasn't going anywhere.

I was just going.

For so much of my life, I had been chasing destinations. Scholarships. Wins. Titles. Money. Stability. Redemption.

Standing there on the side of that road, with no ride and no plan, I realized something simple and radical:

I was finally present.

Not rebuilding. Not proving. Not escaping.

Present.

It felt like a lightning rod hit my chest.

This wasn't failure.

This wasn't exile.

This wasn't a midlife crisis.

This was rebirth.

The walk hadn't been punishment.

It had been initiation.

And today, there's a beautiful irony in all of it. The boy who couldn't sit still, who needed constant motion and noise and validation—he now lives much of his time on a spiritual mountaintop in Costa Rica. Alone. By choice.

When I'm not helping people in recovery, I'm up there in the stillness I once couldn't bear.

The thing I ran from became the thing I needed most.

CHAPTER 8 — A New Question Emerges

For a long time, the question was simple:

How do I stay sober?

Then, quietly, it changed.

What do I do with this?

Costa Rica slowed everything down. The land didn't reward urgency. It rewarded presence.

The jungle doesn't rush. The ocean doesn't strain. The mountains don't compete.

They remain.

And in remaining, they shape everything around them.

As I slowed down, something began to form.

Not a business idea.

A pattern.

Every time I felt steady, it was because I was:

Present.
Helping someone.
Connected to something bigger than myself.

That was it.

The model wasn't complicated.

You learn a practice. You give it away. You build something larger than your own survival. And in that community, you find what alone you never could.

I had seen it in recovery. I had seen it in sports when the culture was healthy. I had seen it in my mother—she was a gatherer of

people, someone who always made room for one more. I had seen it in my father—the original spiritual gangster, who never read a spiritual book in his life but somehow embodied all of them.

I began to see something else clearly.

Helping another human being is not charity.

It is medicine.

When someone teaches a yoga class after struggling with addiction…

When a person in transition mentors someone one step behind them…

When a parent models humility instead of ego…

Something changes in the teacher as much as the student.

The competitor in me had spent decades trying to win.

The man in me had finally learned to stay.

And staying allowed me to see the next layer.

This wasn't about me rebuilding.

It was about building something that could outlive me.

I began to imagine a model that didn't fix people, but grounded them. One that trusted people to help one another.

The question became:

How do I create conditions where people can help each other?

That question became the foundation for everything that followed.

CHAPTER 9 — Why Teaching Heals the Teacher

I didn't set out to become a teacher.

In Costa Rica, I began walking barefoot. My sandals had destroyed my feet, and what started as necessity became something else entirely—a walking meditation that forced me into the present moment with every step. It required attention. You couldn't rush. You had to feel the ground.

Teaching, I realized, was the same.

When people were trusted to offer something meaningful to another person, they changed. They listened differently. They practiced more honestly.

I had seen this in recovery. I had seen this in athletics when the culture was healthy. I had seen this in the treatment center.

In business, I had always been better at building leaders and supporting teams than chasing profit. That was my real gift. Not the numbers. The people.

And now, in this new model, all of those experiences were finding their true alignment.

When helpers are supported, they glow.

Not from praise.

From alignment.

Teachers stood differently. Spoke differently. Took up space with less apology.

Teaching healed the teacher because it asked them to walk their talk.

Barefoot, if necessary.

And in that walking, something deeper than recovery happened.

Identity shifted.

From broken…to useful.

From survivor…to guide.

From wounded…to healer.

That shift is the medicine.

CHAPTER 10 — People in Transition

Students. Veterans. People in recovery. Helpers. People returning to the world. People navigating mental health challenges and trauma.

Different stories. Same moment.

Transition.

When people were given practices that grounded them—and trusted to share them—something changed.

They glowed.

Not because they had arrived somewhere.

Because they had become useful. This is winning.

People in transition don't need to be saved.

They need support.

A place to stand.

And something to offer.

Athletes losing identity.

Executives losing purpose.

Parents losing footing.

Veterans reentering life.

Students unsure of who they are.

People in recovery.

People healing from trauma.

The answer wasn't therapy alone.

The answer wasn't motivation.

The answer was service.

When you give someone responsibility, you give them dignity.

When you trust them to help another person, you restore their sense of worth.

This is not philosophy.

This is lived experience.

And it's scalable—not like a product.

But like a seed.

One person.

Helping another.

CHAPTER 11 — Why This Can't Be Scaled Like a Product

People often asked if this could scale.

It was a fair question. Growth is the measure most systems use to decide whether something is working. Bigger reach. Faster results. More efficiency.

But I kept thinking about something my father used to say.

He believed you could tell how someone was doing by how they walked—whether they were up on their tiptoes, leaning forward and strained, or grounded, chest open, moving with ease. He wasn't talking about posture as technique. He was talking about posture as truth.

Over time, I began to see it too.

When people found their footing, their bodies told the story before their words did. They moved differently. They stood with their weight settled. Their breath seemed to arrive on time.

That kind of change doesn't come from speed.

This work can't be rushed. You can't automate presence. You can't standardize trust. Love doesn't scale—but it does replicate.

It moves person to person.

Relationship by relationship.

Slowly. Carefully. In connection.

And when it's done that way, it lasts.

The Grateful Mind Foundation welcomes everyone. No matter your background, identity, or story—if you're in transition and want to help another human being, you belong here.

CHAPTER 12 — What Winning Looks Like Now

For most of my life, winning had a scoreboard.

Points. Stats. Money. Titles. Recognition. Respect.

It was visible. Measurable. Public.

But somewhere along the way, the definition changed.

I waited seven years into recovery before I became a father.

Seven years.

Not because I didn't want kids. But because I didn't feel worthy. I was afraid that if I couldn't provide for myself, it wasn't fair to bring children into that uncertainty.

And then the worst thing I could imagine happened anyway.

I stayed clean. But I lost my money before I went to Costa Rica. I couldn't provide for them the way I wanted.

It was a low bottom I thought I'd left behind.

But here's the other side of waiting so long: when my children finally came into my life, I worshipped every breath they took. I didn't take a single moment for granted.

The best one hundred moments of my life all start when they were born.

Today, my daughter is starting a new career in Costa Rica. She's taken a few hits in life. Felt the sting of setbacks. Had to get back up more than once.

As a parent, it's brutal to watch your child struggle.

Every instinct wants to protect them.

But struggle is where strength is formed.

And when I watch her choose courage instead of retreat, I feel something deeper than pride.

I feel peace. This is winning.

My son Thor is an ultra runner—full of passion and purpose, walking on his tiptoes the way my father used to describe people who were straining forward in life. But in Thor's case, it's not strain. It's drive. It's joy.

He has plans. Short-term goals. Excitement in his eyes.

I've always told him: Chase what excites you.

Whether it's baseball, Pokémon cards, nachos, or a bigger dream—chase what lights you up.

I used to think my greatest job as a father was providing. Money. Stability. Structure.

Now I understand it differently.

A big part of my job is to model how to walk through adversity without collapsing.

When I lost my money, there were days I could barely look at tomorrow.

But the one thought that steadied me was this:

They're watching.

My only goal during that time was to fight my way to the day when they would think I had made it again—because I had made it with integrity. When they could see me standing tall—not because I had money, but because I had done it right.

And I did that.

In my more dramatic moments, I told myself this might be the greatest lesson I could ever give them.

Not how to win.

How to endure. How to rebuild. How to stay upright when life humbles you.

I get to be the example.

That's the gift.

One of the greatest moments of my life wasn't a championship or a business deal.

It was seeing my mother proud of me again—and watching my kids see their dad stand tall after everything.

After the addiction. After the arrests. After the embarrassment. After the collapse.

She was proud. They saw it.

She talked about me constantly. Couldn't stop.

I was sober fourteen years when she passed from lung cancer.

She didn't have to come to my funeral.

I got to carry her instead.

And my father.

The toughest human I've ever known. The original spiritual gangster.

He never read a self-help book in his life. Never preached. Never posed.

He simply felt his way through life and helped people instinctively.

Near the end of his life, after brutal back pain and surgeries that could have left him paralyzed, he rode hours in the back of a van—lying flat—just to watch his grandkids play basketball.

We had the wheelchairs arranged. Coaches briefed. Kids ready.

They shined that day.

I asked him afterward what he thought of the kids.

He said:

“I loved watching you watch them. I’m proud of the father you’ve become.”

That was winning.

Not a trophy. Not applause. Not headlines.

Peace. Health. Presence. Purpose.

Today, if I’m hitchhiking on a Costa Rican highway or riding in a car I once could have only dreamed of, it feels the same.

I embrace every meal. Every smile. Every healthy day my kids have. Every sober morning.

I feel like the biggest winner in the world on a good day.

Not because I conquered anything.

Because I stayed.

And because I learned to see what was always enough.

CHAPTER 13 — The Gift of the Challenge

One of the first things my counselor Rita told me in treatment was that I needed to learn how to lose.

I didn't understand it then.

I thought I had lost plenty.

But what she meant was different.

I didn't know how to lose without self-destruction. Without blame. Without numbing. Without turning pain into proof that I was worthless.

Over the years, I've lost a lot.

Athletic dreams. Money. Status. Control. People. Time.

I've also won a lot.

Business. Respect. Trust. Health. Peace. Family.

But the strange truth is this:

The losses defined me more than the wins.

When I lost everything and walked those dirt roads in Costa Rica with a 70-pound backpack, I thought it was punishment.

It wasn't.

It was refinement.

When my knees broke down and doctors told me I needed replacements, fusions, surgeries—and to stop playing basketball—I thought it was the end of something.

Instead, it introduced me to yoga.

I had my first knee replaced without pain medication. Not because I was tough. Because I was scared.

Scared that one pill would wake something up in me I couldn't control.

I chose pain over relapse.

I've had a dozen surgeries in recovery and faced them the same way.

That wasn't strength.

That was perspective.

Addiction runs in families.

But today, my children are not addicts. This is winning.

That matters.

That promise—more than money or accolades—is one of the quiet fulfillments of my life.

When I lost my money, I could barely look at tomorrow.

But I kept telling myself:

They're watching.

If I walk through this with integrity, maybe this will be the greatest lesson I ever give them.

I still find myself in awe of this life—and especially of what I haven't done yet. The possibilities that still stretch out ahead. At 62, I feel more alive than I did at 32.

At 62 years old, I finally asked a woman out on a date—someone I didn't know for sure liked me. For my entire life up until that point, I had let the world come to me. I only pursued when I knew I was wanted. No risk.

But this time, I asked. And she said no.

And I didn't die.

I thought I would. But instead, I felt liberated.

I could almost see my mother in heaven saying, "Good job, Johnnie. You finally did it."

When I cried like a baby fourteen days before one year sober and didn't drink, I grew.

When I got knocked down, literally and metaphorically, and stood back up, I grew.

The challenge wasn't the enemy.

It was the teacher.

Every test stripped something unnecessary.

Ego. Speed. Performance. Comparison.

What remained was simpler.

Presence. Service. Gratitude.

Today, on a good day, I feel like the biggest winner in the world.

Not because I avoided pain.

Because I survived it.

Not because I dominated.

Because I endured.

Not because I proved something.

Because I no longer need to.

The dream of my mother at my funeral forced me to live.

The road to the Pacific forced me to slow down.

The losses forced me to look inward.

The children forced me to grow up.

The foundation forces me to give.

This is what a grateful mind looks like to me.

Not someone who had it easy.

Someone who was tested and stayed.

Someone who learned to lose well.

Someone who learned that helping another human being is not charity.

It is the best medicine.

If there's anything in these pages worth carrying forward, it's this:

The challenge is not proof you're broken.

It may be the doorway to who you're becoming.

And sometimes, the greatest win of all is simply staying on your feet.

THE END

EPILOGUE — A Ripple of Humanity

Imagine a world where the first thought is: how can I help?

Not as an obligation. Not as charity. Just as a way of moving through life—eyes open, hands available, heart willing.

That's the world Grateful Mind is reaching for.

Not just a teacher training program. Not just a certification or a curriculum. Something bigger than that—a way of being that spreads person to person, community to community, until helping another is simply what people do.

Imagine thousands of certified teachers carrying these practices into rooms we'll never enter. Imagine the people in those rooms—countless individuals finding steadiness, finding community, finding themselves useful to someone else. Imagine those people becoming teachers too. The ripple doesn't stop. It never has to stop.

And beyond the teachers and the classes and the mats on the floor—imagine a name that means something. Grateful Mind. Not a brand. A signal. When someone lives it, you can feel it. The way they listen. The way they show up. The way they move through hard things without losing their humanity.

Life is a program of attraction. People are drawn to what is real. And when enough people are living this—quietly, consistently, without needing recognition—something shifts in the culture around them.

A ripple of humanity.

That's not a program. That's a movement.

It starts with one person deciding that helping another is the point. It grows when that person teaches someone else. It becomes something lasting when those people build community—not because they were told to, but because they found out firsthand what it feels like to belong to something good.

I often say: if I had received everything I wanted, I would have been dead many times over.

Every loss led here.

And here is a place where people help each other.

That's enough. That's everything.

GRATEFUL MIND FOUNDATION

gratefulmindfoundation.com

How John Can Help

Recovery support • Family guidance • Program consultation—Honored to walk with you or connect you with the right resources

Public Speaking

If you have a group that would benefit from hearing this story—schools, teams, businesses, treatment centers, recovery communities, organizations—I would be honored to share.

Support the Foundation

We are building something human and lasting.
We need teammates—paid staff, volunteers, mentors, and influencers.

If this work speaks to you, we would love your support.

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