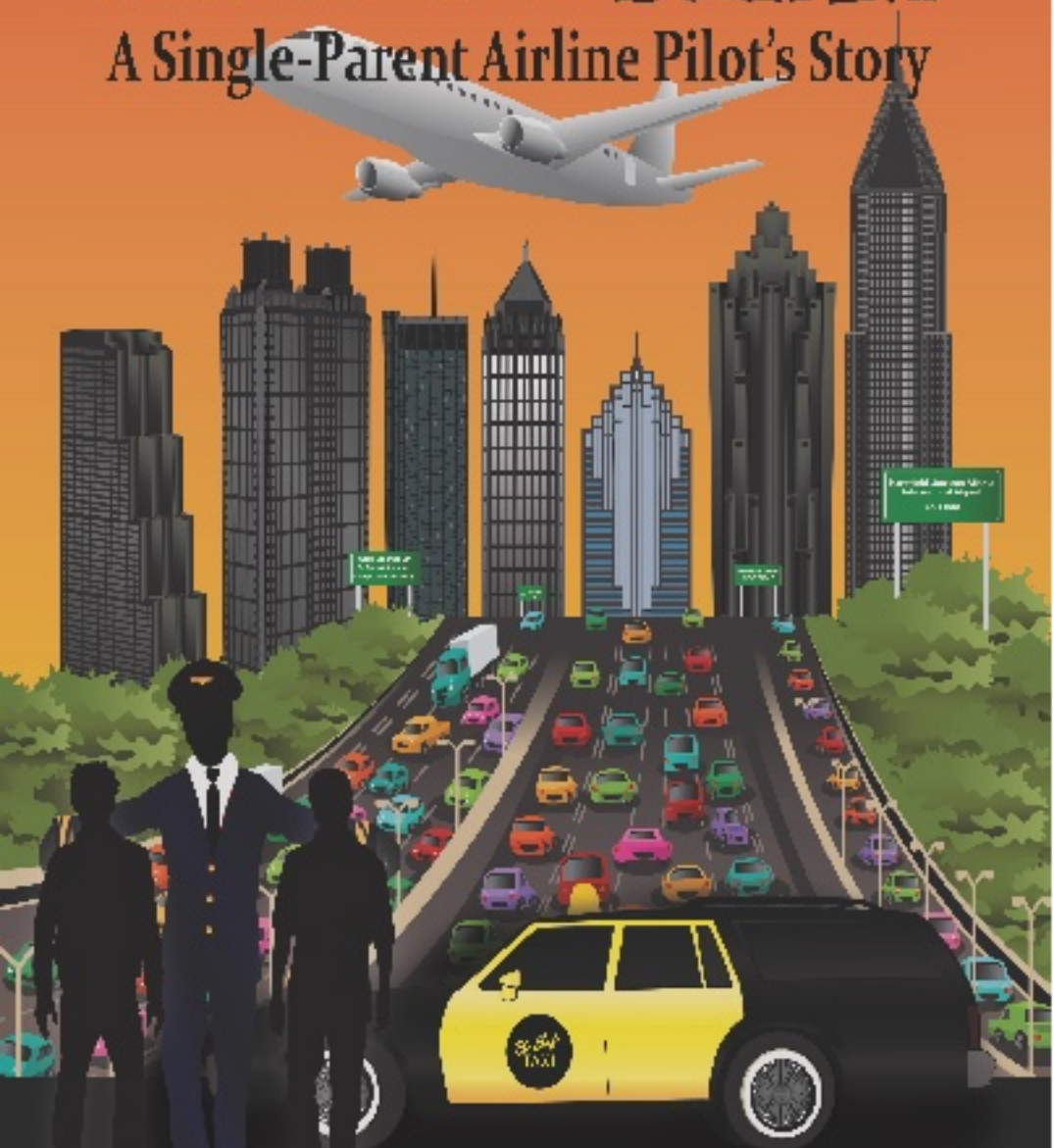


SHATTERED DREAM

A Single-Parent Airline Pilot's Story



BRIAN H. SETTLES



From cockpit to taxicab and back - Brian Settles, a single parent, experienced airline pilot, seemed to have it all until an airline strike and bankruptcy shattered his existence. Shattered Dream: A Single-Parent Airline Pilot's Story is a gripping account of a desperate father's three year, three-hundred-mile-a-day ordeal driving a cab on the streets of Atlanta. Readers will experience the dangers of cabbie life, the condescension of passengers, what he learned about them and, most importantly, himself.

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Shattered Dream

**A Single-Parent Airline
Pilot's Story**

Brian H. Settles

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Contents

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Prologue..... | xi |
| Chapter One: When the Impossible Happens | 1 |
| Chapter Two: Alone in the Valley | 7 |
| Chapter Three: Creating Something from Nothing..... | 25 |
| Chapter Four: Meeting Antonio..... | 33 |
| Chapter Five: The Crafting of a Relationship | 47 |
| Chapter Six: Absentee Parenting | 53 |
| Chapter Seven: Becoming a Cab Mogul..... | 63 |
| Chapter Eight: When Dreams Go Boom | 79 |
| Chapter Nine: Christmas in the Cab | 89 |
| Chapter Ten: People Along the Way | 101 |
| Chapter Eleven: Working Girls | 115 |
| Chapter Twelve: Camping on BS Mountain..... | 131 |
| Chapter Thirteen: Clearing the Interview Obstacles | 147 |
| Chapter Fourteen: As If Driving My Mother..... | 169 |
| Chapter Fifteen: The Help Saved My Life..... | 175 |
| Chapter Sixteen: “Going for Wool...” | 183 |
| Chapter Seventeen: “...Joy Cometh in the Morning” | 197 |
| Chapter Eighteen: When It Rains, It Sometimes Pours | 215 |
| Chapter Nineteen: Crimes of Passion | 223 |
| Postscript | 245 |

Chapter Three

Creating Something from Nothing

In the ontological exploration I had undertaken in the midst of cabdriving after the collapse of my pilot career, I realized that I seemed to have the inclination, from early childhood, to be sensitive to human suffering and struggle, but was rarely motivated to do anything about it. The extent of my response to the less fortunate, when exposed to the daily media parade of tragedies, was vicarious suffering in paralyzed compassion. The trite quip from the streets of Muncie was apropos, “I feel for you, Brother, but I just can’t reach you.” As a taxicab driver, my personal and economic existence was enveloped in the angst of uncertainty. I was undergoing the imposed metamorphosis of a lifetime as an idled airline pilot, would-be writer, and single-parent father. A bright guy named Werner Erhard launched a virtual ontological movement originally called EST Training which today can be found in The Landmark Forum, which was about altering peoples’ lives and creating breakthroughs from past behavior into future possibilities in being. The quote that resonated with me as the justification for my existence, and that was also in-line with living a Christlike life, was: “There is no human experience of greater fulfillment than contributing to the betterment of another human being’s life.” I shared information of my new undertaking in life with my fraternity brother Smittie but he opted to pass on transformation until a later time.

The Relationship Seminar assignment challenge before me was a daunting enigma: *create a project greater than myself that could not be completed*. It took a week of brainstorming ideas for the project; it couldn't be something cliché-ish like Ending World Poverty or bringing peace between Arabs and Jews. I was confronted with a great intellectual challenge, almost as scary as surviving two hundred combat missions in a jet fighter and enduring the loss of my station as a commercial airline pilot while driving a taxicab. Spending six days a week, sometimes seven, driving three hundred miles per day, eight to fourteen hours each day, in the madness of metro Atlanta traffic, I was in the grip of a professional and economic nightmare that was altering my way of life and philosophy toward it forever. I was a single-parent father, strapped to the resolve to keep a son in college and his thirteen-year-old brother alive, left at home alone on his own recognizance, while I braved the daily Atlanta traffic just to keep the For Sale sign out of the yard. As if there were not enough, I had to come up with a project. What was worthy?

In the transformational quake of doing The Landmark Forum, along with half dozen other seminars that built on the foundation of the exploration into what it means to be a human being, I had formulated a vision of What A Life I Love Looks Like, and answered the question of Who Is In That Life with me and Who Am I Being In That Life? In pondering why any of us exists, and what is God's purpose for us, I arrived at a place from which to launch action for living. It is a living that is not accidental but focused, on purpose, driven by intentionality, somehow making a positive difference in peoples' lives. Creating a life from this place inspired me to accept an invitation to a "presentation" by people I did not know but who were introduced to me by my sister's lifelong friend who had married a low-key, soft-spoken man from

Raleigh with a Midas entrepreneurial touch for business success. The host of the gathering was a family living in a richly wooded area of opulent homes at the foot of Stone Mountain. The struggle to resist stereotyping this wealthy white couple was palpable. Often our preconceived notions, the gems of our arrogance, that *we already always know what the deal is*, get in the way of real opportunity and clarity of circumstances. Thus, fighting my way back to an airline pilot career after years of looking down my nose (along with many other Eastern pilots) at Delta pilots, I thought, how could this Delta captain and his wife have anything of value to contribute to my life?

The briefing to the gathered guests consisted of a slide presentation depicting multi-ethnic adult volunteers, from various educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, working in harmony to save at-risk youth, mostly Black and Latino. No more than a dozen guests viewed the presentation, which also chronicled troubled youth in recreational settings, counseling sessions, and ropes-course challenges. The latter were part of a new frontier of motivational tools used to assist people in transcending their limitations and fears, shifting into higher levels of achievement and breaking through stifling phobias that restrict our possibility to be who we can be. As I witnessed the slides of troubled youth interacting with the first adults, white adults, they had ever dared to trust, I was inspired. I reflected on my childhood growing up fatherless in Muncie, the struggle of Mama Settles to keep our family life stable, and what a difference in my motivation our community mentors had made in my evolution to achievement. I was a father with two adolescent sons, black sons who without education and employment opportunities were labeled as endangered species in America. Yes, they were growing up in a single-parent household, but there was love, support, and encouragement to

be who they wanted to be. In the pained part of my being, a silent agony gripped me at the thought of all the young males who get lost because there is no one available to mentor them and support their maturation.

Poverty begets poverty and leads inner cities into collapse. Too many entrusted guardians are unwed mothers (or grandmothers) too busy with survival to save their own children from the rampaging dangers in the streets. Somewhere along the way from the fifties to the sixties, economic transition into the technical age, inadequate education, and ongoing generational obsolescence created a subclass of spirit-impooverished souls who had been tricked into a *dependence lifestyle* by an open-ended welfare system that created legacy disenfranchisement and the seductive conclusion that they were getting over by having babies to create pay raises.

In the void of no parenting, no discipline, and no inspiration for learning, generations of our youth have been falling through the cracks of life in a world that has become so absorbed in advancing technological complexity, too busy making money, climbing success ladders, and interminably pursuing the fashion carrots of *Vogue* and *GQ* dangling in front of us. There is no interest in the invisible citizenry that we view, but don't really see, on the evening news every night.

What I perceived at that small gathering of caring folks, who were taking a stand to save some of our youth, was the possibility of creating a deeper purpose for my own life. Recognizing the good fortune I had to have been adopted by the greatest mother on the planet, as well as a support system of people who cared about my success, it became obvious that mentoring, giving something of myself to inspire and help young people, was it; I had found a place to be somebody. That

would be my project for the Relationship Seminar. I would join Yes, Atlanta, the Committed Partner mentoring program operating in downtown Atlanta. The objective was to save at-risk Atlanta youth.

I signed up to become a Committed Partner of a youth whom I had never met and attempt to create a relationship, a bond from nothing, to see if I could contribute to the molding and redirection of a life, a mind-blowing undertaking for which there was no training manual. I fought off notions that the project was too ambitious. I was at a new low point in my goal of having a great career after the strike and collapse at Eastern, scrambling for solvency, and now embarking on a great adventure into possibility, mentoring an unknown teenage male into a future that could not be seen. With the horrifying statistics of criminal justice system involvement by young black males not in school or employed, youth were dying daily on the streets in major cities in shoot-outs with the police or one another. Gang influences, drug infestation, and incarceration were wiping out thousands of black males. Teen pregnancies became ubiquitous in the urban milieu, and a new murderer, HIV, was taking over the social landscape due to the arrogance of ignorance. Middle America was shrinking in size, but deeper in pursuit of the hypnotic American Dream, enchanted with Beavis and Butthead, addicted to Monday Night Football, *Scandal* and *Empire*, subtly victimized by the insidious takeover of our values by Hollywood producers commandeering our movies and reality TV, subliminally transforming our lives into unreality. I was too enveloped in the excursion outside my comfort zone to know the impact, if any, of my new adventure.

From the briefing at the Delta captain's cavernous home, I was clear that joining the mentoring program was the vehicle

for seeking to accomplish the unaccomplishable. Conscious of the apprehension ruminating within me about becoming a Committed Partner with an at-risk Atlanta teenager, I would ignore the enormity of the challenge and press forward to create a big brother relationship. My spirit to participate in the transformation of another human being's life surged.

The first Committed Partner screening meeting was set soon after I completed the detailed background questionnaire. Thank goodness, with all the hell raising and boozing as a young fighter pilot and forced into an unnatural discipline as a professional airline pilot, I had no arrests or DUIs to hide. I was a single-parent father with a sporadic, butterfly record of church attendance, but a reputation of being morally solid, if not a poster Dad for monogamous relationships. Obviously, a program designed to positively shift the lives of troubled teens could not have among its ranks weirdos, the dishonest, or pedophilia monsters. Before embarking on my mission, admiration was the prevailing feeling I had observing the other prospective Committed Partners being screened by the dedicated Yes, Atlanta staff, among whom were some good-looking babes. As a bachelor father, details in feminine pulchritude never went unnoted. I was impressed with the willingness of others, like myself, to sacrifice time and energy to assist those on statistical tracks for disaster and failure. In undertakings of this import, the ego routinely has its say in the matter and leaves us internally generating superficial value judgments based on erroneous impressions of speech patterns, educational background, and professional orientation, and, yes, leadership demeanor.

Two weeks after the screening process was initiated, the final candidates for the program were selected. As hoped, I was one. The next briefing session was set and we received the

details of what we were getting ourselves into: the do's and don'ts of supporting young people living on the edge, understanding the horror-show home circumstances that characterized many of their lives—teenage girls being sexually abused by Mama's crack-addicted live-in, live-out boyfriend or an adolescent son sleeping with four younger siblings in the same bed, selling crack or marijuana to help Mama make it financially. It was all frightening, aberrational stuff existing outside anything most of the Committed Partners had any firsthand knowledge of, let alone actually experienced. However, some in our mentoring group did come from backgrounds oppressed by poverty, delinquency, and crime; that's why they were there because someone had taken the time to shower some love and hope on them and changed their lives. That is what it was all about. I was drawn to the veterans of poverty and deprivation who were bright, savvy, and motivated to use their finely honed insights. It was heady stuff; was I really up to the mission? I wondered how much danger I was subjecting myself to, traveling in and out of scary places in the impoverished drug and crime-infested areas of Atlanta where the music of the night was gunfire shared with police and emergency rescue vehicle sirens.

As I prepared to launch into my unique voyage, I faced a gnawing queasiness about the wisdom of what I was getting myself into. I had two sons counting on me to emerge safely from the taxicab and return to the well-paid station of an airline pilot to recapture the peace and joy of their comfortable lifestyle, and not be killed on the streets of Atlanta pursuing some mission of saving the life of a teenage stranger who might be destined for prison or death.

The stage was set. We Committed Partners understood our mission: to assist our assigned teenagers in accomplishing three

goals they had established for themselves during the one-year commitment, to be in telephone contact at least once per week and face-to-face contact once every two weeks, for one year, no matter what. Honoring our word in this commitment was critical to the relationship credibility and the essence of the program objective of teen support. Keeping our word, being on time, and doing what we said we would do might be the first time many of these youth experienced an adult honoring his or her word. The teenagers who formed the pool of youth to be worked with had been remanded to Yes, Atlanta by the Atlanta Juvenile Court System or by school principals who had set participation in the program as the only condition under which they could maintain attendance in their district school. It was a daunting, frightening undertaking; if not us, then who would help save them? Absent the coping skills and knowledge of self, they were doomed to the statistical heap of incarceration, unwanted pregnancies, drug addiction, or death. The date was set for the Committed Partners to greet their youth at the Cathedral of St. Philip in Buckhead. What an ironic environment for initial contact with our students from the poorest neighborhoods of Atlanta: the opulence, wealth, and grandeur of affluent Buckhead, the most exclusive community in all Atlanta.

Chapter Six

Absentee Parenting

A saying of uncertain origin suggests that God protects drunks and babies; few quotes I had ever heard seemed closer to the truth. It indeed had application to the helplessness I felt presiding over my sons' welfare as an absentee, single-parent cabdriver. Yes, they were teenagers, the presumption being that they might be imbued with a bit more sense of responsibility than infants, but, as I reflect now, in the clarity of hindsight, it was nothing but the grace of God that brought all of us through that ordeal of my airline unemployment. Many unpardonable mistakes could have been committed and I had my share of them. I am proud and grateful to my sons for their ability and dedication to keeping the wheels on our familial buggy.

Parents, in loving their children, vainly wish for them to avoid the youthful pain of bad decisions, romances that disintegrate, job losses, and dreams that don't come true. Committed parents desire to be successful in parenting, to guide, coach, counsel, correct, and cultivate the characteristics of responsibility. I loved being a father. Tragically, when the love wisdom for parental guidance is absent, there is no discipline, no respect for authority or learning, and failure is predictable. I just hadn't expected to be parenting alone. In the pain of my father leaving home when I was eight years old, an adopted orphan with an adopted sister, I witnessed my mother's agony over her dissolved marriage, the sense of diminishment,

humiliation, and failure that accompanied it; add to that her challenge of raising two rambunctious children. After Daddy left us, I knew I wanted to be someone's father someday, one who would be a better one than the one who adopted me, then abandoned our family, rarely paid child support, yet frequently showed up in the spectator stands at my football and basketball games for unearned gloating. Sons and daughters crave approval from their fathers, even more so those who have been abandoned through divorce. Sports were the only real connection I had with my father; my enthusiasm for competition was heightened because I knew it pleased him to see me excelling. He lived ten blocks from our house with the woman for whom he left Mama. As a jock whose hoop and gridiron dreams died early, I wanted my sons to be fanatical about sports, some sport, any sport. Amiri had played football before we left Highland Park, but the move to Stone Mountain, and enrollment in 3AA Redan High School, subjected him to a major upgrade in competition. I admired his courage. He was five foot eight inches tall, muscular, but not blessed with great speed, and he wanted to go out for the football team. But the Redan football team had two-hundred-pound, lightning-fast running backs and three-hundred-pound linemen. With the new level of competitiveness, even considering his skill and experience on defense, he would be woefully outclassed and most likely spend more time on the bench than on the field. From my experience playing the game, I explained to him that the rewards of playing would not be worth the risk of injury, notwithstanding that there was no expectation for a college football scholarship. He agreed with my assessment and chose not to play football. As much as I regretted not having him in sports, as his father I was more interested in his welfare. I wanted to avoid the male obsession of burdening my sons with

the pressure to compete and excel if they didn't have the talent or drive.

I was determined from my youth, if I were ever blessed to be a father, that I would be about being a strong, loving one. Thirty years later, the boys' mother and I lost the spirit of commitment for what successful marriage requires. There was love and respect, but, through time, unresolved issues deepened in magnitude and the inspiration for solutions became obscured in the murk of ego and instant gratification; apathy and hopelessness became bedfellows. There was no custody battle; I was going to be with my sons, but I just never imagined the *déjà vu* of raising my children alone, just as Mama had raised my sister and me, as a single parent. It was nothing short of God's grace and mercy that we got through it, if not unscathed, at least alive.

We had rules of conduct at our home: no more than two friends at the house when I was not present. No girls unless I was present, no underage drinking of alcohol, always keeping me informed of visitation locations, returning dirty dishes from bedrooms and the den, cleaning up the kitchen after meals, tidying up and vacuuming bedrooms once a week, mopping the kitchen and bathroom floors, and keeping the grass mowed. In exchange for abiding by these rules, I provided food and a home, paid the bills, and supported the best I could their educational and social activities. Although I had proudly financed my own undergraduate education at Ball State, I felt a deep commitment, as his father, to pay Amiri's college tuition and struggled to come up with funds to keep him in school, occasionally suspending my ego to accept financial support from his mother. There could have been a case made for filing for child support or alimony during my cab life, but, again, ego and pride sought to block out any surrender to the notion of

failure. It was also my duty as their father to teach them the consequences of irresponsibility and failure to follow rules in all areas of teen life. Our children are who their friends are. From my own experience growing up in Muncie, I observed this to be true. I was always interested in what kind of people my sons' friends were, what their home life was like, and what kinds of values their parents possessed. I naively overlooked the reality that many bright students, excelling in school, possess creativity for mischief and rule breaking, just as I had. It annoyed me that I was not often invited over to other parents' homes; it seemed my single-parent-father status made me somewhat of a threat to husbands and an oddity to single moms. But driving the cab to survive, I had no time for socializing. Without a church life, or a functional relationship with Christ, it was a lonely existence; I often fretted over my sons' safety. My older son, Amiri, had confided to me one afternoon when I returned home that he had been the passenger in a carjacking at gunpoint of a best friend's high school graduation present. Apparently, a carload of roving rogues in an SUV had spotted my son and his friend in the shiny new red compact at a stoplight and feigned needing directions. Cleverly requesting my son's friend to pull over to the curb for clarifying instructions, one of the thugs exited their vehicle as they pulled up alongside and stuck a pistol through the window, ordering them to get out of the car "right now or be dead." Amiri and his friend wisely complied and scrambled to the curb, as the SUV sped off with the car thief jamming the compact's accelerator right behind them. I thanked God that they had not attempted to resist the carjacking; there most certainly would have been shots fired and another tragic story of Black teen demise on the evening news. I was left on my knees beseeching the Lord to protect my sons, something I

could no longer do as a single-parent cabdriver thirty miles away, zigging up and down the busy streets of metro Atlanta.

Number two son, Rahsaan, had grown tall by the time he was fourteen. He was lanky, olive skinned, and muscular, with a basketball player's physique. I had counseled him when we moved into Hidden Hills that the dudes who would be on the basketball teams played ball year round, not just limiting their play to leisurely pickup games when the spirit moved them. He agreed but was more obsessed by another passion beside BMX bike riding—skateboarding. He was a skilled skateboarder, the star of the neighborhood. I was proud of his commitment to practicing his boarding. He rode his board everywhere in the neighborhood, gliding along the smooth asphalt paved surfaces with grace and ease. Had he focused his athleticism on baseball or basketball, he could have been a real contender. A proud father I was, driving up to the house observing a beautifully designed plywood ramp with curves and drop-offs. He had resourcefully scrounged discarded plywood sheets and two-by-fours from a new home construction site; how he had gotten his material transported to the house, I do not know. Once he gained the knowledge from the original ramp construction, he charged money to build ramps for friends, modifying them by affixing wagon wheels at one end of the ramp to facilitate quick removal from their driveways. Wonderful!

Rahsaan also had his war stories. There is no greater sense of horror and helplessness than when children tell parents of their near-death encounters. I sensed something was wrong on one particular blue-sky Saturday afternoon as Rahsaan entered the front door and uncustomarily slammed it shut with a wall-vibrating bang. I was heading out to Buckhead for the usual flurry of lucrative, party-night action, to catch fares until three or four in the morning. Slightly annoyed at the abuse of the

front door and observing an appearance of disbelief on his face, I asked, "What's up, buddy?"

"I'm so mad at Droop; he's so dumb," he exclaimed, hesitating to proceed into his account of what had just happened. As it turned out, he and his friend Droop had been walking down the middle of one of the quiet streets in our neighborhood en route to another schoolmate's home. Although Hidden Hills was a moderately upscale neighborhood, it had no sidewalks; neighborhood youth often walked in the middle or down the edges of the smooth asphalt paved streets to avoid encroaching on private lawns. A car full of teenaged outsiders had passed Rahsaan and his friend headed in the opposite direction. My son's spider sense kicked in and, as the car passed, he urged Droop, "Don't look back, man; keep walking!" Unable to process Rahsaan's admonishment in a timely manner, Droop turned his head to observe the passing vehicle. In an instant, the car's red brake lights illuminated and one of the teenagers quickly emerged and headed toward them with one arm dangling down and held slightly behind his right leg. Immediately Rahsaan whispered in a firm tone, "Let's split, Droop. Run!" Rahsaan revealed that he took off running onto an adjacent neighbor's property and into their backyard from which vantage point he witnessed the young stranger, perhaps not even thirteen, approach Droop brandishing a gun and demanding his brand-new Nike Air Jordans. Wincing in the out-of-body terror witnessing the robbery at gunpoint of his friend, Rahsaan could not block out the vision of Droop, frozen shoeless in fear, standing solitary in the middle of street as the boy bandito re-entered the getaway vehicle, which then, in the smoke of burned rubber, escaped, shattering the afternoon tranquility. With adrenaline surging and fearful that the armed teenagers might return, Rahsaan raced across a fairway of the Hidden Hills golf course. Shaken and tormented that Droop

had suffered the danger and indignity of robbery at gunpoint, Rahsaan was left to ponder the deep question of why his instincts told him to run while Droop's response was to freeze in place. Entertaining the guilt of leaving my sixteen-year-old son at home alone, loaded down with the mental replay of this near tragedy, I fixed him an oversized cheeseburger with his favorite, macaroni and cheese, on the side. He thoughtfully volunteered that he had called Droop to make sure he was alright. I commended Rahsaan on his maturity in listening to his survival instincts, gave him a big (glad-he-was-my-son) hug, and suggested that he might find more peace staying home that evening, I departed for the unknown adventures awaiting me in the Buckhead night.

Life is dynamic and constantly changing; at times it is filled with bursts of joy and contentment we wish had a more permanent presence. We don't get to choose our tribulations, but we do have a choice in learning from them. Parenting, in most cases, is full throttle OJT (on the job training). Beyond being instinctual, making sound decisions is dependent on the examples we received from our parents. I always believed that my primary obligation as a father was to instill survival skills, humility, and discipline in my sons. I wanted them to understand that life at times is not fair and that bad things still happen to good people. Wicked people still get promoted, often profiting from honest, hardworking people losing their jobs. I reminded them that human beings often pass off the unresolved pain of their pasts to those they encounter in their lives. Without the inspiration of love and relatedness to overpower the disillusion, pain, and regret of the past (what philosopher Eckert Tolle referred to as "pain bodies"), we drudge through life standing in a place of no possibility with no future, only repeating the past in the future. This was the profound insight I wanted my sons to get—always standing for possibility in

relationships and life situations, once there is clarity on the objective to be achieved. At fifty years old, a hippie poet disguised as an airline pilot, I was finally realizing that happiness is not always the companion of material possessions, professional status, title, or wealth; more so, it comes from being a blessing to others we meet along life's pathway, giving of ourselves time, love, and compassion to empower and facilitate their journey. The memory in others of what we contributed to them is the real value of what we leave behind.

In standing for making a difference in someone else's life, creating something from nothing, I had to be willing to step out of the focus on my survival circumstances and create a relationship that would transform a stranger into someone valued in my life. That was the reality I wanted to craft with Antonio, offering myself and what I understood about life to someone whose living circumstances, statistically, were fraught with variables that most often lead to failure and death. Having no father living under my roof while growing up in Muncie, I understood the importance of mentors in my life, the people who planted seeds of competitiveness and possibility for achievement in me that would someday germinate into the capacity to attain a Life that is Loved. I needed my sons, who were puzzled at my taking on the relationship with Antonio, to know that in sacrificing my time and giving of myself to him, I was also contributing to their understanding and practical knowledge of engaging in undertakings greater than themselves.

As a manifestation of that knowledge, I could never have been more proud of Rahsaan than the week I informed him that Antonio's seventeenth birthday was coming up and that I planned to take him to a restaurant in celebration. In an unexpected spirit of acceptance and generosity, Rahsaan told

me he would like to bake Antonio, a teenaged boy he had never met, a birthday cake. Not recalling my number two son's proficiency with baking cakes, I sought reassurance that this undertaking was within his level of culinary expertise. He confidently solidified my support by reminding me that this would not be a first-time endeavor. I said great and we jumped in the car to purchase the ingredients for a yellow box cake that would have white icing. We also carefully selected some of those decorative icing tubes that came in various colors. I was bursting with excitement that my son was voluntarily taking this on, giving of himself to make someone happy whom he had only heard about through my descriptions. Rahsaan did it all, meticulously reading the instructions, preheating the oven, precisely measuring out the proportions of milk, eggs, and mix, stirring them thoroughly, and pouring them into a rectangular aluminum baking pan. I left the house to run some errands and urged him to closely monitor his baking time. He did. When I returned, Rahsaan, uncharacteristically, met me at the door, beckoning me to the kitchen to behold his creation. My eyes flooded as I beheld the beautiful white cake with the red and blue lettering: *Happy Birthday! 17 Antonio*. For artistic flare, Rahsaan decorated the four corners of the cake with red icing stars and positioned two large stars beside the words. I gave him a big hug and announced that it would be only fitting that he come with me to present the cake. In shy reluctance, he resisted accompanying me, but finally acquiesced when I assured him of how shocked Antonio would be to see a birthday cake for him, baked by a sixteen-year-old dude, his mentor's son. I called Antonio and informed him that my son and I were on our way. I wanted Rahsaan to witness the forty miles of urban geography that separated our middle-class comfort in Hidden Hills from the sprawl of humble, poverty-

encumbered surroundings along Bankhead Highway to the surreal world on Hollywood Court where Antonio called home.

As we pulled into the glass-littered parking square, I heard my son exclaim, “Dang!” I said nothing but pointed to the gray metal door with the number 12F. As we approached the door and knocked, we witnessed the slow-motion, nonchalant arrival of Antonio, acting cooler than cool. Surprisingly, not only was Antonio speechless at meeting Rahsaan, who was almost six feet tall, with an athletic frame, but when he removed the tinfoil from the cake pan he went into jubilant shock that not only was it a birthday cake with his name on it, but that Rahsaan had baked and decorated it for him. It was that quintessential Kodak moment, a memory to be locked away for the rest of all our lives from such a simple gesture. I had witnessed the childlike excitement of an Afro-Cuban teenager, an endangered at-risk youth who was being influenced by drug-dealing, gun-packing lifestyles; he could only fantasize about a future that could not yet truly be imagined, that was not at present likely, but wishing for the magic to act and bring it about. I pondered how much power a gesture of generosity and love in giving to another human being might change a life. Neither I, my son, nor Antonio ever forgot that day of the seventeenth birthday cake, the only one Antonio ever had baked for him by a stranger whose father was hoping for a result more critical than changing a life but saving it.

Chapter Nine

Christmas in the Cab

The irony of the holidays seemed amplified at Christmas, a time when earnings from fares increased along with longer hours that precluded engagement with the boys in sharing the season's spirit. In the midst of my scramble for sustenance, juggling bill payments, like a circus clown tossing bowling pins in the air, I discovered more profoundly the "reason for the season." I had been spoiled by Mama Settles, who took gift purchasing, wrapping, and meal preparation to an unsustainable level. When Mama was with us, there was always church at Christmas with yuletide plays, concerts, and Watch Night observances. Driving up and down Peachtree Street in and out of Buckhead during the holiday bustle, I reflected on the absurd excess that my two sons enjoyed in early childhood with abundantly adorned Christmas trees, carefully selected for height and symmetrical perfection. A decorated tree was a work of art in itself, colored ornaments in half a dozen vibrant colors, tinsel icicles dangling among row on row of strung lights in blue, green, orange, white, and the all-important red. Mama had allowed herself to be proud of her career as a librarian at the Muncie Public Library and, following her retirement, she fully relished the holidays, celebrating Christmas with us even more. Until the marriage with the first Mrs. Settles crashed, Christmas was a borderline embarrassment overloaded by a mother's love and indulgence in material excess.

Stopping momentarily for a traffic light, I experienced a mental flashback to the small truckload of gifts under our Christmas trees of the past, spreading out a distance of five feet from the base, all beautifully wrapped, resplendent with the love with which they had been purchased. It seemed I had made a lifestyle of seeking to counterbalance the submersion in materialism that Christmas at the Settles household appeared to represent. Between a retired mother whose superior money management enabled her to bring home more monthly income in retirement than what she earned full time and my elementary-school-teacher sister, it was a virtual spend fest shopping for my sons. Hostage to my cabbie life, there was no longer a display of the materialism of Christmas past; the boys were on their own to create their Christmas. Simply managing the daily bill paying to remain afloat was the best Christmas gift I could offer.

In this particular hectic Christmas season, I glimpsed more proof of a budding entrepreneur. I was overjoyed that Rahsaan sought my input on choices he had to make on elective classes. On the back porch in a rare occasion of leisure, clasp and sloshing an overfilled glass of his favorite beverage, orange juice, he sat beside me on the double swing and asked, "Dad, what elective should I take next session? Auto Mechanics, Wood Shop, or Home Economics?"

I responded, "Well, what appeals to you? What are you interested in?"

Demonstrating his thoughtfulness, he replied, "I'm interested in all of them. But maybe Wood Shop the most because I've built all these ramps. What do you do in Home Economics?"

"You learn to cook and sew," I added with a chuckle.

“For real, Dad?” he responded incredulously.

“Yeah Son, you learn how to cook all kinds of good stuff, sew and make clothes.”

“Wow,” he responded with excitement in his voice, “I’m doing Home Economics.” I was floored by his decision and cautioned him that he might be the brunt of teasing by his peers for being in an all-girls class. He scoffed at the warning. He was enough of an individualist, advanced in his progression toward being a free-thinking innovator, that the notion of being teased by classmates brought empowering delight. At the end of the grading period, he asked me to set aside time to take him to the mall to get some materials. “What kind of materials,” I inquired.

“I need to buy some cloth for my new idea,” he replied.

Deliberately being secretive, he held on to a boy’s joy in keeping me in the dark, as if fostering a surprise that would impress me once revealed. I stepped up my fatherly support for his mystery project and promised him I would make time from my cabdriving schedule to take him to Penny’s department store to get materials. Although I had limited extra financial resources available, he proudly declined my offer of assistance, boasting that he had saved over a hundred dollars from doing lawn work in the neighborhood and selling a skateboard ramp to one of his friends. A father could not have been more proud of a son independently assuming the burden of his own livelihood through inspired exploration of his own creativity.

Taking delight in keeping me in the dark, he emerged from Penny’s with his sack of secret goodies purchased with his own money. “Did they have what you needed?,” I inquired.

“Oh yeah!,” he replied. “These things are going to be ‘dope,’” he crowed in cryptic jargon.

I dropped him off back at the ranch before returning to my road warrior existence, slapped a supportive five with our hands, and assured him I couldn’t wait to see his mystery project. Too many parents don’t appreciate the special gift a creative child is, one who would rather work on projects at home than log wasteful time with friends who are perpetually about youthful non productivity. Rahsaan spent hour after hour holed up in our laundry room working on his projects, sewing on Mama’s Singer sewing machine we had shipped to the house, along with other keepsake pieces of furniture, after her death from cancer.

After a week, Rahsaan called me back to the laundry room studio to reveal his mystery project. With the sewing education gained from his Home Economics class, and recognizing the growing popularity of the Dr. Seuss, bebop like caps worn by hip-hop singers like LL Cool J, Rahsaan had sewn some prototype hats to showcase at school. The genius of his business plan was that he knew the hats were not available commercially in stores. Rather than hustling drugs or popular candy options for income, Rahsaan showcased the prototype hats he had made in the multiple zany patterns of cloth materials he had purchased, some even made out of old towels that had long ago lost their luster. Rahsaan’s hats were so popular he could not keep up with the demand. He purchased the material for a hat for 50 cents and sold the hat for \$5 to \$10. Not only did it boost his bank account, but it made him one of the coolest dudes in his school. I took great pride in his entrepreneurial achievement but quietly lamented that his creative energy was being exercised as a substitute for a father embroiled in his own battle. Rahsaan’s ingenuity and will to

make life easier for me, and a contented Christmas for himself, was a great blessing. In the blur of the familial scramble, there was no time accommodation for the Awards and Decorations ceremonies until the clarity of hindsight many years later. Acknowledgment for parents, and their offspring, is often not timely.

My daydreams vanished with the sound of dispatcher Claude calling "Need a car at Lenox," just where I was headed. "39 ready," I responded immediately, beating out any competing drivers for the pickup. "Call me at the Square, 39," Claude replied, meaning he would fine-tune the location of the pickup once I was within close proximity to the Lenox Square Mall and my potential fare. What we referred to as renegade cab companies had perfected monitoring of our dispatch radio and, if location secrecy were not guarded, they would swoop in and steal our customers, most of whom only knew that a cab had been called but not able to identify, or be committed to waiting for, a yellow and black Be Safe Taxi. "39, Lenox," I transmitted to Claude.

"Pick 'em up at 126, 39, goin' south," Claude responded in our numerical code system that had all Buckhead businesses numerically codified so only drivers with code sheets could know the exact address. Voila! 126 was Neiman Marcus (Needless Markup we all called it), generally an airport trip. Normally, the competition cabbies sat before the hotels and highfalutin establishments, grabbing walkup customers, but on this call the cab stand at Neiman's had emptied and I had hit the jackpot with an airport fare, a \$25 flat rate, plus tip. As I pulled up in front of the gray marble steps leading to the entrance, I spied a tall, statuesque well-dressed blond standing on the steps clutching a small wheelie and a large Neiman's shopping bag stuffed to the top. I slipped the gear lever into

Park and quickly exited to greet her and stash her bags. Without returning my holiday greeting she simply proclaimed “Airport.” After I had loaded her packages and suitcase, the blond customer slipped into my backseat and repeated her instructions “Airport.” Peeved that she had pushed one of my annoyance buttons about rude passengers not rendering a greeting of “Hello” or “How you doin’,” I toyed with her, inquiring, “Would that be Peachtree DeKalb Airport?” With a dropped jaw look that confirmed her presumption that I would be an idiot and a foreigner driving the cab, she shouted incredulously, “No, Atlanta Hartsfield airport!”

“I know; I was just teasing you because we didn’t exchange a holiday greeting,” I replied.

“What?” She exclaimed indignantly in disbelief that I would have the temerity to attempt teasing a passenger of her refinement. I ventured to explain in a non-pedagogical language that I practiced greeting my passengers before establishing destination details. Flushed with scarlet cheeks, the perfumed southern belle, still not getting my message, retorted, “Well, from that tall talk I can tell you’re not a real cabdriver; most of em can’t even speak English.” Ignoring her ignorance, I issued a, “Well, how are you this Christmas season?”

“Fine, thanks! How long will it take to get to the airport?”

Permitting myself to indulge my annoyance with her rudeness, I answered, “With my commitment to safe driving at legal speeds, I’d say thirty minutes.”

“That’s strange,” she retorted, “it only took twenty minutes to get to the Marriott when I came in.”

Intent on diverting the direction of the conversation, I concluded, "Well, I'll get you there as quickly and safely as I can." She relaxed into her seat with a huff and left me in silence, pondering whether there would be any victory of spirit in engaging this lady any further. As miserable as the daily grind could get, I was out to salvage as much joy each day as possible. Enduring passengers who regarded cabbies as lowly creatures presented challenges of toleration and had induced a spirit for seizing opportunities for "teachable moments." The seminar training in The Landmark Forum had instilled new insights into *what it means to be a human being* and I was regularly enticed to subject cab customers to involuntary communication experiments. There was a calculated risk in this diversion, particularly if the customer was convinced a cabdriver couldn't possibly possess any practical or philosophical insights.

"What airline, ma'am, when we get to Hartsfield?," I inquired.

"Eastern!," she replied curtly. Jeepsies creepsies! Another button has been pushed. This stuck-up poster lady for snobbery, with the southern twang of an antebellum slave mistress, picked up on the steps of Neiman's, is flying on my financially strapped airline that is hiring scab pilots to replace me and is offering passengers discounted fares that are below profit margins. I was now in a full-blown fistfight with aggravation. I was fifty pilot seniority numbers from being recalled to fly as my beloved company sought to emerge from Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Passengers flying Eastern were taking advantage of great fare bargains, but, in doing so, were delaying, or eliminating, my prospects for recall.

I was nearing my threshold of pain with the blond as I turned onto the Buford Highway access to 85 South. My impulse was to scold her and then enlighten her for not being aware that she was supporting CEO Frank Lorenzo's union-busting strategy by patronizing Eastern during the strike action but, in prudence, had to evaluate the potential cost to me of her education. Seeking to foment guilt for flying Eastern could create an uncomfortable scene, leading to a complaint to the cab company owner, resulting in a reprimand. Would the lesson be worth it? But how would I assuage my desperation for returning to flying without broaching the subject of boycotting Eastern while the strike was in place? This was a frequent dilemma during those early days of the strike. Say nothing to my taxi customers and languish in self-loathing for avoiding engagement on the issue or dare to break through the stereotype of cabbies held by customers to prevail upon their good will of support for their driver who was a displaced airline pilot whose return to flying was endangered by their patronage of a low-fare airline with labor problems, not to mention safety issues. And there were safety issues; half a dozen top maintenance officials were indicted for "pencil whipping" maintenance write-ups on Eastern aircraft during the strike. No one was ever convicted or did jail time.

From idle chats with fellow cabbies, I knew some of them were adversarial toward customers flying Eastern and would harp on the labor strife, only as information, not admonishment. Then came the epiphany: With the perpetual noise of my ego voices shouting at me, I agonized over passengers not knowing I was Brian Settles, Vietnam combat pilot, commercial airline copilot, single-parent father, and worthy of compassion. Reflecting on the agony in my circumstances, I discerned that my true upset resided in the loss of Looking Good and what we human beings put ourselves

through to achieve it, maintain it, or lose it. What I had to accept, for the moment, was that I was Brian Settles, Be Safe Taxi driver, whose daily responsibility was to give customers a safe, courteous, expeditious ride to their destination, not verbally joust with them for flying Eastern. Once I gained this clarity, my residual thoughts were devoted to what contribution I could make to this stuck-up passenger who was content to turn her back on engaging her lowly driver in conversation. There was always a judgment call that had to be made on whether a customer wished to be left alone or engaged in chat during cab rides.

“Are you flying a long way today?,” I humbly broke the silence to ask as we gained speed circling the entry loop for 85 South.

“No, short trip back home to Birmingham,” she replied in a more conciliatory tone. Daring to press further, I inquired, contemplating the history of civil rights struggle, “Have you lived there long?”

“Yes, all my life.” Graciously adding, “My husband took over his father’s pesticide business twenty years ago that services rural areas outside Birmingham,” she added proudly. No wonder she’s shopping at Neiman’s—big southern money.

Daring to risk sounding nosy, I asked, “Do you assist with the pesticide business?”

“Oh no! I stay at home to raise our children,” she replied.

“Good for you,” I declared patronizingly. “Children need parents more than ever before. Too many children are raising themselves while both parents work,” I announced boldly.

“Do you have children?” she asked, evidently convinced that I possessed some modest knowledge on the subject.

“Yes, two teenaged sons,” I proudly responded.

“Oh my! Is your wife at home with your sons while you’re driving the cab?” she asked.

“Nope! I don’t have a wife; I’m a single parent,” I boldly proclaimed in a voice full of pride. Now I had her interest.

“My, my! You’re a single-parent father with custody?”

“That’s right.” The conversation had suddenly shifted and I was becoming a real person, stimulating her curiosity to know more about my unique circumstances, totally outside the box of southern conventionality. This was my break to make my presentation. “Yeah, I’ll be glad when this strike at Eastern ends so I can hopefully return to my job,” I imparted coyly.

“Gosh, you worked for Eastern? What was your job there?” she quickly inquired.

This was the point at which jaw dropping usually occurred as I responded, “I was a Boeing 727 copilot flying passengers to Birmingham.”

“Oh, my Lord. Really? You’re an Eastern pilot and you’re driving this cab,” she asked in disbelief.

“Yep,” I responded matter-of-factly.

“That’s terrible,” she exclaimed sympathetically. I didn’t know whether her sympathy was due to my losing my job as a pilot or driving a cab. “Well, couldn’t you get hired by another airline?” she asked.

“I could, if other airlines were hiring, but I would have to start all over at the bottom of seniority and pay. My older son is in college. Kinda trapped in the situation,” I confessed while she surrendered her admiration for me doing what I was doing for my sons. Suddenly, at that point in our banter, I observed that the traffic was compressed and moving at high speed. We were just passing under the North Avenue overpass, as I approached the slight bend in the freeway to the left. In a flash of seconds, my eyes could not believe that several cars just ahead of me began swerving from lane to lane, crashing into one another. A Mercedes on my left careened off the concrete wall, dividing north and south traffic, and rebounded rearward across the freeway directly toward our path. A crash seemed unavoidable but I jammed on the accelerator in a desperate attempt to avert hitting the out-of-control vehicle; we whizzed past the Benz, missing it by only inches. Immediately checking my rearview mirror, I spied the Benz slashing behind me and continuing backwards across other traffic lanes, as other panicked motors swerved and crashed in futile efforts to avoid the chaos. In the scramble for survival, I had completely forgotten about my passenger and even what we were talking about. Checking on her status in the rearview mirror, I asked, “You okay back there? That was a close one.”

“Yes, it was. I just knew we were dead,” she exclaimed, adding, “You did an incredible maneuver avoiding that car. I sure thank God I had a pilot driving my cab.” My filters received the comment as lacking consolation, but I understood the spirit of her intent.

After that close call, the inspiration to mention the impact of passengers flying on Eastern fled from my spirit. By casually injecting my plight into the conversation, I had allowed the lady from Birmingham to access greater

appreciation for her circumstances, and mine, and perhaps opened her eyes to the reality that you never know with whom you are in conversation. Presumptions made from stereotypes interfere with real relatedness. After we maneuvered through the Departure-level traffic and stopped at the Eastern ticket counters at Hartsfield-Jackson, I quickly exited to open her door and retrieve her belongings. She wished me the best in getting back to flying and squeezed a \$20 tip into my hand on top of the \$25 fare. I accepted the generous gratuity as an authentic expression of understanding and compassion. It was another one of so many of life's episodes that start off poorly but turn out well. I know she got the message, and I relished the vision of her boarding that Eastern jet, peering into that cockpit to observe scab pilots at work, and thinking about me driving back in dangerous traffic to Buckhead for more Christmas in my cab.



From cockpit to taxicab and back - Brian Settles, a single parent, experienced airline pilot, seemed to have it all until an airline strike and bankruptcy shattered his existence. Shattered Dream: A Single-Parent Airline Pilot's Story is a gripping account of a desperate father's three year, three-hundred-mile-a-day ordeal driving a cab on the streets of Atlanta. Readers will experience the dangers of cabbie life, the condescension of passengers, what he learned about them and, most importantly, himself.

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