

# Conviction

## The Journey of a Lost Principled Man

### ONE

David Freeman's life was steady, but the inane predictability of his daily schedule was causing his routine to seem *boring*, painfully boring. As he drove west on I-44 from St. Louis toward Springfield, Missouri, he reached for his handheld cassette tape recorder from his briefcase and pushed the record button. "Note to self: my life is boring." He pushed the stop button.

David had always been a nice guy, the one his friends thought of first to set up on a date with their cute cousin. "He's great. You'll just love him," they'd say. "He's a gentleman, a nice guy. And nice guys are hard to find."

He called his mother on a regular basis. He was a good friend with his dad. He worked out regularly. He could cook. He made his bed—even though he lived alone. He got a haircut every two weeks. And he flossed regularly.

David went to college and graduated on time. He paid for his education himself by working part-time and qualifying for a couple of student loans. He'd already paid those loans off, even though he'd been out of college less than five years.

He got along well with his neighbors, his coworkers, and the people at his church, although he didn't have many really close friends, not like he had in high school. Back then, growing up near Fort Wayne, Indiana, the really close friends he had were the other three "hossmen." They weren't the four "horsemen." They were the "*hossmen*." "There's a big difference," David would tell people. "Being a *hossman* was a distinction."

The *hossmen* played baseball together. They weren't the natural talent guys, the "pretty boys," as they called them. They worked hard for everything they got, and they were notably successful. That's what being a "hoss" was all about. You got down and dirty and worked hard and you succeeded. David wished he could experience a *hoss*-type alliance with some of his coworkers, but he didn't have that trusting of a relationship with anyone at work yet. He'd been with the company going on four years, but he still felt like he was trying to fit in.

David liked his job with Jay Tools. He was able to travel a lucrative sales route and meet and work with people he found rather interesting. He was paid a regular salary and a commission on what he sold. He could work hard and expect to get paid accordingly. That was one of his most cherished principles of business.

*If you work hard, you should get rewarded for it.*

Conversely, if you don't work, you shouldn't expect to get paid. His father taught him that. "The laborer is worthy of his hire," Dad would say. Jack Freeman also taught his son many of the other principles that David stood for day after day.

*You can't go wrong being an honest man.*

*Your word is your bond if you shake someone's hand.*

*If you're going to pay big money for tickets, get a good seat.*

David prided himself on being a man of principle. The interested observer might even applaud him for appearing to have all his ducks in a row. “So why do I suddenly consider my life boring?” David said to himself, out loud, while driving. “Maybe it’s not really boring.” He grabbed the tape recorder and started recording again. “Another note to self: my life is . . . predictable. Day in, day out, the same schedule. The same . . . everything. My life is too predictable. *I’m too predictable.*”

He thought maybe it was his name that bothered him. David. Everyone called him David. All the time. *Why can't it be Dave?* he thought. *That was a good baseball name. Dave Stewart. Dave Winfield. Dave Dravecky. Even Davey would have been better than David.* Davey Lopes of the Dodgers was one of his father’s favorite players in the '70s. *There weren't many Davids playing ball today. OK, in recent years there have been a couple of really great pitchers: David Cone . . . David Wells. Each of them had even pitched perfect games.* But that still didn’t alleviate his feeling that his name was too formal— *too boring. Maybe even the Davids, Cone and Wells, felt the same way about their names,* David thought.

David Norman Freeman. That was his given name. Norman was his grandfather’s name on his father’s side. He got to know his grandfather surprisingly well, even though he died when David was thirteen.

He frequently reminisced about visiting Grandpa and Grandma’s farm just south of Mattoon, Illinois, during the summers. Grandpa Norm wasn’t much for long-winded or wordy conversation, but it was evident he had a good grasp of his views on life.

Every once in a while, as if a teachable truth blew with the wind and happened to settle on that Illinois farm, he would share a carefully constructed observation with David. His grandpa never faked superior intelligence by using complicated words. He spoke with simple logic and one-syllable eloquence, making complex issues understandable. David listened when Grandpa Norm spoke.

When most other adults would try to explain life to a younger David, with his sponge-like, wide-eyed imagination, they almost always made things seem too complicated. David would find himself drifting off in boyish fantasy and imagine himself running through the cornfields with no particular purpose except to feel the wind in his face and inhale the aroma of the fresh green cornstalks. Or he might start daydreaming about climbing the combine at his grandparent’s farm and pretending it was a fighter jet engaged in air battles over Germany. The crows would become enemy fighters and he’d shoot down every one of them with a make-believe machine gun. However, he didn’t wander off when Grandpa Norm spoke to him. When he spoke, David listened with every fiber of his being.

As he got older and the occasion would present itself where he would recall those special conversations with his grandfather, David was drawn not only to the words that he spoke but also his logical convictions as well. That was what impressed David most about the man.

When he got word in October of his eighth grade school year that Grandpa Norm had died, David immediately had tears in his eyes. The family, who only lived six hours away in Indiana, never spent as much time together on the farm in Illinois after Grandpa died, and David

missed those days, in the same way that one misses that peaceful, surreal sensation of a dream after getting slapped with the reality of waking up.

David grabbed the tape recorder again and began another diatribe. “Further note to self: my life is not boring or predictable. It’s just not that exciting! Not lately, anyway.” He tossed the recorder into his briefcase, but then quickly reached over to straighten things up.

This is not to say that David was upset with the way his life was turning out these days. He was very satisfied. He bought a house last fall in South County fairly near the interstate. It was a good investment, and it was a short commute from his house to the Jay Tools corporate office in downtown St. Louis. Or, he could get on I-270 and go south on I-55 toward Memphis or west on I-44 through Springfield and Joplin toward Oklahoma to cover his sales routes. He was heading out on a weeklong business trip today, scheduled to stay in Springfield tonight and meet with a couple of store owners there tomorrow morning, and then head to Joplin for the afternoon. He planned to stay the night in Tulsa on Tuesday so he could make his morning appointments there on Wednesday before heading to Oklahoma City for the afternoon.

David glanced at his day-timer, neatly placed next to his recorder in his open briefcase on the passenger side of his company car. The pens were organized in a plastic protector tucked in the proper section. A Jay Tools notepad was in the adjacent section. The John Grisham novel he was reading was on the right and a couple of his favorite CDs on the left. Everything was in its appropriate place, of course. He skimmed over this week’s schedule. *Maybe I’ll catch a ball game in Oklahoma City on Wednesday night*, he thought.

David had always loved baseball. He played in high school and at his small college. What he lacked in raw talent he made up for in enthusiasm and hard work. It was the “hoss” way to play ball. He made second team all-conference his junior and senior years in college, but the pros didn’t show any interest in his average talents, so he traded in his baseball cleats for salesman’s shoes and jumped into his work after graduation.

He applied the “hoss” ethic he learned from playing ball to his sales job and moved up the corporate ladder fairly quickly. Last year, David was honored to be named Jay Tools top regional salesman. He was awarded a company car, a tan late model Chevrolet Caprice with a license plate that read JTOOLS 1.

He stayed active in sports after college, but he was reduced to playing softball for the company team and also for the church team. Softball just couldn’t compare to baseball in David’s mind. It was fun, a chance to get some exercise, but playing baseball was an experience like no other to David.

*Baseball is the game of life*, David mused. He spent a great deal of time philosophizing about this theory while driving along the Missouri and Oklahoma interstates. The steady rhythmic road hum can put a man’s mind on cruise control without something to occupy his thoughts.

Baseball is an opportunity to succeed against great odds. When a player is batting, he’s competing against nine people all working to see him fail. But half the game, a player is one of those nine people trying to foil that one person at bat.

Also, in baseball, David knew, the player needs to develop a sense of where to stand, how to stand, where to move, and what to do when the action comes to you. It’s preparation. It’s teamwork. It’s skill. It’s luck. It’s life. It’s baseball.

Baseball is also like life in that it’s a game of principles. There’s a *right* way to play the game, David often told himself, and anyone who would listen. You can play it wrong, but you probably won’t be successful at it. And if you play the game the way it’s supposed to be played,

you can experience an incredible depth to the game. Few people are willing to sink their hearts into the game with that much insight.

David continued to think as he drove. As an example, there were several guys on David's church softball team who hadn't played much ball. They weren't able to scoop up the ground balls very consistently, and if they did manage to field a grounder cleanly, they didn't always know where to throw the ball. Each time a player made an error like that, it was like giving the opposing team an extra out for that inning, bringing up a prime principle a successful ballplayer always adheres to:

*Know what you're going to do with the ball before it's hit to you, field it cleanly, and make the play.*

A good player just won't give the other team more than three outs per inning. That was part of the right way to play. The winning way. The baseball way. What fired David up the most was when the inexperienced players on his team made mistakes, but didn't learn from their mistakes and make the right play the next time. Making the same mistakes over and over again showed you didn't care, and caring about the game, whether you were a skilled player or not, was one of David's most sacred principles.

It might have been a trivial formality, but one game, one of the "rookies," as David called them, was wearing his baseball cap backward. "I admit that I'm from the old school when it comes to baseball customs," David would say. "Wearing a baseball cap backward is a sacrilege to baseball tradition." That day, he barked at the player: "Hey, Slim! This is a ball club, not a rap group." The greenhorn looked surprised, but he knew what David was referring to and turned his hat around to the baseball way. Next game, the kid had his hat on backward again. David didn't say anything this time, but he surmised that the guy just didn't care.

David always went out of his way to care. Not only about baseball, but also about what he considered the many important fundamental areas of a successful person's personal life.

David always held tightly to his beliefs, his principles. Of course his grandfather influenced him in that regard, but so did his dad. By today's standards, people might describe both of them as rigid or stiff, but David always looked at them as solid. Their principles were so rooted and genuine that they could listen to another person's opinion and size it up rather quickly as to whether they believed the same way or whether they took a different slant. Sure, they changed their minds on rare occasions, but the evidence that there was a *better* way certainly would have to be monumental before that occurred.

David had been developing his principles over the years, and been forced by evidentiary logic to adjust some of them— like women working outside the home. Sylvia, David's mom, didn't work outside the home while he was growing up. His grandmother never did have a job outside the home. They both worked hard doing the cooking and the cleaning and the "women things," as folks used to call them before the politically correct police convinced everyone they were always listening over people's shoulders.

However, David had a talk with his mom one quiet evening a couple of years ago and she voiced some regrets that she was never afforded the opportunity to go to college and pursue a professional vocation.

She worked a couple of years as a switchboard operator after high school and married David's dad after he got out of the Air Force. She held down the switchboard job another couple of years until David was born, but she stayed home to raise him from then on. College then

became an impossible, impractical dream in her distant memory, and she had harbored those blurred career dreams for many years, but not to the point that she was angry or resentful. She merely wondered what it might have been like to explore a professional field like medicine or law or even business.

A layer of blindness was chipped away from his mind that day by his mother's sincerity, and he rearranged his principle that "a woman's place is in the home." If and when he ever did get married, he figured he'd insist that his wife pursue her dreams too. If they had children along the way, they'd tackle that situation when they came to it.

Marriage seemed a long way off to David, although he was open to the idea. He dated some in high school and college and had a couple of steady girlfriends. He thought he was serious about one girl in college, but she drifted off to Indiana University with a law student.

He always wondered what falling in love with the "right girl" would feel like. He asked his dad one time when he was about fourteen and all his dad, Jack, could say was, "You'll know." That seemed like a dumb answer, but Jack explained that that was what Grandpa Norm had told him and that it was the truth. He said David was going to have to experience it for himself. True love seemed like a distant lighthouse on a faraway shore at this juncture in his life.

David sighed and picked up the recorder one more time. "Last note: my life *is* predictable, not very exciting, and maybe a little boring. I'm set in my ways of thinking, but it's not that bad. I've got good principles. I'm a nice guy. And I'm still a hoss! And I've got customers in Springfield to think about. And I'm hungry. It's almost supper time."

He pushed the stop button with authority, put the recorder back in the briefcase, and closed the lid with a slam. He pulled off the interstate at the Waynesville exit and headed for the Burger Royal.

David parked his car neatly between two other cars, perfectly inside the white lines. He brushed a thin streak of dust off the dashboard and adjusted the mirror so he could see to fix his tie. He looked into his own eyes, and they told him the truth: he could always see the bottom-line truth in his own eyes. *I am principled and predictable and set in my ways*, he thought. *And regular people usually call that boring.*

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Joani Givens was being dragged along today, like some kind of ornament, on a drug run by her manipulative roommate, whom everyone called Snake. She was reluctant company, but the best Snake could muster, especially since it was Joani's car they were driving. He ran his stuff out of St. Louis, primarily marijuana and cocaine. Snake's customer network was mostly small-time scum who distributed to high school and junior high kids in the St. Louis area and in unpretentious towns along I-44. He was a lowlife, and Joani had nothing better going for her today, so she agreed to hang out with Snake, mostly so she could keep an eye on her car.

Today, they were in Lebanon, Missouri. Snake was checking up on some rat that had stiffed him. He had used a couple of local thugs to help convince the rodent that he had better pay his debts. They needed to get some gas for the drive back to St. Louis. Snake also needed to make a couple of additional phone calls.

They pulled into the Gas Stop. After he fueled the black Camaro, Snake pulled the car up to the store so he could make his calls on his cell phone.

"Just sit there and shut up!" he growled sternly at Joani. "I gotta make a couple of calls. I've put up with too much crap already today. I don't need any from you."