

The background of the entire cover is a photograph of a lighthouse. The lighthouse is white with a dark blue or black lantern room. A person wearing a bright yellow raincoat is standing on the balcony of the lantern room, looking out. The light inside the lantern room is glowing. The sky is dark and filled with dramatic, swirling clouds, with some light breaking through near the horizon.

Steve Pemberton

The  
LIGHTHOUSE  
EFFECT

HOW ORDINARY PEOPLE CAN HAVE AN  
EXTRAORDINARY IMPACT IN THE WORLD

# The LIGHTHOUSE EFFECT

HOW ORDINARY PEOPLE CAN HAVE AN  
EXTRAORDINARY IMPACT IN THE WORLD

Steve Pemberton



ZONDERVAN BOOKS

*The Lighthouse Effect*

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ISBN 978-0-310-36234-0 (audio)

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Pemberton, Steve, 1967 June 15- author.

Title: The lighthouse effect : how ordinary people can have an extraordinary impact in the world / Steve Pemberton.

Description: Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references.

| Summary: "Our culture is adrift in division and distrust, and we need everyday heroes more than ever. Drawing from his own remarkable journey, Steve Pemberton shares stories of the ordinary people who quietly change lives and bring change to their communities. Compelling and insightful, this book will inspire you and renew your hope for the future"— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021008830 (print) | LCCN 2021008831 (ebook) | ISBN

9780310362326 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780310362333 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Conduct of life. | Virtues. | Mentoring.

Classification: LCC BJ1547.4 .P46 2021 (print) | LCC BJ1547.4 (ebook) | DDC 158.1—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021008830>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021008831>

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Cover design: Curt Diepenhorst

Cover image: John Lund / Getty Images

Interior design: Sara Colley

Printed in the United States of America

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21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 /LSC/ 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i> .....	xi
<i>Introduction</i> .....	xv
1. John Sykes .....	1
2. RJ .....	25
3. FL Kirby .....	47
4. Greg Anthony .....	73
5. Rick Rock .....	99
6. Carmen Ortiz-McGhee .....	115
7. Welles Remy Crowther .....	143
8. Monica Kachru and Rajeev Tipnis .....	161
9. Claire Levin .....	179
10. Setting Your Sail for Home .....	199
<i>Acknowledgments</i> .....	203
<i>Notes</i> .....	205

# PREFACE

*I have found it is the small things. Everyday  
deeds of ordinary folk that keeps the darkness  
at bay. Simple acts of kindness and love.*

—GANDALF THE GREY, *THE HOBBIT: AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY*

I did not have high expectations for my first book, *A Chance in the World*. The truth is that none were necessary. Its purpose, I believed at the time, was to serve as a family history that future generations would pull down from a dusty shelf and read one day, should they ever be so inclined.

Soon it became apparent, from those who sought me out, that in the course of sharing my own coming-of-age journey, I had managed also to write chapters of other people's lives. The very first response I received was from a seventy-three-year-old Irishman who wrote to share that he too had experienced great losses in his childhood, but because of what I had written, he could now go to his final rest in peace.

— xi —

## *The Lighthouse Effect*

In another part of the world, a young mother from a remote African village shared that she had read my book to her young children as an example of the importance of perseverance.

When we share our life stories, we invite others to share their own and in so doing offer ourselves a chance to find a common narrative, a more unifying story of family, faith, fortitude, and forgiveness that transcends distance and difference.

Hearing those stories is what inspired me to write this book.

The lighthouse is a perfect symbol for what I have learned from others' lives. In a flat world, the lighthouse is the tallest structure in the sea; set amid this alternately peaceful and turbulent environment, the lighthouse is noble, selfless, steady, and faithful. It requires no recognition and seeks no reward. Rarely will you see a name on a lighthouse; its identifying features are found in its beautiful and poetic design. The lighthouse does not judge or ask how the traveler has come to be in danger; after all, it finds itself in the same storm. Neither does it concern itself with socioeconomic status or the political party to which the voyager might belong. The lighthouse has but one mission: to protect the journey of the traveler.

We need the symbolism of the lighthouse now more than ever. In the film *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, Samwise Gamgee paints a vivid picture of the great need for these timeless structures.

How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad has happened? But in the end, it's only a

## *Preface*

passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something, even if you were too young to understand why. . . . Folks in those stories had lots of chances of turning back but they didn't, because they were holding on to something—that there's still some good in this world and it's worth fighting for.<sup>1</sup>

The need to find goodness, to believe that all will be well, to find some virtue in the land, is a perpetual yearning of humanity. This desire sends us searching for heroes, looking upward to celebrities, kings, presidents, executives, or anyone seemingly above us to offer us guidance and direction. The elevated hero is often placed in front of us as an example of that which we should aspire to. But I have learned that another kind of heroism exists. It is found in the lives of the seemingly ordinary people who live alongside us, their unassuming lives often unknown, ever valuable because of what we can learn from them. Having an impact on the world is not reserved just for those who have the means and the visibility to do so. The stories of everyday heroes are the ones I have been drawn to, and these are the stories that will unfold in these pages.

These humble individuals' life journeys will take us from the harsh battlefields of Vietnam to the famed Los Angeles Dodgers clubhouse, from a wonderful love story beginning in the beautiful land of New Delhi, India, and an unlikely father-daughter reunion in Puerto Rico to a quiet Father's Day in a rural farmhouse in Wisconsin. You will

## *The Lighthouse Effect*

meet those who have turned personal pain into possibilities for themselves and those around them. Together we will learn what motivates them, where their compassion comes from, and the lessons their lives can offer us. In the process, we will harken back to our own human lighthouses, those who saw our possibilities, and in the process be reminded of the power—and the responsibility—we have to be the same. Though the stories are from different generations, races, genders, and faiths, these individuals share a common denominator: *the lighthouse effect*.

In illuminating the pathway to safety, the lighthouse offers us a chance to move beyond the fears and uncertainty of the storm and toward the peace and calm of safe harbor. So it is with the people who most impact our lives. For while lighthouses of the sea have stood watch for millennia, the most powerful and enduring lighthouses are the human ones.

*Steve Pemberton*



## CHAPTER 4

# GREG ANTHONY

*Our fate is to face the world as orphans,  
chasing through long years the shadows  
of vanished parents. There is nothing for  
it but to try and see through our missions  
to the end, as best we can, for until we  
do so, we will be permitted no calm.*

—KAZUO ISHIGURO

Several years ago I requested my case file from the Massachusetts Department of Social Services. It was a long and bureaucratic process, but that didn't particularly bother me. By then I'd met most of the Pemberton and Murphy families, heard the stories of my mother and father, and figured that I already knew everything I needed to know about my early childhood years. I turned out to be quite wrong about that.

## *The Lighthouse Effect*

As I was reading through the large file, a faded color photo fell from its pages. It landed picture-side up, and on it appeared a young boy about seven or eight years old. His eyes were a bluish-green, and he wore a patterned blue-and-white shirt with a collar so large it made him appear as if he did not have a neck. "They've put another child's photo in my case file," I thought. "I'll have to mail this back."

I flipped it over, looking for any identifying information, and saw the unexplainable: my birth name, Steve Klakowicz. "Really?" I thought. I turned it back over to look at the picture again. "That's me?" I had never seen a picture of me as a young boy, and to the best of my knowledge no such picture existed. To see one, then in my midthirties, left me speechless.

The longer I stared at the photo, the more the details of the picture came flooding back. I remembered a social worker had brought me to Buttonwood Park in the west end of the city of New Bedford. She had let me explore all the fun contraptions, and I had gravitated to the swing set. She stopped me while I was trying to swing to the heavens and snapped my picture. The childhood joy of being in a park, and of having my picture taken for the first time, was captured in my gleeful expression in a photo that had lain dormant in my case file for thirty years. By the time the picture was taken, I was, in the eyes of the family court, an orphan.

There are generally considered two types of orphans, biological and social. A biological orphan is a child who has no living parent. A social orphan has parents who are living but are unable to provide for their child, so the child

must find sanctuary elsewhere. The United States has an all-encompassing definition that includes both meanings: “a minor bereft through death or disappearance of, abandonment or desertion by, separation or loss from, both parents.”<sup>1</sup> No one could have told you exactly what group I belonged to because my father had not been publicly identified, not by my mother or the social services system. My mother’s whereabouts were unknown, and her social workers speculated that even if she was alive, it would not be for much longer, given her difficulties. No one, including her own family, thought it would be a good idea for me to be returned to her.

The night I was taken from my mother, I was brought to St. Mary’s Home, an orphanage located on Kempton Street. I would not be there long; the desire to find me a permanent home was a reflection of an ongoing shift away from orphanages and toward foster care and state-supported care of dependent children. In the mid-1800s there were estimated to be one thousand orphanages in the US, housing over one hundred thousand children. Today orphanages, at least how we have historically defined them, no longer exist.

The concept of the orphan has been with us since ancient times. In the Bible, the word *orphan* is mentioned twenty-seven times. Charles Dickens wrote frequently of orphans, from *Oliver Twist* to *Great Expectations*. For thirty years *Annie* held the record as the longest running show on Broadway. One of the most popular holiday movies of all time, *Home Alone*, tells the story of a young Kevin McCallister, who is orphaned—albeit temporarily and unintentionally—by his parents. Batman, Spider-Man,

and Superman have different superpowers but one particular thing in common: they are all orphans—as were Cinderella, Jane Eyre, Frodo Baggins, Harry Potter, and James Bond. The list goes on.

We have alternately mythologized and romanticized the idea of the orphan. As parents we place these stories in our children's lives so they can develop empathy and gratitude and perhaps as a last-ditch strategy to get them to clean up their rooms. As young children we are drawn to the orphan narrative because though these fictional orphans are similar to us in age, they had to become adults sooner, often outsmarting or defying real adults along the way. They had a freedom and a secret kind of strength we long for.

The real picture of orphans in the world is an entire universe away from the mythologized versions that have sunk into our consciousness. The numbers are so astonishing, you have to do a double take to make sure you are reading them correctly: there are 140 million orphans in the world, a number that grows by 5,700 *each* day. Ninety-five percent of them are over the age of five. In the United States, there are nearly 450,000 children in foster care, and 117,000 of them are waiting to be adopted. Over half will spend anywhere from two to five years in the foster care system. For older children, each year 23,000 of them will “age out,” which means that when the kids reach their eighteenth birthday, society believes it has met its commitment to them, and they are no longer eligible to receive any type of support.<sup>2</sup> It is no accident that many of these young people, who have just left one system, find themselves part of another: homelessness, addiction, and incarceration.

Greg Anthony

Orphans exist in a world marked by questions and uncertainty: Where have I come from? Who do I look like? Where are my mother and father? When are they coming for me? A cloud of wandering hangs over them: various placements, numerous social workers, and frequent school transfers. The one thing they know for certain is that nothing is certain.

They are always on the lookout for someone to pull them out of this ambiguous existence. A teacher who offers them something other than a dead-eyed smile of pity or a social worker who uses their name when they talk to them might be the person to provide them sanctuary. Whenever they see anything that approaches a normal family, they imagine going home with them, being seated at their dinner table, and being part of their family. When they hear people complain about growing up in a single-parent household, their real reaction is one of envy. *So you had one parent?*

Whatever orphans lack in normalcy, they make up for in resiliency. They pay attention to detail; they anticipate challenges and take nothing for granted. Still, it is hard to trust anyone; they survive by knowing that they're almost certainly going to be let down, and they're best prepared if they simply expect it.

Greg Anthony was born into a large family in Tiverton, Rhode Island. There were thirteen siblings in all, and Greg, the last boy, fell into the younger group. As the youngest boy, he found himself on the receiving end of his older brothers' entertainment, including one memorable time when they put him in a potato sack and rolled him down a flight of stairs. Clothes and shoes were handed down from one child to the next. Their mother was a stay-at-home mom, and

## *The Lighthouse Effect*

their father was a draftsman trying to provide for the family as best he could.

Tragedy struck the family often. One of the siblings died in a car accident, and another during a failed operation. Being part of a large family allowed them to endure these heartbreaks with some degree of support because, while they did not have much, they still had each other—until they didn't.

One particular evening, when Greg was three years old, a fire broke out in the attic of their small home on Crandall Road. It was the second fire in several months, but the second one was so severe that the house was no longer livable. It would have devastating consequences for the family. With no means to create an alternative living situation, his parents made a decision regarding the younger children: they would have to be sent to orphanages. Greg and one set of twins went to Mount St. Francis orphanage in Woonsocket, and the three brothers closest to him in age went to a different orphanage in another part of the state. Greg heard later on that his older brothers kept running away from the orphanage back to the place where their mother lived.

Greg's introduction to orphanage life was harsh. The staff first cut off all his hair, and he bolted away, running down the hill as fast as his little legs could carry him. They sent the janitor after three-year-old Greg to retrieve him and bring him back to Mount St. Francis. On his return, they put him in a crib with the rails up so he couldn't get out. And it worked because he never ran away again. Still, he was defiant and often found himself on the receiving end of discipline, including being dunked naked in a tub of cold

water. This didn't quite have the effect they hoped for— young Greg loved the cold water.

At Greg's new residence, the boys and girls were separated, and though Greg knew his sisters were there, he rarely saw them. On the occasions he did, it was through a chain-link fence that separated the play areas. When the three of them spied each other, they would run to the fence and lock fingers through the rusty divider.

This was the only family contact Greg would have during his time in the orphanage. He has no recollection of visits from his mother or father.

After a few years, with no contact from his parents, Greg and his sisters were sent to another orphanage, St. Aloysius in Greenville, Rhode Island. When he arrived at the second orphanage, the other boys devised an initiation: Greg would have to get in the boxing ring and fight bigger kids. They underestimated the new arrival, however, and were unaware that he was prepared to fight to the bitter end. They kept sending someone older and older until finally a boy much older got the best of him. Still, he had sent a message: his quietness should not be interpreted as weakness.

While there, Greg became acutely ill and was hospitalized for some time. While he was in the hospital, he learned his mother had passed away. Greg doesn't remember how he and his sisters got to the funeral or back to the orphanage that day. What he does remember is seeing the mysterious figure of his father at the funeral. But there was no interaction; he can only remember seeing him.

He remembers his older brothers were there, and he recalls them challenging him to a race because they'd heard

## *The Lighthouse Effect*

he was fast. He was still too weak to run, and though he tried, he simply couldn't keep up. He was nine years old.

As Greg entered the sixth grade, he had now been in orphanages for eight years. A prospective foster parent came to meet him and sought to become his legal guardian, but the officials at the orphanage told the foster parent that the family's wishes were that the three siblings remain together. *If you want Greg, you'll have to take his sisters as well.* Greg recalls being struck by the reference to his family. "They know I'm here," he thought. As far as he was concerned, they had forgotten about him, and that they had any feelings about him one way or another struck him as odd. Now knowing that his family knew he was there and still had not come to see him or his sisters was a hard reality to accept. So was his conclusion: *they are never going to come for us.*

The foster home functioned more like a group home, and it felt more like a form of indentured servitude than it did a family. He was required to wait on the foster mother hand and foot, and there were always many foster children in the home. Greg's plan was to graduate high school and then go out on his own where he would be free to make his own choices for the first time in his life.

One day, while coming home from a local gym, Greg saw an unfamiliar car parked at the curb. His sisters were standing there talking to a stranger through the car window. He had come to be protective of them, and he quickened his pace to get to them. When his sisters saw him, they yelled excitedly, "It's Daddy!"

He walked up to the car window, and there his father was. "Hi, how ya' doing?" his father asked.



"Fine," Greg said quietly. An awkward silence followed, and then his father drove away. He can remember nothing else about the exchange. Greg doesn't know if he tried to come inside and his foster mom wouldn't let him in the house. He was simply there, sitting in the car for about two minutes, and then he was gone.

Greg attended private school and paid the tuition himself by working summers at the local amusement park and wherever else he could find work. While in high school, Greg became an outstanding student-athlete, and soon enough, college coaches started calling. He ultimately chose Boston University on an academic scholarship.

The next time Greg saw his father, he was in college. The siblings gathered on Thanksgiving Day at his oldest sister's home, and Greg remembers that he looked forward to going, primarily because his father would be there. They spent a few minutes quietly watching football. His father said, "I see you on TV," referring to Greg's success on the football field. It wasn't a long conversation.

As Greg was preparing to leave, his father took off the watch he was wearing and handed it to him. Greg would wear the watch every day, never taking it off. Not too long after, he was playing a game of basketball when the watch broke. When he returned home, his foster mother shared the sad news that his father had died that afternoon around three o'clock. Instinctively, Greg reached into his pocket for the broken watch and saw that it had broken right at three o'clock.

Greg went on to earn his degree in occupational therapy at Boston University. He had a little taste of the NFL with

## *The Lighthouse Effect*

the Pittsburgh Steelers before injuries curtailed his career. He worked as an occupational therapist for a time and then returned to school for a second degree in physical therapy at the University of Connecticut while also serving as an assistant football coach.

While there, he met a fellow student, Sonja Hendrix. They saw each other every Tuesday and Thursday, as she was on the student board of governors and had office hours in the student union. As she left, Greg would be walking up the street headed toward the gym. They passed each other frequently and would say hello but did not have a meaningful conversation until they finally met at a campus party when he asked her to dance. Shortly thereafter they began dating and decided early on that their future was going to be together. They were married on a Saturday, and Sonja graduated the next day.

The happy couple lived in Rhode Island for several years before moving to Florida and then settling in Athens, Georgia, where Greg was offered the opportunity to serve as director of rehabilitation at St. Mary's Hospital. Along the way, Sonja and Greg welcomed three children into the world.

Orphans often live in the world of questions. As time and life move on, they get answers to some of them. Yet there are other questions that remain. Though he had moved forward in life, and had finally found peace in having a family of his own, Greg often wondered, "How come no one ever came to see me? Why hadn't they tried to make a connection?"

But one day, when he least expected it, someone did come looking for him.

Greg Anthony



The day I graduated from Boston College, I did so alone. There was no family to celebrate this important milestone. It had been that way for so long, I did not think it particularly odd until I walked across campus toward the ceremony and saw hundreds of families gathered around my classmates. “I came from somewhere,” I thought. “Where was that place? Who were those people?” I, who had secretly wished to become a detective as a young boy, was determined to find out.

That journey for identity would take several years and many twists and turns. One of those twists found me back in my old neighborhood, standing in front of 11 Lincoln Street, where I lived with my mother for the first three years of my life. That home, a two-story colonial, was two blocks from my foster home. As a young boy, I had passed it on many occasions, unaware that a chapter in my life had unfolded in that very place.

I would also come to learn the identity of my father, once one of the top amateur fighters in the world, who had been murdered when I was five years old. He had told no one of my existence, sealing my fate as an orphan. For years, his rather large family mourned his passing, unaware he had a child. My suddenly telling them that I was Kenny Pemberton’s son was quite a surprise.

When I called to tell his family who I was, they were initially skeptical. “Kenny didn’t have any children, and if he did, we would have known. Why hadn’t he told anyone

## *The Lighthouse Effect*

about you?” I wanted to know the answers to those questions as much as they did. Still, whatever doubts they may have held ended as soon as they saw me in person. Though I had no memory of my father, they certainly did and knew I bore an uncanny resemblance to him.

I made it a point to meet all of Kenny’s family and introduce myself. Many of them were still in New Bedford, but others had left the area. Almost a year later, I had met all his siblings except his youngest brother. As I walked up the long tree-lined walkway toward his home that spring afternoon, I was taken in by the quiet and peace of the neighborhood.

When I rang the bell, a tall brown-complexioned man answered the door. He extended his hand warmly. “Hi, I’m Greg.” Greg Anthony Pemberton, the ninth of thirteen children, is my uncle.

As he ushered me into the living room, I was struck by the physical similarities between us. Perhaps it was the many years I had spent as a young boy trying to determine my identity, but seeing someone I resembled was still surreal. He introduced me to his wife, Sonja, and somewhere in the house I could hear the sounds of young children laughing while playing a game of hide-and-go-seek. Eventually they came out of their hiding spots and introduced themselves. Family pictures of Greg and Sonja with their children adorned the house. There was also a wedding photo of Greg’s parents, Mary and Joseph—my grandparents.

We talked about his path to becoming a physical therapist, his college days, and how he and Sonja met. I shared the same about my own college days and my relatively new career working in higher education. We had pledged rival

*Greg Anthony*

fraternities while at our respective universities and enjoyed some good-natured teasing about whose fraternity was better. As the conversation turned to our early years, the similarities astounded us. It was as if we'd had nearly identical childhoods, just fifteen years apart.

We'd both been separated from our mothers before the age of five. The day we left her was the last day we'd ever see her; they both passed away at the age of forty. Our fathers were either absent or distant figures in our lives, neither assuming responsibility for us. We'd spent years of our childhood waiting for family to come bring us back home. But they never did. What followed was the nomadic existence of an orphan, trying to find connection and meaning in a world that offered neither. We had both ultimately aged out of the foster care system and only a college acceptance letter averted further wandering. We belong to a rare fraternity of individuals who have never experienced what it feels like to have parents.

We've accepted that we will never fully understand some things: why his mother and father never came for him or why my father never took responsibility for me. We can dig deep into the well of justification as a way of trying to explain things to ourselves, but the truth is that there is no explanation, at least none that will be sufficient.

Some things are not our fault, but they are our responsibility. Greg and I resolved that this cycle of orphanhood and disruption, pain and loss had to end. That simple idea—that it must end—drove both of us long before we met. Nearly every life choice we made was with that goal in mind. It's why, against seemingly improbable odds, we both found

## *The Lighthouse Effect*

a way not only to attend college in Boston—he at Boston University and I at Boston College—but also graduate and earn additional degrees. We chose careers that were more like social missions, in part because we wanted to change people's lives for the better.

Most importantly, we focused our efforts on family, understanding that a family of your own is the only thing that can ever truly fill the void of losing the family you'd been born into. To achieve that, we decided we would be the very thing we never had. We chose to be husbands and fathers even though we'd had no frame of reference for how to do that. We are not perfect, but we have tried to make a perfect effort.

When Greg and I parted the first time we met, he walked me out to my car. The kids came pouring out of the house behind him, climbing on him as if he were a human jungle gym. He was, I could tell, a natural dad—and a good one too. I thanked him for welcoming me to his home and for embracing me without reservation. He smiled gently and replied, "Well, I appreciate that, but I am the one who should be thanking you."

"Why is that?" I asked.

He paused for a moment, looking down the quiet, tree-lined street. "When I saw you walking up the driveway, it brought back memories of a time when I went looking for my family. I thought they had simply forgotten about me, and so I had to go looking for them. To have somebody seek me out, who *wanted* to find me, is a real blessing."

Over the years since we first met, Greg and I have never stopped finding each other. Maybe that's how it is for those

Greg Anthony

who find family later on in life; we're always trying to make up for lost time. Our bond has grown and strengthened and has included other members of the Pemberton family. Greg and Sonja attended our wedding, and Tonya and I would do the same years later when his oldest daughter, Taryn, was married. When our first son arrived, we named him Quinn Gregory.

We gather for holidays now, and after dinner is over and the table is cleared, we bask in the glow of watching his three children and my three children enjoy one another's company. A knowing glance passes between us because we are aware of the long, hard road we traveled to create this moment. For the children, they have known only the comfort of this family, growing up in a world where there is only love and security, understanding their fathers' turbulent journeys but never experiencing them. And that's the way it should be.

The Pemberton family will continue to grow. Hundreds of years from now, we can imagine our descendants gathered together, enjoying all that family should be. Our journeys will be distant memories, if they are remembered at all. We have found peace in that truth. There is another truth too: Family is not only what you are born into. It is also who you find along the way.

## The Lighthouse Effect: Uncompromising Belief

At first glance, the term *uncompromising* describes a negative behavior, commonly associated with ego, stubbornness, and an unwillingness to find middle ground. There is a lot

## *The Lighthouse Effect*

of truth in this definition. But we all have to make compromises over the course of our lives. The challenge for many of us is to determine when we are willing to compromise and when we will not—and for what. Being uncompromising does invite uncertainty. We worry that we will be seen as too aggressive or that we are the only ones who feel a particular way about an issue. We are unwilling to draw a line for fear of judgment or being labeled a naysayer. But for Greg Pemberton, this line has always been clear.

What I have come to understand about my uncle is that his reaction to the adversity he had come upon was to fight against it. He was determined that the pain and struggle he'd experienced as a young boy would not carry forward into his adult life. He decided that he, the inheritor of a set of circumstances he neither created nor asked for, could put an end to them. To achieve that, he refused to see himself as a helpless victim blown about by the winds of chance. He would not be shackled by low expectations. Nor did he seek approval from others to determine his worth. He didn't settle for anything less than what his work ethic, sacrifice, and determination would bring him. In that sense, he was making an important statement about his own integrity, his value, and his right to find his own place in the world.

In this belief, Greg does not compromise. There is too much at stake, especially for his family. Over the years, he and Sonja have made it clear that I am part of that family. He has been as equally uncompromising about that as well, something I appreciate more than I can possibly express, especially the day I called him seeking his help.

Consider the times in your life that you needed a light-



Greg Anthony

house and one appeared. Whoever that person was did not compromise in their belief about what was possible for you. I suspect you consider them a lighthouse because they advocated for you, extolled your virtues, or told someone about your potential. They likely directed their uncompromising belief at you as well: nudging you, challenging you, pointing out to you the greater opportunity that was in front of you. Their uncompromising belief is a large part of why it is so easy to remember our own lighthouses. Time has taught you how important they were to you. You realize that without their intervention, your life could have wound up in an alternate history, a different kind of timeline that would not have brought you to where you are today.

In many ways, your lighthouses reflect the mindset of the lighthouse keeper in the yellow rain slicker on the cover of this book. This person stands with their feet firmly planted on the lantern deck, earnestly looking out to sea for any sign of someone who might need assistance from the rapidly approaching storm. There is no negotiation or compromise in the lighthouse keepers' belief that you are worthy of being guided.

### *Know Your North Star*

Polaris—better known as the North Star—is arguably our most well-known star. Surprisingly, this is not because of its radiance—astronomers speculate that it is not even in the top forty—but rather because of its steadiness and that it is easily identifiable. To our eye, the North Star rarely moves, and everything else in the sky appears to revolve around it.

In our lives, we need North Stars. Your North Star is

## *The Lighthouse Effect*

your personal mission, a goal to which you dedicate yourself and which keeps you centered and focused should you be tempted to wander. It informs the steps you take and the decisions—and the sacrifices—you are willing to make. North Stars can be short-term, long-term, or somewhere in between. Each one can be as short-term as the day ahead or a specific meeting or as long-term as ten years.

North Stars evolve over time. They are different when we are in high school, head into the workforce, or become a parent. Still, your North Stars always have the same characteristics in aligning your relationships and focusing your priorities. It helps order your steps by breaking down your life into smaller parts. You can see these goals in Greg's life. As a teenager, he worked multiple part-time jobs to save money to attend private school because he knew that would improve his chances of reaching the North Star of his life at the time: getting to college.

North Stars are the first building block of uncompromised belief. When we know what we are trying to achieve, we are less likely to be swayed by uninformed opinions and more inclined to make principled and ethical decisions. We know what will allow us to reach our North Star and what could derail us. When we find ourselves in conflict or having to make a tough decision, the North Star becomes our compass and our navigational guide, much as it did the sailors of long ago.

### *Protect Your Spirit*

Having uncompromising belief also means safeguarding your own spirit, defining who and what you want in your

Greg Anthony

life. I learned that stability matters a great deal to my uncle Greg, and he does not allow anything or anyone into his circle that takes him back to the emotions of instability that marked his early years. He does not dwell in negativity or pessimism. In the many years I have known him, I can't recall ever hearing him raise his voice or offer a disparaging word about another person.

Unfortunately, we live in a time of unprecedented toxicity. Civility seems to have faded away, and the common denominator of many interactions is rooted in rage, anger, rudeness, and shaming. Hatred has been steadily on the rise. Unlike generations past, we have to be more on the alert for things that invade our spirits, whether that be what news we digest or the relationships we have. Defining the sanctuaries that protect us matters. It could be the music we listen to, the apps we download (Calm is a particular favorite of mine), the extracurricular activities that soothe us, or the organizations we belong to. Having a place where we can simply *be*, without explanation or justification, is important.

This applies to our personal relationships as well. We can find ourselves in friendships or romantic relationships that don't lift us up but rather break us down or force us to doubt ourselves. We quietly ask ourselves, "How did I get here?" What complicates matters is that these relationships are important to us and we fear losing them.

### *Untie the Rope*

Imagine you are standing on a bridge, connected by a loose, single rope to someone you care about. The rope represents the strong bond and connection between you. All

## *The Lighthouse Effect*

seems well between you, but then the other person begins to pull away from you, headed in the opposite direction. You are puzzled by this and pull on the rope to get their attention; they look back at you and continue going the other way. You don't understand why, and you want to pull on the rope, but the rope is no longer loose but tight. They are dragging you in their direction. You try to dig your heels into the surface of the bridge, but you can't stop the slide. Panic rises as you realize they are now going over the side of the bridge. If you don't untie the rope, you will go over right along with them. The simple solution is to untie the rope, but there is a major dilemma in doing so: You care a great deal about this relationship, and you know they will fall. If you untie the rope, you'll feel as if you abandoned them.

What do you do? The answer is you untie the rope from yourself—and tie it to the bridge.

In doing so, you are saying that you care enough about them not to let them fall. You are also saying that you care enough about yourself and have an uncompromising belief in your own value not to go along with them. The bridge—perhaps their faith, their family, or their friends—is now their strength. What their source of strength can no longer be is you. Should they allow the bridge to be their strength and can find their way back to the top, you'll be there to reconnect, support, or find a way to tie the rope again.

### *Stand with Others*

Uncompromising belief is not only about pushing back against something we disapprove of. It also requires us to stand *for* something, whether that be a principle, a cause,

Greg Anthony

or another human being. Some of our most enduring movements in society, ones that have fundamentally changed America and made us a more inclusive society, are reflections of this very idea. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, women marched for the right to vote; fifty years later African Americans marched for the end of legal segregation and full participation in American society; people with disabilities did the same thing twenty years after that. Standing for something meaningful, positive, and for the greater good is more likely to endure than by simply saying what we are opposed to.

Often we don't speak up because we are afraid that we're the only ones who are feeling this way. We worry that we will expose ourselves to critics and judgment. But many times we are not alone in our experiences. Whenever we take a stand, we invite others who are sitting on the sidelines to join us. Those in leadership positions, whether it be in student government, teaching in the classroom, or on the board of the local parent-teacher association, can help create an environment where others can share dissenting points of view. Invite people to disagree with the majority opinion. If you're responsible for making decisions, ask people in the room what the group is *not* seeing. This protects us against groupthink or herd thinking.

Herd thinking, the tendency for individuals to blindly follow the crowd, can have devastating consequences. The Salem witch trials is one of history's most famous examples. In the late 1600s, accusations of witchcraft began running through a small Massachusetts village. By the time it was over, one hundred fifty people had been accused and jailed.

## *The Lighthouse Effect*

Nineteen of them were ultimately executed because no one was willing to step up and challenge the group. The failure of the *Challenger* disaster in 1986 has largely been attributed to herd thinking; scientists knew there was the potential for fault in the shuttle's O-rings when the temperature dropped below a certain level, but groupthink prevented those concerns from being heard. More recently, cancel culture, the online affinity to culturally block a popular figure because of a perceived offense, has also taken hold. We must all recognize when we are part of these behaviors, intentionally or unintentionally.

When a human lighthouse sees you in the midst of your storm, it points you toward safety and protection. In doing so, it also sends you an uncompromising message of belief: Yes, the situation is difficult, but you are not alone. I'm standing right here with you, and I know the way home.

I can still remember the final day I walked up the steps of that abusive foster home with my social worker, Mike Silvia. A violent confrontation had unfolded that cold December morning, and I had fled the house and headed for Mike's office. An argument ensued between him and my foster parents, and they finally agreed to release me from their custody. Mike and I returned to the home to get my belongings, both of us bracing for what was certainly going to be a confrontation. I vividly recall standing shoulder to shoulder with him and him nodding ever so slightly at me, as if to say, "Whatever is on the other side of that door, we are going to face it together." We all need someone to come stand by us from time to time. And we can also stand beside another, to answer their call for support in a time of need.

*Greg Anthony*

Many years after we first met, this was the kind of call I had to make to my uncle Greg.



There have always been questions in the Pemberton family as to whether my father, Kenny, knew of my existence. The reasoning was that had he known, there is simply no way he would have abandoned me. As one of the top amateur fighters in the country, he was respected and feared. Still, he had a soft spot for children, and having a child, even if unexpected, would have required him to step forward to take responsibility.

The problem was that this did not mesh with the facts as I came to learn them. My mother had not only identified Kenny as my father to her own family but had told him as well. Two people who knew of their relationship, including one who witnessed the conversation between my parents about my pending arrival, told me that Kenny initially denied paternity, though he knew it was at least possible, given their relationship. A friend of Kenny's shared with me before his passing that he had gone to visit Kenny one time and found him taking care of a young boy, whom he remembered as me, in large part because my blue eyes did not match Kenny's deep brown ones. When he questioned Kenny about this, he had responded simply by saying, "This is my son." I appreciated the story, but I also knew it would be virtually impossible to prove.

I understood that Kenny's absence in my life was not

## *The Lighthouse Effect*

how his family wanted to remember him. But the question of his responsibility was a secondary matter to me. For years I had walked through the world with the weight of not knowing where I had come from. Finding my biological family had allowed me to finally put that burden down. Besides, I thought both could be true: that my father had many extraordinary qualities *and* he did not make the best decisions when it came to my sudden arrival in the world. Over time, and with the wisdom gained from my own lighthouses, I saw his lack of responsibility as a reflection of his own difficult childhood and the fact that he was twenty-one years old when I was born.

When I met the Pemberton family, I could see the resemblance between us, and so could they; it was very clear that I was a Pemberton and Kenny's son. They said as much, and so did their eyes. It was a look of recognition. When I petitioned a family court to change my last name from my birth name of Klakowicz to Pemberton, the Pemberton family did not protest.

Until one day, one of them did exactly that.

One of Greg's brothers decided nearly thirty years later that I was not a Pemberton after all. He penned a self-published, incoherent pamphlet, basing the title off my book, accusing me of making up the story of my early years and emphatically denying that Kenny Pemberton was my father. He offered no evidence for his claims about my childhood other than an uninformed speculative opinion. On the other hand, I had my case file, spanning twenty-five years, along with many hours of recorded interviews with Kenny's family and friends as well as public records.



*Greg Anthony*

In essence, I did not write anything I could not prove or defend.

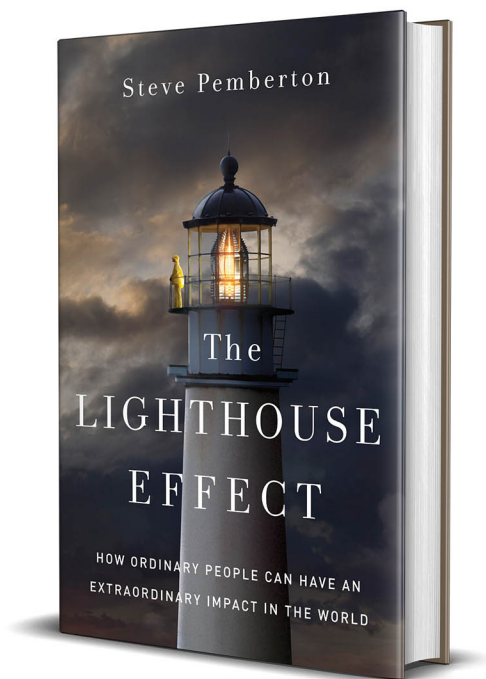
I can't say this broadside surprised me. I had been warned over and over again by his siblings and Kenny's friends that this particular family member was capable of this behavior. Over the years, I had followed their advice and kept my distance from him as a result.

Still, the allegation that I was not a Pemberton was far more serious, especially when he took to asserting that another man was my father, going so far as to include the deceased man's photo in his booklet. That was followed by a lengthy social media campaign selling his pamphlet, asserting time and time again that I had been untruthful. It was readily apparent that his only motivation was to sow seeds of doubt, an effort that was destined to fail.

My first thought was my children. I sat down with them to explain the situation and most important of all convey that Pemberton was indeed their last name, that I would never have allowed them to walk through the world with a name that was not theirs. I then called Uncle Greg to tell him what had unfolded. He was furious and frustrated, unable to understand why his brother had taken this route, especially nearly three decades after my initial meetings with the Pembertons. When I asked Greg to take a familial DNA test with me to prove scientifically what the Pembertons had told me years ago, he readily agreed. As we awaited the results, I remarked that if the DNA test showed we were not related, I was going to adopt him as my uncle in any event. When the test came back with 99.8 percent accuracy, we shared a long hug.

*The Lighthouse Effect*

Greg understood the impact of having someone try to rip away the identity I had spent so long trying to find. He understood perhaps better than most what a long search for family felt like, the rootlessness an orphan feels, the desire for connection they seek, and their restlessness until they find it. He also understood the importance of finding the truth wherever it might lead. It meant a great deal that he would stand by me in a time when I needed support. Greg's uncompromising belief is not only about his own worth and value but about mine as well.



# THE LIGHTHOUSE EFFECT

HOW ORDINARY PEOPLE CAN HAVE AN  
EXTRAORDINARY IMPACT IN THE WORLD

---

STEVE PEMBERTON

**“I want to feel good about the world again...I want to find genuine heroes and to be connected to goodness, to see it in myself and to be that for others.”**

Our polarized, divisive culture seems to be without heroes and role models. We are adrift in a dark sea of disillusionment and distrust and we need "human lighthouses" to give us hope and direct us back to the goodness in each other and in our own hearts.

In this stirring follow-up to his memoir, Steve Pemberton gives practical encouragement for how you can be a "human lighthouse" for others and through these inspiring stories will renew your hope for humanity.

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