

THE CRACKED LENS

Why We Believe the Lies We Live — and How We Learn to See Again

Jeffrey W. Allen

History is a teacher, not a dictator.

See differently. Think differently. Lead differently.

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This short publication is a reflective work about experience, growth, and leadership. It is not intended as a substitute for professional mental-health care.

A Note to the Reader

I have spent much of my life watching people.

Long before I understood why, I learned to pay attention to voices, expressions, changes in mood, what people said, and perhaps more importantly, what they did not say.

Eventually, I began paying the same kind of attention to myself.

Why did I react so strongly to certain things? Why did I sometimes expect rejection before it occurred? Why could I believe in the potential of another person while questioning my own? Why did some beliefs about myself feel unquestionably true even when the evidence suggested otherwise?

For years, I assumed the answers said something about who I was.

Eventually, I began asking a different question:

What if they said something about what I had learned?

That distinction changed my life.

I came to understand that we do not simply experience childhood. We interpret it. And when we are young, we often lack the ability to understand what is happening around us. So we explain it the best way we can.

A parent is angry, and a child thinks, I must have done something wrong. Love is withheld, and a child wonders, What is wrong with me? Home feels unpredictable, and a child learns, I must always be prepared. No one talks about what is happening, and a child concludes, We do not talk about difficult things.

None of these conclusions requires someone to sit beside us and teach them. We absorb them.

Over time, those conclusions can become beliefs, and those beliefs become the lens through which we see ourselves, other people, relationships, opportunity, failure, love, leadership, and even hope.

The lens becomes so familiar that we eventually stop noticing it. We simply assume we are seeing clearly.

This little book is about that lens.

It is not about blaming the past. It is about understanding its influence. It is about recognizing that some of the things we have believed most deeply about ourselves may have been conclusions reached by a much younger version of us who was simply trying to make sense of the world.

And if those conclusions were learned, perhaps they can be examined. Perhaps they can be challenged. Perhaps some can even be unlearned.

I know this because I have spent much of my life doing exactly that. And I have watched others do it too.

The purpose of these pages is not to tell you what you should believe about yourself. It is simply to invite you to look through your own lens—and ask whether everything you see through it is still true.

1. The First Crack

I have come to accept something that is difficult to acknowledge.

Pain, tragedy, abuse, neglect, and emotional abandonment exist behind far more closed doors than we will ever completely measure. We collect statistics. We conduct studies. We tell stories. We try to understand the effects. But numbers can only tell us so much.

They cannot completely measure what happens inside a child who learns to listen for footsteps in another room. They cannot quantify what silence feels like when everyone in a house knows something is wrong but no one is willing to name it. They cannot fully describe what happens when love and fear occupy the same room.

I know something about that world. I also know that for much of my adult life I had to unlearn things I absorbed while living in it.

Over time, that experience has led me to a belief that sits at the center of this book:

Children are born believing they belong.

They do not enter the world wondering whether they are worthy. They do not lie in a crib questioning whether they are enough. They do not measure themselves against shame.

Those questions come later. They are learned. And because they are learned, they can also be unlearned.

The tragedy is not simply that children experience suffering. The deeper tragedy is that they are sometimes left to explain it alone. In that lonely act of explanation, the first crack can appear in the lens through which they will come to see themselves and the world.

The Explanations We Create

A child has very little control over the world into which they are born. They do not select their parents. They do not choose the emotional climate of their home. They do not decide whether affection will be freely given or carefully rationed, or whether the adults around them will be predictable or volatile, present or absent, encouraging or critical.

But children do something remarkable: they adapt.

They observe. They listen. They learn. They develop ways of understanding the world that help them function within the world they have been given.

The problem is that children must often interpret adult behavior without possessing an adult's ability to understand it. When something repeatedly goes wrong, a child searches for an explanation. Sometimes the easiest explanation is themselves.

Maybe I am the problem. Maybe I should not need so much. Maybe if I am better, this will not happen. Maybe if I stay quiet, everything will be okay. Maybe if I can anticipate what everyone needs, I can keep the peace.

These conclusions may help a child navigate childhood. Childhood eventually ends. The conclusions do not always leave with it.

The Lens

Imagine looking through a perfectly clear piece of glass. Then imagine a small crack appearing. You can still see through it. Another crack appears, then another. Eventually, you are still looking at the same world, but you are no longer seeing it exactly as it is. You are seeing it through what happened to the glass.

That is the cracked lens.

Abuse distorts vision. Shame distorts vision. Silence distorts vision. Fear distorts vision.

But that is not the end of the story.

Grace restores vision. Truth restores vision. Recognition restores vision. Love restores vision.

And eventually, service can become an expression of restored vision.

The cracks may remain part of our history. They simply do not have to determine everything we see.

What the Environment Teaches Us

Children absorb far more than words.

They absorb atmosphere. They absorb silence. They absorb fear. They absorb hope.

Long before they possess the ability to evaluate the world intellectually, they are already learning what the world feels like.

If love fills the environment, love becomes imaginable. If trust fills the environment, trust begins to feel natural. If encouragement fills the environment, confidence can quietly grow.

But the opposite is also true.

If fear fills the environment, fear can become normal. If silence fills the environment, silence can begin to feel like truth. If neglect fills the environment, a child may eventually wonder whether they were worth noticing at all.

This is where I believe we frequently misunderstand the lasting influence of childhood. The deeper tragedy is not only that children suffer. It is that they may be left to explain their suffering alone.

That explanation can become the first crack in the lens.

THROUGH YOUR LENS

What did the environment in which you grew up teach you, without anyone ever actually saying it?

What did you learn about love, trust, conflict, success, failure, asking for help, and your own worth?

For now, do not judge the lessons. Simply notice them.

2. Borrowed Conclusions

Some of the most powerful beliefs we carry were never consciously chosen. We simply acquired them.

They came from the homes in which we lived, the people who raised us, the experiences we could not understand, and the explanations we created when no better explanation was available.

Eventually, those explanations stopped feeling like conclusions. They began feeling like facts.

Do not trust too easily. Do not let people see weakness. Keep the peace. Do not ask for too much. Be useful. Be responsible. Do not disappoint anyone. Stay alert. Do not make mistakes. Take care of everyone else. Handle it yourself.

None of these ideas is necessarily destructive on its own. Responsibility can be a virtue. Independence can be a strength. Awareness of other people can become empathy. Hard work can produce extraordinary things.

The difficulty comes when we do not understand why we developed those qualities or what we believe will happen if we stop practicing them.

There is a difference between being responsible because responsibility reflects your values and being responsible because somewhere deep inside you believe everything will fall apart if you are not.

There is a difference between serving others because service gives your life meaning and serving because you believe usefulness is the price you must pay for belonging.

There is a difference between independence and being afraid to need anyone.

The behavior can look almost identical from the outside. The lens underneath it can be completely different.

When Adaptation Becomes Identity

Children are remarkably adaptive. Give a child an unpredictable environment and that child may become extraordinarily observant. Give a child responsibility too early and that child may become unusually capable. Give a child emotional instability and that child may learn to read a room before anyone else realizes the room has changed.

Those abilities can follow us into adulthood. Some may even contribute to our success.

The observant child may become an insightful counselor, teacher, leader, or coach. The child who learned responsibility may become the person everyone trusts. The child who learned to anticipate problems may become an exceptional strategist. The child who learned to read people may become highly effective at building relationships.

That creates an interesting paradox.

Sometimes our greatest strengths develop alongside our deepest wounds.

That does not make the strengths false. It simply means we should understand where they came from.

For many years, I watched people carefully. I watched expressions. I listened to changes in tone. I noticed when something seemed different. I learned to recognize what was not being said. Eventually, some of those same abilities became useful in my work with people.

But the ability did not begin as professional insight. It began as adaptation.

Understanding that distinction allowed me to appreciate the strength without continuing to live from the fear that originally helped create it.

We do not have to reject everything the past gave us. Sometimes we simply need to separate the gift from the fear that produced it.

THROUGH YOUR LENS

What strength in your adult life may have begun as an adaptation?

Does that strength still serve you or does the fear behind it sometimes still make the decisions?

The Stories We Stop Questioning

Every life develops a narrative.

This is who I am. This is what people expect from me. This is what I am good at. This is what I am not capable of. This is what happens when I trust people. This is what happens when I fail. This is how relationships work. This is what I deserve.

Most of us do not wake up one morning and consciously write these sentences. They accumulate experience after experience, reaction after reaction. Eventually, they become so familiar that we stop hearing them as interpretations. We hear them as truth.

That is one of the most powerful effects of the cracked lens. It does not necessarily change the world in front of us. It changes the meaning we assign to what we see.

Two people can experience the same criticism. One hears, There is something I can learn here. Another hears, I knew I was not good enough.

Two people can experience disagreement. One thinks, We see this differently. Another feels, The relationship is in danger.

Two people can encounter failure. One sees information. Another sees identity.

The event may be similar. The interpretation is different. And the interpretation often reveals the lens.

3. When the Past Enters the Present

The past rarely announces itself.

It does not walk into the room and say, I am something you learned thirty years ago.

Instead, it appears as a reaction. A hesitation. A fear. An assumption. A need to control. A reluctance to trust. An inability to receive praise. An overwhelming need to succeed. A tendency to withdraw. A desire to make everyone happy.

This is why simply leaving a difficult environment does not necessarily free us from its influence.

We can leave the house. We can leave the neighborhood. We can build careers. We can raise families. We can become respected. We can accomplish things the child we once were could never have imagined.

And still carry the lens.

I have spent much of my life observing my own behavior, not because I wanted to become someone entirely different, but because I wanted to understand why certain parts of me sometimes felt disconnected from the person I believed I wanted to be.

I questioned reactions that seemed automatic. I challenged beliefs that did not feel entirely like my own.

That process took time. It still does.

Awareness rarely arrives all at once. Sometimes it arrives as discomfort. Sometimes someone we trust points out a pattern. Sometimes we recognize ourselves in another person's behavior. Sometimes life simply repeats the same lesson often enough that we finally become curious about our role in it.

There is an enormous difference between asking, What is wrong with me? and asking, Why might I respond this way?

The first question contains judgment. The second contains curiosity.

Judgment tends to close doors. Curiosity opens them.

The Power of the Pause

One of the most important things we can learn is that a reaction and a response are not the same thing.

A reaction often comes from history. A response can come from awareness.

Between the two is a small but powerful space: a pause.

Sometimes only seconds.

But within that pause we can begin asking: What just happened? What am I feeling? What story am I telling myself about what happened? Is that story supported by what is actually happening now? Or does it feel familiar because I have experienced something like it before?

This is not about distrusting our instincts. Instincts can protect us. It is about becoming curious about them.

Not every alarm signals a present danger.

Sometimes an alarm is simply very well practiced.

4. The Question That Changed Everything

I believed something inside me was broken, for much of my life.

I did not necessarily say those words aloud. Brokenness does not always announce itself that clearly.

Sometimes it disguises itself as striving. Sometimes as perfectionism. Sometimes as independence. Sometimes as the inability to accept that what we have accomplished is enough. Sometimes it appears in the quiet conviction that everyone else seems to understand something about life that we somehow missed.

But beneath those different expressions can be the same assumption:

Something about me is not right.

That belief is extraordinarily powerful because once we accept it, we begin collecting evidence for it.

A relationship fails. See? Someone rejects us. There it is again. We make a mistake. I knew it. Someone else succeeds where we struggled. More proof.

The cracked lens begins confirming itself.

Then, eventually, I began asking a different question.

Turning Point

What if it was not me that was broken?

What if the way I had learned to see myself was?

That question did not instantly change my life. It did something more important. It gave me permission to investigate it.

What if some of the things I had accepted as facts about myself were actually interpretations? What if some of my fears were not predictions? What if some of my limitations were conclusions? What if the voice I assumed was mine had borrowed its language from somewhere else?

And what if healing was not about repairing a defective person?

What if it was about learning to see that person accurately?

That was the beginning of a very different journey.

5. Learning to See Again

We often imagine change as becoming someone else: a stronger person, a more confident person, a more successful person, a more disciplined person, a more loving person.

But I eventually came to understand healing differently.

I was not uncovering a broken person. I was uncovering a distorted way of seeing.

That realization changed everything.

Healing no longer meant becoming someone new.

Healing meant learning to see accurately.

There is freedom in that distinction.

If I believe I am fundamentally defective, then change requires reconstruction. But if I understand that some of what I believe about myself came through a distorted lens, then change begins with examination.

Is this true? Where did I learn it? Does it still serve me? What evidence supports it? What evidence contradicts it? What would I believe if fear were not making the decision?

These are deceptively simple questions. They can challenge conclusions we have carried for decades.

Restoration Does Not Erase History

A restored lens does not mean pretending the cracks never existed.

I do not believe growth requires us to rewrite history into something more comfortable.

What happened, happened. Loss matters. Abuse matters. Neglect matters. Betrayal matters. Words matter. Silence matters.

But acknowledging their impact is different from surrendering our future to them.

We can say, This shaped me, without saying, This must define me.

We can understand why we developed certain patterns without remaining obligated to repeat them.

We can have compassion for the child who adapted while giving the adult permission to choose differently.

That is why one sentence has become increasingly important to me:

History is a teacher, not a dictator.

History deserves to be heard. It deserves to be understood. It may explain a great deal.

But explanation does not have to become destiny.

THROUGH YOUR LENS

Complete this sentence: Growing up, I learned that I needed to be _____ in order to be accepted.

When someone is disappointed in me, I tend to _____.

Which of these responses describes who you truly are and which describes what you learned to believe?

6. Grace Restores Vision

There is a temptation, once we begin understanding our past, to replace one form of judgment with another.

First, we judge ourselves. Then we discover where some of our beliefs came from and begin judging the people who helped create them.

Sometimes anger is necessary. Sometimes it is overdue. There are experiences that should never be minimized simply because the person responsible had struggles of their own. Understanding someone's history does not excuse the harm they caused.

But eventually I discovered another possibility.

Grace.

I do not mean pretending something did not happen. I do not mean excusing abuse, neglect, betrayal, or cruelty. And I certainly do not mean returning ourselves to relationships or environments that remain harmful.

Grace is something different.

Grace allows us to understand without requiring us to excuse.

That distinction took me a long time to understand.

For years, I thought there were only two choices: either what happened was wrong, or I had to understand the person who caused it.

Eventually, I realized both could be true.

I could acknowledge the harm and become curious about the human being who caused it. I could recognize what was missing in my childhood while also wondering what had been missing in theirs. I could hold someone accountable in my own understanding without allowing anger to become the permanent caretaker of my life.

Grace did not change history.

It changed my relationship with history.

And that changed what I could see.

Understanding Is Not Permission

Understanding why someone behaved as they did does not mean deciding the behavior was acceptable.

Sometimes people confuse forgiveness, grace, and reconciliation. They are not necessarily the same thing.

We can understand someone without trusting them. We can forgive without returning to the same relationship. We can develop compassion without abandoning boundaries. And we can recognize another person's wounds without volunteering to be wounded by them again.

One of the consequences of growing up in a difficult environment is that boundaries can become confusing.

If you learned early to monitor other people's feelings, you may eventually believe those feelings are your responsibility. If you learned to keep the peace, saying no may feel selfish. If acceptance was conditional, disappointing someone may feel dangerous.

That is another distortion of the lens.

Healthy relationships do not require us to disappear in order to preserve them.

7. Recognition Changes Us

There is something remarkably powerful about being seen.

Not noticed. Seen.

There is a difference.

To be noticed is for someone to recognize that we are present. To be seen is for someone to recognize something about who we are.

Sometimes a single person can begin changing the way we see ourselves simply because they see something in us that we cannot yet see.

A teacher. A coach. A counselor. A friend. A spouse. A mentor. A colleague.

Someone who says, in one way or another: I see you. I believe you. I believe in you. There is more here than you realize.

Recognition does not erase the cracked lens. But it can challenge it.

If I believe I am incapable and someone repeatedly entrusts me with responsibility, eventually there is a contradiction I must examine. If I believe my voice does not matter and someone genuinely wants to hear what I think, something shifts. If I believe I am unworthy of love and someone consistently treats me with dignity, the old conclusion begins encountering new evidence.

This is one reason relationships matter so deeply in healing.

We do not form our understanding of ourselves entirely alone. And we do not always revise it alone either.

Borrowed Hope

There are times in life when we cannot yet believe something better about ourselves.

Someone else may have to believe it first.

I think of that as borrowed hope.

We borrow another person's confidence until we can develop some of our own. We borrow their perspective until our vision becomes clearer. We borrow their belief that tomorrow can be different until we are strong enough to imagine tomorrow ourselves.

There is nothing weak about that.

Human beings have always grown in relationship with other human beings.

Eventually, though, borrowed hope must become something more.

Someone can hold the light for us.

But eventually we have to learn to see.

8. Truth Restores Vision

If grace allows us to look at history differently, truth allows us to look at ourselves differently.

And truth is not always comfortable.

Sometimes the cracked lens makes us see ourselves as less than we are. Sometimes it does the opposite. It protects us from seeing things about ourselves that need to change.

That is important, because this book cannot simply be about discovering all the ways other people shaped us.

At some point, adulthood asks something more difficult:

What am I responsible for now?

I may not be responsible for what I learned as a child. I am increasingly responsible for what I continue to do with it as an adult.

Understanding why I reacted a certain way could provide context. But context could not become a permanent excuse.

If my history caused me to distrust people, understanding that mattered. But if that distrust damaged people who had done nothing to deserve it, eventually that became my responsibility.

If childhood taught me to withdraw during conflict, understanding the origin mattered. But if withdrawing prevented honest communication in my adult relationships, I had something to work on.

If being responsible too early taught me to control situations, I could have compassion for the child who developed that strategy. But the adult still had to learn when to let go.

This is where truth becomes liberating.

Not because truth always feels good.

But because truth returns choice.

Explanation Is Not Destiny

There is an enormous difference between saying, This is why I am this way, and saying, This may help explain why I learned to respond this way.

The first can become a prison. The second opens a door.

Explanation gives us context. Awareness gives us options. Responsibility gives us agency.

And agency is where change becomes possible.

I cannot change what happened.

I can change what happens next.

THROUGH YOUR LENS

What pattern in your life can you now explain more clearly?

What would responsibility look like without turning that understanding into self-blame?

9. Rewriting the Story

We all tell stories about our lives. Some are factual. Some are interpretations. Most are combinations of both.

The challenge is learning to distinguish between them.

Perhaps your father rarely praised you. That may be a fact: My father did not praise me.

But somewhere along the way, the fact may have acquired an interpretation: I was not worth praising.

Those are not the same statement.

Perhaps a relationship ended. That happened. But Everyone eventually leaves me is an interpretation.

Perhaps you failed at something important. That is an event. I am a failure is an identity.

The cracked lens has a remarkable ability to transform experiences into definitions.

Healing requires separating them again.

Something that happened to you is not necessarily something that defines you.

Something someone said about you is not automatically true.

Something you believed at ten does not deserve permanent authority simply because you have believed it for fifty years.

The Courage to Reconsider

Changing a long-held belief can be surprisingly uncomfortable.

Even painful beliefs can feel familiar. And familiarity can masquerade as safety.

If I have spent decades believing that I must always be strong, allowing someone to help me may initially feel wrong. If I have always believed that conflict threatens relationships, honest disagreement may feel dangerous. If I have measured my worth through accomplishment, rest may feel irresponsible. If I have spent my life caring for others, asking what I need may feel selfish.

The old lens will resist.

It may whisper: This is not who you are.

Perhaps.

Or perhaps it is not who you have to be anymore.

That is worth considering.

10. Love Restores Vision

Love is one of the most frequently used words in our language and one of the most difficult experiences to define.

For someone whose early understanding of love became intertwined with fear, unpredictability, absence, or conditional acceptance, receiving healthy love can be surprisingly difficult.

We may say we want it. But when it arrives, we may not recognize it.

Healthy love can feel almost too quiet.

It does not require constant vigilance. It does not make us earn our place every morning. It does not disappear every time we disappoint someone. It allows disagreement. It allows imperfection. It allows space. It allows truth.

And perhaps most importantly:

Healthy love allows us to remain present without performing for our belonging.

That can take time to learn.

If you spent years believing belonging had to be earned, unconditional acceptance can initially feel suspicious. The lens expects the conditions to appear eventually.

Sometimes healing means allowing ourselves to discover that they will not.

11. From Healing to Purpose

For a long time, I thought healing was primarily about the person who had been hurt.

That makes sense. When we are hurting, survival occupies enormous emotional space. We want relief. Understanding. Peace. Freedom.

But over time, I began noticing something else.

As the lens becomes clearer, our attention begins moving outward.

We start noticing other people differently. We become more curious. Perhaps less judgmental. We recognize that the behavior in front of us may have a history behind it.

We begin asking not only, What is wrong with this person? but, What might this person have experienced?

That does not mean tolerating destructive behavior. It means seeing human beings more completely.

And for me, that is where healing began connecting with purpose.

Service as Restored Vision

I keep returning to a simple progression:

Abuse distorts vision.

Shame distorts vision.

Silence distorts vision.

Fear distorts vision.

Grace restores vision.

Truth restores vision.

Recognition restores vision.

Love restores vision.

Service becomes an expression of restored vision.

That final sentence matters because service changes the question.

For years, much of our internal life can revolve around: What happened to me?

That is an important question. Sometimes it is essential.

But eventually another question becomes possible:

What can happen through me?

That question points toward purpose.

Pain does not automatically produce wisdom. Suffering does not automatically make us compassionate. Difficulty does not automatically make us better people. We still have choices to make.

But when experience is examined, understood, and integrated, something remarkable can happen.

What once made us vigilant can become awareness. What once made us sensitive can become empathy.

What once made us feel powerless can deepen our commitment to helping others discover their own agency.

What once isolated us can eventually connect us.

The wound does not become good.

But something good can grow around it.

THROUGH YOUR LENS

Where has a difficult experience increased your capacity to notice or help someone else?

What can happen through you now that could not have happened before?

12. Leadership Through a Clearer Lens

This idea extends beyond personal healing. It changes how we lead.

Leadership is often described through strategy, communication, vision, execution, and influence. All of those matter.

But every leader also brings a lens into the room.

We bring our histories. Our insecurities. Our assumptions. Our need for recognition. Our relationship with authority. Our tolerance for disagreement. Our response to failure. Our ability—or inability—to trust.

A leader who has not examined those things can unintentionally make other people carry them.

A leader afraid of failure may create a culture afraid to experiment. A leader who needs constant validation may surround themselves with agreement. A leader who equates disagreement with disloyalty may silence the very people whose perspectives are most needed. A leader who believes they must solve everything may prevent others from growing.

This is why self-awareness is not separate from leadership.

It is part of leadership.

The clearer the lens, the greater our ability to see people as they are rather than merely as they relate to our own fears and needs.

See Differently. Think Differently. Lead Differently.

Seeing differently begins with curiosity.

What am I assuming? What might I be missing? What part of my interpretation belongs to the present—and what part may belong to the past?

Seeing differently does not mean distrusting ourselves. It means becoming willing to examine what we see.

Once perception changes, thinking can change.

Instead of This always happens, we can ask, What actually happened this time?

Instead of That is just who I am, we can ask, Is that who I am, or is that how I learned to respond?

Instead of They do not respect me, we can ask, What evidence do I have—and what conversation might clarify it?

Different thinking creates different possibilities.

And eventually clearer seeing and clearer thinking affect how we show up in the world.

Leadership becomes less about proving ourselves and more about creating conditions in which other people can contribute.

We listen differently. We become less threatened by perspectives that challenge our own. We recognize potential. We create belonging. We allow people to grow. We serve.

That is why, for me, these three ideas belong together:

See differently.

Think differently.

Lead differently.

Leadership begins long before anyone gives us a title.

It begins with learning to lead ourselves.

13. The Restored Lens

I used to think healing meant becoming someone different.

I no longer believe that.

The more clearly I learned to see, the less effort change seemed to require.

I was not forcing myself into a better life.

I was learning to live from a truer one.

That does not mean every crack disappeared.

Some experiences remain part of us. There are memories we will always carry. There are losses that cannot be reversed. There are questions that may never receive satisfying answers.

A restored lens is not a perfect lens.

It is an examined lens.

We become aware of its cracks. We recognize where they distort. We learn when to question what we are seeing. And eventually we become less afraid of looking.

Perhaps that is what growth really is.

Not reaching some final state in which history no longer matters, but reaching a place where history no longer gets the final word.

One Last Reflection

Before closing this little book, I want to return to where we began.

Think about the child you once were.

Not as an abstraction. Picture that child.

What did they learn? What did they fear? What did they need? What conclusions did they reach because no one was available to provide a better explanation?

And then consider the adult you are today.

Which of those conclusions are you still carrying? Which have served you? Which protected you once but no longer need to? Which might you finally be ready to question?

And perhaps most importantly:

What would become possible if you learned to see yourself more accurately?

You do not need to erase your history. You do not need to pretend it did not matter. You do not need to become someone else.

You may simply need to look again.

History is a teacher, not a dictator.

A Final Thought

I have spent decades watching human beings struggle, adapt, grow, retreat, begin again, and surprise themselves.

I have done all of those things myself.

If there is one thing I have learned, it is that we are far more than the conclusions we reached during the most difficult moments of our lives.

The environment matters. Experience matters. History matters.

But none deserves absolute authority over what comes next.

The lens through which we learned to see the world may have cracked.

That does not mean our vision cannot change.

And sometimes the cracks themselves allow us to recognize things we might otherwise have missed: the person who feels invisible, the leader who doubts themselves, the child who has become too responsible too soon, the adult who still believes they must earn belonging, the person sitting across from us whose behavior makes far more sense once we become curious about their story.

Perhaps the goal was never to return to an uncracked lens.

Perhaps the goal is to understand the lens we have and learn to see clearly through it.

Then use what we see in service to something larger than ourselves.

See differently.

Think differently.

Lead differently.

About Jeffrey W. Allen

Jeffrey W. Allen is a leadership strategist, consultant, speaker, and longtime community-service leader whose work explores the connection between personal insight, purposeful leadership, and meaningful service.

Drawing on decades of experience working with individuals, organizations, and communities, Jeffrey challenges people to examine the assumptions that shape how they see themselves, how they make decisions, and how they lead others.

The Cracked Lens grew from his own process of examining the beliefs formed in childhood and discovering that history can explain us without controlling what comes next.

His broader work is guided by a simple invitation:

See differently. Think differently. Lead differently.

Learn more at JeffreyWAllen.com.