

# The Crying Place

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My wife Ellen died just over 13 months ago on March 3, 2025. She died from ovarian cancer. She was only 75 years old. I'm always thinking about her. Before she died, she told me many, many times that I should write some things about my life so that our grandchildren would have a true understanding of who I am. She suggested that I start by writing about a location on our farm which I have called, ever since I was a young boy, *The Crying Place*. So I am going to tell where The Crying Place is and explain, as best I can, why it has been important in my life.

I will start with some background about the Talheimer farm where I have lived almost my entire life. It is a big farm, a full 640-acre section, in the shape of a perfect one mile by one mile square bounded by four county roads. My grandfather Friedrich Talheimer, who was born in 1896 and who married my grandmother Madeline in 1922, bought the southeast quarter section of this square in 1923 with money from grandmother's family. He built a modest two-story farmhouse, raised a variety of animals, and grew many kinds of fruits and vegetables. Grandfather Friedrich was an exceptionally successful farmer who made very good money selling the farm products he produced, especially goat cheese and apples. He and my grandmother had seven children, four boys and three girls, beginning with my father Florian Talheimer who was born in 1923.

In 1939 Grandfather bought the two north quarter sections of the square. (With this addition, the Talheimer farm grew from 160 acres to 480 acres.) Only about half of this addition was farmable. The rest of the land, which was mostly in the northwest quarter section, contains two creeks flowing east that merge together to form Rogers Creek that exits the farm in the middle of the northern boundary. Much of the land near these creeks was heavily wooded. However, on the land between the north and south branches of Rogers Creek was a large marsh with water deep enough to easily float a canoe. In the middle of this marsh was a long glacier-formed drumlin, a longish, oval-shaped hill topped by an ancient forest that has never been logged — and will likely never be logged since it is effectively surrounded by a moat.

My father lived on this farm his whole life except during World War II when he was fighting in the Pacific theater. He was the only one of the boys interested in farming, so the farm was being worked by just him and grandfather after the War. My father married my mother Charlotte in 1946. In

1947, my sister Sylvia was born, and in that same year my father and grandfather built, with lumber they harvested on the farm and milled themselves, a new spacious house on the northeast quarter section of the square. I was born in 1949 and lived my entire childhood in this house.

I had a wonderful, but lonely childhood. There were no boys my age that lived near me, so I either played with Sylvia or played alone. I had great fun doing things with Sylvia, but she didn't like much getting wet or getting dirty. This meant I spent a lot of time exploring the area around the creeks west of our house alone. I was particularly fascinated with the drumlin hill that my father and grandfather told me so much about. They both promised many times to take me there, but they were always too busy.

In my own explorations, I found several ways to get across the north and south creeks by climbing on top of fallen trees. I could not find, however, a dry way to get onto the drumlin. The only approach that had a hope of success was to start at the western most part of the farm where the land gradually transitions from forest to marsh as one moves east. After many attempts, I discovered when the water level was low in the summer a circuitous route to the drumlin that required a fair amount of both climbing and jumping.

Exploring the drumlin for the first time at the age of nine was one of the most memorable moments in my life. The drumlin was covered by a dark climax forest with very little undergrowth. Many of the trees were gigantic. The biggest and most common were American beech and sugar maple trees. Yet there were also huge trees of other species. The most impressive of all was a majestic beautiful chinquapin oak. Almost all the trees I saw that first day on the drumlin are still there today, even the chinquapin.

I spent the rest of the summer improving my route to the drumlin by adding little bridges here and there and a rope line to help me get up and down a particularly steep incline. My favorite place on the hill was the highest point on the very eastern end of the drumlin that offered a beautiful view of the marsh, the joining of the north and south branches of Rogers Creek, and our house and farm buildings farther east. I visited the drumlin almost every day as soon as I could finish my chores. On each visit I would spend some time at my favorite place sitting on a log, enjoying the wonderful view, and listening to the birds and the wind in the trees.

My father worked hard to make me a good farmer. I learned all kinds of things from him. He wanted me to be strong and confident, someone who would never give up. He wanted me, even as a nine-year old, to be less sensitive and more like him and Grandfather. He didn't understand why so many things would make me cry. He would give me little lectures like, "To be a farmer, you need to be strong. Crying keeps you weak. You're not a little boy anymore. You must stop crying and show the world how strong you are." I learned to keep my crying inside until I could let it out when I was alone.

The next spring, my favorite cow was pregnant. I loved this cow so much. I remember with delight the day she was born. I was filled full of expectation as this cow approached the time to give birth. The time came one morning. I was there at her side with my father and grandfather. The birth progressed quickly and the calf was soon born. It tried to stand up, but immediately fell down. It tried again but fell again. It then remained on the ground breathing in a funny way with what looked like fear in its eyes. The calf's color had a strange hue.

Father took the calf's mother away and Grandfather quickly went to his house. I sat petting the calf and watching it struggle to breathe. I felt tears coming, but I held them back. Father returned without the cow and Grandfather came back with his rifle. Father told me to move away from the calf, and Grandfather without warning or hesitation shot the calf in the head. Father immediately ordered me not to cry. By some miracle, I remained silent. I looked at Father and Grandfather and wanted to ask them why the calf had to die, but I couldn't make the words come out.

I turned and walked away. When I was out of sight, I started running as fast as I could to the drumlin. When I got there, I went to my favorite spot and started crying. I spent the whole day crying on and off. I couldn't understand why Grandfather had to shoot the calf and why Father and Grandfather didn't want to help it. This experience haunted me for many years. I tried to never think about it because doing so would always make me want to cry. Whenever I would be in trouble or frightened, the image of the calf being shot would appear in my mind. I could not escape from the memory.

After this horrible day, my favorite spot on the drumlin became what I called *The Crying Place*. A place where I could go and be alone. A place where I could cry as much as I wanted or needed. I didn't tell anyone about The Crying Place, not even Mother — until I met Ellen.

Over the next few years, I slowly recovered from the trauma of the calf being shot and, for the most part, was doing extremely well. I was an excellent student, and I had a long-term girlfriend named Amanda who I thought was perfect in every way. At the beginning of my junior year I had three goals. First, I wanted to marry Amanda after graduation. Second, I wanted to win at the end of my senior year the medal for best academic achievement by a boy. And third, I wanted to go to Michigan State University and get a college education.

Things didn't happen as I hoped they would. At the end of my junior year in high school, Amanda broke up with me. I couldn't understand it. I thought we were the perfect couple meant to be together forever. What made it hurt so bad is that she wouldn't tell me why she decided to break up. I tried everything I could to get her to say why. All I ever got was one single inscrutable sentence: "You're too smart for me." It was clear that there was no way forward with Amanda, so I put all my energy and hope into winning

the medal for best academic achievement and getting into Michigan State.

I started trying to talk about college with my parents, but I never could get very far because mother wouldn't say much and father would say nothing at all. My mother eventually told me that my father didn't want me to go to college because, now that Grandfather was getting old, I was needed to help Father with the farm. I told Mother I was going to college no matter what she and Father thought. I started preparing for the battle that was to come with a plan A and a plan B. Plan A was to get a Bachelor of Arts degree and to go wherever that led me. Plan B was to study Agricultural Science and come back and work on the farm with Father.

The battle lasted three days. I yelled at my father and he yelled at me. He said that (1) I was needed on the farm, (2) college wasn't worth the expense because it wouldn't make me a better farmer, and (3) it would be very risky to try to achieve happiness by pursuing an intellectual life compared to living the life of a farmer. Both Plans A and B failed completely. I accepted the painful fact that I wouldn't be going to college next year — or probably any year later. I spent a lot of my senior year at The Crying Place.

A few days before graduation, my history teacher Mr. Roberts asked to see me after school. He told me that I wouldn't be the winner of the medal for best academic achievement for a boy. He knew this would be a huge disappointment for me. He said the teaching staff generally thought I deserved the award the most, but they decided it would be best for the school if the medal went to someone going to college. He did say, however, that I would be the winner of the medals for the best student in science and the best student in mathematics and this would be the first time that the school awarded the same student more than one subject medal. He also said that I received the most votes for the medal for history, but everyone agreed that two medals was enough for any student. Mr. Roberts congratulated me and thanked me for being his student and wished me well in my life after high school.

That summer after graduation was a very sad time for me. All my plans had been thwarted. I tried not to think much about the future. And then in fall 1967 I was drafted into the U.S. Army and soon sent to Vietnam. I won't attempt to try to describe the horror of Vietnam. It wasn't all bad. I got to know people different from me — Blacks, Hispanics, Catholics, Jews, city folk, and two or three rich kids. It was a new world: I depended on people I only partially knew to survive and they depended on me. But I saw and was involved in a lot of killing and, not killing of just enemy and friendly combatants, but killing of innocent and helpless women, children, and old people. Still today I don't understand why we had to have that horrible, horrible war!

When my platoon was rescuing the men in a downed helicopter, I was hit by a bullet that entered my left arm shattering my humerus. After a series of

surgeries, I was discharged early and sent home in great physical and mental pain, a thoroughly broken young man. I was angry with father since I would have received a deferment from military service if I were allowed to go to college. But I was the most angry with my country for sending into hell an 18-year boy who was completely unprepared and unqualified for the job he was forcefully given.

My life after Vietnam back on the farm went in slow motion. My father, who, to his credit, always respected the truth, understood that my capacity to contribute to the farm was limited. He and my mother had to patiently wait for me to recover. I was given only easy tasks. One such task was to pick up a used tractor we bought from Sanders Farm, one of the biggest and most productive farms in the County.

I drove there with our biggest truck pulling a large flatbed trailer. I was met at the farm, to my surprise, by a woman named Ellen, a daughter of Mr. Sanders. She told me all about the tractor and noted that the tractor's engine was in need of a tune-up. She then helped me get the tractor on the trailer. She exhibited an extraordinary confidence and an extraordinary power of discernment. I had never met a woman like her. We talked a bit before I left. I learned that she was the same age as me and was in college studying art but worked on the farm in the summers. When I told her that I had fought in Vietnam, her expression changed in a way that said she understood what that means.

A couple days later Father and I tried to tune the tractor's engine. We couldn't get the engine running well, even after a couple hours of effort. We were both at a loss about what was wrong. My Father said to call the Sanders Farm and tell them that the tractor we bought from them has a bad engine and we want to return the tractor. I called and asked for Ellen. She was apparently out in the field some place and took several minutes to get to the phone. She told me the engine was fine, but it was an engine that was not easy to optimally adjust. She said that, if it was okay with us, she would drive over to our farm tomorrow morning and show us how to get the engine running like new. When I told this to Father, he didn't say much, but I could see that he didn't think there was any chance that she could fix the engine because he asked me whether she was bringing a trailer with her. I said I didn't think so and said she sounded 100% confident that she would have the engine in perfect shape without much effort. My answer didn't change Father's scepticism.

The next morning Ellen arrived (without a trailer). We took her to the tractor and she immediately started making little adjustments, explaining each of them as she went along. Then she asked us to start the engine. The engine sounded pretty good, but she pointed out a couple of concerns and made a few more adjustments. After that the engine ran perfectly. I could see that Father was very impressed. She asked whether she could be given a

tour of our farm before she left. I told her I would be happy to do so. Father nodded his head and off we went.

I told Ellen that our farm consisted of three quarters of a mile by mile square with two farmhouses, one where my grandparents lived and another where my parents and I lived. I also told her that Father was negotiating to buy the Thompson farm, the southwest quarter section of the square and that we were all hoping it would become part of our farm soon. I showed her all the buildings and fields, animals and crops. She asked many questions and made many comments. She seemed to really like our farm. I took her last to the northwest part of the farm and showed her the creeks, the marsh, and the drumlin. She asked me if I ever went to the drumlin. I said I did and it was a very special place for me. Having said that, I was afraid that she might say, "Could we go there now", but thankfully she said instead, "Maybe we could visit it sometime." I told her that would be nice, and we went back to our house without talking much. When we reached her car, she said, "Thank you for the tour. I enjoyed seeing your farm. You and your family have done a good job with it. You have a lot to be proud of. I hope to see you again soon." And she was gone before I could compose a response.

It seemed like just minutes after Ellen left both of my parents started urging me to invite her to have dinner at our house on the weekend. So the next day I called her and asked her if she would like to come to our house for dinner on Saturday. She said yes immediately as if she knew the question before it came out of my mouth. My mother made a great dinner, one of her best. Ellen had many questions about our farm, and Father was more than happy to answer them. Everyone was surprised when she offered several suggestions for improving the farm. I don't think Father ever heard a woman talk this way before about farming. He seemed like he didn't know what to say. He changed the subject and asked why she was studying art. She said, "I love art, I am good at art, and I can make money doing art. It is also an occupation that fits very well with being a mother." Father asked her then why someone like her who knows so much about farming would want to give farming up. She replied, "I'm going to marry a farmer, so I certainly don't intend in any sense to be giving up farming."

After that dinner, Ellen and I started dating regularly, and Father and Mother started praying that we would get married. It was clear that Ellen was deeply interested in me, but I didn't understand why. I didn't go to college, my family's farm wasn't anywhere near as grand as her family's farm, and, if I was going to be honest, I would have to say that my psyche was deeply damaged. I couldn't imagine that any woman who really knew me would want to marry me.

I decided that we needed to have a serious talk about who I really was after we had been seeing each other for almost a month. So Ellen and I went on a walk on one of my favorite trails, and I told her that she should know

that I was a deeply broken person for whom every single day was a struggle, that I had lived my whole life trying to keep my feelings under control, and that I would be a heavy rock around her neck if we ever got married. Ellen smiled and said, "Thomas, I knew from the first moment I met you that you have a fractured soul. But I know that with time your soul will mend and your spirit will become free. There is nothing in the world I want more than to see this happen."

The next time Ellen came to our farm, she asked to see the drumlin. I warned her that it took about thirty minutes to get there from our house. We were both silent as we walked across the west field, along the south branch of the creek, over the big fallen white oak, and through the marshy woods onto the drumlin. We meandered our way east across the drumlin under the big trees. When we arrived at The Crying Place, I told her this is a place I come to when I am struggling with my feelings — which is often. She said, "I'm so happy, Thomas, that you have such a place where you can be alone and sort out your feelings." She then walked over to me, kissed me, and gave me a long hug. After that, Ellen always refused to come with me to the drumlin. She would say every time, "You need a place for just you."

A couple months later on April 17, 1970, Ellen and I were married. My parents were overjoyed. They and also my grandparents loved Ellen. Sylvia as well as other relatives noted how Ellen was so different from Amanda, my old girlfriend. I didn't really know what that meant, but I knew Ellen would bring me a kind of happiness that I wouldn't have obtained with Amanda.

As a wedding present, Father and Mother gave us the house on the recently purchased Thompson farm that was now part of the Talheimer farm. This was, and still is, a wonderful 19th century brick house in the American Bracket style. I was very happily surprised that Father and Mother, who could have moved into it themselves, decided to give us the biggest and most beautiful of the three houses on the farm.

A pleasant added benefit of moving into the big brick house was that the drumlin was much closer, just a fifteen-minute walk through a gap in the cornfield north of the house. When I would come into the house at the end of the day, Ellen would often say to me, "While I make dinner, go for a walk to the drumlin and take with you that bottle of scotch I bought for you and have a drink as you relax and sort out your feelings." This became a habit: A walk to the drumlin and a drink there before dinner.

Father, Grandfather, Ellen, and I had a series of talks about what we should do with the Thompson land. The Thompson farm had been primarily a corn and soybean farm. Ellen suggested that we should produce products for some of the growing niche markets. Grandfather mentioned for Ellen's sake that when he started the Talheimer farm in the 1920s it was almost entirely a niche farm that sold goat products and various kinds of unusual fruit and vegetables. He said, and Father agreed, that it would be good

if we could move into more niche markets. We considered bison farming, but we rejected it because it would require too much new infrastructure and we lacked the expertise needed to deal with bison. We then switched our thinking to Angus beef cattle since the demand for grass-fed beef, though still very small compared to corn-feed beef, was growing.

Our discussion about raising bison got me thinking. After doing some research, I proposed that we convert some of the Thompson land into small pasture fields, buy a herd of Angus cattle, and then rotate the herd through the fields to mimic how bison lived in the past on the great plains. The cattle herd would be packed into one of the small fields where they would feed on the pasture grasses and at the same time drop manure and urine on the field. When the grasses were depleted, the herd would be moved to a new field to once again eat and fertilize. After the pasture in a field recovered, either its grass would be harvested like hay for the winter or the herd would be moved back into the field. The benefit of this system is that pasture-fed cattle can be produced without requiring hay grown using expensive fertilizer.

Everyone thought this was a great idea. So we converted about two-thirds of the Thompson farm to pasture fields, bought a herd of Angus cattle, and started producing highly profitable grass-fed beef. Our beef product allowed us to quickly pay down the mortgage on the Thompson property and to not have to worry so much about the future. Father and Grandfather both thanked me several times over the years for proposing and implementing this cattle rotation system. Father said, "This is the best idea that any of us ever had. It has truly made the Talheimer farm one of the most prosperous in the County."

Ellen told me on our first wedding anniversary that she could see that my soul was on the mend. I could see it too. I was more at peace than I had ever been in my life.

Our first son Michael was born in 1971 and then less than two years later in 1973 Robert was born. These two boys were exceedingly robust and adventuresome. Everyone noted how much they looked like and acted like my father and grandfather. Both my parents and grandparents were delighted with them. I could see that Father was thinking of a future in which they would be running the farm. That future has come. The farm now belongs to Mike and Bob. I am only a temporary guest.

These were the halcyon years of our marriage. Everything was good. We were enthralled by our expectations for the future. I was happy as a farmer and a father, and Ellen was happy as an artist, a mother, and the wife of a farmer.

The peace and happiness of the first five years of our marriage ended with Ellen's third pregnancy. Her doctor told us that the heart of the fetus was not normal and that, if the baby was born alive, it wouldn't live long. Ellen didn't want to terminate the pregnancy. I went along with her decision, but

I was afraid. I started thinking again about the calf that Grandfather shot and the dead, dying, and suffering children I saw in Vietnam.

When Theodora — “gift of God” — was born in 1975, she was very sick but determined to live. The doctor thought she would die in a few hours, but she was still alive the next day. We decided to take her home to let her die on the farm. She lived through the second day. On the third day, she was in agony, every breath was a battle. In our house Ellen held Theodora surrounded by family waiting for her to die. (Mike and Bob were with their grandmother at my parent’s house.) I left the house without saying a word. I wasn’t sure what I would do. I thought maybe I should drive to the hospital and ask them to take me in. I went instead to The Crying Place and quietly wept ... and wept.

After two or three hours, I walked back to the house. When I came inside, everyone looked at me. Their faces were all saying the same thing: “Where have you been! You missed the death of your daughter!” The message on Ellen’s face was different. She immediately stood up holding our dead daughter, and said, “Thomas, please come with me.” We went into the room we called the library, my favorite room. She told me to sit down in the big chair, and she handed me Theodora. She said she would be back in a little while, left the room, and closed the door.

I didn’t cry. I had no tears left. I held Theodora and thought about how fortunate I was to be able to hold her in my home without having to worry about anything else. About an hour later, Ellen returned. She sat in a chair next to me. She said, “I sent everyone home. I am happy that we can be alone with her. She had a short and painful life, but the fact that she lived and was our daughter can never be taken away, even after we are long gone.” We quietly sat together with Theodora for the rest of the afternoon, and then Ellen called the funeral home to come and get her.

After Theodora died, I never again went to The Crying Place to cry. I went there only to think about things, to look at the marsh and the flowing creeks, and to sort out my feelings, as Ellen would say.

Ellen was soon pregnant again and gave birth to Natalie in 1976. And Effi followed after Natalie in 1979. Unlike Mike and Bob, these daughters were a lot like Ellen — and also like me. They both went to college, the first members of the Talheimer family (other than Ellen) to do so.

Natalie became a farm vet. I once asked her what she does when a cow or horse gives birth to an animal that is not viable. She said that she gives the animal some pain medicine and urges the owners to stay with it until it dies and sometimes, when the owners are not ready to do this, she sits next to the animal and comforts it until it dies even if that takes a long time. I thanked her for telling me this and told her that I was very happy that she takes this approach. She replied, “Father, could you really imagine that I would take any other approach?”

Effi became an architect who specializes in the renovation of classic farmhouses like the one she grew up in. Effi is also a writer. She likes to tell stories about the interesting people who have lived in our county. I hope she will tell Ellen's story one day.

As the years went by, I never stopped going to The Crying Place, but it became for me a place to be alone and contemplative instead of to be alone and sad. Although I would take my children and then later my grandchildren on walks to the drumlin and even to that special spot overlooking Rogers Creek, I never told any of them that this was a place where I would often come when life was too much for me to handle.

My grandparents both died in the same year, 1983. I loved them both and was exceedingly grateful that I had the opportunity to know them. Long ago, I forgave Grandfather for shooting the calf.

Father died in 2015 at the age of 92. He told me not too long after Ellen and I got married that he had made many mistakes in his life, but the biggest mistake was that he believed I was, deep down, just like him. He thought that I would grow out of the problems I had as a child. Yet eventually he realized that I was cut from a different cloth, as people say. He realized this when Ellen came into my life. After that, our conflicts ended, and we could concentrate on caring for each other.

Mother died in 2019 at the age of 93. When I was growing up there was always a bit of distance between us — like Father, she didn't understand who I was. I became much closer to her after I married Ellen and even closer after Father died. Father would have said that she was the perfect wife of a farmer.

When Ellen died last year, I didn't feel sad. I felt instead tremendously thankful that I had the extraordinary opportunity to share a life with her. Ellen helped me transform a broken life into a life replete with all the things that make life a blessing. She made me see the true texture of the world in which sorrow and suffering lived in partnership with happiness and jubilation. Her body has died, but her spirit is alive — so, so very much alive. Every moment that I am awake or asleep I feel her next to me.

Thomas Talheimer  
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April 14, 2026

P.S. What I have written reveals a great deal of me — maybe too much — but not nearly enough of Ellen. I'm not sure I want to show this note to my grandchildren. I will keep it for now and see how I feel about it down the road.