When Edward Kennedy was 13 or 14, his father called him into his room for a chat. "You can have a serious life or a non-serious life," Joseph P. Kennedy proclaimed. "I'll still love you whichever choice you make. But if you decide to have a non-serious life, I won't have much time for you. You make up your own mind."

Teddy returned to his room, he tells us, and it didn't take him long to decide what kind of life he wanted to lead.

In "True Compass," that's his story, and he sticks to it. An homage to the Kennedy family and a description of his career in politics, the autobiography, which was released shortly after his death, is a passionate, partisan, poignant, punch-pulling portrait of a talented -- and deeply flawed -- person.

The youngest of nine children, Kennedy idolized his parents and siblings. He "rarely investigated the myths" surrounding his controversial father, who remained "eternally and solely, my dad." And "'hero worship' wouldn't be too far off the mark" in
characterizing his attitude toward his brothers Jack and Bobby.

In 1963, he claims, JFK was well on his way to finding a way out of Vietnam. Four years later, he indicates, President Johnson should have acceded to Bobby's proposal that he be empowered to negotiate a peace treaty with Ho Chi Minh.

Citing a "distaste for self-justification," Kennedy does not dwell on the scandals that punctuated his life. He takes responsibility for the death of Mary Jo Kopechne on Chappaquiddick Island, but does not account for his delay in reporting the accident or provide details about the scenarios he "devised" in "feverish" discussions with friends and associates.

Kennedy's analysis of his political career is marred by occasional bouts of self-justification. He suggests, for example, that his disastrous interview with CBS' Roger Mudd in the fall of 1979 was an ambush:

"The agreement, as I'd understood it, was that our topic was supposed to be the sea, and the connections between the Cape and the Kennedy family."

If he had already declared his candidacy, he adds, unpersuasively, he would have prepared "a more polished answer" to Mudd's question about why he wanted to be president.

Kennedy is at his best when he turns to the issues he cared about so deeply. When his son, Teddy Jr., lost his leg to bone cancer, he writes, he walked the halls and waiting rooms of Boston Children's Hospital. Many of the men and women he encountered had been wiped out by the "macabre calculus" of the American health care system.

When he drafted a health insurance bill, he took his colleagues to facilities in rural and inner-city neighborhoods, forcing them to experience illness not as an abstraction "but as blood, bandages, needles, and wails of pain."

As he abandoned his aspirations to be president, Kennedy became "the lion" of the U.S. Senate, celebrated for his ability to reach across the aisle to forge a majority. He did it, he reveals, by mastering the arcane rules of the body and drilling down into the details of proposed legislation. Most important, he didn't care who got his name on a bill.

For Kennedy, public service was a calling, "an opportunity to do things about injustice and unfairness." One could say that it saved him from his more hedonistic self.

His progressive principles, to which he adhered with an admirable consistency, were his North Star, his true compass, helping "displace the emptiness inside me with an awareness of direction."
Kennedy's autobiography is not the last word on his legacy, but it ought to persuade everyone, Republican and Democrat, that he did, indeed, have a serious life.

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"Bob Hoover's Book Club" is available exclusively at PG+, a members-only web site of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Our introduction to PG+ gives you all the details.