

The Indestructible Gordie Duram

A Story of Surrender

The doctor was fairly matter-of-fact as he delivered the news. “The tumor is cancerous, but unfortunately is sitting right on top of your portal vein. Because of its location, we can’t operate unless we can shrink the tumor enough to let us get in and remove it without any risk of nicking that vein. I am recommending that you go to Ann Arbor to be evaluated at the University of Michigan Hospital. Maybe they will look at it another way and have better news, but the way I see it, surgery is out of the question. This is not a fixable situation.”

Not fixable. Nothing we can do. It doesn’t look good. With these words echoing in their ears, Gordie and Shelly walked out of the doctor’s office dazed. They struggled with their individual thoughts as they reeled from the impact of this news. They had already faced mortality questions when Gordie was diagnosed with prostate cancer a few years earlier. The surgery that time was successful and the ogre of cancer had been beaten. Now he was 44 years old and the old enemy had hit him again, this time angrily and with seeming vengeance. The war was on.

Another war was also going on deep in the soul of Gordie Duram. It was a spiritual battle that has been waged since he had consciously and bitterly turned his back on God as a teenager. There had been opportunities and invitations to turn back, but the harbored bitterness prevented Gordie from being willing to relate to God on His terms. Now, there

was no doubt in his mind, that God was the One he needed most. And both he and Shelly knew where to go for help in connecting to God.

Gordie was the second oldest of six children born to Gordon and Dolores Duram in Grand Haven, Michigan, a town on the eastern shores of Lake Michigan. Gordon, Sr. was a police officer in Grand Haven and well-respected on the force. His job required significant dedication and long hours away from home. So Dolores became the hub around which the family revolved. She was a stay-at-home mom and took her responsibilities as a mother and homemaker very seriously. She energetically cooked, cleaned, laundered, mended, and shopped for her two sons and four daughters. She was there when the kids left for school in the morning and when they returned in the afternoon. The family attended a local church together twice each Sunday and even went back faithfully for the Wednesday evening prayer meetings. They revered God, studied the Bible, and prayed together consistently.

“I liked our church and my friends there,” Gordie recalls. The God he knew was a loving heavenly Father. Life was good. But the cancer enemy struck at the roots of this idyllic life when Gordie was only 14 years old. His mother, the centering point for the entire family, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and, soon after, was taken to the hospital where she was treated for several weeks, but there wasn’t a lot that could be done for her. Gordie remembers the day his uncle came into his school classroom and called him out into the hallway. “I knew right then what had happened,” he says. “Mom had died.” He describes her as the “utmost Mom” and he missed her terribly.

He also missed the kind of life they had enjoyed as children when his mother was there. He remembers many relatives and friends from their church who did all that they could to help. But while strangers were in his home lending a hand, Gordie often found himself taking entire afternoons to wander alone in the woods crying without consolation and asking God why He had to take her. “At first I just didn’t understand,” he says. “Then I was hurt and, finally I just got mad. I was raised to believe that God was all-powerful – that He could do anything. We had prayed. We prayed everyday that she would get better. Yet, He let this happen. Why didn’t He do something to stop the cancer? Didn’t He care about us?”

Well-meaning people from the church told Gordie and his siblings that God needed their mother more than they did. That didn’t make sense to him either. He had been taught that God was complete and without need. How could God possibly need Mom more than Gordie did? More than his Dad did? More than his sisters and brothers did? It just didn’t make sense. Or did it? Maybe what he had been taught about God was wrong. Maybe God was not good and loving after all. Maybe God was a selfish, uncaring bully and used His great power to take away the one person Gordie had loved most and counted on most in this life. If God was like that, Gordie decided he wanted nothing to do with Him. God could just leave this young man alone.

With the God issues settled, Gordie erected emotional walls that would protect him from further hurt. He determined that nothing would stop him from making a good life for himself and, at least for the next few years, for his brothers and sisters, too. He and his

older sister, Brenda, took over as the overseers of the household as they cared for the younger members of their family. Gordon, Sr. was feeling financial pressures and took an additional job. The kids knew he cared for them, but they didn't see much of him during the first couple of years after their mother had died. But Gordie's determination and Brenda's hard work melded together to make a home and to keep the family together.

That plan would have worked until they were all grown up as far as Gordie was concerned. But Dad met a woman at work and fell in love. Very soon, too soon for the kids, there was talk of a stepmother. "We were fine by ourselves," Gordie recalls. "We didn't need anyone else." But within a year of Dolores' death, Dad had remarried and Linda moved in. "She tried hard," Gordie says, "but she wasn't *Mom*."

His father and stepmother thought it might be better for the family to have a fresh start, so they sold the house that had been their family home and bought another. The idea of new beginnings was not a bad one, but the children were not ready to part with the known and the familiar. They resented moving to a new house and resisted making Linda a part of the family. With the mounting resentment, trouble brewed and within six months of Dad's remarriage, Brenda moved out of the family home and rented her own apartment in town. A few months later, in the middle of an angry confrontation with his father, Gordie, too, packed his belongings and headed out the door. He was only 15 years old, but he knew he could make it on his own. He didn't need God. He didn't need his father's involvement anymore. And he surely didn't need a stepmother.

He called on a school friend whose parents said that he could stay with them for a couple of weeks. Gordie was certain that his father would come looking for him by then and he would end up back with the family. But there was no word from Dad and the two weeks stretched out to three years. The surrogate family, already with six children of their own, took Gordie in and provided a home for him until he was old enough to leave the nest. They were a church-going family, Gordie recalls, but they allowed the older boys to choose whether or not to attend Sunday services and Gordie, of course, opted out. In spite of the love shown to him by this family, God was still considered an enemy in Gordie's internal world. By the time he was 18, he decided he had imposed on his friends long enough and that it was time for his true independence to begin. He moved out of the home he was in and began to share an apartment with his sister, Brenda.

There was still no word from Dad. There were no efforts on part of either father or son to resolve the conflict that parted them so angrily three years earlier. In fact, it would be seven more years before they would communicate again. The rift was deep and Gordie had decided he could go his own way without ever reconciling with his father if that's what it took to prove to himself that he was master of his own life. He now says, "I decided that Gordie Duram could take care of himself. I didn't think anyone else cared anyway."

He knew, however, that you cannot live independently in this world without income, so he quit high school after his junior year, and took a job frying chicken at a locally-owned chicken and seafood take-out restaurant. When he went to work for Cobb's Chicken, he

found not only employment and income, but also two people who caught glimpses of his need and were willing to provide the stability that he had longed for in his life since the death of his mother several years earlier. Al and Henrietta Phillips had purchased the chicken restaurant just a few years before Gordie applied for work. Gordie was young and inexperienced when they hired him, but teachable and responsible. The relationship between Gordie and the Phillips' grew over the years into one of love, compassion, and support. "Al and Hennie have had a great influence on my life," he says. "I knew that if I needed them, they would be there." And the time was just around the corner when he would need them more than he then knew. In the meantime, he learned the business and became a valued and trusted employee.

Another key relationship began to develop during this time in Gordie's life. He met a pretty young woman named Shelly, and a bond began to grow between them. After all, they had a lot in common: partying, alcohol, drugs, and friends who shared the wild side of life with them. "The parties and the stuff associated with them helped me forget," he says. But there was more to the relationship with Shelly than parties. She had a mother and stepfather who accepted him just the way he was. "Shelly's stepfather was a great guy and easy to talk to. Whatever I needed, he was there to the point that I would let him help." The acceptance felt so good, so right. Shelly loved him, her family welcomed him, and he had a job that would support them, so at 20 years old, he asked her to marry him. Six months later they became husband and wife.

Shelly kept her waitressing job and Gordie continued to work at Cobb's now learning every aspect of the business that could be taught. His goal was to own the store someday and he began to talk to the Phillips' about that. They were open to the idea, but knew that Gordie had a lot to learn before he was ready to run the business. They valued his hard work, but knew that he was struggling internally with his relationship to his dad and, more importantly, with his relationship to God. Al would talk to him late at night when the front doors had been closed to customers and all that was left was the clean-up. He encouraged Gordie to forgive his father and to give his life back to God. Gordie wasn't ready to receive what was being said, but out of respect for his employer, he listened. Deep inside, he wanted what Al told him about, but he knew he could not do it: He could not submit to a God who would take his mother away, and he was too stubborn and too angry to forgive his father for upsetting his life. So he buried even deeper the feelings that gnawed at him. He focused on his work and eventual ownership of the restaurant. He focused on his marriage and their desire to have children. And he soothed the deep-seated ache with the pain killers of drugs and alcohol.

In thinking about buying Cobb's, Gordie knew that he would have to come up with a down payment. He and Shelly bought a small house out in the country. It was in need of significant repairs, but they worked side by side in renovating this little house so that they could sell it at a profit large enough to buy the store – a goal that now had become a driving force in Gordie's life. But it was taking a long time and Gordie became impatient. He discovered that there was another way to make money – a way that was quicker and far more profitable than anything else he could do. He developed a contact

for buying marijuana and reselling it to his friends who were users. The money rolled in. He couldn't believe how easy it was. There were nights when he and Shelly would collect a day's receipts and, in amazement, would count out ten or fifteen thousand dollars. He knew that what he was doing was illegal, but so was using drugs, as he had now done for several years. He rationalized that he was not a down-and-dirty dealer because he sold only to other users. He never tried to talk someone into trying marijuana so he could profit from their habit. He never approached younger children. He simply was the go-between for his friends who were already knee-deep in the drug game.

There was a little something inside him that felt a bit of triumph over his dad at this point, too. His father was still a highly-respected member of the local police force. Here he was, Gordie Duram, selling drugs right under the nose of the enforcement agency in which his father was so prominent. He was truly doing life his own way!

At four o'clock one morning in 1982 when he and Shelly were sleeping soundly, there was a pounding at their front door. He groggily opened it and found standing outside his father's best friend who was a Grand Haven City police officer, and several officers from a county-wide drug enforcement team acronymmed WMET. They searched the house and did, in fact, find drugs. So Gordie was arrested immediately and taken to the Ottawa County Jail. How did the officers figure out what he was doing? Apparently, Gordie now says, the police had raided the home of the person from who Gordie purchased the drugs which he re-sold. At that dealer's house, the officers found a series of contact phone numbers and Gordie's was one of them. So he was busted!

And he was relieved. Gordie admits now that the drug business had lost some of its luster by that time and he was ready to get out. Getting out once you are in is not an easy thing to do, so the arrest forced his decision. He determined that the life of drug dealing was not for him. After his arrest, he and Shelly did continue to use occasionally, but he never sold another joint.

He was released from custody and an arraignment was set, but the hardest part for Gordie was to be faced the next day. He had to go to work and tell the Phillips' about the trouble he was in. He knew they were straight-laced citizens and outspoken Christians and would be distraught over his involvement in the drug business. He feared losing his job and, more than that, feared losing the long-held dream of buying the restaurant and making it his own. He didn't even know how to bring the subject up, so went through the entire work day as if nothing had happened. Finally, at the end of the day, Al said, "I hear there was a little excitement at your house yesterday." He already knew.

"I will never forget our conversation," Gordie says.

"You need our help and we need your help," Al said. "We have prayed about this and we want to stand behind you. It is what God wants us to do."

Gordie couldn't believe what he was hearing. It sounded like forgiveness. It sounded like unconditional love. It sounded like the security and consistency in relationship he

had craved since his life was turned upside down at the age of 14. Al asked Gordie to give up his bitterness toward God, but Gordie responded that he could not do that. He didn't know how. So Al then encouraged, almost insisted, that he see a counselor. Gordie agreed and kept several appointments with the counselor until the he began to give answers Gordie could not accept. He quit the counseling sessions with the self-satisfied thought, "Gordie Duram is still in control."

The drug arrest did cost him, though. His truck was confiscated. The house was sold to pay for fines and legal costs instead of to serve as a down payment for the business as originally intended. The financial success they had experienced by selling marijuana was short-lived. But, in return for assistance to the enforcement agencies in finding and convicting the dealer from whom he bought, Gordie saw no jail time. For that he was grateful. And, after a ten-year silence, his father reached out to him. There was a letter in the mail one day that simply offered to talk. His dad stated that he still cared and that he understood that people make mistakes. The reconnect with his father was fragile, but it was a beginning and was evidence to Gordie that good could, in fact, come out of the mistakes he had made.

Gordie took on a second job after the financial setbacks of the drug bust and his two incomes, combined with Shelly's waitressing dollars and frugal living, enabled them to scrape together the down payment they needed to close on their purchase of Cobb's. Just over a year after his arrest, the deal was done. He had now achieved the goal he had set

for himself as a teen-ager. His response to himself was, “There. I did exactly what I said I would do.” Gordie Duram reinforced his sense that he was in control of his own life.

As a business owner, the hard work really began. Gordie worked 10-12 hours every day six days a week. They made a lot and spent a lot, but life was good. Then, ten years into their marriage, just as they were beginning to despair of having children, Shelly called him at work one day and announced that she was pregnant. Sheree was born and fatherhood took on a whole new meaning for Gordie. Two years later, Mitchell was born into their little family. They bought a new house. Gordie cut back on his hours at work while Shelly pitched in to help him more at the restaurant. “Life was good,” Gordie says, “We were taking care of ourselves.”

There was one fly in the ointment, however. Some time after Sheree was born, Shelly became a Christian. She told him that the Phillips’ had come over that day and she had asked them about how to have a relationship with God. Her questions told Al and Hennie that she was ready to commit her life to God and she did just that. This was a turn of events that Gordie hadn’t planned on. But he had always given her a lot of freedom, so when she wanted to go to church, he said “OK.” In spite of her repeated invitations, he chose to stay at home on Sunday mornings while his wife and two children trundled off to church. It probably would be good for the kids.

The diagnosis of prostate cancer in 2001 was hard to take. Because his mother had died of cancer, the “C” word had always held fear for him. At first, he thought he was

doomed. He felt defeated and out of control for the first time since his mother's death. Gordie's thoughts began to turn more and more toward God, but he stopped short of submission to God as his heavenly father. He seemed to be able to go only so far with his God thoughts. Something stopped him from true commitment. He did respond appropriately to Al and to Shelly when they talked to him about spiritual matters, but he now realizes that he said and did the right things only to make them feel better. He went through the prescribed surgery and the long recovery and was pronounced cancer free. He had beat cancer and felt he had won a great victory over this terrifying enemy.

The more victories Gordie won, the more he persisted in his bitterness against God. At 14, he had determined he could live his life without God's interference or help and every obstacle he overcame along the way simply confirmed his ability to do just that. But the bitterness that grew and the emotional walls he had erected in order to allow him to be the independent man he had set out to become began to create problems in his relationship with Shelly. She sensed his internalized anger and began to resent his emotional aloofness. Finally, early in 2003, she insisted that they go together for counseling. He resisted.

"You will do this with me or I will leave," she said. Then she used the biggest piece of ammunition in her arsenal. "The restaurant is almost paid for, but remember that half of it is mine. If you want to buy it all over again, just keep on going the way you are going."

Owning Cobb's had been his lifelong goal. He had bought it early and had, by now, made nearly 20 years of payments. They were within a few months of the last payment and the financial freedom that a debt-free business would bring. Now Shelly was threatening to set him back ten years! He knew she meant what she said and that she must have reached a real point of desperation in their relationship if she would stoop to this kind of attack. He relented and began to go to a marriage counselor with her.

"The counseling helped immensely," he now says. "It started opening my eyes a little more to realize that maybe I could open up to others and let them show me their love." After six or seven counseling sessions and many conversations at home, things began to go better between Gordie and Shelly. There were still little battles, but the foundation of their marriage had been reinforced so the little battles no longer threatened to topple the whole structure. Shelly found a new church that provided the spiritual nurturing she and the children needed and she began to get more involved. Gordie was not ready to go with her, but became more supportive of her need to have a healthy relationship with her Creator.

As Thanksgiving neared in 2003, Gordie noticed a lump, but was afraid to tell anyone. A few weeks later, Shelly also observed the lump and insisted that he see a doctor. Fortunately, it was a hernia that could be easily repaired. The doctor did not see the problem as urgent, so scheduled the surgery for after the holidays. New Year's Eve, Gordie was getting ready to go to a party with Shelly and his negative attitude was beginning to wear on her.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s your attitude. You have no smile and you’re grumpy all the time.”

“I don’t know why, but I just haven’t felt good in two or three months.”

“I know that. I just want to know why.” Shelly was afraid his seeming depression had something to do with their relationship. They were doing better, but they both knew they had a lot of ground to cover yet before they had the strong and vital marriage they wanted.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s the hernia.”

With that, they finished getting dressed and went off to be with friends, but there was a cloud that followed them. Was it health? Was it the pending surgery? Or was there something between them that would never be healed?

The hernia surgery took place mid-January of 2004 and for a few days, Gordie felt good. Then the familiar run-down, lack of energy feeling returned. One morning when he was

showering, Shelly came into the bathroom and was shocked at what she saw, “You’re turning yellow!”

The official observation of the doctor was the same. Yellow skin, amber urine.

Numerous tests were run and the diagnosis was gallstones. Back to the operating table just ten days after the original hernia surgery. The gall bladder removal was routine and fairly simple and Gordie went home the next day feeling his strength returning. Three days after the surgery, however, he began to get sick. Thinking his nausea was the result of eating the wrong thing or doing too much too soon after his dual surgeries, Gordie just went to bed to rest and to allow the strength to return to his body. He moved from the bed to the big chair in the living room for the next couple of days, trying to act as normal as possible in front of the kids. But by the third day, he could no longer get out of bed. Shelly was at Cobb’s that day and called regularly. It was truly out of character for her husband to be in bed all day. Not able to get away from the restaurant, Shelly called a neighbor who was a nurse and asked if she would go over to check on Gordie. Jackie came in, took one look, and advised Gordie to call his doctor. Jackie left and Gordie went back to sleep. By evening, when Shelly came home, she called Jackie again. This time Jackie said, “Take him to emergency.” Gordie, who by now was having some trouble breathing, didn’t argue.

He was admitted and medicated and, as a result, felt better the next day and wanted to go home. The endoscopy that was done, however, concluded that there was something affecting his bile duct and, as a result, was causing his yellow coloration. Gordie was

anesthetized while the medical team inserted a stint into the bile duct to re-open it. In that process, the doctor discovered that there was a tumor pressing against the duct and had caused its blockage.

“Everything OK?” Gordie asked Shelly when he roused from his anesthesia. As he looked at her face, a tear rolled out of her eye and he knew that there was bad news to follow. Shelly simply said that they had to wait to talk about things when the doctor came in. It was only a short time later that Gordie was told there was a tumor and it was believed to be cancerous. They took more pictures with a scope after which Gordie went home. A follow up meeting with the doctor a few days later confirmed the cancer. The cancer was not in the bile duct but was, in fact, a pancreatic tumor which pressed against the bile duct. The bile duct was now opened with the stint, but decisions would have to be made on how to treat the cancer. The doctor did not believe it was operable.

Gordie and Shelly emerged from that meeting shaken to the core. They knew his very life hung in the balance and that the only things that mattered now were one another and their children. But Gordie had another issue at the forefront of his mind. He, at last, faced an obstacle he could not overcome. He had overseen a family of six children at age 14. He had declared independence from his family and struck out on his own at 15. He had held a job and supported himself all these years. He had overcome a drug bust and the related repercussions. He had reconnected with his father and had built some bridges back to that relationship. He had bought the business he had set his heart on. He had won the love of Shelly and had even overcome difficulties that had developed over the

years of the marriage. They had two beautiful children who suddenly became even dearer to him. He had beat cancer just a few years earlier. This was the first time in his life he didn't have a way to conquer the enemy that he faced.

He knew where to turn for help. Gordie and Shelly drove from the doctor's office to the home of Al and Hennie Phillips. When Al opened the door, he found two people on his front porch with tears streaming down their faces. He invited them in ready to help with whatever need they had.

"I need help," Gordie said. "I need God. You are the one who can help me find Him."

Al and Hennie listened to the story as Gordie and Shelly unfolded it for them. Then Al quietly led Gordie in a prayer of faith turning his life over to God. Four smiling faces looked up from that prayer. In a few short minutes, the tears had turned to joy. Gordie left the Phillips' home a changed man. "It was like a load lifted that I had been carrying for 30 years! I felt better. I stopped hiding. Instantly, I stopped caring about what people asked or thought of me. I felt vulnerable and open. Deep down, this is a decision I had wanted to make for a long time, but I put it off, never being quite ready. When I had nowhere else to turn, God was there, just waiting for me to tell Him that I finally understood how much I needed Him."

The next meeting was with Mike Harrison, the pastor of the church that Shelly and the kids attended. Mike was overjoyed at Gordie's new-found relationship with God and dismayed at the health issues he was facing. He counseled and comforted and agreed to

meet with them the next day so that together they could tell Sheree and Mitchell what was happening in their dad's life. Before he left their home, Mike laid on the coffee table a little book entitled *God's Promises*. After Mike had gone, Gordie picked up the book which opened to the section on courage. There he read this verse from Isaiah: So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand (41:10). The verse seemed to leap off the page and into his heart. "This is *my* verse," he said to Shelly. "This is the verse that I will live by." He then walked over to the family chalkboard and wrote this message, "Make every day count. Love, Daddy." It has become the Duram family motto.

The next day Mike came back and together they talked to the children about what was happening within their family. "We all cried," Gordie says, "but I shared my verse with the kids and we all agreed that we would live by the truths in that scripture."

Then Mitchell asked a question that pierced Gordie's heart, "Why would Jesus let this happen to you, Daddy?" Gordie remembered the questions he had wrestled with as a 14 year old and the bitterness that grew in his heart because God had taken his mother. It was still a hard question, but Gordie determined that it was a question he and Mitchell would deal with together. Mitchell would not have to face it alone.

That Sunday Gordie went to church for the first time in many years. The sermon that Mike preached was on relationship with God and relationship with family. Tears rolled

down Gordie's face as he listened, believing the sermon had been written specifically for him. When they got home from the service, he held Shelly as he had never held her before and whispered, "Thank you. Thank you for helping me through this. Thank you for staying with me and making sure I got past my bitterness." He now says, "I never loved Shelly more than I did at that moment. I never really knew how to love before. Now I am filled with joy, happiness, and love for my family that can only be God-given."

Gordie and Shelly headed off to the University of Michigan Hospital hopeful that the second opinion there would be more positive than the opinion they had obtained locally. It was not. The doctor at U of M agreed that surgery could not be done because of the proximity of the tumor to the portal vein, the main carrier of blood from the abdominal organs back to the heart. That vein had to be protected at all costs. So a treatment plan was devised whereby Gordie would undergo six weeks of chemotherapy and radiation in an attempt to reduce the size of the tumor. If the treatment is effective in reducing the growth to manageable size, surgery may be attempted.

Soon after his return from Ann Arbor, Gordie called his maternal grandmother. He told her about his new relationship with Jesus and shared with her his newly-adopted life verse. She listened intently to his reading of the verse and then began to cry. When he asked why, she said, "Gordie, there is a basket that has been on my dresser for 30 years now. In it are a few precious things from your mother including her necklace and some other treasures. At the bottom of that basket is a card and on it is written in your mom's

handwriting the words of Isaiah 41:10. That verse, Gordie, was her favorite verse, too. When you read that verse in the promise book, God was talking to you.”

“He was, wasn’t He? He wanted me to be reassured that He was there. God was willing to do whatever He had to do to open my eyes and to confirm that He was watching over me.” There was a triangle in his mind. At one apex was God, at another his Mom, and at the third was Gordie himself. All three were tied together by one promise from God’s word. God was love after all.

Now Gordie sees himself as a “billboard for God” and he loves his new role. At Cobb’s Chicken Take-Out these days, passers by do not see the weekly special posted on the changeable pylon sign. Instead, they read words of inspiration from Gordie’s experience or from scripture. This week it reads, “Prayer is power.” One man read the sign and stopped in just to talk about God. He didn’t want any chicken, he just wanted spiritual connection – the newest menu item at Cobb’s.

Life is different now for Gordie, though. He considers each precious day an unfolding adventure. He says that he and Shelly now pray together with the children, there are hugs and kisses when the kids leave for school in the morning. He has taken to leaving love notes for his wife. Nothing is taken for granted anymore.

“I want people to realize that no matter how much you think you know or how strong you think you are, you are nothing without God. God will give you so much more strength, it

is unbelievable. I always thought I was the indestructible Gordie Duram. Now I truly am the indestructible Gordie Duram, but my strength is because of God's love. I don't have to do it by myself anymore."