

# Glimpses *of* Heaven

Gordon MacDonald  
Kay Warren, Ben Patterson  
Liz Curtis Higgs, Mark Buchanan  
*and more*



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## GLIMPSES OF HEAVEN

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# Entering the Stories of Ordinary People

*We can discover joy and wisdom by taking the time to observe the lives around us.*

The other morning, I headed for the Egg Shell restaurant just down the road from our home to join a friend for breakfast. My PDA scheduled us for seven a.m, but his, I later learned, said seven thirty. Result? I had a half hour to drink coffee and observe life around me.

Sitting at two or three tables shoved together not far from my booth were ten baseball-capped men in working clothes and mud-caked boots. The same group is always there whenever I breakfast at the Egg Shell. They sit shoulder to shoulder saying little to each other. Mainly, they read their copies of the *New Hampshire Union Leader* and shovel down omelets and home fries.

I once asked Cindy, a server at the Egg Shell, who they were. She said they were retired guys who had met for breakfast for years. “They’re like a bunch of brothers,” she added. “They do lots of stuff together.” She didn’t say what the stuff was.

When these mostly nonverbal men finished their breakfasts, they paid their bills, grabbed their coats, and grunted goodbyes to Cindy. Some of them even gave her a sisterly hug. I could see why she likened them to a band of brothers. As they passed my booth, I said, “Make the world a better place today, guys.” One of them responded, “Great idea. We’ll do it.”

Two women (middle-aged) were at another table. Unlike the men, they were spirited talkers, their conversation bouncing between laughter and whispered confidentialities. When they finished eating and

started for the door, one called out to Gloria, the other server, “Behave yourself, Gloria. But if you decide not to, it won’t matter much.” This breezy goodbye tickled me because—and I mean no disrespect—Gloria didn’t look like the kind of person who would misbehave even if she had the opportunity. It was clear that the comment was an indication of affection between people who share a lot of history together.

When Gloria started to refill my coffee cup, I asked, “Known them for a long time?”

“Neighbors,” she said. “One of them may lose her home. We’re pretty shook about it.”

“She’s fortunate to have friends like you,” I responded.

“Well, we’re going to have to stick close to her.”

In one of the booths was a woman with a boy I guessed to be about eight years old. She talked while he ate. My sense? She was a fretful single mother in the process of taking her son to school and then heading for her day job. Their clothing suggested financial austerity. Her facial expression hinted at deep motherly concern about something going on between them, and she was trying to talk it through. His body language said, *Get this over with so I can get out of here.* How hard it must be for both of them, I thought, to keep life steady and keep it whole.

I prayed for them.

I was sitting by the front window of the Egg Shell, so I was able to see a van pull into one of the parking spaces. A small-built man (80 years old, maybe) got out, opened the back door, and unloaded a wheelchair. Then, sliding back the side door, he began operating a hydraulic lift that allowed a disabled passenger (obviously his wife) to exit the van and, holding on to him, settle into the chair.

All of this was done slowly and carefully because of the snow and ice. But neither husband nor wife evidenced the slightest impatience. They functioned as a team, and it was clear that they’d made this move from van to wheelchair a zillion times.

When they approached the front door of the Egg Shell, I jumped from my seat and opened it for them. I said, “Good morning—everyone’s



been waiting for you!” The woman in the wheelchair brightened and instantly retorted, “Well, let the party begin!”

He helped her with her coat, Cindy poured them coffee, and soon they were talking. I was too far away to overhear their conversation, but not so far that I couldn’t appreciate the way they touched each other and maintained eye contact as they spoke. There was obvious enjoyment between them.

Stealing occasional glances in their direction, I wondered if they could have anticipated on their wedding day (55 years ago?) that a time might come when they would share a life dominated by a physical disability, a time when a simple breakfast at the Egg Shell would require special effort. Had they ever, back then, anticipated a day when the “for better or worse” clause in the marriage vows might be activated?

Watching them caused me to think back appreciatively across the years of my marriage.

When I first met Gail, love seemed such a simple, spontaneous matter. It was mostly about romance and dreams. There were valentines, chocolates, flowers, and frequent kisses. There were fantasies about homes, babies, and changing the world. Our energy and zeal for life and each other—we had little else—was in abundance. The possibility of a wheelchair never entered our minds.

A few years later, our love grew in the ups and downs of family formation: tight budgets, taking out the garbage, deciding who would comfort a child having a bad dream. We learned to communicate and cooperate, to encourage and, when necessary, to correct. We figured out that changing the world was more daunting than we’d thought. Still, we pushed ahead and found love’s deeper ways.

At midlife, our love matured in the process of raising and then saying goodbye to teenagers. We had to come to grips with the physical, emotional, and spiritual changes that mark life in one’s forties and fifties, and love was occasionally tested, even toughened, through disappointments and failures. Now and then we felt as if we changed a tiny bit of the world...but only a very tiny bit.

Then, not too long ago, we reached the days of Social Security checks. Now, our fiftieth anniversary looms on the horizon. But

that love, once expressed by chocolates and kisses, continues to grow into something greater. It is framed in a life of grandparenting and mentoring a younger generation. It's about discovering fresh ideas and spiritual deepening. Oh, and it's about simple things like watching our diets, debating the efficacy of vitamins, and bragging about achievements in our daily workouts.

We pray more together these days. And at night—if we're not traveling—we find it easy to turn off the TV and head early for our bed, where we can hold each other closely. This love in the aging years is a deeper, more resilient kind purchased over time at great expense. Of course it's a love with scars. But underneath those scars there are no doubts.

Watching the eightysomething couple at the Egg Shell suggests still another iteration of love—one I have not experienced, but could. It's a love that comes when life's limitations—perhaps including a chronic illness or disability—accumulate and one partner must totally depend upon the other.

This version of love between two people does not just happen. It is the result of years and years of both building and discovering new layers of love's meaning so that when two people get old (really old!), they are prepared to do anything for each other and to be glad for the privilege of doing it.

The pastor in me had wanted to give something to that couple, but they beat me to the punch. Simply by being there, they unknowingly gave me a gift: a simple reminder of how beautiful aged love can be. Most young people know nothing about this.

That morning I was thankful that my friend and I had botched up our meeting time. I'd been given 30 valuable minutes to do something I'm often too busy to do. And that was to enter the stories of everyday people who like and love each other—some old guys, women friends, a mother and son, a tender husband with his beloved wife. It was a time to enjoy simple, human encounters that all too often go unnoticed.

GORDON MACDONALD

# A Cheerful Giver

*Christian generosity is more than just writing a check.*

Christmas was approaching, the season to be generous. To give gifts to friends, donate goods to needy families, and write checks for worthy causes. Imagine my dismay when our 16-year-old son showed me I wasn't nearly as ho-ho-happy about giving as I claimed to be.

My lesson in humility began one Tuesday afternoon. Our son, Matt, sat perched on the steps of a downtown office building, waiting for his father to pick him up after his first driver training class. A man in shabby clothes ambled along, asking for money, supposedly to pay for having a tire changed at a nearby garage.

When Matt told me this story later, I felt my skin grow hot. *Yeah, right...he needed money for a tire. More like for drugs or a cheap bottle of wine.*

"The man said he needed seventeen dollars," Matt explained. "So I gave him ten."

"Ten dollars!" I fumed. How dare this panhandler talk my son out of his hard-earned money? "Honey, why would you do such a thing?"

"Because it felt good to help somebody, Mom."

*Ouch.* Still, I felt Matt didn't understand the situation, didn't get the Big Picture about how the world worked. "A dollar would have been plenty, Matt. Just to show him you cared."

*Just to get rid of him.* That's what I meant, even if I didn't say it.

Matt's brow drew into a knot. "But wouldn't ten dollars show him I cared even more?"

*Ouch again.* Adult logic goes by the wayside when faced with a teenager determined to do the right thing.

The Bible teaches, "If your gift is...giving, then give generously"

(Romans 12:6-8). Then why wasn't I congratulating my son for being generous instead of chastising him for being taken advantage of by a stranger on the street?

Before I could sort out my feelings, Matt confessed, "He asked me if I could spare any more, so I gave him another three dollars."

"*What!*" I threw my arms in the air, exasperated. "Son, you don't have to keep giving people money just because they ask for it! What that man did amounts to polite robbery."

"But he didn't rob me, Mom. I gave it willingly," Matt reminded me. "And it was my money. I just wanted to be kind."

*Ouch, ouch, ouch.*

Matt had given generously, and I called him gullible. He had given joyfully, and I robbed his joy.

He had done precisely as he'd been taught—not by me, obviously, but by the apostle Paul: "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Matt wasn't at all reluctant. But I was. He said yes to this man without feeling coerced. I would have said no and blamed the man for being pushy. My son was cheerful. I was infuriated.

Here's the saddest truth of all: I gladly write a check each December to a Christian mission for the homeless not far from the very spot where Matt did his kind deed. Sure, I'm willing to help the needy, but only if I control the amount and how it's spent. And only if I can drop my money in the mail instead of pressing it into a grimy hand.

It's embarrassing when your children teach you by example how to be more Christlike. The only thing worse is refusing to be taught. *Teach me, Lord. And forgive me when I stumble.*

If you're like my son—a cheerful giver—then may you find many opportunities to exercise your spiritual gift.

But if you're like me—a conditional giver—then may the Lord nudge your conscience, as he has mine, and show you what "cheerful giving" really means: to give without judgment. To give without hesitation. To give from the heart.

LIZ CURTIS HIGGS

# When the Bus Driver Cried

*God works through people who practice the power of presence and who are willing to say the things he whispers into their hearts.*

When I was in seminary, I took a job driving a school bus for kindergartners. Several of the kids came from single-parent homes. Ryan was one. As he got off the bus one day he asked me if I'd like to meet his mom sometime. "She's real pretty."

"I'll bet she is," I responded. "But I have a pretty wife at home."

Heading back to the bus barn one afternoon after finishing my route, I glanced in my mirror and saw a shaggy blond head peeping up over the last seat. "Ryan, why didn't you get off at your house?"

"I fell asleep," he said.

"When did you wake up?" I asked.

"At Kim's house," he replied.

I quizzed him further. "Well, why didn't you tell me you were still on the bus?"

Sensing my irritation, Ryan responded quietly, "I just didn't want to bother you." We circled back to his home, where he let himself in with the key hanging from a shoelace around his neck.

Halloween came. Friday afternoon, the kids were in costume, high on sugar and anticipation. Ryan was made up like a vampire. It was a long run. *Lord, just get me through this so I can go take some aspirin.* After my last stop, I scanned the bus for stowaways and headed home.

I slept in on Saturday. When I finally got moving and settled down with my first cup of coffee and the newspaper, a story on page 2 caught my eye. There had been an accident at the YMCA Halloween party.

A heavy piece of gymnastic equipment was turned over. A child was killed. It was Ryan.

I went to the White Chapel Funeral Home. My greatest fear was that I would say something that would make his parents cry. *Just don't say anything sad or stupid*, I told myself.

There were just a few people talking to Ryan's family. His mom was pretty, just as he said. His dad was there too with Ryan's stepmom. I imagined that the issues that had led to their divorce must have seemed pretty insignificant compared to the nightmare they were living right then.

I looked at the body in the half-sized casket. I thought I detected a little bit of Halloween makeup on his ear. *Don't cry, you idiot, you'll upset his parents*.

I looked up. There was no one left in the room except these three parents. I walked up to shake their hands. "I was Ryan's bus driver." His mom's eyes began to glisten. *Watch it, don't get her started*.

I told them about the day Ryan fell asleep on the bus and missed his stop. Even as they laughed at his response—"I didn't want to bother you"—I could see the tears begin to well up in everyone's eyes. *Way to go, Ed. Now you've made them all cry*.

Ryan's mom started to speak and then grabbed me tight and started shaking with those choking sobs that I dreaded worse than anything. To make matters worse, I started crying too. Not discreetly, but all noisy and messy. I held this young mother I'd never met before and wished I had something to say that would turn their attention away from my tears and runny nose.

A thought came to me. It sounded good until I said it aloud. "Just remember," I said when we all quieted down a little, "God knows the pain of losing a son too." With those words, another wave of grief crashed over us.

As soon as I could, I got out of there. I feared I had poured salt in the wounded hearts of those parents.

The months passed quickly. Christmas came and went. My mid-term exams were on the horizon. One Saturday, I spent the whole day studying and nursing a stomachache that wouldn't go away. Finally, I

called my doctor. “You’d better get to the emergency room. Sounds like appendicitis to me.” My wife drove me over right away.

As I lay there on the gurney, waiting for tests before surgery, a shot of something warm took the edge off the pain. In walked a pretty, young woman in white. She looked like Ryan’s mom. *You’re hallucinating*, I told myself.

“Hello, bus driver,” she said with a smile. It was her—with a needle in her hand.

“I want to thank you for being there that night,” she said as she tightened the tourniquet until my veins popped out. “I can’t tell you how much your words about God understanding have helped me over these past few months.” She slipped the needle in—I never even felt it. “But the fact that you cared enough to cry with us meant more than anything.”

ED ROWELL





# Thanksgiving at Fair Acres

*The holiday takes on new meaning at a nursing home.*

The tables have been rearranged end-to-end, pilgrim-style, for the Thanksgiving feast, and my father and I take our places on either side of my mother. Across from us sit Norman, the owner of the Christian music boom box, and James, a black man in a Mister Rogers cardigan who moves with glacial stateliness to compensate for his halting, stroke-damaged gait. They maintain their usual distant reserve.

“May we join you?” I ask, making my voice bright with what I hope they will see as holiday cheer. James inclines his head in a courtly manner. Norman says, “Sure,” and blinks several times in what appears to be welcome.

“Isn’t this nice,” I say enthusiastically, gesturing toward the centerpieces—baskets of orange, yellow, and red silk leaves, accented with stalks of dried grass and little plastic ears of corn. James nods; Norman says, “Yes, nice.” My father grins.

Meanwhile, an aide is maneuvering the wheelchair of a woman with a rust-colored perm and a silk blouse into position across from my father. Her head shakes like Katharine Hepburn’s, and in one hand she clutches a washcloth with which she continually dabs at her mouth. The washcloth, I see, is to mop up saliva pushed toward the front of her mouth by her tongue, which squirms compulsively like a small burrowing animal.

Over the kitchen clatter, I shout inanities across the table at Norman and James alternately. “Smell that? Mmm, turkey!” “What kind of pie are you going to have, pumpkin or pecan?” “Want a roll to tide you over?”

Amid great bustle, the food is brought from the kitchen and laid out buffet-style. I load a plate with turkey, dressing, gravy, sweet potatoes, fruit salad, cranberry sauce—the dishes I know my mother has always liked. After cutting the turkey into bite-sized bits, I name the plate's contents, coaxing her appetite. "Take a bite of the dressing, Mother, you'll like it." She ignores me, making her way slowly but steadily through the turkey.

"Would you like another roll? I'll butter it for you."

She shakes her head and, after finishing the turkey, puts down her fork, leaving the rest of the meal untouched. The noise, I know, distracts her. The sounds are a jumble she can't sort into meaning.

Telling my father to finish at his own pace, I wheel my mother back to her room. We're both relieved by the quiet that settles around us there. I press the call button for the aides to come and lift her into bed, and then I sit beside her, holding her hand until she drops into a fitful sleep.

"How did the nursing home dinner go?" my daughter asked me the following week as we were recovering from the "real" Thanksgiving feast.

"You know that parable in Luke where the master sends his servant out to the highways and hedges to bring in the maimed, the halt, and the blind after the people he'd invited to the banquet don't show up?"

"Mmm... I think so."

"Well, that's how it was. And I got to come too."

VIRGINIA STEM OWENS