

Learning to Not Give Up!

Gary Hoffman's Pathway to Growth and Healing

By: Myra Biernat Wells, Storyteller

It would have been easy for Gary to blame his wife for the failure of his marriage. After all, he felt like he was doing everything to keep the marriage together. His wife wanted to leave saying: "I just want to be happy." Gary's pain was beyond what words can convey. Questions kept swirling in his mind: "*Why is this happening?*" "*What is my part?*" "*How can I go on?*" His life felt totally out of control.

His divorce forced him into a low place — suffering that plummeted him to the bottom of his existence and left him face down in disappointment. Off balance. A failed relationship. A divorce. Shattered dreams. Discouragement. Lost hope. Depression.

Gary felt he had been knocked off his feet, dumped in the trash and left grasping for air. In the depths of his despair, Gary started calling every separated man he knew. He didn't want to be alone, stewing in all the wrongs he perceived his wife had done to him. All this did was leave him stuck in the past. He recalls "*Rejection was the last thing I expected from someone I trusted so deeply. The unexpected emotional wounding was profound, mostly because it was so unexpected. I felt like I needed God to help me process the hurt and to understand what seemed incomprehensible.*"

Gary went church shopping and decided to try the church up the street (Saddleback Church) mostly because he didn't know why so many cars were always coming and going there. Soon, he was attending Saddleback church regularly. When a friend invited him to the Separated Men's Group he realized he found a place of healing. Slowly, his perspective on marriage began to change. The group consisted of men who were seeing their lives and families torn apart by divorce. Yet, every man kept asking, "*Why is this happening to me?*" Soon Gary realized he had to *own his part in the divorce*; that failure was not entirely his wife's responsibility. "*I needed to learn from my past and this very painful experience, but I didn't know how. I was being stupid. I lived my life without God in it and it showed in my cockiness and arrogance. I was looking for solutions in all the wrong places.*"

Feeling like he had nowhere else to turn, he attended the Separated Men's Group every week. Gradually, the guys became his family. All of them had experienced the same desperate hopelessness Gary had, yet together they were guiding each other towards God's peace. "*Creating a safe place for open communication, we shared our failures. We learned to be accountable to each other. It wasn't easy, but God slowly began to teach each one of us that our failures can give us wisdom.*" When his life was crumbling, Gary was quick to blame everyone else. Through the studies with this group, he learned only when he was willing to admit his faults could God scoop up the rubble of his life, make the most of his suffering, and help him grow as a person who lives an honest and authentic life filled with purpose and meaning.

As Gary began attending services regularly, he learned most people truly didn't know their purpose in life. So, Gary began to challenge God; praying: "*Help me to know my purpose, and why I'm here on earth.*" Knowing this might be tough, he whispered to himself and God; "*I can handle the pain!*"

When a senior leader in the church approached Gary about leading the *Separated Men's Group*, Gary had some misgivings. He had never led a group before. He didn't know what to expect. He was unsure if he had the ability to help other men. He recalls; *"But I felt God tugging on me to do this. I knew that once a couple separated, the odds of saving the marriage were dismal. I didn't want anyone else to experience the pain of divorce. There are millions of ravaged homes, devastated hearts and shattered dreams. Could my experience prevent some of this brokenness from happening? I had learned that masking the pain does not lead to emotional health or recovery. Because of my growth through this group, I saw this invitation as opportunity to develop a greater sense of purpose, spend more time in God's presence and gain a new perspective on my pain."*

Gary turned this request into another support group ministry called *Men On The Edge (MOTE)*. The goal of this group is to educate men struggling in their marriages with godly principles to uncover roadblocks and overcome challenges preventing a loving union. Through short studies on different topics, MOTE gives men a supportive place to do the hard work that will lead to personal growth.

"When a new participant arrives, he often talks mostly about what his wife is doing wrong. In a compassionate, loving manner, the group begins to ask this man, 'What is your part in the failure? What does God want you to do? How can you grow from this experience?'" Gary feels strongly that growth cannot take place until men slow down to learn where God is working in their lives. Failing to admit their character flaws causes men to stagnate, unable to mature.

Today, the *Men On The Edge* support group ministry helps hundreds of men every year develop a closer relationship with God by diving into their questions and hurt. Because all the men in the group have experienced relational difficulties, they can honestly tell newcomers, *"I have experienced what you are going through. And I am here to tell you that if you have faith in God, he will get you through this – just as he got me through my difficulties."*

The time each man spends in the program varies with the level of difficulties they want to resolve. *"Once men start digging into their lives, they begin to realize they didn't get into this situation overnight, and they aren't going to get out overnight. If they are truly honest with themselves, they often begin to identify 8 – 10 major issues in their marriage. As they begin to work on themselves, they realize that change begins from the inside-out, with God's help! Often, most wives enjoy the benefits of her husband's hard work, as he begins to become a different man, a better man, little by little, with God's help."*

The perspective God gave Gary in his lowest place helped him see God more clearly. *"He can take the worst things in your life – loss, abandonment, failure – to create the best for you"*. Though his failed marriage, Gary learned how to *communicate better, focus on God and work on his own shortcomings*. *"Learning those things felt like open heart surgery without any anesthetic. Whatever you do, though, don't give up! The pain taught me how to be honest and authentic."*

Gary and his wife, Faith has recently celebrated their 16th anniversary. Gary often says; *"God refined me in the middle of my crisis. Going through it gave me a sense of purpose and increased my faith. I now feel balanced with God at the center of our marriage."*