

Chapter 9 Phil Calloway
Reluctant Hero

1.

Never give in! Never give in! Never! Never! Never! Never! In anything great or small, large or petty- never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense.

-SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL, WHO SMOKED OVER 300,000 CIGARS

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the words *report card* and *repentance* start with same letters. Just yesterday our children brought home their envelopes and haltingly handed us their report cards. There was no drumroll. No Grammy Award-like fanfare. No thank-you speeches. Today we visited their teachers. And asked forgiveness.

I keep telling my wife that there are more important things than As in mathematics. That we're more concerned with developing the "Is, Ds, and Cs": Integrity, Diligence, and Character. "Character?" she responds. "We're partway there, honey. We're developing characters."

As you may know, part of the risk of parenthood is that you're never quite sure what your kids are going to write, think, say or smash. One day Rachael lined her dolls up on the bed and placed a piece of paper and a pencil before each one. "Whatcha doing?" I asked her, poking my nose through her open door. "Playing school," she answered. "I'm the teacher ... these are my prisoners."

Some time ago, Ramona was visiting a former friend of ours who by her own admission had been struggling with her waistline. In fact, she'd been struggling from diet to diet and from fridge to fridge. Jeffrey, who was four at the time, looked across the table at this dear lady and said with sincerity, "You know, dinosaurs are even bigger than you."

And you wondered why I referred to her as a former friend.

Of course, there are moments when kids surprise another way. Moments that make us proud to be their par, In sixth grade, Stephen's teacher asked the students to down the name of their hero. One child wrote "Bart Simpson." Another wrote "Mother Teresa." Stephen wrote two simple words on a page: "My dad."

I raised his allowance that day.

Decided to take him to Disney World.

Bought the child mutual funds.

Of course I'm kidding. But his flattering words reminded me that God is in the business of building character into characters. And He can do that with the most unlikely candidates.

Let me tell you about one of those characters.

One of my heroes. A guy named Doug.

If they gave out "Most Likely to Fail" awards in high school, Doug Nichols would have been handed his even before the vote.

Born in 1942-the same year his father left home for another woman-Doug was raised by his mother and grandfather. Before long he was known as a troublemaker, something that earned him a high school diploma six months earlier than his classmates.

"Hey Doug," said the principal one day, "have I got a deal for you!"

The tall skinny teen stood before his superior uneasily, wondering if the deal included a firing squad. – "You promise not to come back after Christmas, and I'll give you your diploma now."

Doug smiled. Laughed. And eagerly accepted.

By the time he entered college, Doug was majoring in two subjects: women and alcohol. His late-night exploits were well known, his reputation widespread. You want fun, talk to Nichols. Whatever he does, he holds nothing back.

One night during finals week, he returned to his room from a night on the town. With the help of both walls he stumbled down a long and shifting hallway.

There stood a classmate, Hank Jaegers.

"Hey, Doug," said Hank, "how about some coffee?" Inside Jaegers' room, between long sips of very thick liquid, Nichols listened as his new friend told him an old, old story. The story of Someone who would rather die than live without him. The coffee sobered Doug. The story changed his life. He sat in a folding chair, shaking his head. Jesus loves me? At 4:30 in the morning in a small dorm room in California, Doug got on his knees and asked God to change him for good. "I was full of coffee," he recalls, "but I understood that Jesus died so I could live with Him, so I trusted Christ."

For the first time in his life, Doug had a Father. The adventure had just begun.

The next morning, the new convert to Christianity armed himself with a huge black Thompson Chain-Reference Bible, but soon discovered a problem. His marks had been slipping ever since kindergarten, and he couldn't read a paragraph.

One year later a letter arrived from Hank Jaegers. studying at Prairie Bible College in Canada. "Why don't you join me?" asked Hank.

But Jaegers had no idea what it would cost his friend. "By that time I was engaged to be married," says Nichols, "and my fiancée's father told me to make a choice. I could stay in California and have a brand-new Cadillac, a fancy house and a prosperous business. Or I could go to Bible college up with the polar bears." When

Doug decided on the latter, his fiancée turned her back and dumped him.

"That Cadillac's in a junkyard somewhere," he laughs "And I don't know about the girl."

His poor reading and writing skills nearly did him in at Bible college. But in 1966 he somehow made it to graduation, set his determined face toward the mission field, and ran smack into a major barrier. His soiled past and poor marks in school caused thirty mission agencies to turn him down. Finally called Operation Mobilization said yes. "OM accepts anyone", jokes Nichols.

While learning the Tagalog language, the frustration continued. "Doug," said a teacher after hours of frustration, "do you know what 'walang utak' means?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. It means 'no brains'!"

But Doug was smart enough not to quit. During twenty years in the Philippines, together with his Bible college sweetheart, he learned a new language, started churches, and founded a new mission, Action International. Today its 130, missionaries feed, clothe, and love thousands of street children around the world, and Doug is on the front line in the fight against AIDS in Africa.

One day Doug was preaching in India and he began to cough. Diagnosed with acute tuberculosis, he was sent to a sanatorium to recuperate. Surrounded by starving and dying patients, he wondered how this could ever turn out for the good. Meanwhile, back in Canada, students at Prairie passed a hat around a room, collected about three hundred dollars, and sent it to Doug in an envelope. Nichols sneaked out of the sanatorium with the money and bought as much food as a shop owner could fit into his truck. Then Doug asked the man to back the truck up to the door of the sanatorium, and Nichols watched in delight as the patients hungrily devoured bread and jam and fruit.

But when he offered them gospel booklets, they refused. Dejected, the young preacher began to despair. One night as he lay awake, unable to sleep because of a raspy cough, he noticed an old man trying to leave his bed, only to fall back, exhausted and crying. The stench from the old man's bed the next morning brought loud insults from fellow patients. He had been unsuccessful in trying to get up and go to the restroom. Nurses roughly changed his bedding. One slapped him. Nichols watched as the old man curled up in a ball and wept.

The next morning about 2: 00 A.M., Doug awoke again. The old man was trying to get out of bed. This time, without thinking, Doug left his bed, lifted the frail patient and carried him to the bathroom. When he had finished, Doug carried him back to bed.

Jabbering in a language Doug did not understand, the old man smiled profusely, then kissed him gently on the cheek.

In the morning, Doug awakened to a steaming cup of tea served to him by another patient who spoke no English. After serving the tea, the patient motioned to Doug that he would like a booklet.

"Throughout the day," says Doug, "people came to me, asking for gospel booklets." There were nurses. Doctors. Hospital interns. Over the next few days, several came by to tell Doug that they had made the same decision he had one coffee-soaked night in California.

"I simply took an old man to the bathroom," smiles Doug. "Anyone can do that."

Back in 1993, Doug listened again to a doctor's prognosis: "You have colon cancer, Doug. After radiation and chemotherapy you have a 30 percent chance of recovery."

"You mean I have a 70 percent chance of dying?" Nichols corrected him.

"Uh...I wouldn't put it that way."

Doug had no idea the doors cancer would open.

After surgery, radiation treatments left Doug's body racked with pain and insatiably thirsty. He knew the end was near. But his world was not the only one collapsing. Nightly news reports from Rwanda indicated that civil war had spiraled out of control and more than a million people had been slaughtered, many by their own neighbors and trusted friends. Terrified Rwandans by the thousands fled across the border into Zaire and crowded into filthy, ill-equipped refugee camps where diseases like cholera found a ready home. People were dying everywhere, fifty thousand in three days alone in the little town of Goma. As Doug read those terrible accounts, the thought hit him: *I'd like to hold some of those dying children in my arms before I go Home.*

And so it was that he found himself with a team of doctors and nurses in the middle of Rwanda hoping to do whatever he could to help.

A local Christian leader had hired three hundred refugees as stretcher bearers to bury the daily masses of dead and bring in the sick so the doctors could work with them. One day he came to Doug with an expression of deep concern. "Mr. Nichols," he said, "we have a problem. I was given only so much money to hire these people and now they want to go on strike."

"What? In the middle of all this death and destruction these men want to go on strike?"

"They want more money."

"But we have no more money," Doug told him. "We've spent everything. If they don't work, thousands will die. Can I talk to them?"

"It won't do any good. They're angry. Who knows what they'll do to you."

But Doug was undeterred. He walked over to an old bombed-out school building and ascended the steps wondering what on earth he should say. Three hundred angry men surrounded him and an interpreter. "Mr. Nichols wants to say something," the man called above the noise.

"I can't possibly understand the pain you've experienced," Doug began, "seeing your wives and children hacked to death. I can never understand how that feels. Maybe you want more money for food and water and medical supplies for your families. I've never been in that position either. Nothing tragic has ever happened in my life that compares to what you've suffered. The only thing that's ever happened to me is that I've got cancer."

Doug was about to continue when the interpreter stopped him cold. "Excuse me," he said, "did you say cancer?"

"Yes."

"And you came over here? Did your doctor say you could come?"

"He told me that if I came to Africa I'd probably be dead in three days."

"Your doctor told you that and still you came? What did you come for? And what if you die?"

"I'm here because God led us to come and do something for these people in His name," Nichols told him. "I'm no hero. If I die, just bury me out in that field where you bury everybody else. "

The interpreter began to weep. Then, with tears flowing down his face, he turned to the workers and began to preach. "This man has cancer," he told the crowd. Suddenly they grew quiet. In Rwanda cancer is an automatic death sentence. "He came over here willing to die for our people and we're going on strike just to get a little bit more money? We should be ashamed!"

Suddenly men on all sides began falling to their knees in tears. One crawled over to Doug and threw his arms around his legs. The others stood to their feet, walked over to their stretchers and went quietly back to work.

I wish you could hear Doug tell this story. I wish you could! see the tears in his eyes and the laughter too.

"What did I do?" he later asked me. "Nothing. It wasn't my ability to care for the sick; it wasn't my ability to organize. All I did was get cancer. God used that very weakness to move the hearts of people. Because they went back to work, thousands of lives were saved and many heard the gospel. "

I don't pretend to know why. But I've seen it happen over and over. God uses our weakness, our handicaps, and our inabilities when we give them to Him. Today Doug is more alive than ever. But he's hard to find. We stay in touch mostly by-

mail. If he's not praying over squatters on a garbage dump in Manila, he might be hugging a dying child in a refugee camp. If he's not visiting one of his two adopted Filipino children, he may be celebrating the fact that doctors are shaking their heads. The cancer seems to have vanished.

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Many years ago as the body of David Livingstone, celebrated missionary doctor to Africa, was carried through the streets of London on its way to a final resting place in Westminster Abbey, thousands of people the world over mourned his passing.

One man in particular wept openly.

A friend gently consoled him, asking if he had known Livingstone personally. "I weep not for Livingstone, but for myself," the man said. "He lived and died for something. I have lived for nothing."

Livingstone's life motto was this: "I will place no value on anything I have or possess, except in its relationship to the kingdom of God."

David Livingstone lived that way. So does Doug Nichols. Doug knows the future is cloudy. The cancer could return at any time. But this fireball that God transformed from an out-of-control college kid to a mission leader still believes what he told a very surprised doctor the day cancer stared him in the face for the first time.

"Let me tell you something, Doc," said Nichols, a broad smile crossing his face. "I may have a 70 percent chance of dying. But whatever happens, I have a 100 percent chance of going to heaven."

And when he gets there a report card will be waiting. It will be first one he's ever received with an A+ on it. And these two words: "Well done."