

IT'S TOO LATE TO  
DIE YOUNG NOW



Gary R. Hope

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*Dedicated to:*

*My mom, who deserved more from life*

*My wife, who deserves everything from life*

*My sister, who challenges and loves life*

*My daughter, who needs to understand the meaning of life*

*My niece, who is living the life*

*and*

*My granddaughter, who is life*



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# PREFACE

I used to think I was a good man. But now I know that was just an illusion, a way of fooling myself. A way of rationalizing my life and the decisions I made throughout the years. As I lie here, with a few weeks, or if I'm lucky, a few months left to live; I need to relieve myself of the guilt I've carried around for most of my 73 years. I can't undo the hurt both known and unknown, that my actions have caused so many people. The only thing I can do now is confess my transgressions and admit I've not been a good person. Most people think I have been good, that I've led a nice life. That I've treated people fairly, been loyal, been trustworthy, honest and faithful. I have not. I, George Winston Kerry, have been a scoundrel, a cheat, a liar and a grand illusionist—making people see something in me that I am not.

What is bringing out this confessional now? Cancer. The end is near and I want to set the record straight. I have the most embarrassing of all cancers (in my opinion), rectal cancer. Yes, this awful disease is killing me from my butt. When I've had to tell people what was wrong with me, they all look concerned and

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rightfully so. But, inside I know they want to grin, thinking “cancer of the butt?” Well, it is that, it starts in your butt, but just like all cancers, it just keeps growing, spreading and devouring anything and everything in its way, until your body cannot fight it any longer—as is my case.

The doctors tell me it won't be long and there is nothing else that can be done. All the treatments have done is prolong my life by several months and cause me pain and sickness enduring it all— which I truly deserve by the way. I am not bemoaning my fate, not wondering “Why me?” In fact, I often wonder why something like this hasn't happened to me sooner.

I never really took care of myself, nor exercised with any consistency. I never paid any attention to my diet, except that I tried not to get too fat, but I always ate what I wanted to. I only went to see doctors when I was sick, never for checkups, and for close to 73 years this formula worked. I'm not going to tell anyone to start exercising, or to stop eating this or that, or go to the doctor for checkups regularly. Most people don't want to hear any of that.

I mostly think that when it's your time, then it's your time. It really doesn't matter how fit you are when cancer strikes. All you can do at that point is try and fight back, in my case, not very successfully. I was going on vacation (by myself) and just didn't feel well. When I got to my hotel and went to the bathroom I was shocked that my urine was blood red—I knew that was not good.



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I tried to stay for a few days, but I just felt terrible, so I cut my stay short and flew back home—if you can call living alone, a home. The doctor sent me to the hospital to confirm what he probably already knew, and after several tests and procedures they confirmed the grim news. What do you do when you hear this news? Call your spouse? Your family? Your friends? What do you do when you're me? I went to an Irish bar and had a drink at 11:00 in the morning and thought of everything in the world that was important to me. It was a short list. At that point in your life, it's amazing how your thoughts can be focused into one or two things that really matter.

This will surprise a lot of people I'm sure, but I truly believe in God. In fact, I talk to Him often, especially when I'm in trouble. I've often wondered why and how I got away with all the stuff I did for so many years. Why I wasn't punished for hurting the people I loved and taking advantage of people I barely knew? I don't know the answers to these questions.

I'm sure God had a plan for me, I'm also sure I disappointed Him, as I did myself. And now that I'm going to meet Him face-to-face, I don't know how I'm going to explain myself. This is scary! I don't want to spend eternity in hell, but how can someone like me ever be admitted into Heaven? Now you understand my dilemma, why I must come clean and confess my wrongs, okay sins...yes they were sins.

My problem, as I rationalize it here, is that I was too smart for my own good. If I hadn't been so smart, maybe I couldn't have figured out how to do the stuff I

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did and still get away with it. “So George, you’re saying its God’s fault you did the dastardly things you did? You only did these deeds because He gave you the intelligence to cheat and steal and lie and always get away with it...right?”

Let’s wait a bit before I answer that.



I remember taking advantage of my two younger brothers quite often. It was just so darned easy that I couldn't help myself. I don't really think I meant to be mean, it was just a game for me to see what I could get away with and how much they would believe. I would tell them that a coin like a nickel was more valuable than a dime because it was bigger than a dime; and that a penny was more valuable than a dime, because it was bigger. I'd then trade them all my nickels and pennies for their dimes—they thought I was the best big brother ever!

Back in those simple times and days, your parents NEVER asked what you wanted for dinner. Whatever your mom cooked, you ate; or you went hungry. If there was something she prepared that you didn't like, you always had two choices: eat it then with the rest of your dinner, or sit there until you did eat it. No matter how long it took.

I didn't like squash or okra (and I still don't), but it seems we had those two slimy, distasteful vegetables every week—especially in the summer. It didn't matter if I ate it immediately, when it was warm, or if I sat

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there for a couple of hours until it became cold, oily and slimy, it still tasted horrible.

Our small dining room had a big bay window looking out on the front yard and the street. I always sat in the chair facing the window and made my brothers sit with their backs to the window. I'd get a big spoonful of okra and then point out the window and say, "Who's that kid on the new bike?" Or, "Where does that dog live?" They would both turn around immediately to look out the window and when they did, I'd dump my spoonful of okra on their plate. I never did that in front of dad, he wouldn't have seen the humor in it; but mom would just giggle at my ingenuity. And, I had much less squash and okra to eat...win/win.

In our hallway we had a picture of Jesus, kneeling down in a garden, looking up towards heaven and a light was shining on His face. It was a pretty nice picture and I liked looking at it. I didn't really understand what He was looking at, or why a light was shining on His head, but I enjoyed looking at it. Except when I "exchanged" nickels and pennies for dimes; or dumped food on my brother's plates...I always avoided the hallway then. It was very hard to look at Jesus when I had been a little naughty.

The first act of blatant wrongfulness outside of home, that I remember, was in grade school. We were in the lunch line and I was last in line that day. My good friend Mobley was in front of me eyeing the fish sticks and English peas the servers were dishing out to us.

Mobley had a very fashionable new wallet in his back pocket, the kind that stuck out of his pocket about half an inch.

Well, I immediately noticed the tip of a \$1 bill sticking out the end of his wallet. I looked around—no one was looking at me, no one was behind me. Mobley was talking to Scooter, the class clown, and they were laughing at something—or someone. I grabbed the tip of the \$1 bill and quickly snatched it, it came right out. I hadn't planned on stealing Mobley's money, I didn't need the money for anything. The moment just appeared and before you could say "give me two fish sticks please" I had the \$1 bill in my pocket and no one knew a thing...except me, and maybe God. I wish I could find Mobley today (if he's still living) and give that dollar back to him. I truly do, that utterly stupid, senseless act has bothered me for over 62 years now.

Why did I steal that money? I liked Mobley, he was my friend, and stayed my friend throughout our school years. Why do any of us do the things we do? Of course I knew better; I knew it was wrong. But the opportunity presented itself and before I knew it, I had done it. The problem was that it was too easy. Maybe if I'd been caught that day 62 years ago, my life would have turned out differently. "So, in effect, you're saying because Mobley didn't catch you that day, it's really his fault you ended up being you...right, George?" Please, conscience, don't give me any outs...I am what I am.

I did little things as a kid that I still remember, things that were wrong that bother me now. Maybe all

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kids do stuff, I don't know, but I know that I did and now they're coming back to haunt me. My dad would take all the change out of his pockets in the evening when he came home from work and put it all on his dresser in the bedroom. I'd sneak in there and take a dime or a nickel. I'd never take a quarter, I thought he'd miss the quarter, but I didn't think he'd ever miss a nickel or dime. Other times, I could convince my mom that I hadn't had my weekly allowance yet and she would give me my quarter, when in reality, my dad had already given me a quarter. Funny how badly a quarter can make you feel now.

My favorite teacher in school was Ms. Barnett, whom I had in the fifth grade. I don't really know that she was a great teacher or not, but she was very pretty and seemed to like me (more than all the other students, I'm sure). In those grades, you kept the same teacher all day long. She taught English, Math, History, and everything else we took—Ms. Barnett taught it all. I loved Ms. Barnett. When she smiled at a little fifth grader like me, my heart would almost jump out of my body. I'm not really sure if I loved Ms. Barnett like a surrogate mom, or as a fantasy girlfriend. I'd never had a girlfriend before, I didn't know how that felt.

I'd bring Ms. Barnett an apple every week or two. She'd make a big fuss over it. Sometimes I'd save a cupcake that my mom made (if I could hide them from my brothers) and take one to Ms. Barnett.

Thinking back on those cupcakes now, I didn't put them in a baggie, I just wrapped a paper towel around

them. I'm pretty sure they were probably stale and hard by the time Ms. Barnett actually had the chance to taste one (if she ever did). But it sure made my little heart skip a beat when she would smile and thank me...I'd do anything for Ms. Barnett. Even steal from her.

Ms. Barnett had this big red pen on her desk at the front of the room that she used to correct our papers. She liked to hold it in her hand as she talked to us and during our lessons...she was always holding it. I often thought that if a magic genie came into my life, I'd like him to change me into that red pen, so Ms. Barnett could hold me all day long. Funny how little kids think.

One day, after lunch, Ms. Barnett told us to put our books away, that it was time for recess. Everyone, excitedly, put their books under their desks, grabbed their coats and hurried outside for a spirited game of kickball, or dodge ball, your choice. I liked dodge ball a lot. It really made my day to hit the bully, Albert, with the ball as hard as I could. It didn't happen often, he usually hit me more than I hit him, but when I did hit him—it was so sweet.

Anyway, this particular day, as I stood up, I noticed my shoe lace was untied, so I stopped to tie it, causing me to be the last student to leave the classroom. As I started to leave, passing next to Ms. Barnett's desk, I saw it...the red pen. It was sitting there, unguarded, seemingly whispering to me, "Take me George, it's okay." I hesitated for an instant, looked around the empty classroom, then I grabbed the pen. I

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stuck it in my coat jacket and ran outside, feeling exhilarated, scared and guilty for what I'd done.

After recess, when everyone was back in the classroom, Ms. Barnett announced that something had been taken from her desk. She didn't say it was the red pen and she didn't say it was stolen, she said "taken" like someone had borrowed it. She did say she expected whoever took the object, to either put it back on her desk as school ended that day, or to simply leave it somewhere in the classroom so she could find it.

Until that moment, I didn't know it was possible to instantly break out in beads of sweat. I was sure Ms. Barnett would notice how badly I was sweating and that I would be caught. School ended that day. Ms. Barnett didn't catch me. I was by then too scared to put the pen back on her desk, so I took it home. I held the pen that night, but somehow, it didn't make me feel good—in fact, it made me feel bad. I had hurt someone that I loved, I knew right then I was not a good person.

It was a hard, cold fact for an eleven year old to digest. I couldn't stand for the pen to be in my possession any longer, so I threw it in the creek behind our house the next day. I don't know if it was my imagination or not, but I always felt as though Ms. Barnett looked at me differently the rest of the year. I'm pretty sure that's when the little voice in the back of my mind was born.





As I got older, my friends and I would meet at a local soda shop to hang out and watch girls. There was a mixed nut display case there with warm, fresh cashews and those nuts smelled so good and looked so inviting. But, they were also very expensive for a kid with no money. I'd look at those nuts every day, smell the sweet aroma of those warm cashews and lust for them on the way home. Oh, how I wished I was rich so I could eat cashews every day!

Soon I began to position myself at the corner of the mixed nut display case and the magazine rack. When everyone was laughing at a joke or looking at a pretty girl who just walked in, I would discreetly lift the lid of the nut case and take 2 or 3 cashews out before anyone knew what had happened. Why did I do this? I wasn't starving. I can't explain it accurately now, just that the temptation overwhelmed me and I could not stop myself. One other time, I bought a comic book and after I paid for it, I slipped another comicbook I hadn't paid for inside the pages of the first one and walked out. How can I remember all these dirty little deeds now, yet not remember birthdays, anniversaries and other important details of my life?

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I continued to take advantage of my brothers, and sometimes their friends as well. We loved to play cards. We thought we were big time poker players when we were 11—12 years old. I'd play with my brothers, or we'd have some of their friends over and have up to seven or eight people playing nickel—dime poker. What they didn't know was that I had a built-in advantage. Even then, I was looking for ways where I could benefit at the expense of others.

I saw an ad in a magazine for a “magic” deck of cards that you could do amazing tricks to astound your family and friends. I ordered the “magic cards,” not to amaze my family and friends with, but to use for my own personal gain. Each of these “magic” cards had designs on the back that were seemingly all the same. However, each card had a “magic” code that identified that particular card, if you knew how to read the code. That was the “magic” part—being able to understand the code. I could look at the back of each card and tell if it was a 3 of spades, or a king of diamonds. In poker, this ability was an invaluable resource.

Being able to decipher the codes on my “magic” cards gave me the uncanny ability to always have the best hand, or fold if I didn't. My brothers and their friends thought I had the best poker instincts of anyone this side of Wild Bill Hickok! It helps when you know what each card is that your opponent is holding, and what the next card is that's going to be dealt. My amazing poker ability won me a lot of nickels and dimes that summer. It ended when they all refused to

play with me anymore, because I always won. So, I took my cards and went home.

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In high school I had a job pumping gas at Tom's Texaco. I enjoyed the job and Tom was a good guy to work for. As far as I know he treated all his employees and customers fairly. In those days, in the mid 1950's, us attendants pumped gas in the customer's cars, washed their windshields, checked the oil and the tire pressure. While customers relaxed in their car and drank a 6 oz Coca-Cola while they waited. What simple times they were.

Gas was relatively cheap then, 25-26 cents a gallon. Tom was paying me \$1.00 an hour, which was average wages for the day, and I was happy for it. After a few months, the sneakiness in me realized that if a customer got \$4.75 worth of regular and paid in cash, I could simply pocket a quarter and put the other \$4.50 in the cash register and no one would ever know. Heck, it was only a quarter!

Tom didn't need that quarter, he'd never miss it. Well, maybe not that one quarter, but if I did that three or four times a day, then those quarters added up. I could make an extra dollar a day, and when you're only making \$1.00 an hour, an additional dollar a day is a lot of money. I kept rationalizing that old Tom would never miss that "quarter."

I soon began to consider that extra dollar as part of my salary for doing all the dirty work. Like checking

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the oil and throwing away garbage for customers. Washing their front and back windows, and even checking their tire pressure. Even though I knew what I was doing was wrong, heck, it was only a quarter...right? Tom didn't need it...right George? Sometimes I hate that little voice in the back of my mind. Or was that God talking to me?

Somehow, Tom never found out about the missing quarters and I kept working there when I started college. My hours were flexible and I worked mostly late afternoons and evenings. College life was fun for me, I enjoyed the courses, the interaction and mostly, the parties and the girls. I did fairly well, an "A", a couple of "B"s and a "C" or two in my first year. Honestly, I didn't try very hard and seldom studied at all. I found that if I paid attention during class and listened to the lectures I could usually do okay on the tests and exams.

Some of the courses, like accounting and finance were truly interesting and I was fascinated by the lectures and discussions. Other courses really bored the daylight out of me. Courses like history, sociology and geography were insufferable and it took all my will power just to stay awake during those classes. Interestingly, two courses that intrigued me were Old Testament (first semester) and New Testament (second semester). It seems odd now to be taking religious courses in college. But in those days it was required and we didn't have the ACLU, or any other groups protesting that this was unconstitutional, or some other nonsense.

I thought about taking more religion courses my next year. I was hoping to learn something, not just memorize things from the Bible. That first year, it seems like all we did was memorize the books of the Bible and then recite passages and verses. Never really learning anything, but being tested on how good we could memorize things. Even then, I wanted to see what the Bible was really about and what it had to say to me. However, between the summer of my freshman year and sophomore year, something happened to change my mind.

Our professor, Dr. Henriksonn, who wrote, not only our textbook, but several other texts and books on religion and the Bible, was arrested. It was nothing major, a simple misdemeanor on his part, but very embarrassing for him and the school. Dr. Henriksonn and his wife, both in their 70's, were seen by some neighbors sunbathing on the deck in their own backyard—in the nude.

Apparently, the neighbors who reported them had just moved in and had some young kids and they didn't want their children to see the good Doctor and his wife in the buff. Trust me, no one wanted to see that.

The other two neighbors, who could see into the backyard, had always ignored Dr. Henriksonn and knew he was a little quirky. The new neighbors didn't ignore it. It made quite a scene at the university and Dr. Henriksonn retired rather than take the suspension they were offering. So, that incident, rightly or wrongly, influenced me not to take any other religion courses. In retrospect...my loss.

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My system of just paying attention in class and not studying very much worked well for me. That is, until one day on a History exam when I looked at the test questions and realized that I didn't recognize hardly anything on the exam. I had not done any of the required reading or studying. I just figured I would get by, like I had in the other classes. Sometimes, being smart was an advantage in that you didn't have to work as hard. Sometimes it got you in trouble—like now.

I looked at all the questions on this end of term exam and only knew about 25% of the answers—I was in big trouble. By taking short cuts and not studying and doing the work I had put myself in a deep hole. I did not know what I was going to do, when suddenly, opportunity again presented itself to me on a golden platter. The professor stood up and told us he is going down the hallway to his office and we are to bring him our exams when we finish them.

Wow!

As soon as he left our classroom, I got up from my desk, mentioned something about feeling sick to those around me and also walked out of the room. Only, I wasn't sick. I went to the next empty classroom, got out my history book and looked up all the answers to the questions I didn't know and completed the exam.

Guess what? I made 100 on the exam and enhanced my sterling reputation as one of the smartest guys around.

That professor should not have left us alone in the classroom. No way he should've done that. How could he trust a bunch of 18 and 19 year olds to be on their own? What a senseless act. I would've never done what I did if he didn't give me the opportunity. It was all his fault—at least, that was the excuse I used in my mind for the next 50 years. It was his fault I cheated. Right, George?

The only positive to come of that episode was that it scared me really good. From then on I worked a little harder to prepare for the exams. Not a lot harder, just a little harder. I didn't want to be faced with that situation again. I never cheated on tests or exams again, but I did start a new kind of cheating that was a lot more lucrative.