

GOING THROUGH HELL TO GET TO HEAVEN



Dr. Scot Hodkiewicz

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DEDICATION

There are a lot of people who are the reason I wrote this story. Certainly those most important in my life are my wife, Mona, and my three kids, Alexa, Victoria, and Chase. They are the inspiration for everything I do and this book is no different. We, as the story will demonstrate, have been through great pain, fear, and doubt. But those same experiences have brought us great joy and strength. To them, I dedicate this book. I really wrote it to tell *our* story, not mine.

Yet, there are many others to whom I owe a great debt. Many of them I either never met or never knew by their names. They are the “angels” I mention throughout the story, the men and women who stepped forward when they were needed to do what was good and right. Whether it was Dr. Lang, who was so pivotal in the events of my life, or the unknown people who seemingly appeared, did what God had put them in place to do, and then just as quickly vanished, never to be seen again. These were all angels in our lives, and it is to them that I also dedicate this book; the people who took action, who refused to sit by and do nothing, the ones who needed no recognition, no glory. In fact, many probably never got anything for their services other than the joy of knowing they made a difference—that one day, they were in the right spot at the right time and jumped in to help someone else. These are the angels in our lives whom I now strive to emulate. These people, placed so carefully in our lives at just the right time and in just the right circumstance, I will never be able to repay. It is to the angels here on earth that I dedicate this book.

But in keeping with this effort to repay what is owed, a portion of all proceeds from this book will go to various charities whose sole purpose is to be an angel to others in need.

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FOREWORD

On a fall day in 2006, we received an emergency call informing us that Dr. Scot and his family had been in a horrific automobile crash. While everyone in the family sustained injuries, Scot's were so extensive that the staff confided in us it would take nothing short of a miracle for him to survive. Those words proved to be prophetic.

What you are about to read is the unfolding story of many miracles that would ultimately bless the Hodkiewicz family, our church, the community, and every reader.

This book is so gripping, we guarantee you won't be able to put it down and will want to give a copy to everyone you know. Scot humbly tells his story with raw honesty, searing personal insights, and a degree of vulnerability rarely put in print.

Skating so close to death and being utterly helpless opened Scot's mind to the deeper meaning of life. Where was God in the midst of his extensive, life-threatening injuries?

The Bible says, "Suffering produces endurance" (Romans 5:3).

We have never seen anyone work harder than Scot did at enduring multiple surgeries and torturous physical therapy. But those challenges were so agonizing, they kindled a rage that Scot admits was far more destructive than his physical injuries.

Scot's fury at the drunk driver who caused the crash consumed him. As you read this book, you'll discover the personal revelation that caused Scot to examine his own culpability, birthing in him what he calls a much-needed humility.

"Endurance produces character," Scripture continues (Romans 5:4). A humbled Scot was transformed as he changed his focus to what he describes as his own shortcomings. God was doing great

work recreating Scot's heart as he endured the demands of his recovery.

Scot diligently studied God's Word, facilitated Bible studies at church, helped lead numerous mission trips, and served as our congregational president.

In addition to being Scot's personal account, this book has a wider reach, pressing us all to examine what we most value: our priorities, our relationship with God, and how we might use our lives to better serve others.

There is nothing theoretical about this book. It's the real deal. Scot takes the reader on a roller coaster of emotions, with agonizing valleys of despair, the tenacity to endure seemingly impossible challenges, and stunning small victories that restored not only his body but also his spirit.

This book is a testament to courage, perseverance, the power of the human spirit, and the ways God is able to do immeasurably more than all we could ask or imagine.

—Pastors *Mary Ann and Mark Moller-Gunderson*

MY GREAT PLAN

I thought I had a great plan.

I had always done well in school. I was valedictorian at my high school graduation and ranked second in my undergraduate class in college, although I never received my undergraduate degree. Because I had been accepted into veterinary school, I left a year early to fulfill my dream of working in medicine. Why veterinary school? In spite of my academic accomplishments, I was shy as an adolescent, with a bit of an inferiority complex; becoming a top-notch physician and taking on the responsibility of treating people seemed too much for me to handle. When you're lacking in confidence, putting another human being's life in your hands is way too risky. So instead, I became a veterinarian.

Of course, I still have to cope with a great deal of pressure as a vet because my patients are often regarded as members of the family. Yet it pales in comparison to what physicians face every day. Even now, losing someone's beloved pet rattles me, but losing someone's child or spouse would haunt me forever. During my training, I discovered that veterinary medicine fit my personality perfectly; I absolutely *loved* it. I enjoyed the challenge of medicine and the freedom that working with animals affords. Because I was in my element, I developed confidence, lost my shyness, and blossomed. This career just made sense to me; I had found my calling. Four years later, I graduated at the top of my veterinary class with job offers everywhere I applied.

My great plan.

Step One: Become a vet. Step Two: Get a good job. Step Three: Get married and start a family.

Right out of vet school I married Mona—a beautiful, intelligent woman from the veterinary class behind me. Because she had her pick of guys, I felt incredibly lucky to have won her over. Mona and I began working at a mixed animal practice where we treated dogs and cats as well as farm animals. Here, I perfected my craft and honed my skills by developing a specialty in surgery. I became especially adept at orthopedics—fixing broken bones.

Soon after, we started our family. With the birth of our first child, Alexa, we took yet another step on my carefully laid-out plan.

The last step? Open our own veterinary hospital.

Five years after graduation, Mona and I got our chance and moved to a beautiful area in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Home to about ten thousand residents, this Midwestern town boasts a gorgeous lake and constant activity, in addition to safe neighborhoods and great schools—the perfect place for us to raise our family. We spent the next eight years building a successful veterinary practice and expanding our family to include another daughter, Victoria, and a son, Chase.

Life was good. I truly believed the hard part was over—the sixty-hour workweeks spent building a new business and the constant reading and studying to sharpen my skills in surgery and medicine. All of this was winding down and life was getting progressively easier. We'd survived the baby stages and the terrible twos, having changed countless diapers and dealt with constantly interrupted sleep, courtesy of either crying kids or emergency calls.

The rest of my plan was simple. We'd already put in the hard work building a practice and raising the kids so we could coast by the time they grew into teenagers. At that time, we would hire more staff, work fewer hours, and play more. With our eyes on retirement at sixty, we'd practice veterinary medicine for another twenty years, then sell the business for a bunch of money. Thereafter, we would travel. Yes,

sir. We had it all figured out. By sticking to our great plan, we were now in complete control of our lives as successful business owners, parents, and pet owners (even our dogs listened well). Not only were we making good money, we were the toast of the town—regular invitees to the best parties and events hosted by the wealthiest people in Lake Geneva—most of whom were also our clients.

Was it any wonder Mona and I were absolutely convinced we could handle anything life threw at us?

We'd built it all ourselves without any help from anyone else. I figured now I could sit down and write a self-help book about my great plan, in which I'd tell others how to build the perfect life. People would rush to read all about it. It would be a bestseller and elevate me to a whole new level of success, with Oprah and Dr. Phil calling to interview the young veterinarian who had achieved it all by his late thirties.

Yeah, great plan.

Then came that fateful October. We were returning home from our cabin in northern Wisconsin following our “get ready for winter” weekend. The boat needed to be winterized and the dealer up north had offered a special deal: “Saturday only, winterization for \$65.” Since the winterization down where I lived often cost over \$200, this was a bargain I couldn't resist. (Boy, was I smart!)

Of course, the cabin required some maintenance too. The gutters were full of pine needles, and a few windows were in desperate need of caulking. Soon snow would be piling up two feet high on the roof (and in the driveway, on the roads, and everywhere else). Although there were also some dead trees around the property in need of cutting, I figured that task could wait until next time we were up. No rush, plenty of time.

The weekend had been productive but still fun. Our cabin had no TV—just the way we like it—so we spent most of our time outside fishing (or at least *trying*, since we've never had much luck on the

lake) and hiking with our two dogs (a Golden Retriever named Annabelle and a little Yorkie-poo named Olivia). We made “pudgie pies,” a family tradition of meat, spaghetti sauce, and cheese cooked in a sandwich iron over a fire. We talked and ate s’mores around the bonfire until either the weather or the mosquitoes chased us inside, where we then played Clue and Battleship. Often the night ended with blackjack, which is a pretty easy game to understand for three little kids. In fact, at the last parent-teacher conference prior to this October weekend, Chase’s teacher had commented on my son’s remarkable addition abilities as a pre-K student. When I replied that Chase was really good at adding to twenty-one, I got the “bad parent” look and a kick from Mona under the table. At the ripe old age of four, Chase already was becoming quite a little card shark!

I love fall in Wisconsin. Actually, I enjoy all the seasons here—hot summers, cold winters, and beautiful springs—but fall is by far my favorite. Wisconsin is known for long, frigid winters, Packers games at Lambeau Field, and brats on the grill. When most people think of Wisconsin, they automatically start to shiver. To me, there is nothing better than being in a warm sweatshirt next to a hot fire with a book in hand when the leaves are changing colors. During that October weekend, the temperature had ranged from high fifties during the day to low forties at night. Fall is the season when fishing picks up and we toss footballs in the driveway. It’s the time of year when being at the cabin is all about campfires in the cool nights, countless twinkling stars, a crackling fireplace, and a thick, warm comforter.

By Sunday we’d completed our chores and playtime at the cabin; it was time to head home. To avoid traffic, we’d left early. There are typically a lot of cars heading back from northern Wisconsin on Sunday nights, so we got on the road around noon. Naturally, I timed the three-hour trip so I could listen to the Packers game on the way, having been a die-hard fan since I was a kid. My dad was at the famous Ice Bowl of 1963 (game-time temperature of minus-thirteen

degrees), when the Packers beat the Cowboys on a last-second quarterback sneak by Bart Starr. Of course, half of Wisconsin claims to have been there!

Because Mona does not share my enthusiasm for the Green and Gold, she sleeps when we drive so I can listen to the game. Our minivan was also equipped with a DVD for the kids, who sat with their headphones on, watching a Scooby-Doo cartoon. Mona and the dogs, exhausted from the activity of the previous forty-eight hours, drifted off to sleep. As per her habit, Mona doesn't even try to stay awake and is usually asleep within a mile or two of leaving, feet propped up on the dash and seat set as far back as possible.

This was the very definition of peace and tranquility: wife asleep, kids watching a video, and a football game playing on the radio. It was *my* idea of heaven. The leaves were changing and the temperature was a pleasant fifty-five degrees. The Packers were having a good season, with a high probability of making the playoffs. All was right in my world.

Yes indeed, my plan had come together perfectly. What could possibly go wrong?

Although an avid fan, I was not really listening to the game that day because I was busy using the time to figure out ways to make the veterinary clinic more successful, i.e., more *profitable*.

What if I learned to do a different surgery or added another piece of equipment? How much money would that bring in? Could I raise my prices or cut back on staff? The business was booming and my focus had shifted. When I started, I wanted nothing to do with the business side; I just wanted to work on my patients. Now I'd set my sights on how much money I could make, doing what Americans naturally do—pursuing happiness through the accumulation of wealth. And why not? Our earnings were already paying for our cabin in the woods; what was wrong with wanting more?

Truth be told, I was losing my way by chasing other people's

definition of the American dream. Although I did have some misgivings about my relatively new and nearly exclusive focus on income versus the care and healing of animals, I'd usually brush them off. After all, I was making good money, running with the wealthy in town, enjoying the respect of my community, and buying anything I wanted. And still, I wanted even more.

Oh yes, I had it all figured out. Life was perfect. We would miss church again this Sunday, but who cared? We hadn't really been going much anyway, because we were just too busy living the dream. At some later point, we'd start to attend more regularly. Plenty of time for that.

I don't remember the impact.

I heard and felt nothing. The only thing I know is what witnesses have told me. The other car was a 2005 Jeep, purchased from a dealer the day before by a drunk driver with a record of seven DUIs and a suspended driver's license (it is legal to sell a car to someone with no legal way to drive it in Wisconsin). Today would be his eighth offense. The driver, a man about my age whom I'll call Mike Jacobs (that's not his real name), had spent the morning driving around with a case of Miller High Life in the car. He had stopped by his mother's house that morning already drunk but had driven away (she had not even tried to stop him) and continued guzzling beer. He had already spent seven years in prison, three after his sixth DUI, and four after his seventh. As soon as he'd get out, he'd start drinking all over again.

Jacobs was out on parole the day of the accident, but like every other time prior to that, it mattered little to him. He'd violated the conditions of his parole numerous times since his last stint in prison. The pattern would go like this: His mother would call his parole officer to report he was drinking again; the parole officer would stop by his house, see beer in the fridge and empty cans all over the place (a condition of parole was that no alcohol could be on the premises); give Jacobs a warning; and leave. *Nothing* had been done. Jacobs

had been caught driving drunk a month earlier in a hotel parking lot and once again let off with only a warning. In Wisconsin, DUI can be charged only if you are on a public road. On that particular day, he had been in violation of his parole since he wasn't supposed to drink in the first place. He was not allowed to be in possession of car keys—much less drive a car—after consuming alcohol. Although Jacobs could have been sent back to serve more prison time, instead he was given another meaningless warning. These warnings and threats of punishment carried no weight, and he knew it. By one o'clock on this particular Sunday afternoon, he was over halfway through another case of beer.

Our decision to leave early that day to avoid the worst traffic put us directly in his path. Mike Jacobs was going to change everything I knew, everything that was so right in my perfect world, and my perfect plan. Good thing I hadn't written my self-help book yet.

About halfway home, just outside of Madison, Wisconsin, the crash happened. Jacobs was heading north on I-94; we were heading south. The median at that point was about fifteen feet across, and there was no guardrail—only a shallow ditch to separate the northbound and southbound lanes. I was probably going about seventy miles per hour, as was Jacobs. Though I don't remember anything about the collision, Mona does. She had drifted off to sleep but was awakened by my voice. I can't say I muttered anything too intelligent or profound as I realized there was a Jeep about to hit us. My words of wisdom after being the class valedictorian and becoming a doctor were, "Oh shit!"

That is about all I had time to say, and it pretty much summed up what was about to happen: Our lives were about to change forever, and we all were going to go through a lot of shit.

It is humbling to consider the force such a crash can generate. It spun a fifteen-hundred-pound vehicle one and a half times, moved the front end and engine by a foot and a half, and still had enough

energy to smash bones and mangle bodies. The impact was simply incredible.

I always figured that in a crash I could “just hold on” and ride it out. I was in pretty good shape at thirty-eight and had never had any serious injuries. My job as a veterinarian kept me on my feet for eight hours straight and required lifting dogs weighing over one hundred pounds (the one-hundred-fifty-pounders I no longer lifted by myself like I used to). At the start of my veterinary career, I had done 50 percent dairy work, which meant dealing with very large and often stubborn animals, so I was in decent shape. I had kept my weight fairly well in check at about one hundred seventy-five pounds on a five-foot, ten-inch frame. Not bad for a guy pushing forty, but still no match for the pounding I was about to take from a half-ton vehicle hitting us at a combined closing speed of one hundred forty miles per hour.

The half-second I had to react gave me no time and no good options. They were basically limited to turn right, turn left, stop, or speed up. Actually, stopping was never an option, since I was going way too fast. I instinctively hit the brakes but had no way of avoiding a collision. Plus, Jacobs was drunk or passed out and not trying to stop anyway. Speeding up isn't an option either when a car is careening toward you in your lane while you're driving a minivan not known for its great acceleration. Turning left would have turned us into the Jeep coming across the median from the other direction; that didn't seem like a very smart choice. Turning right would have put Jacobs's front end into my door or, worse yet, into my son, Chase's, door (he was strapped into his car seat right behind me). That would have put three inches of door between us and the front of Jacobs's car as it sped right into us. There were no good choices: The crash was going to happen, and it was going to hurt. All that could save us was the car's engineering and God's help. As for me, the only thing I could do was hit the brakes and hold on for dear life.

“Oh shit!”

The front corner of Jacobs’s Jeep hit the front driver’s-side corner of our van. The engine was instantly pushed back, forcing the driver’s compartment back into my legs. The van spun, coming to a rest on the exterior guardrail three lanes over facing the opposite direction. The impact smashed my body with such force that multiple bones shattered instantly. Bones in my arms, legs, pelvis, and nose were all broken. In spite of the airbag and seat belt, the impact to my chest and abdomen ruptured vessels, causing massive internal bleeding. Mona was thrown forward and to the right, her head impacting the car door, knocking her unconscious. The kids were whipped violently forward and sideways. For us to just survive this amount of impact would be a miracle.

There was nothing I could do. And in the end, I didn’t do much. I simply hit the brakes. I didn’t even swerve, because it happened too fast. I just braked and braced for impact, knowing our lives were about to change in a very bad way. The crash was completely out of my control. And it was definitely *not* part of my perfect plan.

FOR REFLECTION

*The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.
(Proverbs 16:9)*

1. Have you ever had a plan for your life that changed?
2. Have you ever been without a plan at all?
3. How often have your plans come to fruition?
4. Is planning for the future worthwhile?