

Knock- Gordon MacDonald Outs

I'm not a big-time boxing fan, but—like most people—I am familiar with a few well-known fighters. Their careers are simply assessed: fights won, lost, or drawn. There is also the knockout record: how many knockouts achieved or experienced.

I was musing on such “deep” things the other night, and I wondered what it means to a fighter to be knocked out. What a devastating experience to lie there, dazed on the canvas while the crowd cheers the winner.

Former heavy weight champion Floyd Patterson confessed that when he fought, he brought a bag of disguises with him—wigs, moustaches, big sunglasses—to effect a private getaway should he lose. So knockouts must generate more than just a pain in the jaw.

When I rehearse my spiritual journey, I often think about knockouts. Not the ones I might have scored, but rather the ones I've experienced. I hit the canvas well. In terms of this coarsened metaphor, I figure I've been knocked cold at least five times.

Of course, I've been down on the canvas a number of other times, but on those occasions I managed to get up. And there have been a few occasions when I felt as if I were out on my feet, and I didn't have the sense to fall down and take the count.

But my spiritual “fighting record” includes at least five personal knockouts when getting up was not guaranteed. Five humiliating experiences (all my responsibility) changed me and became important markers in my life of following Jesus.

Let's say it right up front. All of us (well, most of us, anyway) will be knocked out sooner or later. But not all of us will respond to the experience the same way. I've lived long enough to know some men and women who have been knocked out and have never gotten up. They simply could not handle the disgrace or the defeat. I've known a person or two whose heart was so broken by a knockout that they simply quit or died. When a young man, I never planned on being knocked out.

Does anybody? I assumed I could learn by other people's experiences. And I guess I figured that I was smart enough, clever enough, that while I might lose a few close ones, I could always stay on my feet and avoid the roundhouse right that might otherwise send me to the floor.

But this was a foolish confidence.

My first knockout came in the earliest days of my aspirations to be a pastor. I had been invited to join a ministry staff and handle the responsibilities of youth work. My wife, Gail, and I had just returned from our honeymoon, and we were ambitious to enter ministry while I made my way through seminary.

The first year of youth ministry seemed an amazing success. The young people and their parents actually seemed to love us (although I secretly suspected they loved Gail and liked me). The decisions I made about youth programming were lauded. My relationships with teens seemed smooth as glass. In short, I had

one good year. One! Year two was a disaster.

I'm still not sure what I did wrong, but my influence simply wore out. Suddenly I was the target of criticism everywhere I turned. Decisions, once good, seemed poor. Teens who had loved (or liked) me now found me boring. Programs formerly successful now sputtered. I tried shouting, spraying guilt, whining. Nothing worked.

Then one day I found a piece of paper on which someone had written a note. It read, "If MacDonald doesn't get out of here soon, this whole youth program will go down the toilet." The note was the knockout blow.

Within the hour, I was at my typewriter arranging a letter of resignation. I quit! Only twenty-four years old, a future of anticipated ministry ahead of me, and I was already a loser. I was down for the count. Years later, a distant member of my mother's family would say to me at the time of my mother's death, "You know, you come from a long line of quitters. When things got tough in your mother's family, they drank, got bitter, or simply lay down and died." A comment like that gets one's attention.

The remark was a revelation of my behavior when I'd quit so impulsively in earlier years. And I was quick to see other, more recent times when I had wanted to quit in the face of opposition, severe critique, or failure.

I wondered if there was a quitter's gene in me. Would I have to face it down for the rest of my life? Was I the kind who would

throw in the towel every time there was an adverse moment?

This was where I caught on to the discipline of resolve. "Let us run the race with perseverance..." the biblical writer had exhorted knocked-out Christians. And I had to learn to master this idea.

A few years later came another knockout blow. A person with whom I had a working relationship broke promises that I thought were solid between us. Looking back from the perspective of many years, I find my behavior to be silly and immature. But at the time it seemed to me as if the sky had fallen.

I found myself gripped with a spirit of resentment, possessed of a hateful force I'd never known before in my life. I was obsessed over what I perceived the other person had done. In bed at night, I would awaken and imagine vengeance and retribution. Every idle moment was overwhelmed with vindictive feelings. In time, I could smell hate. And it crippled my spirit.

Whenever anyone tells me about his or her inability to shake a habit or an addiction, I recover the memory of that knockout because it is as close as I have ever come to my mind getting fully out of control. I simply could not manage my thought life! For all practical purposes, I was knocked out.

One Friday afternoon, I was flying to a distant part of the country where I was to preach for the weekend. I was seated at the rear of a nearly empty plane, and my thoughts were full of rage. Yet—and here was the irony—I had to

preach that weekend to several hundred people. And what would I say to them? How could I refresh their lives when mine was flooded with bitterness?

Was this too a family trait? I wondered. Was I patterned to be an angry man who kept a list of my enemies and plotted their demise in my fantasies?

"We will be landing in thirty minutes," the pilot suddenly announced, intruding on my dark reverie. And I knew at once that I could not enter the weekend with such a toxic spirit. If I could have gotten on my knees, I would have. But planes do not have kneelers, so I sat, belted in, begging God for relief.

And the message came: Forgive! Impossible! Another message perhaps? But the word returned again and again until, in a burst of almost embarrassing emotion, I begged God (out loud) to provide me the power to forgive.

In an experience I reluctantly describe, I had a vision of God cutting a hole in my chest. Inky, thick fluid began to ooze from my heart. And it bled on until we had landed. When I got off that plane I felt spiritual weight loss—the bitterness was gone.

This is an important knockout story for two reasons. First, because it taught me that I could never again in life allow the root of bitterness to grow in my heart. And secondly, because I went on to preach at a church that weekend with a level of power that I'd never known before. It resulted in an unexpected conversation with the church leadership before I left.

*I wondered if there was a quitter's gene in me.
Would I have to face it down for the rest of my life?*

“You’re a very young man,” the people said, “but you have qualities we need in a pastor. Would you consider...?”

Sixty days later, I became the spiritual leader of that congregation. Could it have happened if I’d arrived that weekend representing Jesus out of a heart hardened with hatred? The answer is, as they say, a no-brainer.

This second knockout experience enforced one of life’s most important lessons: “Be tender-hearted, forgiving one another” (Ephesians 4.32, KJV).

A few years later (actually my thirty-second year), I was knocked out a third time.

I had spent several weeks working nonstop. I had presided at two terribly sad funerals, attended several board meetings which had been tension-filled, preached or taught so many times I was tired of myself and my words, and visited with people who all seemed to have unsolvable problems. Add to this my reading of a theology book which subverted virtually everything I believed in. It had been a 24/7 lifestyle packed with frustration and adversity.

The knockout came on a Saturday morning when Gail greeted me at the breakfast table with an innocent (and accurate) comment: “You haven’t spent much time with the children lately.” The ten-count began.

As the words sank in, I began to cry. And I mean cry! Wrenching, painful sobs which would not stop for more than four hours. Was I losing my mind? This had never happened before (or since). So what had happened?

I was to learn from that Saturday knockout experience that I had finally reached the bottom of an empty soul. For the first years of my ministry, I had been content

to glide along on natural energy, talent, and charm to serve Jesus. And it wasn’t going to work any longer. St. Paul wrote that the weapons of our warfare are spiritual (2 Corinthians 10:4). And I was lacking spiritual weaponry.

While I’ve come close a few times, I have never gone back to that day again. The dreadfulness of an empty soul is too real to me some thirty-plus years later. That was the day I began to take spiritual discipline seriously: not a discipline that guarantees against further failure or defeat, but a life of devotion that builds the soul’s resilience.

That knockout taught me the power in the words, “Live in Christ, rooted and built up in him” (Colossians: 2.6,7, NIV).

Some years later, I found myself on the canvas again, this time through personal disillusionment. The time had come for some strategic changes in my ministry life, and I thought (no, I was convinced!) I knew something about the will of God and how it worked.

But I was naive. When the moment of truth of what was to be next came, it was a different scenario than I’d anticipated, and I felt as if my lights had been punched out. Where I had expected a yes, there was instead a no. The easy assumption? God had tricked me, made a fool of me, proved himself untrustworthy.

Frankly, there was no one I felt I could talk to. There was no one to provide perspective. I hadn’t built the friendships I enjoy now. Result: I fell to the canvas with a thud. I was angry with God (oh, the impudence!), and it would have been very satisfying to confront him and tell him off. After all, I’d given him twenty-five good years, and—so it seemed—he had found a new and crafty way to make a fool of me.

The effect of the knockout last-

ed for a longer time than it should have. But slowly, a healing of spirit took place, and I learned some of the most valuable lessons I would ever learn from any experience. First, in retrospect, I now know that God steered me away from certain failure. Second, I learned never again to presume on God—which was exactly what I’d been doing. And, third, it was the launching of a new Gordon—a quieter, less ambitious, more contented man.

This fourth knockout taught me the power of the words, “In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps” (Proverbs 16.9, NIV).

The fifth knock-out was the most painful, the most dramatic, the most public of them all. In my mid-forties, I succumbed to a temptation that I’d sworn would never get me.

“Satan could never get me to betray my loved ones,” I’d said rather condescendingly to a man who’d asked me one day if I had any weaknesses in my spiritual armor. Imagine such a question! Imagine such an answer!

But in a moment when thought and conviction had been disrupted, when self-deceit had laid a smokescreen, I failed my wife and my marriage. And because I hoped that what I’d done would simply become a buried matter, I began to live with a secret that ruthlessly nagged at my spirit. There were hours in the middle of the night when I had to deal with unspeakable guilt and shame, and I told myself that death would be preferable. Only a kindness from God kept me going so that when I was in public, I was able to function. But the chaos in my interior life was next to unbearable. I kept telling myself, Wait out the torture; perhaps it will go away.

I came to see with a hideous clarity how capable is the mind of

playing tricks upon itself. One part of the mind will actually manufacture a logic and rationale that will justify an event that, if seen in the light of day, would be unthinkable. Another part of the mind will create the ability to maintain a publicly impressive persona while the heart within is breaking.

In those days, people would approach me after a talk or a meeting where I had been a leader and say, "You speak with a new softness and humility, and we sense your openness to God." And I would respond, "That's because I've seen myself as a sinner." I suspect they left me thinking that I was an unusually humble man.

And I? I would go away saying, "If those people had any idea of what's surging in my heart, they would despise me." And when the day came that my secret became public knowledge, some despised me.

In the "dark days" (as Gail and I often refer to them) which followed, we came to know a combination of sadness and grace that will never be put into words. It was a bittersweet time of life—those days of the fifth knockout—when we faced up to the hideousness of sin and the depth of God's grace.

"You will one day look back on these moments," a godly man said in those dark days, "and you will say, 'Those were some of the most important days of my life.'" Speaking of knockouts! I would have liked to knocked him out for saying such a thing. But years later, I learned he was right. This was a knockout which I can never afford to gloss over or glamorize, but I will confess this: In those moments God spoke things into my life (and into Gail's) that we can't imagine we'd have ever heard under any other circumstances. Let others debate what I've just said, but this section of *Conversations* is about honesty, and

*I became a
significantly freer
man, a person no
longer bound by so
many of the empty
shibboleths and
traditions that have
bound our Christian
world and
threatened it with
obsolescence and
ineffectiveness*

I've been encouraged to speak out of my own experience.

I came to a deeper, more accurate, more humbling awareness of my deeper self than I would have ever reached under other circumstances. I learned about the magnificence of God's kindness. I learned the importance of personal community—sacred friendship with other brothers and sisters. I came to realize just how far and wide is the brokenness of many, many people who sit in our churches every week and live in the fear that their secrets will be exposed and judged without mercy.

I became a significantly freer man, a person no longer bound by so many of the empty shibboleths and traditions that have bound our Christian world and threatened it with obsolescence and ineffectiveness as a witness of God's saving

love. And, by the way, I found a new dimension of marriage with Gail, whom I dearly love and admire today more than words can tell.

This fifth (and, please God, may it be the last) knockout taught me the power of the words, "I was shown mercy so that in me...Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience" (1 Timothy 1:16, NIV).

The burdensome thing to me as I recount these knockouts (and I've done it before) is that they are safe to talk about in some communities only after they are years and years old. Were I to be experiencing one of them right now (any of these five) my audience would likely recoil. More than a few people would not want to hear me out. They would feel uncomfortable not knowing how to respond.

There's something wrong with this picture. Because with knockouts there is the possibility of grace and growth. These are possible if a person is ready to repent, willing to listen, prepared to be humbled. All that is needed then is a supportive community that desires to restore (Gal. 6:1).

I have seen the beaten fighter face down on the canvas. The referee counts. The crowd cheers. The winner raises his gloves in exhilaration. There is no mercy in that ring. It is an unspeakably harsh moment. Will the fighter get up? Can he?

My journey has known five such occasions. And each time, Jesus climbed into the ring and pulled me to my feet.



Gordon MacDonald

is a best-selling author, speaker, and Senior-Fellow of the Washington-based Trinity Forum. He is the author of *Ordering*

Your Private World and serves as Editor-at-Large for *Leadership Journal* and Chairman of the Board for World Relief.