A Business Parable about
Discovering Your Philanthropic Why

GIVING UP

THE SURPRISING SECRET
to a *Life* that Matters

BARRON J. DAMON

Giving Up: The Surprising Secret to a Life That Matters

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A Note Before You Begin

This book is not about quitting.

When most people hear the words *giving up*, they hear defeat. Surrender. The white flag raised by someone who has run out of options or run out of will.

This book is about something else entirely.

It is about the most courageous, deliberate, life-changing act a human being can perform: releasing your time, your talent, your treasure, in service of something and someone beyond yourself.

The word *philanthropy* comes from the Greek *philos*, meaning love, and *anthropos*, meaning human being. The love of mankind. Not a sector. Not a tax strategy. Not a line item on a balance sheet. A way of seeing people, of deciding, every day, that the human being in front of you is worth something. Worth your attention. Worth your presence. Worth the risk of being changed by what you find.

Marcus Ellison is a fictional character. But his story is not fiction. It is the story of every person who has built something impressive and arrived at the question that no achievement can answer: What is all of this for? Parts of this story are loosely based on real lives, real seasons of loss, real moments of redirection, real encounters with strangers who sat beside someone who needed them and changed everything.

The characters in this book found their answers through loss, through hardship, through the specific seasons that strip a person down to what is actually there underneath. Every one of them converted that experience into giving. And every one of them discovered that what came back, in ways they did not expect and could not have planned, was the only thing that was ever worth having.

This is a story about giving up.

I hope it changes what those words mean for you.

— Barron J. Damon

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“Marcus Ellison had everything he ever wanted but he lost everything he ever needed.

Then he realized everything he was missing.

Chapter One

The Scoreboard

Charlotte, North Carolina

The award was a crystal obelisk, fourteen inches tall, heavier than it looked.

Marcus Ellison knew this because he had held it twice already. Once when they handed it to him backstage for a photograph, and once when his publicist suggested he practice the walk from his seat to the podium. Which he had done, at fifty-two years old, in an empty ballroom at nine fifteen in the morning the day before the event, because that was the kind of man he was.

Prepared. Efficient. In control.

Marcus spent the night in Charlotte, North Carolina to ensure he was in place so he could maintain that control. His driver was ready to take him to the award ceremony that evening. He sat in the back of the car now, his acceptance speech memorized, his tuxedo pressed, the city lights of Charlotte moving past the window like something from a film he was only half watching. The driver, whose name Marcus had not asked, had the radio low. Something classical. Marcus approved the driver's music choice.

His phone buzzed.

He looked at the screen.

Simone.

He watched the name pulse twice more before the call dropped to voicemail. He set the phone face-down on the seat beside him and looked back out the window.

There was no reason to feel anything about that. Simone called occasionally. They spoke occasionally. They had dinner twice last year, once at Thanksgiving, because she felt obligated,

and once in March, because he had asked and she had surprised him by saying yes. Both dinners had ended earlier than he expected. Neither had ended well. Their lives seemed to be going in different directions.

She was thirty-one now. She worked for a community foundation in Atlanta, doing something with grants and giving and the careful distribution of other people's resources toward causes she believed in with a conviction that Marcus found difficult to quantify. It was good work, he supposed. The kind that required considerably more optimism than the evidence typically supported.

He was proud of her, in the way one could be proud of something they did not fully understand.

The car slowed. The hotel entrance appeared, all glass and light, a small cluster of photographers near the door. Marcus straightened his jacket. Picked up his phone. Did not listen to the voicemail. He had given up everything that mattered to get where he was.

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The ballroom held four hundred people and the energy of an industry that liked to celebrate itself.

Marcus moved through it the way he moved through most rooms, efficiently, without waste, shaking the right hands in the right order. He had been doing this long enough that it no longer required thought. His mouth said the correct things while his mind cataloged the room: who was there, who wasn't, who could benefit him the most.

He found his table. He was seated next to a man named Anderson, a commercial developer from Raleigh, he said, who spent the better part of twenty minutes describing a mixed-use project in Durham that Marcus had no interest in funding and no intention of pretending otherwise. He nodded at appropriate intervals. He drank water and smiled when it seemed appropriate.

Carolyn was across the room in a group of women whose names Marcus knew from charity boards and society pages. She moved through the space with practiced elegance. She caught his eye briefly. Smiled. Turned back to her conversation.

That was their arrangement. They moved well in rooms together. They photographed well. People used the word enviable. Behind the photographable surfaces, in the house that Carolyn had turned into a museum of impressive objects, there was a quietness that Marcus had decided to call contentment.

He was getting better at deciding.

When the awards portion began, he half-listened to the other honorees. A woman who had built a healthcare staffing company after immigrating from the Philippines. A young man who could not have been older than thirty-five, who had launched a supply chain platform during the pandemic and sold it eighteen months later for a number that made Marcus briefly recalculate his own timeline.

They were fine. They were deserving. They were also, in Marcus's private assessment, at the beginning of a journey whose destination he already knew.

"Our final honoree tonight," the emcee was saying, "has spent thirty years building one of the most respected logistics companies in the Southeast. He employs over eight hundred people across four states. He has been named on this list three times. Please welcome Marcus Ellison."

The applause was warm. He stood, buttoned his jacket, and walked to the stage the way he had practiced. The crystal obelisk was heavier than it looked. The obelisk was a visual representation of his success that he enjoyed.

He set it on the podium, looked out at four hundred faces, and said the words he had written three days ago and revised twice since. He talked about resilience. He talked about building something that lasts. He talked about the people who had believed in him early on, and named three of them by name.

He did not mention David Marsh.

He never mentioned David Marsh. It was too much to remember what had happened between them.

He had gotten very good at it.

Four hundred people applauded. Several stood. The young man from the supply chain company leaned over afterward and asked, simply, “What’s next for you?”

Marcus opened his mouth and then closed it.

Smiled the smile that had served him in a thousand rooms just like this one.

“More of the same,” he said.

He picked up his phone. Opened his voicemail. Held it to his ear.

“Hi, Dad. I just…I don’t know why I’m calling. I just wanted to hear your voice, I guess. It’s nothing. Don’t worry about calling back.” The message ended.

The ballroom was loud around him. Crystal obelisk. Four hundred people. More of the same.

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He came home to an empty house.

Carolyn had her events, her circles, the calendar of obligations that kept her out until ten most evenings. The house she had turned into a museum, impressive objects on every surface, fresh flowers delivered Tuesday, a yard maintained by a service and never sat in, was quiet and climate-controlled and entirely beautiful.

He set the crystal obelisk on the shelf in the study. The third one. They stood in a row in descending order of size, rewarded for building the same thing and being recognized for it three times. He looked at all of it.

What’s next for you?

He opened his mouth to answer, and nothing came. Not because he lacked plans. But the question landed differently. Not as a professional inquiry but as something else, something that was able to penetrate the emotional fortress he had built over the years but had not prepared for. It wasn’t just a question about the company; it was personal too. At eleven forty-seven, he picked up the phone and listened to the voicemail again.

“Hi, Dad. I just…I don’t know why I’m calling. I just wanted to hear your voice, I guess. It’s nothing. Don’t worry about calling back.” It was only eleven seconds, but it seemed much longer.

He thought about what she said the last time they had a real conversation. You want more for me, but I want more for others. Those are two different things.

He didn’t have a response then, and he still didn’t. He turned off the study light. He walked through the museum of his house to the bedroom where the lights automatically turned on when he entered. Marcus walked over to the huge mirror in his bedroom and stared at himself as if he was seeing himself for the first time. Still no answer. He got undressed, put his clothes in his closet, put his nightclothes on, and got into bed. He continued to contemplate the question, What’s next for you? After a few minutes went by, he clapped his hands and the lights went off. The question was still there when he closed his eyes.

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He was asleep before he expected to be. Marcus didn’t usually have dreams; however, tonight was different. A dream arrived with the vividness of dreams that did not feel like a dream, but the dream took place in a completely different house, so he knew it had to be a dream.

It was around five thirty in the morning in the dream. Still dark outside, rain pressing hard against the windows, the kind of rain that gets your attention and brings with it a slight sense of anxiousness.

The homeless man had come in through the back door. There had been break-ins in the neighborhood, several homes entered in the early hours. Money, checks, and jewelry were stolen from multiple homes. The man had moved through the neighborhood entering people’s homes with ease because of their false sense of security living in multi-million-dollar homes.

He walked through Marcus’s house the same way. Through the front rooms. Into the office. Through the kitchen. He touched nothing. He made his way to the bedroom. He stood beside Marcus’s bed. Just stood there. Silent. Not threatening. Not urgent. Simply present, in the dark, waiting with the patience of someone who has learned that waiting is all that is left.

Marcus opened his eyes.

He saw the man immediately. Standing over him, rain-soaked, and still. Surprisingly, Marcus was not afraid.

He registered it like he registered most things: as information. Then he looked down.

The man was not wearing any shoes.

Not worn shoes. Not damaged shoes. No shoes at all. Bare feet on the hardwood floors of the house at five thirty in the morning.

Marcus looked past everything else. Past his face. Past his clothing. Past the smell of rain and something older underneath it. He looked at the bare feet and felt something move through him that he did not have a name for.

“Are you okay?” Marcus said.

The man nodded once. He did not speak. Marcus got out of bed.

He did not think about it. He did not assess it or calculate it. He simply got up, walked to the closet, and opened the door. The closet was organized. Everything was in its place. Suits, shirts, sweaters, ties, and shoes all lined up perfectly on the floor. He looked at them quickly and made a rough estimate of the man’s shoe size. His eyes landed on the pair he would have called his favorite, the ones he wore to his favorite functions. He did not deliberate. He reached for them without thinking.

He brought them back to the man. The bedroom door opened. Dorothy came in. It was his mother. Her presence required no explanation. She was simply there, settled, purposeful, carrying something.

A pair of socks.

“Hello, sir,” Dorothy said. She said it simply, without expecting any grand gestures, as if this were an ordinary morning. “You are going to need these socks with those shoes.”

The man looked at her, then at Marcus. Then at the shoes in Marcus’s hands and the socks in Dorothy’s, as if he was puzzled by their response.

Something happened to his face. The specific disbelief of someone receiving something they had stopped expecting. He looked at both of their faces, their body language, and said quietly, “Thank you.”

But there was sadness in it. A sadness that had nothing to do with this moment and everything to do with the weight he had been carrying before it.

He sat in the chair and put on the socks. Then the shoes. He scraped them carefully across the top of the shoe, with the focused attention of someone for whom this small act mattered to him.

Dorothy said, “Let’s get you some food.”

They walked him to the kitchen. Marcus and Dorothy stood on opposite sides of him. Dorothy opened the refrigerator. She asked him what he couldn’t eat, with the practical understanding of someone who had been feeding people for sixty years and knew that dignity lived in the details.

The man was specific. Dorothy adjusted without comment and made him a plate.

He sat at the kitchen table and ate. And for a few minutes, sitting there with food in front of him and shoes and socks on his feet with two people who had asked him what he needed instead of what he had done. The man was still, but uncomfortable, having a difficult time processing everything that was happening in the moment.

Not relieved. Not saved. Just briefly, trying to relax. The weight of the world lifted from his shoulders for a few minutes. After he finished eating, he stood. Thanked them again with that same quiet sadness and walked out.

The police arrived twenty minutes later. Carolyn had called them from another room, silently, without telling Marcus. The man was arrested at the end of the block. In his possession: money, checks, and jewelry from four other houses on the street.

He had taken nothing from Marcus’s house. Nothing at all.

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Marcus woke up from the dream abruptly with his heart racing, looking around the room as if he was going to find someone. The first thing that made him realize it was a dream was that his light was still off. If someone had walked into his bedroom, the light would have come on, which would have easily woken him up. As he recalled more details of the dream, he realized it did not take place in his house, and his mother had never slept over his house because they lived in the same city.

Marcus sat up in bed, clapped his hands to turn the lights back on, and wondered why he would have a dream about a homeless man. He could not make any sense of the dream or its significance to him. Marcus rarely ever had dreams, and if he had dreams, they were usually related to success and business.

Marcus lay back down briefly but began mentally preparing himself for the day ahead. Once he cleared his mind of the events that happened in the dream, the next question that entered his mind was the same question that he went to bed with.

What's next for you? He still did not have an answer, but it was time for him to start his daily routines and move on with his day.