

Self-Surrender:
THE **KEY** TO
Dreaming
AGAIN



RICK UNRUH

Endorsements

You've probably heard the phrase "life happens," and it certainly happens to some people harder than others. Rick is that man. I've known Rick since he was a teenager, and I'm confident you'll quickly be drawn into his extraordinary story of tragedy, failure, and personal loss. Yet, his example of faith to *dream again* is the real story here. It's something we all need to learn.

—Dave Divine, Pastor, The Church at Chapelhill

Rick tells a unique story of nearly unspeakable pain and loss. However, his story also simultaneously retells the story of everyone who ever experienced the crushing loss of a close family member or the humiliation of a public "failure." Rick's story will connect your heart to one of the few universal collective human realities and will plant this undeniably magnificent seed of truth: you can dream again—if you embrace the art of surrender.

—Pastor Terry Yancey, District Supt., AGK

Having known Rick since we were kids at church camp and then again in Bible college, I never would have imagined the tragedy his future would hold. When we reconnected decades later, I heard his story for the first time and was inspired by what God had done through terrible circumstances. If you feel low, Rick has been lower. If you need a lift, this is the book for you.

—Allen White, Author of *Exponential Groups*

I have had the privilege of hearing Rick's story over the last few years. I have heard it on long bicycle rides on country roads, on trips from Carlinville, Illinois, to the Brass Door Restaurant in Carrollton, and at many sit-down lunches we have had over the years. Just when I think *How much more can a man take?* he would tell me another part of his life that would cause my heart to ache with his. Rick's story says that Jesus is alive and well in us today! Jesus promised never to leave us, and that truth is incredibly evident in Rick's story!

—Rev. Dayton Poe, Wheat State Retreat Director

When Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble," it turns out He wasn't kidding. Whether self-inflicted or random, we've all faced difficulties of living in a broken world. Rick Unruh tells a story of pain, loss, and failure that only a few can identify with, but also a story of restoration that all can be encouraged through. He tells the story well because it's his own. His story and God's restoration will inspire you to *dream again* in spite of whatever life has thrown your way.

—Greg Perkins, Director of Church Health and Men's Ministry, Southern Missouri

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RICK UNRUH

REDEMPTION 
P R E S S

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Dedication

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO OUR SON, LANDON, we will never forget you. We only shared 12 years with you, but you left a lasting impression on so many. You brought such great joy and laughter to our world, yet you also had this sensitive side that was aware when people were having a bad day and just needed to have an arm put around them. One of my favorite memories is you sitting on the porch with your arm around mom after a bad day and my favorite picture is of you walking beside your mom, with your arm around her.

To my wife, Tamela, when we said for better or worse, it's hard to imagine the "worse" that we have seen together, yet I love you more today than I ever have and I am more thankful than ever for God's gift and to have you by my side in our journey.

To Dake & Darian. So much I could say, but so little space. To see how well you both have turned out, despite the devastating blow you had to deal with. It would have been easy to quit. But you both are thriving in life and in your careers, makes us so proud to be your parents. Having three boys taught us so much about love and what an amazing gift from God you are. You both are an inspiration to your Mother and me. We love you!

To our wonderful daughter-in-law's, Kristi and Taylor. So many great qualities that you both have, but let's cut to the chase, nothing greater than having daughters-in-law

that love our sons, unconditionally. We are blessed. We love you both!

Sadie, Londyn, Tate, & our future grandchildren, because we are believing for more! You light up our world, and in the pain of our loss, you are a great reminder of the joy in life.

To my dad, Loren. You have been a rock, many a day I just wanted to give up; you always found the right words to say. Your steadfastness is a powerful trait that has carried you through every trial in life, including the loss of your wife and the tragic loss of your grandson. Your faith in God has always been steadfast.

To my Mother, who is in heaven, you didn't just talk about faith, but lived it out, even in your greatest pain. Little did you know that when you were writing in your journal during your battle, that it would become a part of my book over 32 years later. That you helped write the closing chapter in a way only you could.

To my in-laws. You gave me the greatest gift I have ever had, your daughter and the love of my life. You have always been there for us, and so grateful for your love and encouragement.

To all Landon's friends, teammates, classmates; The list seems endless of the people we need to thank for your love and support. We have been blessed to be surrounded by so many great people. Thank You!

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Foreword

YOU OFTEN HEAR STORIES about an individual life, and you think to yourself, *Seriously?* When you look at the life of Rick Unruh, your mind immediately begins to ask, *What next?*

Rick has been my friend for many years. Over thirty years ago, I served as a counselor at a youth camp. Each of those young men were special, but that year there was one young man I knew God had a plan for. Rick Unruh and I became lasting friends. Being lasting friends is something totally different than just friends. Lasting friends walk through the storms together and come out on the other side better for being friends.

Rick has experienced loss that I would not wish on my greatest enemy. Yet, during the loss, Rick has always had the ability to come back. I have watched over the years and wondered to myself, *Is this going to be the one that takes Rick out of the game of life?* He comes back, smiling and believing that God has a plan and future for him.

As you take the time to read Rick's story, I want to remind you of a few things. First, God is the only one who can determine when you are finished. It does not matter how many times you are attacked; God is the one who determines your future and your completion.

Second, hold on to nothing tightly. When you think that you have it all and you see that God has blessed you greatly, that seems to be what gets attacked. Rick has lost the most

precious treasures in life, yet he still has what matters most.

Third, remember who is on your team. When life throws you a curveball and you feel that you are finished, remember that there is a team behind you that will help you win the game.

My joy has simply been watching from the outfield as Rick has gone up to bat time and time again. Strikes were thrown, he has swung, and at times I thought he was out. The good news is that there was a team behind him that helped to keep the game going.

My greatest prayer as you read this book is that you will not cry for Rick but dream again as Rick has done. You are not out; you are not finished. God has a plan, and no matter what happens, you will be back in the game and victory will be yours.

Dr. Billy Thomas
Senior Director, US MAPS

CHAPTER 1

Physical Surrender

THIS TRIP WASN'T JUST A BUMP IN THE ROAD; it felt more like the termination of all my dreams. I was officially finished. God could never use me now. I would forever be labeled a felon. I was an embarrassment to my family, my friends, my church, my Bible college—and the list could go on and on.

God's plan for my life had just been washed into a river that flows into an ocean of one disappointment after another.

After years of searching and preparing for my purpose, the Dream Again Counseling Center launched. I felt as if I had finally been lifted from the pits of despair after our family's tragic loss. My life had found a purpose once again. I felt alive.

This blow felt like I had just been knocked out in a championship bout, and now I was left desolate, defeated, and crippled from the blow. It was over—the final countdown had begun.

I had grown up in a loving, Christian home with a long heritage of godly examples. I had been called to the ministry at a young age and had always tried to live my life on the straight-and-narrow path.

Over the next few hours, I said goodbye to my family and to my freedom. My hope that this was just a bad dream dissipated with each mile marker that we passed.

There was some chatter, but everyone was avoiding the

elephant in the car. We were all doing our best to mask our fear of the unknown. How was this going to impact our lives forever?

Questions were running rampant through my mind. How did I end up in this mess? *How much more can my family handle? Why, God?* How could God ever use someone as broken as me? *I am a complete failure.* I was drowning in a sea of self-pity, with no lifeline anywhere in sight.

Six weeks before this day, I had entered the courtroom as a defendant and stood before a federal judge. The federal prosecutors were asking for thirty- to thirty-six months; through the grace of God, I was only sentenced to fifteen months in federal prison for my involvement in a mortgage-consulting group. I was ordered to self-surrender on March 22, 2010.

We arrived at Yankton, South Dakota, and checked into a motel the night before I was to self-surrender. Sleep was elusive that night, as my soul crawled back into the cave of despair and hopelessness. This was my last night with my wife, Tamela. We had been married twenty-three years. How was she going to survive? How was my youngest son, Darian, going to handle his senior year of high school without his dad? *All his baseball games I am going to be missing. The birthdays. The holidays.* How would my oldest son, Dake, deal with all this as he was launching into his new career and moving to Kansas City? So many unanswered questions, so many unknown fears. *When is enough, enough? I want to be strong, but I'm just not sure that I can be.*

That night also brought back memories of the fateful day when we had lost our twelve-year-old son, Landon. The loss of a child makes you feel like your own life has ended. But you hold on to your remaining family tightly. And now, I was going to be separated from the one thing that held us together—each other. From the pit of despair, our family had somehow rallied together, and we were climbing ever

so slowly upward again. About the time it appeared we had our life back on track, we were leveled with the devastating news of the investigation and eventual prison sentence.

Now, I just wanted to quit. Life had become too overwhelming—too many losses, too many failures. *The embarrassment and shame of going to prison, the never-ending grief of losing our son, and now I am going to be separated from my family—the driving force, the reasons to keep living. How much is one person supposed to take?* I tossed and turned all night.

The next morning, we parked our car in front of Yankton Federal Prison Camp (FPC) and made our final walk together as we crossed the street to the control center where I was to check myself in and say my last goodbyes. We crossed the street in silence, observing every little detail of my home for the next eleven and a half months. The fear and dread of the separation I was about to experience was welling up inside, and I was trembling.

We walked through the doors of the control center, and I said a sentence that I had no idea would become prophetic words on my journey in Yankton: “I’m Rick Unruh, and I’m here to self-surrender.” There was no way I could comprehend what those words would eventually mean to me over the course of the next year, as God began a powerful work in my life. I would come to understand their true meaning and would learn to fully “self-surrender.”

Felon. This will become my new label, a constant reminder of my past. I was walking into a physical prison, but I was already living in a spiritual prison of shame, regret, and deep hurt.

And yet I would find freedom in prison. Freedom from the shackles of our grief and the burdens of my failures. Only when I was willing to surrender “self”—all my hurts, all my pain, all my regrets, and all my questions—and just trust that I genuinely began to understand freedom.

Prison has a way of slowing life down, with few distractions and much less of the busyness of life that often gets in the way of us hearing from God. Romans 8:28 says, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” But here is one of the key misconceptions about this verse, in my opinion: it doesn’t say that all things that happen to us *are* good. The word “all” encompasses the good and the bad. “All things”—even bad, horrific things in our lives—God takes these and *works them together* for the good. How could something good come out of losing a child or a parent, a house burning down, a financial crisis, or spending time in prison?

These are brutal things to go through, and on those days in my life, it seemed especially hard to grasp Romans 8:28 as a truth. All I could feel was the pain of that day. But in the end, God was going to take those events to mold me, shape me, and give me a testimony to bless others.

But I couldn’t see any of that yet. That first day at Yankton FPC, the officer I surrendered to instructed me to say good-bye to my family. One last hug and kiss, and they left the premises. The officer waited for them to get out of sight; she didn’t want them to see me getting patted down and taken away. As they walked away, I plastered a fake smile on my face as they silently stepped out the door and disappeared. It was official: I was in custody, a federal prisoner. *This is it, the beginning of the end of my life.*

My thoughts start churning wildly: *This is my new reality. What will prison be like? Is it really like what you see on TV? What about gangs? How will I stay safe? What if I sit at the wrong table? What are all the unwritten rules?*

The Enemy loves to wreak havoc in our minds with the fear of the unknown. Fear screams the worst possible scenarios, but only faith can calm the screaming lies of the Enemy.

I walked into R & D (receiving and discharge), where

I was officially registered into the system. I felt numb and dazed. After another pat down (and a much more thorough one, I might add), I traded in my street clothes for my prison uniform—khaki pants and a khaki shirt.

This book traverses the twists and turns of my journey—from my family heritage and the loss of my mother, to ministry, to drifting, to the loss of my son, to prison, and ultimately to God opening up the ministry door to dream again.

It is Tamela's and my prayer that this book exemplifies God's love and plan for your life even when you have taken a wrong turn that leads to circumstances that leave you feeling helpless. Knowing that when you trust Him, you can truly dream again and fulfill God's plan for your life.