



Giving Up

a novel

Mike Steeves

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For Nikki

*... the sorry and ludicrous fact with most people is, alas,
that in their own house they prefer to live in the basement.*

—Søren Kierkegaard

JAMES

The world is full of uplifting stories about extraordinary men and women who toiled away in obscurity for years and years, if not for their entire lives, before they were finally recognized, in some cases only in their afterlife, for achieving something great where so many others have failed. We constantly hear of how they stuck to their guns and defied all the odds when everyone was telling them to quit. It's rare to go a full day without nodding along to an inspiring anecdote about someone who was

able to shut out all those voices telling them that they weren't good enough and that they were on the wrong path, so all they could hear was the little voice inside their head that told them they were destined for glory and that all they had to do was to stay the course. We might be sitting on a bus next to a couple of potheads, or in the lineup at a food court behind a gang of computer nerds, or maybe we bump into an old friend from high school, whatever the case is, we're forced to listen to these people talk about *a complete nobody* who endured the pity and ridicule of their entire community, until later in life he or she revealed his or her true genius and, one assumes, experienced the sort of vindication that most of us don't even dare dream of. Considering how ubiquitous these stories are, you would think that we place a high value on unwavering strength and conviction, you would think that we admire people who keep trying despite countless punishing failures, but the truth is that we only admire these people in retrospect. If we actually come across one of these singular and heroic individuals who defy all criticism, who ignore their countless defeats, who carry on despite all the evidence that they should give up, then we are invariably disgusted by what we see. We think we can tell the difference between someone who has yet to succeed versus someone who is doomed to failure, but we can't. It's impossible to tell them apart, they both come off as desperate and slightly crazed, so we get it all wrong, or try to play it safe, by rejecting the true genius and celebrating the mediocre, the sure thing. We never discover these geniuses for ourselves, it's always from someone

else, which is why it takes years before we can finally recognize their accomplishments, and why many of these geniuses end up dying before word gets around. Whenever I hear about one of these great men or women who died before they could be recognized, I always wonder if they knew they were right and that everyone else was wrong. Had they discovered some sort of sign or evidence that proved, if only to themselves, that their destiny would be fulfilled? I'm particularly curious because I decided at a very young age that I was going to devote my life to accomplishing something extraordinary, but now I'm worried that I've made a huge mistake. Maybe I should give up. Maybe it's insane to keep going when everything I've done up to this point clearly indicates that there's no greatness in store for me. I've been concerned about this for a while now. I worry out loud to anyone who will listen, but this is all just for show, and doesn't affect my conviction. If anything, it strengthens my resolve. If I gave up now then I would be admitting that my entire life had been a waste, or, if not a complete waste, then it was the equivalent of walking in the wrong direction for twenty years, and, losing all hope of ever finding my way back, laying down on the ground where I stood and waiting for sleep, or whatever, to come over me. There didn't seem to be any use in turning around at this point, so just like all the countless other failures out there, I'm trapped by my own unyielding determination. The supreme irony of it is that even though I am wasting my time I feel as though I'm superior to all those who, rather than devote themselves to achieving the impossible,

spend their lives accomplishing easily defined and reachable goals. And it's feelings like these that have led me to think that maybe it's time to give up. Maybe giving up on these pretensions is the more courageous thing to do. Even though we never tell stories about the people who took the advice of their family and friends – especially because we don't tell stories about these advice-takers – it no doubt takes way more guts to admit that the course you have been following, that you have shaped every aspect of your life around, was precisely the wrong course to take. (This was the big lesson from my encounter with the con man.) And there is an additional moral imperative for giving up, of course, since I'm not the only one heading in the wrong direction – I'm dragging my wife along with me. Every day, she puts her faith in me and trusts that I'm leading her in the right direction, that the course that I have chosen for myself will inadvertently also lead to the fulfillment of some of her own hopes and desires, when in fact I am leading her into total ruin. Of course the reason that she is so compliant, so willing to be led down the garden path, so to speak, is because I look her right in the eye every day and say to her, 'I know where I'm going.' Obviously she is very suspicious that I've been lying to her face. She's flat out accused me on numerous occasions. For instance, 'You have no fucking idea what you're doing,' is something she just said to me during the fight we had earlier today, before I went out and met the con man. 'I am so angry with myself for going along with this,' she said, referring to my work in the basement. 'I should have known what I was getting

into.' But there was no way she could've known. When she first met me I was like everyone else my age. Back then it would've been impossible to say who was going to succeed and who was going to fail. The odds looked even. The differences that would emerge later on and set us apart so drastically weren't apparent. It's hard to believe that a true genius ever had equals or rivals for the same great goals and grand pursuits. We are convinced that they were fated to become the singular geniuses that we know them as, and it's strange to us that this may not have been obvious to everyone since the day they were born, but since we don't know what genius looks like, we can't even describe what genius *is*, and at that early age what may seem like idiocy can turn out to be a talent for concentration. So back when I was young, while you might have been able to identify a few of the more likely successes or failures, most of us were simply too insubstantial for there to be anything to base one's judgment upon. We might have been very promising, or at least not unpromising. There wouldn't have been much cause to suspect that we would end up as tragic failures, bringing our wives and our children to the brink of ruin, just as it would have been ridiculous to assume that any of us would have a great success, and become the subject of tedious anecdotes about the virtues of singular vision and perseverance. I should probably mention that Mary and I are only on the brink of ruin, and that I haven't led her so far down that we'll never find our way back up again, which is to say that there is still time for her to do a one-eighty, to refuse to be led by me any longer and go her

own way, but it isn't likely that she will do this, for the same reason that I'm not going to give up at this point (which was also the reason why I didn't walk away from the con man once I knew he was full of shit). She has invested too much to pull out now, especially when there is still a remote possibility that I am actually on the right path and that success is right around the corner. What if, right after she finally gave up on me and tried to start a new life for herself, I turned out to be right all along, and the long, hard years were redeemed by recognition and success? How would she be able to live with herself knowing that if she had stayed with me for a little while longer it all would have been worth it? No, she's too invested to consider leaving, at least not for a little while longer, although there are signs that my time is running out. She's become increasingly encouraging, offering advice and assistance, which may sound like a good thing but is actually what she does when she's losing her patience. I wasn't nearly as concerned about the status of our relationship when she was openly contemptuous of how I spent my time down in the basement pursuing something that in all likelihood I was never going to achieve. Back then she wasn't worried that I was going to sabotage our lives together, she was only annoyed by how much time I was wasting down there. When she did allow a shadow of a doubt to cross her mind it was because she was worried that maybe it wasn't healthy to be so obsessed with my life's work. But she still had faith in me. When she occasionally lost her composure and accused me of using my basement-time as *an excuse for not having a life*, when she tried to start a

fight by belittling the calling that I have devoted my life to, I rarely got upset because I knew that ultimately she wasn't worried about how everything was going to turn out, she just wanted me to hurry up and get things over with. I can tell that she's becoming increasingly worried because these days she is clearly making a *concerted effort* to stay positive. No more jokes about how she should've married someone else instead. 'You know,' she would say, 'someone normal?' Gone are the little tantrums she used to throw when she couldn't 'take it anymore,' after she'd come home from doing groceries to find me down in the basement while the rest of the apartment 'looked like a fucking disaster.' In its place was a sort of forced serenity, and now, instead of losing her temper, she would speak to me in a perfectly even, almost emotionless tone, and no matter what I did, despite the relentless parade of rejection and bad news I greeted her with every day, she maintained the same implacable demeanour. This shift from her prior state of annoyance and mild irritation, which only manifested itself as anger if I neglected my household duties, to her new blandly cheerful and supportive role obviously makes me suspicious and insecure, because it's clear that she's losing her faith. When I started out on this course I never imagined that I wouldn't have time to accomplish my goals – that I would have to race against failure never occurred to me. I'm not saying that I expected to be an 'overnight success,' I knew that the work would be long and hard, but I never thought for a moment that I wouldn't be able to take my time, go at my own speed, etc. . . . I know now that each hour is a gift – a gift

that until very recently I have taken for granted and squandered recklessly – a gift that has been steadily depreciating in value because as each hour slips away it becomes increasingly unlikely that I’ll be able to achieve much with what I have left – a gift I wasn’t even aware I had been given, and that I frittered away because it never occurred to me that it could run out. The moment I wake up, I’m already behind. The first flush of consciousness, the first coherent rush of thought, is that I shouldn’t have stayed up working so late, especially since the last couple of hours were wasted puzzling over a minor detail that I now realize, in the brutal light of day, should’ve been left for when I wasn’t so tired, that I should’ve gone to sleep the moment I noticed that my thinking was becoming muddled and that I was making stupid mistakes. I should’ve gone to bed earlier so that when I woke up I could go back down, before I had to be at my day job, and correct that minor detail in a fraction of the time I had actually spent on it. Instead I stayed up until I was so exhausted that I couldn’t even see clearly and going to sleep was more like passing out, so that when I wake up I’m already despairing over the day ahead, in particular the first eight hours I have to devote to my day job (plus two for the commute) before I can get back to the basement. I’m so overwhelmed by everything I haven’t done but have promised myself *must* be done before the end of the day – although I already know that I won’t even come close to getting done what I plan on doing (especially because my ‘plans’ are so vague and unrealistic that it’s impossible to fulfill them) – that I strongly consider calling in sick and

staying in bed all day. When I was younger none of my peers had accomplished much of anything, except for a few precocious ones who I wrote off as freaks of nature, outliers who weren't part of the competition. But as the years have gone by I've been watching my friends, as well as people I don't know personally but have read or heard about through mutual acquaintances, as they rack up one success after another. It's becoming difficult to categorize myself as a 'late bloomer,' since by this point most everyone I know has more or less gone through the 'blooming' phase. In fact, it's a little indecent to speak about a man my age in terms of 'blooming,' or as having bloomed. It's humiliating to think about all the stock phrases I use when I'm offering up excuses (most of the time to people who haven't asked for them) for why I haven't been able to accomplish anything yet. 'I'm a slow learner,' I say. 'Everybody develops at their own speed. I started late so I've had a lot of catching up to do. I'm not a natural like some of the other guys out there. Things don't come as easily to me as they do for some people. I just think about the work. That's all I have time for. Maybe some of the other guys are a bit cannier when it comes to that sort of thing. I'm not good at selling myself, and if you're going to make it in today's world you have to be able to sell yourself. It doesn't matter if you've come up with the best idea since sliced bread (which, in retrospect, isn't that great of an idea and likely succeeded only because somebody knew how to sell it), it doesn't matter if you're a genius, you won't have a chance in this life if you don't know how to network, bargain, convince, entice, inspire,

enable, persuade, and bamboozle (like the con man). It's not enough anymore to just work hard, and I haven't figured out the other part yet. I'm not in a hurry,' I say, lying through my teeth, 'There's loads of guys like me out there who work away patiently. I'm sure it's just a matter of time.' One cliché after another. Bullshit piled on top of bullshit. The moment I utter these phrases I know that they're complete fabrications, which is not to say that they have no basis in reality – they *are* clichés after all – just that they weren't true in relation to my situation. The truth is that I haven't worked hard enough. I have been busy, but that has nothing to do with hard work. In fact, I have kept busy in order to avoid working hard. Rather than tackling problems that I've been putting off for weeks, months, years, I spend my time 'fine-tuning' parts of the work that are more or less complete and no longer require my attention, parts that have been complete for quite some time and should be left alone since my efforts to 'fine tune' usually end up undoing the work that I've already done. Even a year ago, I was much closer to completing the work than I am now. Every day that I continue to work is just one more day of ruining or undoing something that I had previously worked very hard to complete. So not only have I been wasting my time with all this busy work, but I have actually been turning back the clock, so to speak. If I could only shake off this lethargy, this apathy, this depression, and start back up with the hard work that is absolutely necessary for success, then I may still avoid the disastrous failure that looms over each passing day. But nothing seems to work.

About the Author

Mike Steeves lives with his wife and child in Montreal.
Giving Up is his first novel.

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