

PASTOR GARY

The Man Who Taught Me the *Love* of Jesus

“I have no greater joy
than to hear that my children
are walking in the truth.

— 3 JOHN 1:4



A HEART
THAT LOVES



A PRESENCE
THAT HEALS



A FAITH
THAT LEADS



A LIFE
THAT SERVES

A Time of Brokenness

At a time when my life had fallen apart, and I have written elsewhere about the details of that season, one of the deepest struggles I carried was this crushing sense that I was a failure. I felt unlovable. I felt like I did not matter.

There are seasons in life where pain does not merely wound you, it dismantles you. It strips away certainty, identity, confidence, and even hope. That was where I found myself during that period of my life. On the outside, I could still function. I could still speak intelligently. I could still carry on conversations. But internally, I felt shattered, exhausted, and profoundly alone. Perhaps the deepest wound of all was this quiet but relentless belief that I was somehow beyond love, beyond redemption, beyond truly being known and still accepted.

And then entered Gary Thomas, Assistant Pastor at Calvary Chapel of Olympia and lead counselor there.

He willingly took me on.

Now, I was no easy person to take on at that point in my life. I was emotionally demolished, deeply complicated, overwhelmed by pain and confusion. Looking back, I can only imagine how overwhelming I must have appeared walking into his office for the first time. I probably came

carrying layers of grief, fear, shame, anxiety, theological confusion, relational pain, and emotional exhaustion all tangled together into one exhausted human being trying desperately to survive.

But week after week, over the course of roughly a year, Pastor Gary met with me unwaveringly. He did not flinch. He did not recoil. He did not try to rush me toward easy answers or simplistic spiritual clichés. He simply stayed present. There was a steadiness about him that I desperately needed at a time when my internal world felt utterly chaotic.

And what he taught me, more than anything else, was love. Not performative love. Not superficial religious politeness. Not conditional acceptance based on how well someone is functioning. But deep, abiding, Christ-centered love that reaches another human being at the level of the soul.

The Love of Jesus

If there is one word that defines Pastor Gary, it is love. The love of Jesus. Agape love. Soul-level love. The kind of love that settles a human being from the inside out.

There are people who speak about love, and then there are people who embody it so naturally that you feel it before they even say a word. Pastor Gary was one of those people. His office did not merely feel like a counseling office. It felt safe. It felt calm. It felt like entering the presence of someone who genuinely cared about your heart and not merely your symptoms.

He told me often that he loved me, and he meant it. His hugs meant the world to me. He was a large man compared to me, and those hugs made me feel safe. At the end of every session, he would hug me and tell me he loved me, and somehow you could feel it, not merely hear it. You could feel the love moving from his heart to mine. There was authenticity in it. No pretense. No performance. Just genuine human warmth rooted deeply in the love of Christ.

At the time, I probably did not fully understand why those moments affected me so deeply. But now, years later, after immersing myself in neuroscience, polyvagal theory, HeartMath®, neurocardiology, and interpersonal neurobiology, I understand something I could not have articulated then. Safety heals. Presence heals. Love heals.

Years later, as I became immersed in neurocardiology, HeartMath®, and the science surrounding heart-brain coherence, I found myself thinking about Pastor Gary often. His heart rate variability had to be carrying this beautiful rhythm of peace and love, this steady sine wave of grace flowing from one nervous system to another. And it settled me.

I always felt safe with him.

That may sound simple, but for a traumatized person, feeling safe is not simple at all. It is sacred. Trauma teaches the nervous system to brace for danger, rejection, abandonment, criticism, or humiliation. It creates hypervigilance. It keeps the body preparing for threats that may never come. Yet somehow, in Pastor Gary's presence, my nervous system slowly began to

exhale. Not because he was using sophisticated techniques or quoting theories, but because he carried peace within himself.

Presence and Safety

I felt that I could say anything, everything, and he could take it. He could sit with me through the pain, through the silence, through the confusion, through the moments when I did not even know what to say. There was never pressure. Never judgment. Just this quiet, gentle presence and this soft-spoken smile that embodied safety itself.

He understood something that many people, even many helpers, never fully understand. People do not heal primarily because someone gives them perfect advice. People heal because another human being is willing to remain emotionally present with them while they are suffering. Pastor Gary knew how to sit with pain without trying to dominate it, fix it prematurely, or make it disappear simply because discomfort made him uneasy.

That is rare.

Many people rush toward answers because silence frightens them. But Pastor Gary understood the ministry of presence. He understood that before people can truly heal, they often need someone willing simply to remain with them in the darkness long enough for trust to slowly re-emerge.

At the time, I knew very little about neuroscience because I was simply trying to survive. But in hindsight, Pastor Gary was already teaching me the very things that would later become foundational in the NeuroFaith® model. He taught me presence. He taught me interpersonal neurobiology long before I had language for it. What Dan Siegel would later describe as the healing power of being deeply seen and safely held in relationship, Pastor Gary was already living out naturally in the quiet rhythms of his counseling ministry.

He taught me emotional regulation. He embodied what we now call polyvagal safety. He simply lived in the green zone. I do not recall him ever moving into harshness, defensiveness, reactivity, or emotional chaos. He carried steadiness, and when you are emotionally drowning, another person's steadiness can become profoundly life-saving.

He also taught me authenticity. He taught me what it means for another human being to remain emotionally present without needing to fix, dominate, preach at, or control. There was humility in him. Gentleness in him. Strength in him. And all of it carried the unmistakable fragrance of Christ.

The Beautiful Irony

And here is the beautiful irony.

Years later, after I found healing, after I wrote my books, and after the NeuroFaith® model had taken shape through the integration of polyvagal theory, HeartMath®, neurocardiology, Internal Family Systems, and faith, I shared my seminal NeuroFaith® book with Pastor Gary.

He gave me one of the most thoughtful reflections on the work that anyone has ever offered.

What moved me deeply was not simply that he appreciated the material, but that he immediately understood it. He recognized the connection between faith, nervous system regulation, relational safety, emotional healing, and authentic human presence almost intuitively. We dialogued deeply about the model, and from his spiritual perspective he validated it profoundly. He told me that the NeuroFaith® framework gave language and organization to what he had intuitively been doing all along in ministry and counseling.

And he was right.

In many ways, I simply gave vocabulary back to the man who first gave the experience to me.

That realization was profoundly humbling. Long before I understood polyvagal theory academically, Pastor Gary was already embodying it relationally. Long before I studied neurocardiology, he was already transmitting peace through presence. Long before I could articulate interpersonal neurobiology, he was already helping my shattered nervous system relearn trust, safety, and connection.

The science came later.

The experience came first.

And Pastor Gary was one of the people who gave me that experience.

Thank You, Dear Brother

So thank you, dear brother.

Thank you for helping save my life. Thank you for being present when I was shattered. Thank you for loving me when I could not love myself. Thank you for helping heal me spiritually, psychologically, emotionally, relationally, and even physically.

There are people who leave impressions on our minds, and there are people who leave fingerprints on our souls. Pastor Gary belongs in the latter category for me. Even now, all these years later, when I think about safety, grace, gentleness, and the healing presence of Christ expressed through another human being, I think about him.

And thank you for continuing to hold such a special place in my heart and in my life. Just knowing you are there, knowing you are only a phone call away if I ever needed you, is more than enough. There is something deeply comforting about knowing certain people exist in the world, people whose very presence reminds you that goodness is real, that faith is real, and that healing is possible.

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-Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

The older I get, the more I realize that some of the most important healers in our lives are not necessarily the loudest, the most famous, or the most externally impressive. Sometimes they are simply the people who quietly love us well during the seasons when we are hardest to love.

Pastor Gary did exactly that for me.

And I will never forget it.

Blessings, dear brother.

And thank you.