

How Duane Saved the World

Notes from August, 2020 (Ned Hamson, Copyright 2002)

It is really hot and sticky walking the three miles to visit a bit with my great-grand nieces and nephews. Of course, it is August and I am in Cincinnati, Ohio, so it has to be hot and sticky.

It is so hot that sweat is dripping out from under the brim of my old straw hat — that makes me think about the first time I met Duane — the six year-old who “saved the world.” I met Duane on a hot sticky August evening in Cincinnati. I haven’t heard from Duane for a while, I thought.. I wonder what he is up to. “Let’s see,” I said to myself, “have my nephews and nieces had ever heard about Duane.” They always want to hear a story when I visit, maybe I’ll tell them about Duane.



As soon as I got inside of their house, I heard Louise shouting: “Tell us a story Gran-Gran!” (Great-Grand Uncle was always a bit much for these kids, so they called me Gran-Gran.)

“Oh, let him cool off or at least get the sweat out of his eyes first,” their mother said.

No, that’s all right. Fact is, I was just thinking of a good story, a true story, as I was walking over here. “Want to hear it Louise? Kids?” (The other three kids: two more girls — Janell and Marie and a boy - Ted.)

“Yes, yes, yes, yes!” they all said.

Well the story, that’s true, is about how Duane saved the world. One six year-old boy, named Duane began saving the world on a hot, sticky August, Cincinnati night in 2002.

Now you may know that the world is now at peace and has been for about ten years.

And if all reports are true, the hurt we did to the planet back then is healing too.

That’s not all though. Children just like you - the whole world over — can now dream dreams of who and what they will be... all because of Duane.”

Janell, the 11 year-old said, “Really? Then tell us the story. Was it a big job and how did a six year-old do it?”

Was it a big job? You better know it was, I said. “So many people and plants and animals to save. And bugs too — lots of them.

Ted, you might ask: “Is that what Duane set out to do on that hot, sticky night?” Then, I’d have to say: Well, not really. In fact, if you had seen Duane the way others first saw him that night and the fuss he was making you would say: “Duane save the world? No way!”

But he did save the world and here’s what happened.

Duane was a small, slender six year-old who could cry up a storm when he did not get his way, or when his sisters teased him too much. Or when his mother would say: “Duane. not now,” or “Duane, you know that’s not good for you,” or “Duane, if you are going to act that way — go and sit by yourself.”

Now, Duane knew — even if he was only six — that crying and bawling helped other kids get their way. And even if his mom had never given in, he thought he should keep trying — just in case.

On that hot, sticky night, Duane, his mother, his grandmother and his three sisters decided to go out late for a treat — some ice cream — at the store that sold ice cream, soda and “and toys!” thought Duane. Duane liked toys even more than ice cream — that sounds strange but it’s true.

They went out and got into Grandma’s car and drove over to the store. Duane’s middle sister pinched him on the way over to the store and he pinched back — hard.

When they got to the store and went in, it was crowded with all sorts of people also up late looking for a treat.

Duane’s sisters, mom and grandma all placed their orders for ice cream cones — chocolate double, peach and vanilla, marshmallow strawberry cream, and a double-dutch chocolate fudge. Duane had his eye on a plastic ring with

a puppet hanging from it. “Duane?” asked his mom. “None, mom,” said Duane.

His mom, three sisters and grandma went to the counter to pay and Duane reached out for the ring with a puppet hanging from it.

His middle sister, the one who pinched him in the car on the way over to the store, saw him with the toy. She pulled at her mom’s hand and said: “Duane’s hiding a toy! Duane’s got a toy!”

Just then, Duane saw a man rush in to the store wiping sweat out from under an old straw hat he had on his head.

The man nodded at Duane, just like he knew him.

Then he heard his mom say: “Duane?” He looked up at his mother with an unspoken but loud look of, “I want this toy, mom?”

“Duane, put it back - put it back now - you did not ask.” Duane started to cry. Not just a small whimper of a cry but a first class wake up the whole northwest side of Cincinnati howl of a cry. With tears almost as big as fat summer rain drops running down his cheeks on to the floor.

Duane looked around, his mom was not going to give in. He cried louder.

Then the man who nodded at him, the man who was dripping wet from under his straw hat when he came in and was next in line behind his mom, sort of tilted his head and looked at Duane again. Duane’s mom said firmly: “Duane, put it back and go out and sit in the car if you are going to be like that.”

Then the man in the straw hat, spoke to his mom — softly but Duane could hear: “Excuse me mame, I don’t want to get in your way but may I ask Duane a question, please?”

She was surprised but motioned with her hand for him to go ahead and ask duane a question.

Then the man bent down and said in a calm, low voice (not what you’d expect from a hot, sweaty man in such a rush):

“Duane, you woke up this morning — right?” Duane kept

crying and saw his grandma look up at his mom. But he shook his head “yes, I woke up.”

“And you woke up in your own bed, Duane, with a roof over your head?”

Duane stopped bawling but still cried and said to himself — “What a question?” But he nodded “Yes.”

“Duane, your mom or your grandmother... gave you breakfast in a bowl or on a plate at a table?”

“Yes,” said Duane — speaking instead of crying or nodding.

“And it tasted good?” the man asked.

“OK, yes, OK,” Duane said.

“Then, Duane, you played all morning long, did you Duane?”

“Yes!” said Duane. “We had fun — baseball and running and video games.” Duane saw his mom and grandma smiling and looking at the man shaking their heads a bit.

“And Duane, when you got hungry someone helped you wash up and made you a lunch?”

Duane, made a face. “Yes — washed my hands, ears and even my neck. Damon’s Famous Chicken Wings, my favorite!”

“And then what did you do, Duane?”

“I played and played, caught and hit the ball, played video — it was the first time I caught a real high throw.”

“And then washing up again and dinner, as good as the meals before, Duane?”

“Yes, yes.” The tears were gone now. “Then I played a video game and won once.”

“So,” the man said, “Duane, you would say you had a pretty good day?”

Duane could see his mom smiling behind the man.

“Yes, it was a good day, until now,” said Duane.

The man looked at Duane’s mom and then stooped a little lower until he was looking Duane right in the eye.

“Yes,” the man said, “you had a good day. You are very fortunate - lucky - to have such a good day.”

“Yes,” said Duane, “I guess so.”

“Yes, very fortunate, Duane,” he said. “Did you know Duane that a boy just like you did not wake up this morning like you did and have such a good day?”

Duane saw his mom look surprised. She started to reach out her hand toward the man but grandma took her hand and held it. Grandma, Duane saw had a tear in her eye.

Duane, smiled and said, “Did he sleep the whole day and miss it?”

“No,” the man said. Duane saw his mom look at her mom.

“No, Duane, a boy just like you did not wake up this morning in his own bed, with a roof over his head, or have breakfast in a bowl or on a plate, or play all morning, get washed up and have a good lunch and play all afternoon, then wash up and have a good dinner on a plate at a table. or play video games.

A little boy just like you Duane, did not wake up this morning and will never wake up again. Do you understand, Duane?”

“A little boy just like you,” the man said again, “did not wake up and will never wake up.”

“You mean, he died,” said Duane. “I know what that is, my papa didn’t wake up — he died last summer and my mom told me what it was. I know what that is. Why didn’t he wake up? The boy just like me? Was he bad? Was he sick? Why didn’t he wake up?”

“No, Duane, he wasn’t bad, or really sick. His mom and grandma both loved him very much just as yours love you. But they had no food or water to give him for days and days and days. No shelter, no bed, no table, nothing to give him so he could live, play, dream, and wake up just like you did this morning.”

Duane asked the man, “Did someone, anyone have food or water to give to the boy just like me so he did not have to die — so he could have waked up this morning — just like me?”

“Yes, I believe so,” said the man who also had a tear in his eye now.

“That’s sad. And it is wrong,” said Duane. He saw that both his mom and grandma had tears in their eyes now But grandma nodded down at Duane and said without speaking “Good boy Duane!”

Then Duane asked THE QUESTION.

Duane asked the man:

“WHY DID A LITTLE BOY JUST LIKE ME HAVE TO DIE?”

“That’s a good question Duane, a very good question! In fact, that, Duane, is maybe the best question I ever heard!” the man said. “I believe if you keep asking that question Duane — that someday a little boy just like you will not die — he will wake up and play and eat and learn and love and be loved just like you are — every day.”

Duane’s mom and grandma were nodding at both Duane and the man now. Then the biggest smiles he had ever seen from both mom and grandma to Duane.

Then Duane looked up at the man and said: “Then, I will keep asking that question: ‘Why did the boy just like me have to die?’”

The man straightened up, looked at Duane’s mom and grandma, then back at Duane and said:

“I knew you would, if you could Duane.”

Then he tapped Duane on the shoulder and said: “Thank you Duane.” Then he looked again at Duane’s mom and grandma, paid for his snack and walked out of the door and back into the hot sticky night.

Duane looked up at his mom and grandma and said: “I will, I will. I will keep asking.”

And that’s how it all began — Duane’s saving the world.

Starting the next day, he asked people everyday why a boy just like him had to die. Teachers, other kids, big people — all sorts of people. He even convinced his sisters to teach him how to use their computer so he could ask more people.

And the people he asked, some, not all, but some then changed things they did so a boy just like Duane might

not die. And they took Duane's question with them and asked other people, "Why did a little boy just like Duane, have to die?" Over the next year or two those people started adding up to a lot of people in many different place in the world. And things did start to get better, not all at once but better and in lots of places because people asked Duane's question to people they met and Duane could ask a lot of people on the internet.

But there were some people that always said they understood but could not do anything because there were just too many boys just like Duane that did not wake up each day and the problems were so big.

That really bothered Duane and one day he thought, I need another question. He thought about the night in the ice cream store, wished the man was there to help him and then...

The next day, Duane was eight now, he asked his question of four or five people on his walk to school and one said, she understood but there were too many little boys just like Duane and the problem was just too big...

The SECOND QUESTION came to Duane.

And Duane said to the woman:

"BUT YOU KNOW ME NOW. IF YOU KNEW THAT I MIGHT NOT WAKE UP TOMORROW, IF YOU KNEW THAT I MIGHT DIE BEFORE I WOKE — WOULD YOU DO SOMETHING, WOULD YOU TRY TO SAVE ME?"

She cried a little bit and said "Yes she would." Then Duane asked her if she would do something for him could she do the same "for a boy just like me" and she said "Yes, yes," she would.

After that things started changing faster, and faster. By the time Duane was almost eleven, there were no more wars going on and people who needed food and water were getting it quick and people were working on healing the planet so bad things in the air, in the dirt or in the water might not kill a little boy just like Duane.

But there were still accidents, and floods and earthquakes — times and places when little boys just like Duane needed extra help.

In August, just after Duane's eleventh birthday, on a hot sticky night, just after dinner, his mom and sisters were

watching TV. Duane was getting out his new video game. He wondered if the food that he and the kids in his class had collected money for was helping any one now, maybe a boy just like him. They had sent frozen, pre-cooked Damon's Famous Wings because they thought "What kids would not like Damon's Famous Wings."

"DUANE! DUANE! Come quick!" his sisters and mom were shouting. "That earthquake in Iran or Iraq, where ever it was. It's on TV and there's a little boy just like you on the screen talking to a TV guy! Come quick!"

As Duane watched the little boy who did look just like him, he heard the announcer say:

"Jamal's 11th birthday came and passed while he and his family were trapped under their collapsed house. No food or water for ten days. They thought last night would be their last. Jamal's mother told me that Jamal had said to her just before he fell asleep that was sure he would not wake up again."

"Then", Jamal's mother told me, "Out of the blackness, through the broken wall, someone reached in, tapped Jamal on the shoulder and woke him up. Then some water and food was squeezed in through narrow, new opening to the world. Not much food and water but enough so we had hope and knew that we were saved." Jamal's mother tells me that Jamal does not know much English but that he wants to say something to you who are watching this live report." the man said.

The camera then pulled a bit back and Duane and his sisters, and his mama and now his grandma who had heard the shouting and come into the TV room could see there was someone standing next to Jamal, bending down talking to Jamal, wearing a sweaty straw hat, pulled almost down over his eyes... The man sort of looked at the TV camera out of the corner of his eye and Duane said almost out loud to himself, "No way. Could it be?"

The reporter asked: "Jamal, what is it you wanted to say?" Jamal looked straight at the camera, held up a Damon's Famous Wing in his left hand, looked straight into the camera and said: "Thank you Duane!"

And that's the story about how Duane saved the world! With two good questions, asked everyday.

Janell, smiled her 11 year-old, "Good story Gran-Gran"

smile and said: “This is a true story Gran-Gran? It’s a good story but true?”

She had him, No way could he convince an eleven year-old with that knowing smile.

Then Janell’s mother came down the stairs, looked into the room and said:

“Oh, Gran-Gran, I didn’t know you were here yet.”

“Someone just called for you — here?! He said, to tell you to: ‘Get packed, warm clothes, need you in Peru, now!’ His name, I wrote it down... Here it is, His name was Duane. Do you know a young man named Duane? Duane called and left that message. Mean anything to you Gran-Gran?”

“Yes, it does. Means, I got to go kids. See you when I get back.” He looked back just in time to see Janell’s mouth still hanging open, and getting bigger in surprise.