

*Bless
♥ Your
Heart*

*Stories to Renew Your Spirit
and Pamper Your Soul*

JEAN GATZ

Author of *Mama Said There'd Be Days Like This*

Bless Your Heart

Stories to Renew Your Spirit and Pamper Your Soul

Jean Gatz, CSP

Cover design and graphics
Joni McPherson

Compositor
Ronnie Bucci

Author's photo by Mike LeBlanc

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 C A R T E R
R A N D O L P H
P U B L I S H I N G



For Les, Steven, Michael and Jennifer

*Thank you for making me laugh,
and for blessing my heart in so many ways.*



CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Who Are Your People and Where Are Y'all From?	15
Chapter 2 Please Don't Be My Valentine!	31
Chapter 3 Bulldozers Are Not Your Friends!	45
Chapter 4 Clean Out Your Junk Drawer.	57
Chapter 5 Closets and Attics and Basements, Oh My! ..	71
Chapter 6 From Queen to Farmer's Daughter	85
Chapter 7 Staying Angry Is Way Too Much Work!	97
Chapter 8 Good Job!	111
Chapter 9 Friends Are Like Flowers in the Garden of Life	121

Chapter 10	Casseroles and Front Porch Visits	135
Chapter 11	Planning the Trip of Your Life.	149
Chapter 12	Don't Get Your Wires Crossed	163
Chapter 13	Dance Class 101	175
Chapter 14	Open a Window	185
Chapter 15	Don't Just Sit There. Do Something	195
Chapter 16	Are There Squirrels in Your Attic?	205
Chapter 17	Virginia Hams and Family Reunions.	217
Chapter 18	Broadway Bound.	231
Chapter 19	Don't Worry. It's Just a Phase	243
	About the Author	255



INTRODUCTION

Introduction

To fully appreciate and understand how and why the phrase “Bless your heart” originated in the South, it helps to understand that most southerners are very gracious, kind and thoughtful people. Our comments are genuine, sincere and heartfelt. For instance if we say to someone, “You look just lovely” or “Your baby is just precious” both of these may be interpreted as real and sincere compliments. *Darlin’* is also a good word, especially when combined with *precious*. To say to a young mother, “Your baby is darlin’ and her little outfit is just precious” will truly make her day.

Because we are often overly concerned about offending someone by a harsh word, we will go to great lengths to avoid hurting someone’s feelings. So in order to be able to talk to each other and express how we *truly* feel, it became necessary to come up with a secret code that Southerners understand but most other folks don’t. This code was created years ago when our great grandmothers established the Fundamental Rules of Southern Communication. Once you understand how they work, it makes total sense.

For instance, if you’re out shopping with a friend and you both notice someone in a truly awful and unbecoming outfit, you wouldn’t say, “Isn’t that the tackiest thing you ever saw?” That’s because the person *in* the tacky outfit might overhear you and

get her feelings hurt. So instead you would smile and say to your friend, “Look at her outfit. Now isn’t that *interesting?*”

We are always delighted when our friends share their good news – whatever it may be. And we are there to be supportive as we listen to stories about difficult situations and sad times as well. We also enjoy sharing stories and anecdotes about our families, children and grandchildren. While imparting good news is one thing, some women can go on and on and *on*. We all know someone who enjoys being the center of attention, assuming that no one else could possibly have information as fascinating to share.

For example, even though we are happy that a friend’s nine-year-old grandson won first place in his swim meet, we don’t need to listen to the details for 30 minutes. Maybe someone else is waiting for a turn to talk, and short of raising her hand to be called upon by the non-stop talker, that isn’t going to happen.

While listening to the woman who is prattling on about something or other when the other women in the group have obviously long since lost interest, a genteel Southerner would never call attention to this rude behavior outright. She would simply interrupt with a smile and say, “Well, isn’t that special?” Then before the offender could take another breath and continue, our heroine would change the subject with a comment or question and deftly turn the conversation to another person in

the group, or to another topic. This is a finely honed skill among southern women, as great finesse is needed to spare any hurt feelings.

While “Isn’t that interesting?” and “Isn’t that special?” are two examples of Southern shorthand that every self respecting southern woman understands, the phrase “Bless your heart” is a bit more complicated to interpret. That’s because its meaning can vary widely, depending on the nuances of the voice, body language and facial expression of the speaker.

We learn how to use and interpret this phrase from a very early age, usually from our mothers, grandmothers and aunts. And it has its place in a wide variety of situations. If someone is going through a challenging time or has suffered trauma or tragedy, it’s often difficult for us to find exactly the right words to express how we feel. (That happens to everyone, no matter where they live). The phrase “Bless your heart” is another form of Southern shorthand. Spoken among Southerners, the message is clear. In the case of bad news it conveys our concern and care, our sympathy and support. Often accompanied by a kind gesture such as a hug, an embrace, a gentle touch on the arm, or a tender pat on the back, it is a sincere and heartfelt expression we use when other words fail us. These three simple words can speak volumes.

The phrase is also used in another positive way when we defend someone who has said or done something inappropriate because

they just don't know any better. I remember telling my mother one night at dinner about a girl in my fourth grade class who was really fun to be around. But she had such terrible table manners that no one wanted to sit with her at lunch. After listening quietly to my critical comments my mother asked, "And where did you learn your good table manners?"

"From you and Daddy," I replied in a matter of fact tone, not seeing where this conversation was going.

"That's right. And maybe her mother and daddy haven't taught her good table manners because they don't have good table manners themselves – because nobody taught them. Perhaps your friend doesn't know any better. Maybe it's not her fault, bless her heart."

I gave Mama's comment much thought. A few weeks later my classmate invited me to her house to play after school and stay for supper. After sharing a meal with her family I realized my mother was right. It wasn't her fault, bless her heart. That experience has stuck with me all these years and is probably one of the reasons I try to give people the benefit of the doubt more often than I should. Perhaps they truly *don't* know any better. And maybe it's not their fault, bless their hearts.

My audiences always have great fun when I teach them how to use this phrase in yet another way – when dealing with difficult people. In this instance, knowing you have no power to change

a difficult person's behavior, it helps to use coping skills. And one of our best coping skills is humor. So I ask my audience to get a picture in their minds of the most difficult person they know. It might be someone at work or at home. Then I ask them to think about what they would *really like* to say to this person – what would give them great satisfaction. Of course they can't say what they're really thinking. I tell them I completely understand that they might want to look this person in the eye and ask one question in all seriousness.

“I already took a pain pill, so why are you still here?”

That phrase is actually the title of one of my most popular programs on dealing with difficult people. Meeting planners are already chuckling when they call to book it, and they appreciate that audience members will learn appropriate skills to deal with difficult people and will obviously have fun in the process. Laughter is such an important element of learning.

As I explain in my keynotes and workshops, when all else fails you can smile, look the difficult person in the eye and in your most sincere voice say, “Bless your heart.” Of course you're really not saying it for *their* sake. You're saying it for your own benefit in hopes of retaining your sanity when interacting with this person. Then we all practice together so they can look and sound convincing. Body language, tone of voice and facial expression all have to convey the message that they really care. That's the secret, and that last piece of advice is what leaves

them laughing and pointing at each other. “That’s you!” and “No, that’s *you!*”

“Bless your heart” often becomes the most popular phrase of the conference and brings more laughter each time it’s used. That’s because I have instructed everyone to count how many times they get their own hearts blessed by the end of the day – which might reveal how their colleagues and friends *really* feel about them. At one conference the CEO of the company spoke following my keynote. A very serious boss and stern taskmaster, I wasn’t sure how well he would appreciate my humor. Without cracking a smile he worked “Bless your hearts” into his speech three different times – and brought the house down.

In the more serious parts of my presentations, I’ve begun sharing with some of my audiences all the different ways we can bless our *own* hearts – in mind, body and spirit. If we are so busy taking care of other people, we are often the last people on our own “to-do” lists. We miss opportunities every day to lighten our spirits and pamper our souls. Discovering simple ways to do both is the focus of the book you are holding in your hands.

If you’ve heard me speak or you’ve read my book, *Mama Said There’d be Days Like This*, you know that I use personal stories and life lessons learned to connect with my audiences and my readers. In this book you’ll find some long chapters and some short ones, depending on the story involved. Some are funny and

others are more serious. They're not in any particular order, so you can start wherever you want and pick up later where you left off. Each story is meant to make you laugh, think, reminisce about your own life experiences, and reflect on ways you can bless *your* heart.

Depending on where you are in your life right now, several of the positive changes you decide to make (that's what blessing your heart is about) will be easy. Some will be more difficult. A few will call for compromise. And other changes will require your dedication, determination, courage, sacrifice and hard work.

Some people aren't afraid of hard work, especially when they are wise enough and practical enough to foresee the positive results their efforts will bring. Others have the idea that life is supposed to be happy, require little effort, and never call for compromise. Most of us have figured out that *everything* positive in life requires hard work including (but certainly not limited to) relationships, family, marriage, parenting, career and job success, friendships, education and financial security. In addition to hard work, don't forget courage and determination, too.

Parenting is a good case in point. As a mother of three, I believe that raising a child is one of the most rewarding experiences on earth. I fully understand that everyone will not agree with me, and that's OK for both of us. As a parent you will make enough special memories to last a lifetime, long after your children are

grown and out of your nest, perhaps with children of their own. Being a parent also provides memories and moments you would prefer to forget – like countless sleepless nights, changing thousands of diapers and nursing sick children back to health.

One thing for sure is that parenting is never boring because there are always too many activities and obligations to fulfill. Parental duties keep you busy attending school plays, sporting events and a myriad of other pursuits. Other activities include years' worth of teacher conferences, homework, conversations about report cards, and arguments over bedtime when your kids are young and more frustrating conversations about curfews when they're older. And don't forget being a Scout leader or a room mother, or serving on the board of the Parent Teacher Association, driving carpools, and hosting sleep-overs (when you know *you* won't be the one getting any sleep). All of that takes work.

Teaching your children the values you hope they will live by as adults is an awesome responsibility. Modeling those values takes commitment and effort. You have to practice what you preach – every moment of every day. And let's not forget the years of worrying about all of the things in their lives that you won't be able to control, no matter how good a parent you are.

Without a doubt, hard work certainly isn't limited to parenting. There are hundreds of thousands of other choices that demand

daily effort. Every goal, every hope, every dream and every vision requires work. If you're stuck where you are, or not yet quite where you want to be, change is going to be inevitable, unavoidable and even necessary. Maybe you're in a job or a relationship that has left you feeling discouraged, weary, frustrated or confused. You're trying to maneuver back onto the path in the direction you want to go. It could be that you've reached a point at which you are feeling stuck, stalled, spinning your wheels and getting nowhere. People and projects constantly pull you in another direction – often to a place you didn't want to go. It's a challenge to stay in control of your day, your job, and your life.

Perhaps you're feeling stranded, isolated and alone, afraid to reach out to others because of bad experiences in the past when you tried to do so. You have to make some difficult decisions and none of your choices are easy. Of course there is always the possibility (and my sincere hope for you) that your life is good at the moment and all is well.

It's easy and natural to fall into habits of behavior and ways of thinking because they are just that – habits. Wherever you are in your life right now, I hope my stories will provide you with insights and ideas, inspiration and encouragement, laughter and joy. If you decide to make any changes, don't be surprised when people begin to notice a change in you. And even more important, don't be surprised when you begin to notice a change in you.

When your mind and heart are open to looking at life from a different approach and a fresh perspective, you can renew your spirit and pamper your soul on a daily basis. You'll discover countless ways to bless your heart and the hearts of others. That alone just might qualify you as an honorary Southerner even if you weren't born and raised in the South... Bless your heart. Oh, and I meant that in a good way!

♥ *Questions for Reflection*

What forms of “shorthand” do I use when communicating with those who know me well?

What “secret code words” do we share and enjoy?

When have I used the phrase “Bless Your heart” to show care, concern and compassion when other words failed me?

When have I “blessed a heart” to make allowances for someone who didn’t know any better?

When have I “blessed a heart” and used humor as a coping skill when dealing with a difficult person at work or at home?

How do I bless my own heart?

Do I make time and find ways to take better care of myself while taking care of other people and other problems? If not, why not?

Here are some areas of my life that I want to change or need to change in order to change my future.

My physical health:

My mental health:

My personal life:

My professional life:

My intellectual life:

My social life:

My spiritual life:

My finances:

The amount of JOY in my life:

I understand that some of these changes will be easy and involve only a bit of fine-tuning. Several will call for compromise. Others will require dedication, determination, courage, sacrifice and hard work.

Am I ready for the challenges?

If I don't feel ready, I must remember that I can take baby steps that will lead to bigger steps along the way. I can set incremental goals and reward myself in small ways (or big ways!) when I achieve one of my goals. I can create a plan and follow that plan.

I have the power to make choices that will renew my spirit, pamper my soul and bless my heart – every single day for the rest of my life.



CHAPTER 1

*Who Are Your People and
Where Are Y'all From?*

Who Are Your People and Where Are Y'all From?

The title of this chapter reflects a question that was often asked by my Virginia relatives whenever they met someone new. Not meant as an insult – and never taken as one – the question was another form of that Southern shorthand I described earlier. Depending on the answer, the ensuing (and always friendly) conversation might reveal that the parties knew some of the same people, had grown up in the same town, had attended the same school or (and this happened quite often) were distantly related.

It's always fun for me to watch the faces of audience members during my keynotes when the photograph of my childhood home in Virginia first appears on the large media screen. This two-storied antebellum mansion, with majestic columns spanning its width and inviting rocking chairs dotting the spacious front porch, draws involuntary "Ohhh's and Ahhh's" from many a crowd. If you're having trouble imagining what it looked like, picture Scarlett O'Hara's beloved Tara in "Gone with the Wind" ... before General Sherman burned Atlanta during the Civil War. (As true Southerners like to point out, there was *nothing civil* about that war.)

But I digress. Let's get back to that photo of my childhood home. When I ask audience members how many of them think they might enjoy living in a home like that, most of their hands shoot right up. But as soon as I mention that this lovely dwelling is

actually a *funeral home*, every hand in the room disappears rather quickly.

When you're young, living in a funeral home doesn't seem like such a big deal – especially if it's the only environment you've ever known. Daddy's family had been in the business for several generations and my grandfather owned two funeral homes at the time I was born. In order to keep the family business alive (no pun intended) our family lived in the funeral home where Daddy worked in Wytheville, and my Uncle Peyton and his family lived in the other funeral home in Marion, about 25 miles away. In both homes, business was conducted on the first floor and the family quarters were located on the floor above.

I'm the oldest of four children, and as our family grew, my parents wisely decided that a funeral home might not be the most normal environment in which to raise (relatively) normal children. So we packed up all of our belongings, minus the furniture from the family dwelling on the second floor because it was the property of Barnett's Funeral Home, and headed farther south.

We drove from Virginia all the way down to New Orleans, where my mother's family had their roots. For the first year we lived with my maternal grandparents in their house in the French Quarter. There were actually four generations living in that house at the same time, including my great grandfather, Dominique, who had

immigrated to the United States from France when he was 19 years old.

“Peperere” (French for “Grandfather”) spoke fluent French with bits of broken English mixed in, so conversing with him was always a challenge. Both of my mother’s parents spoke French, and my mother actually had to learn to speak English before she could go to school, as only French was spoken in their home. As for me, I am proud to say that I am also fluent in two languages. I speak English and Southern.

Daddy was a hard-working man who was proud of his professional calling, and we were proud of him as well. Our family heritage was indeed unique. After all, how many of my classmates could boast that *their* fathers had graduated from the Cincinnati School of Embalming?

Although my father worked for someone else during the first two years we lived in New Orleans, he was eager to start his own business. I guess that’s where my entrepreneurial spirit comes from; and the tradition continues with two of our three children starting their own companies this year. The opportunity to be his own boss finally presented itself when Daddy bought 12 acres of land in a little town on the other side of Lake Pontchartrain. We moved to Slidell and while we lived in a rental home in town, he began to build his new business on the outskirts of our community. And build it he did – literally, from the ground up.

He bought a tractor and some other equipment and hired two honest, hard-working men to help him create his dream. Mr. Ed Square and his son Paul worked alongside my father for many, many years as he continued to expand his business. With their help Daddy cleared the land, landscaped it, built gravel roads that wound throughout the property and planted magnolias, gardenias, camellias and azaleas – all the beautiful flowers, trees and shrubs that represent the South so well.

Then they began to work on our family dwelling, attached to the business office and situated at the back of the property. The following year we moved out of our rental house in town and into our new home in Forest Lawn Cemetery.

Now you might think that living in a cemetery is a little ... well... peculiar. OK, I understand that you're also thinking of other words to describe this living arrangement – like *weird*, *bizarre*, *eerie* and *creepy*. While I will admit that living in a cemetery felt very different than living in a regular neighborhood in town, I never felt scared. Not one time. Life was actually pretty normal except for certain things we weren't allowed to do – like decorate our house for Halloween.

My brother Randy put a plastic skull in his bedroom window in preparation for the holiday one year. Daddy spotted it while walking through the cemetery doing a last minute check before a funeral procession arrived for burial services. He calmly explained to Randy that this was not acceptable. From now on

he could decorate the *inside* of his room however he wanted, but placing *any* objects of *any* kind in the window was not allowed – no matter what the holiday happened to be.

Halloween was always a disappointing holiday for us because no one ever came trick or treating to our door. I should explain that in order to reach our house from the entrance to Forest Lawn Cemetery, you had to walk or ride the distance of two city blocks. In all those years we had only one lone trick-or-treater. And Billy Murphy's dad played the best trick of all on him.

Billy had insisted that he wanted to go trick or treating to our house. His dad agreed and drove Billy out from town, dropped him off at the front gate and made him walk the two blocks – through the cemetery – at night – alone – without a flashlight – to get to our house. When my mother opened the front door, Billy Murphy's face was as white as any ghost or goblin we had ever seen. And he wasn't even wearing a mask.

Other holidays, thank goodness, were a lot more fun. Thanksgiving was a very special time because our Big City cousins, Rusty and Betty, would travel by train from Birmingham, Alabama with their parents to spend the long holiday weekend with us. The highlight of Thanksgiving Day began when Daddy hitched the trailer to his tractor and took us for an adventure into the woods behind our house to look for bears.

Of course there *were* no bears in our woods, but that didn't stop us from screaming with delight when Daddy "spotted one" behind a tree. Naturally, we all "spotted" that bear and many others as well. Looking back, we should have given a prize to the kid who saw the greatest number of invisible bears. Late in the afternoon when the sun was beginning to set we would return to the house, bragging and boasting about another successful Thanksgiving bear hunting expedition.

Every year our family hosted a Sunrise Service on Easter Sunday for our community. We would all get up around 3:00 a.m. to go into town with Daddy to pick up the many dozens of donuts Mother had ordered. She would make gallons of coffee and after the Sunrise Service the minister would invite everyone back to our house for coffee and donuts. It was a long day, but we enjoyed it.

A particularly exciting time was the Christmas season, because we had much more than traditional decorations at *our* house. Right after Thanksgiving, construction would begin on the cemetery grounds for our annual nativity scene. This included the stable and all its surroundings, inhabited by life-sized statues of Jesus, Mary and Joseph along with a varied assortment of shepherds, both large and small. And let's not forget the three Kings who were positioned on their trusty, life-sized camels!

But Daddy didn't stop there. To make the scene as authentic as possible, he brought in live sheep and lambs and built an enclosure for them next to the stable, with a fenced area where they could

safely roam and children could pet them. He even managed to acquire a family of donkeys including mother Mingo, father Socrates and baby Natividad.

As you can imagine, this was quite a popular attraction in our little town. People would drive from neighboring communities to see the lighted scenes at night, let their children pet the animals, and enjoy the carols that were piped in from speakers hidden in the straw under the Baby Jesus. This was a total family commitment, with all of us taking our assigned turns to feed and water our menagerie.

I learned a lot about life from the funeral business, and from observing my parents as they helped people get through some of the most difficult times of their lives. Only one door separated the business office from our living room. When a family came out to choose a burial plot for a loved one, Daddy would advise them on the decisions that had to be made. As you can imagine, it takes a special sort of person to do this job. Throughout the entire process my parents always modeled professionalism and compassion, care and concern.

When all of the arrangements were completed and my mother had typed and prepared the necessary documents for their signatures, she would slip quietly into the kitchen two rooms away. Daddy always invited the family into our home for coffee and a piece of homemade pie. Most of them gladly accepted, as it was the first time they'd had a chance to sit down, relax and have something to eat and drink in many hours.

As I grew older I had the privilege of sitting in a corner of our kitchen and observing my parents as they listened to the stories people shared about their loved ones. Some of the stories were sad and some were surprisingly funny. Laughter is always good for the spirit, and in our kitchen over the years there was definitely an unforgettable combination of laughter and tears.

Whether people were laughing or crying, they were grateful for the chance to tell a story or share a moment about someone special. For just a little while they were able to forget about all the details of the days ahead and focus on the person who was so important to them. When they left our home, they were feeling better than when they arrived. And that made my parents feel like they had provided a service above and beyond what their clients expected.

All of us have inherited some traits from those who raised us. My parents modeled compassion and the importance of listening with your ears, eyes and heart. From my mother I inherited my language skills – my love for reading and learning, and my interest in writing my own books. Like her I enjoy writing personal notes and letters, which is truly becoming a lost art. I still write notes by hand but as I spend more and more time at the keyboard, my handwriting is sometimes so illegible that even I can't decipher it.

When my father died suddenly at the age of 47, I began to learn a lot more from my mother. It took bravery and determination to run his business alone for another few years and then move to Baton Rouge and start her life over again. Working two jobs so she could put my younger sister Kathy through school, she also took care of my grandfather in his last years on this earth.

As that famous saying goes, my father never knew a stranger. He was comfortable talking to everyone and he never excluded anyone from a conversation. I see that in myself as a keynoter who can have “a conversation” with an audience of 30 people or 3,000 people – and love every minute of it. He was an honest man and a very hard worker who was proud of the business he built and who cared deeply about the families he served in their time of need.

From Daddy I inherited my sense of humor and my abilities as a Southern storyteller. And the family tradition continues. All three of our adult children are engaging storytellers, each with their own unique sense of humor. Thankfully they have also inherited some of Les' wonderful traits, too. This doesn't mean, however, that all of the traits I inherited were good ones! My parents were not perfect people and neither am I. So I won't go into detail about the traits I'm constantly working on improving. I've tried my best to keep the good parts of what they taught me and put the rest away.

As a parent I fully understand and accept that our children have learned some things from me that they will want to put away. I get that. If there is any doubt that I am not perfect, just ask them. No, wait. I have a much better idea. Ask our grandchildren. They absolutely do believe that their JeJe can do no wrong!

What did you learn from the imperfect people who raised you? What traits did you inherit from them? What experiences did you have? From all you saw, heard and learned, have you kept the good and put the rest away? What are your children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews learning from you? What good will they keep? What are they learning that they will eventually want to put away?

It was a privilege to hear the guests in my parents' kitchen share stories and talk about how their loved ones would be remembered because of the legacy they left behind. Have you ever thought about the legacy you will leave and how you will be remembered? I have.

No doubt friends and family will agree that I didn't have a very good memory for details and that I worried enough for everyone else in the family. Maybe they will mention that I was a good story teller who made people laugh, that I was very organized, ran a successful business, worked hard for my community and enjoyed making people feel comfortable in our home, whether

Les and I were hosting a party or providing shelter to hurricane evacuees.

While those attributes may partially describe me, they don't totally define me. More importantly, I hope to be remembered for my faith in God and family, my efforts to make people feel included and comfortable in my presence, and for my volunteer work to make even a small part of the world a better place for those who didn't have the blessings I had.

I hope my children remember me as a caring and compassionate wife, mother and grandmother who wasn't perfect but who gave the best she had to give to the people she loved. Of course I have no doubt that our children will share other stories – in great detail – about the many things I did over the years that drove them crazy. That's OK. They're entitled. Just as long as they don't share those stories at the funeral, bless their hearts.

Questions for Reflection

What are some of my favorite memories of growing up?

If that period was more painful than happy, are there any good memories to recall? What are they?

In how many different places did we live?

What did our home(s) look like – inside and out?

What about our yard and neighborhood surroundings?

Which holidays did we celebrate?

How did we celebrate?

How did we decorate for those holidays?

Which family members came to visit, or did we visit them?

What did I enjoy (or detest) about those visits?

How was my family at listening and communicating?

How has that influenced my abilities to listen and communicate?

What traits and talents did I inherit from those who raised me?

What did I learn from them that was good and helpful to me?

What did I learn that was not good and that I have put away?

How will those who know me describe me after I'm gone?

What legacy will I leave behind?

If I'm not happy with how I answered some of these questions what can I do – beginning today – to change my future?



CHAPTER 2

Please Don't Be My Valentine!

Please Don't Be My Valentine!

My career as a first grade teacher lasted exactly one year. I was 22 years old and fresh out of college with a degree in Psychology, not Elementary Education. My main deficiency was a profound lack of management experience with six year olds. Walking into the classroom on that first day at Southside Elementary, the new reality sank in quickly. I was now in charge of managing 31 of them. Looking back on the various jobs I've held in my life, teaching first graders was one of the most rewarding of all. But it almost did me in!

At that time children didn't go to kindergarten in preparation for first grade. While some of my students had obviously gotten a head start at home, most of them came to my classroom without many of the skills that today's first graders possess. There were varying degrees of proficiency at many levels. Several could already write their names yet others weren't sure how to hold a pencil. Each was so precious – and so different. A few of them were confident enough to carry on a comfortable conversation with an adult, while most of them were so shy that their voices were barely audible when I asked them to tell me their names.

For some, it was apparent from their behavior within the first few days that they were in family situations and home environments that were not positive or healthy. I quickly realized that in addition to teaching them to read and write I would have to model appropriate adult behavior in the classroom to try and

compensate for what they were not getting from their adult role models at home. With 31 pairs of eyes on me at all times, this was a huge responsibility and one that I took very seriously.

I had diligently prepared my lesson plans and I was prepared to be an excellent first grade teacher. What I wasn't prepared for, however, was the collective energy of 31 children in the same room, and the amount of *noise* they could generate with little effort or encouragement. I had not factored energy and noise into my plan! During those first few weeks I came home from school every day feeling . . . well . . . rather shell shocked.

Since Daddy had died that summer, I had decided to live at home with my mother and my three younger siblings (all still in school) until Les and I got married the following spring. I think I needed Mama more than she needed me. To their credit my family was extremely tolerant of my attitude and behavior as I walked into our house every afternoon, crawled into a chair in the corner and announced, "I've had a very hard day. *I need quiet*. Please do not talk to me or make any loud noises or sudden movements while you are in the room."

My mother should have sent me to *my* room as she had done when I was little, but she was very patient and understanding. Perhaps, in her parental wisdom, she realized that if she *did* send me to my room, there was a good chance I would refuse to come out the next day and go back into that classroom to do my job.

It was a challenge to motivate myself every morning to face that room filled with happy and eager students who could not sit still or remain quiet for more than two minutes at a time. After a few weeks, however, things improved as we settled into a routine and worked on “Our Rules of the Classroom.”

No matter how organized I was, each day held a surprise for which I was not prepared. It started on the very first day of school when Joey stole a dollar out of my wallet. How he managed to do that when my wallet was in my purse, tucked away in the drawer of my desk, I'll never know. We talked about it and it never happened again.

Other unplanned surprises were funny, in retrospect, although I didn't find them amusing at the time. One afternoon we had a scheduled fire drill. As our principal announced over the intercom for several weeks in advance, this was going to be a very special fire drill because the Fire Chief from the Slidell Fire Department was going to be there to personally check us out. Naturally, we had several practice drills in the days before his arrival to make sure we were prepared and ready to execute a flawless plan.

Every practice went perfectly. We were ready. On the day the Fire Chief arrived, the children in my class were very excited. I reminded them once again that everyone was to follow the drill exactly as we had practiced all week. The fire alarm bell finally rang, and it was time to show the Chief what we could do.

I felt a bit like a mother hen leading my little brood of chicks as we proceeded, quickly and quietly, in two lines, to our assigned station in the schoolyard. (Perhaps I even strutted a bit. I'm not sure). As I stood there with my students, I couldn't help but feel proud of how well they had done. But my feelings went deeper than pride in my students. Since I was the only new teacher among the four first grade classes, I was sure this would reflect favorably on me and show the more experienced teachers that I could handle any challenge – including a simple fire drill – with ease.

My self satisfaction was short lived, however, when I noticed a small boy walking towards me. As he got closer, I recognized him. He was one of mine.

How had this child gotten out of line and disappeared without my noticing? I shouldn't have been so surprised, since Lance was a very bright and happy-go-lucky kid who lived in his own little world. Getting him to pay attention in class every day was one of the major accomplishments in my entire year of teaching.

I should explain that at this particular point Lance wasn't actually *walking* towards me. He was sort of strolling along, hands deep in his pockets, smiling broadly and waving at the other kids as he passed by. Of course the three other first grade teachers saw him when I did. Were those smirks on their faces as they shook their heads from side to side, eyebrows raised, while exchanging knowing glances? Couldn't this new teacher control

her class and keep track of her students during a simple fire drill? Obviously not.

Sauntering over to me, Lance grinned and announced, “I’m back.” I resisted the urge to scream, “Where *were you?*” I whispered the question instead. His matter of fact answer made perfect sense – to him. “Oh, I *really* had to go to the bathroom and I decided if this *really* was a *real* fire, and not just practice, I wouldn’t have time to go later. But it’s OK. I’m back now.”

No matter how hard I tried, I was never fully prepared for Lance and Joey’s antics. Bless their hearts, they really kept me on my toes. Is there anyone at work or at home who keeps you on your toes? Are there times when you think you’re prepared to face whatever the day may bring, only to realize at the end of that day that you weren’t even *close* to being ready? That’s OK. You did your best.

But there are times when most of us feel that our best isn’t good enough. And instead of learning from the experience, we beat ourselves up. Hopefully we learn enough to make it easier on ourselves in the future. We think, “Hum, this reminds me of the time when....” and we recall what we learned from our past experiences.

My students were learning new things every day and so was I. By the time Valentine’s Day rolled around, I’d had them in my classroom for almost six months and I was feeling pretty

confident about my competency as their teacher. They were learning to read and write, and I couldn't have been more proud of that fact than if they had been my own children. I loved these kids and they loved me. Valentine's Day, however, brought with it another new lesson I needed to learn about planning ahead.

In theory the school principal's plan was a good and fair one. To make sure that no child was left out, all of the teachers sent notes home to request that if a child wanted to bring valentines to school, he or she had to bring enough so that each child in the class would receive one. My plan was to celebrate with a party during the last 30 minutes of class time. I had even brought cupcakes with pink icing and red sprinkles to make it a festive occasion.

While chatting with the other first grade teachers at recess and in the cafeteria at lunch time, I noticed they were all complaining about how much time it was taking to give out the valentines. All I could think of was that they must be quite disorganized if such a simple task was taking all day. How long does it take for kids to go around and put a valentine on each other's desks?

If only I'd had the sense to ask *why* it was taking so long to give out the valentines, one of them would have gladly explained the process and saved me a lot of stress. When it was time for valentine distribution in our classroom, I quickly understood that it was too late for explanations of any kind.

As the children were enjoying their cupcakes I glanced at my watch. Perfect timing. Right on schedule, we still had 25 minutes before the dismissal bell rang. My plan was working extremely well. Smiling broadly I announced, “Boys and girls, you can all give out your valentines now.”

Within ten seconds Angela thrust her bag of valentines at me as she explained, “My mother put everyone’s names on the envelopes, and I can’t read them. Would you give out my valentines for me?”

“Sure,” I replied in a calm and confident voice. With a kind and caring smile I took the bag from Angela’s icing-encrusted fingers and peeked inside. The first thing I noticed was that these valentines were not arranged in any order that vaguely resembled the seating chart in my classroom. They were just there, a jumbled mass of tiny white envelopes, each with a child’s name on the front – written in script, of course! OK, time for me to get to work.

As I scurried up and down between the rows, trying to deliver the correct valentine to the child whose name was on the envelope, I happened to glance behind me. A line had formed and 30 children were now thrusting their bags at me. “I can’t read these names. Will you give out my valentines for me?”

“Sure,” I replied in a panic filled voice, giving them a weak smile.

OK, I'll save you the trouble and do the math for you. There were 31 children in my class, each with a bag of valentines, one for each child in the room. Just my luck – no one was absent that day. Well, who would want to miss the big party?

So... 31 students x 31 valentines each = 961 valentines to be distributed... in 25 minutes.

That's 38.4 valentines per minute.

I didn't need to calculate the actual numbers to know I was in *very* deep trouble. I had already figured that out. There was only one way to accomplish this super-human feat, and it didn't involve my running from desk to desk in a whirling dervish of confusion. So I took charge, wiped the smile off my face, and in my most commanding voice gave the following directions.

“OK, class. Everyone put your cupcakes down. Now come up here next to the chalkboard, and stand in a straight line. Listen for your name. When you hear me call your name, take one step forward, put your hand out, take your valentine, and step back in line. There will BE NO talking. If you talk, you will not hear me call your name. And that means you will not get all your valentines. Do you want to go home with NO valentines?”

Picture 31 solemn little faces, eyes wide open, heads turning from side to side as they silently replied to my question.

“OK. If you want to get all of your valentines pay attention, be quiet and LISTEN UP.”

For the next 25 minutes the only voice to be heard in the room was mine. Those kids were practically standing at attention! In the nine months I spent with those children, that was the only 25- minute period of silence in our classroom – ever. Thank the good Lord, my plan worked. Every child went home with 31 valentines. I even received a few for myself.

I obviously wasn't prepared that day. I surely did not have a plan – until I was forced to come up with one in desperation at the last minute. Spending nine months in the company of 31 six-year-olds taught me to plan ahead, not just for special events and occasions but for everyday life. As a result of that training my friends, family and colleagues consider me one of the most organized people they know. They're correct. I am.

My plan works well for my personality. I focus on the outcome and then work backwards to determine what I have to do and when I have to do it, to be prepared enough to get results. Life isn't perfect, so I try to come close. And I usually do come fairly close, even if I don't hit the target every time. But remember, it didn't come easy to me at first, and I learned the hard way. Between expecting things to go smoothly and secretly knowing they won't, I've learned to work with a plan that fits somewhere in the middle.

What event do you have coming up in the near future? What are your expectations? How are you planning and preparing? Even if things don't go as well as you hoped, how will you take what you learned from the experience and apply it to your future?

No doubt you're heard of Randy Pausch, a young professor who died of cancer on July 25, 2008 at the age of 47. His Last Lecture, "Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams," delivered to 400 of his colleagues and students at Carnegie Mellon University became an Internet sensation and a best selling book. His message has now been heard and seen by millions of people around the world. His 76-minute presentation was overflowing with words of wisdom. One of his profoundly wise thoughts applies directly to my story. He said, "Experience is what you get when you didn't get what you wanted."

You *will* learn something from every experience whether it's good, bad or somewhere in between. If you didn't get what you wanted and you didn't learn anything, you probably weren't paying very good attention – to the event, or to your life.

I sometimes wonder if any of my little first graders – now adults with children of their own – ever have flashbacks of their first Valentine's Day school party. I know I still do. And in case I don't see you before then, Happy Valentine's Day!

Questions for Reflection

When have I felt inadequate about my abilities, either in my career or my personal life?

When did I feel like the job I had was not the job for which I had prepared?

How did I handle that stress – in good ways or bad?

How did I keep myself motivated?

What did I learn that helped me better prepare for my next job?

When do I feel like my best is not good enough?

What am I proud of accomplishing?

When I recall events that weren't so amusing at the time, which ones make me laugh when I think about them now?

When did my best laid plans go awry as other people with different needs, priorities and goals got involved?

How did I handle it?

What did I learn to help me move forward?

What events are coming up in the near future?

What are my responsibilities?

What are my expectations?

How will I plan and prepare to get the results I want without creating stress for myself and others?

What steps can I take to pay better attention to people and events in my life in order to learn more from them?

What changes am I willing to make in order to change my future?



CHAPTER 3

*Buldozers Are Not
Your Friends!*

Bulldozers Are Not Your Friends!

For the past six months exiting our peaceful little neighborhood has required a combination of my utmost attention, visual acuity, perfect timing and a healthy dose of courage. That's because we are living (as my Southern-born-and-raised daddy used to say) "right smack dab in the middle" of a major construction zone.

Our section of Perkins Road is gradually being transformed from a quiet two-lane street into a major five-lane thoroughfare. While it will surely be a great improvement when it's finally finished, flying across the country to speak at a convention is sometimes easier than navigating down Perkins Road to reach the interstate and get to the airport across town.

New detour signs spring up daily, as we are directed onto a different piece of roadway that wasn't open yesterday. And that's actually a good thing because the piece of roadway we drove on yesterday has now been reduced to a pile of rock and rubble. Dust is everywhere. As I maneuver through an endless line of orange barrels lined up on one side of the road and down the other, I feel like an Indy 500 driver. The difference between an Indy 500 driver and me, however, is that my racing speed is an incredibly slow 15 miles per hour.

On some days the signal light is working and on other days a highway worker waves his flag, motioning for us to slow down, turn right or left, stop or go. Our one female flag person sports a

pink hard hat and she always makes me smile. Lumbering dump trucks and mammoth bulldozers resembling life-threatening monsters are everywhere. They always assume they have the right-of-way and even when they don't, I haven't seen anyone jump out of a car yet to challenge them.

Step back and take a look around. Does your life at the moment resemble a construction zone? Perhaps your dump trucks take the form of whiners, complainers, gossips and tattletales who feel much better after dumping their problems and complaints on you. Your bulldozers may appear as loud, bossy and arrogant customers, colleagues, coworkers, family members or friends. Your orange barrels could be those who obstruct your vision and impede your progress at every turn. Who are the difficult people making your life challenging (to say the least) or downright miserable at the moment?

While every person and every situation is different, we often forget that difficult people share one trait in common. They've realized that being difficult gives them a feeling of power, of being in control over others, and usually results in their getting what they want. It's their standard operating behavior. On the other hand, perfectly nice people can become difficult when they get desperate. And sometimes it's hard to blame them.

If you've ever been (or witnessed) the harried parent in the grocery store with your young children you can, without a doubt, relate to this concept. Maybe you picked them up from daycare

on your way home from work and you're running late. Or you were home with them all day, but a myriad of tasks took longer than you planned and you got a late start. Now you're angry with yourself because it's too late to shop quickly and wisely. Your kids are tired, and so are you. And the cashier who's waiting to check you out isn't in any better shape than you are.

Quickly scanning your list, you frantically try to remember the items you forgot to write down while you search high and low for that box of your children's favorite cereal on a shelf filled with hundreds of choices. You're already thinking about standing in that long check out line, then having to push your overflowing basket out to the car and unload your groceries without any help. Now you notice it's started to rain. You remember that your umbrella is safely tucked away under the front seat – nice and dry.

This is the exact moment when your children decide to ask for the candy they've spied at eye level and within reach. When you don't respond to their first polite request they ask again. Their frustration level gradually rises and so does yours. Now factor in other issues I don't even want to mention. (“Didn't I *tell* you to go to the bathroom before we left home?”) Taking all of the above into account, I have one question for you.

What are the odds that your children are going to get that candy when they ask “nicely and politely” – as you have taught them to do? Slim to none, right? They know this. They are smart kids. So

they ask again. And again. Finally, in order to get your attention when all else has failed, they intensify the energy of their request and turn up the volume of their sweet little voices.

At this moment store patrons within close proximity will now get to witness your normally polite, well-mannered and adorable children whine and cry, kick their feet, flail their arms about and turn red in the face as they scream, “WE WANT CANDY!”

In this case your children resorted to difficult behavior on a short-term basis to get what they wanted. They’re good kids and this is (hopefully) not their normal behavior. Difficult people, on the other hand, use this type of behavior as their ongoing standard of performance. They can create pain for the rest of us, but only when we give them permission to do so.

When dealing with difficult people, just as with those bulldozers, dump trucks and orange barrels, it IS possible to maneuver around them by using one (or all) of the following strategies. I’ve included them in my two other books, *How to Be the Person Successful Companies Fight to Keep* and *Mama Said There’d Be Days Like This*. They’re important to mention here, and I’ll share a personal example to illustrate that they really do work.

1. Stop taking their behavior personally.

In dealing with the difficult person in my life, I finally stepped back and took a good look at how she treated other people – not

just how she treated me. What I realized was that she treated others in the same way. This knowledge allowed me to be more objective in dealing with her, rather than taking everything so personally. I now had a sense of being more in control of myself and the situation.

2. Stop making excuses for them, and stop accepting theirs.

My difficult person had a myriad of excuses for her behavior, but very few apologies. Eventually I found myself thinking, “Well, that’s just how she is and I’ll have to learn to live with it.” It was then that I realized she was *training me* to lower my standards and accept hers. What’s wrong with *that* picture? A lot. So I had to change the picture.

3. Stop rewarding them by your words and actions.

Analyzing my own behavior helped me recognize the many ways I was rewarding her. She may be difficult, but she’s not stupid. Why would she make the effort to change behavior that was obviously working for her? Since I didn’t have the power to change her style, I had to change *my* style and let her know that I was rewriting the rules of our relationship.

4. Set your boundaries and stick to them.

This was the hardest one for me, but also the most effective. When she began sending angry, cruel (and irrational) emails it

became clear that I could do nothing more to help her and that this was not a healthy situation for me. It was time to take action. As that saying goes, “Drastic times call for drastic measures.” Since I can only imagine what ideas might be going through your mind right now, don’t worry – I didn’t do anything *that* drastic!

I replied to her email, explaining that my first responsibility is to take care of myself. In order to do that, I could no longer jeopardize my emotional health by receiving her emails. My response was not angry or hurtful, although it would have been very easy to take that road. But I had nothing to gain by sinking down to her level. So I took the high road, stated the facts as I saw them and shared what I chose to do to protect myself.

Then with one click on my server’s website, it was done. Her emails were blocked forever, and I was safe. Her anger is still her choice, but I no longer have to worry about her inflicting that choice on me. I set my boundaries and stuck to them, and I now have a sense of peace I have not had in many years.

The strategies I’ve shared here aren’t easy solutions. Change is never easy. They were painful for me but the results were worth the pain. As I’ve mentioned throughout this book, real change takes hard work. If you’re in a relationship with a difficult person you’ll know when you’re ready to make some changes for your own good.

It looks like the construction work on Perkins Road will be finished soon. The inconveniences we've endured over the past few months will soon be forgotten as life in our neighborhood gets back to normal. The bulldozers will move on to another location and begin again to create positive outcomes out of chaos and confusion. That's what they do.

The difficult people in our lives may operate like bulldozers but they never produce positive outcomes. They're too busy creating chaos and confusion in the lives of people like you and me.

While I won't miss the bulldozers, I will definitely miss the flag lady in her pink hard hat. Bless her heart, she always made me smile.

Questions for Reflection

Does my life right now resemble a construction zone?

If it does, how would I describe what is happening?

Jean described behaviors of people who cause havoc and disruption with no positive results. With that in mind:

Who are my whiners and complainers?

Who are my gossips and tattletales?

Who are my bossy and arrogant challengers?

Who is obstructing my progress, and why?

Which strategies can I use to deal with these difficult people?

Stop taking their behavior personally. (Write steps involved).

Stop making excuses for them and stop accepting theirs. (Write steps involved).

Stop rewarding them by my words and actions. List the ways I do that now, and how I will change that behavior.

Set my boundaries and stick to them. (Write steps involved).

How painful will this process be for me?

What are the ultimate rewards for me?

When will I take my first steps to put my plan in place?

(Write down a starting date).

What changes am I willing to make to change my future?



CHAPTER 4

Clean Out Your Junk Drawer.

Clean Out Your Junk Drawer.

My Uncle Marcel was one of the neatest men I've ever known. I don't mean *neat* in the sense of *cool*. I mean neat in the sense of *tidy*, *orderly*, *organized* and *precise*. Parrain (French for "Godfather") believed in "a place for everything and everything in its place." Each tool was hung on the wall of his garage, evenly spaced from the next one. Screwdrivers and wrenches were displayed in graduating order of size. Nuts, bolts, screws and nails were stored in clear glass jars. No two sizes were ever mixed together, not even for the sake of convenience if there were only two nails in each jar. The floor of his workshop was always spotless and there was never a rake or a shovel out of place. His office was equally as immaculate, organized and well kept.

One Sunday while Les and I were visiting Parrain and Aunt Louise, he asked Les to go up into the attic to retrieve an item he needed. Ninety years old, he was no longer able to manage the attic stairs. "Do you know where I can find the box, once I get up there?" Les innocently asked. Parrain smiled and pulled out a notebook. It had a diagram of the attic with the location of every box, each of which had a number on it. On the following pages of his notebook was the complete inventory of the contents of every single box. To say I was impressed with his organizational skills is an understatement.

Later that day I followed Parrain out to the garage and asked him how he managed to have a place for every one of his earthly possessions. He smiled again, leaned across his workbench and pulled open a drawer.

“I try to keep everything organized as best I can, but there are some things I just don’t know where to put. I don’t want to throw them away because I might need them one day. So I just stash them in here. This is my special junk drawer.” Then he looked over his shoulder and added in a whisper, “But don’t tell Aunt Louise!”

What a relief! If the neatest, most organized person in our entire family had a junk drawer, there was definitely still hope for me. I’ve got one in every room of our house – kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, home office – you name the room and I’ll show you a drawer where I put stuff I just don’t know what to do with and don’t have time to think about.

How many junk drawers would you honestly admit to having in your home or office? Hey, don’t worry. It’s just us. Your secret is safe with me!

An audience member once confided that she has a junk room that she considers as her junk drawer on steroids! If your home is still filled with growing children or other people in your care, you may not have a spare room to call your own. Or perhaps you’re like Les and me at this time in our lives. All of our children are

grown and gone from the nest and we have the entire house to ourselves. So we now enjoy the luxury of having a *guest room*. The door to that room, however, remains closed at all times. When a guest does come to visit I need at least two days notice to make it presentable for company!

Most of us would admit to having at least one junk drawer somewhere, at work or at home, crowded with stuff we don't need any more. Here's a question I've found difficult to answer. Maybe you have, too. If we don't need it any more, why is it so hard to get rid of it? Why do we keep it around, knowing it's taking up valuable space for something else that could be more useful, more fun, more rewarding or more satisfying? You get the picture.

Have you ever been to a garage sale? Some of them are loaded with bargains on items that are practically brand new and can be purchased for pennies on the dollar. In fact, garage sales can be smart shopping destinations for folks on a tight budget who may need furniture, appliances, clothes, toys, dishes, lamps, linens and other items. Many a college student has furnished an apartment with garage sale bargains. If you're watching your pennies but love to go shopping, you can spend a dollar or two at a garage sale and satisfy the urge instead of going to the mall and spending a lot more than that. I am a big fan of garage sales, which leads to my next question for you.

Have you ever participated in a garage sale? If you have, then you know that *staging* a garage sale is a totally different experience than *going* to a garage sale as a potential buyer. I've had my share of them over the years and I've learned that they can be a whole lot of fun – and a tremendous amount of work. And what a novel concept! Think about it. You get tired of looking at all the clutter in your humble abode and so you decide it's time to have a garage sale. You might even invite a few friends or neighbors to join in, as we all know that the bigger the sale and the more families involved, the more customers you will attract.

You begin by cleaning out your house or apartment and gathering up all the stuff you no longer want. If you're really serious you go through every drawer, bookcase and cabinet. Nothing is sacred! No item is off limits for consideration! Well, some items are, but you get my drift. Now it's time to load things into boxes. If you've done your job well, you have *many* boxes. Then you haul all this stuff out to your carport, garage and front yard. (If you're wise enough to host the garage sale, you don't have to haul your stuff to somebody else's yard.) You put price stickers on all of it, and people come and *buy* stuff you never dreamed you'd be able to *give* away.

Starting out with high hopes on the first day, by Day Two you're marking things down just so you don't have to carry them back into your house. A worthwhile charitable organization is always willing to come with a truck to pick up whatever doesn't sell, and

you end up with a less cluttered dwelling and some cash in your pocket. If you plan and stage it well, you can actually have a very profitable garage sale. I've made good money at several of them.

I'll have to admit, however, that I never took that money and went straight to the bank to deposit it into our children's college fund account. Nope. I had worked hard to earn it, so I tucked it away until I was ready to go shopping with my "garage sale money." I often came home with stuff I didn't need. I even went to other garage sales and bought stuff that was just too good a deal to pass up. Once I got home and really *looked* at it I thought, "Why do I now own this thing?" Within a year or two "this thing" would be included in my next garage sale.

My junk drawers are the resting places for stuff I don't use very often yet don't want to discard. They are also filled with stuff that doesn't have anywhere else to go. Where is your favorite junk drawer located? Mine is in the kitchen. When I tried to open it recently it simply would not budge. But I did not despair, as I have found that a spatula works very well as a hand tool in this situation. I wedge the spatula into the tiny opening, mash everything down inside, and give the drawer a good, firm pull. Like magic, it opens every time. Then I can begin searching for the item I can't seem to find anywhere else.

And what do I find? Usually not what I was looking for. Instead I find coupons that have long since expired, partially burned birthday candles and recipe cards with dishes I haven't prepared

in years. Because I might decide to serve these dishes once more before I die, I have to hold on to the cards. I also uncover a wide assortment of cocktail napkins with clever sayings on them, most of which are so badly wrinkled that they need to be thrown away. What else? Christmas cards from family and friends that I want to read and enjoy one more time before recycling them. Oh, and old candy bars. *Really* old candy bars.

Look at all this clutter – this stuff I no longer need that is taking up space I really could use in this kitchen! Wouldn't it make perfect sense to stop what I was doing, right then and there, to clean out and organize that drawer? Of course it would. But will I do that right now? Of course I won't. It's easy to rationalize that there are too many other more important (and much more interesting and fun) things to do with my valuable time.

We all tend to hang onto some of our junk, even though we know it needs to go. We hang on to “junk drawer thinking” too – those attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that keep us from being our best, and compound our stress as we struggle to improve our careers, our relationships and our lives. “Junk drawer thinking” may include a negative idea we've been carrying around that's keeping us from becoming better, facing our fears, becoming the person we want to be (or the person we used to be) and reclaiming our personal power.

“Junk drawer thinking” may include feelings of anxiety, fear, discouragement or disappointment. It may embody the challenges of parenting along with marriage and career decisions, or it may include issues that deal with procrastination, life balance, care of self, or fear of the unknown. And it can encompass feelings of grief and loss, holding a grudge, or being unable to let go of anger.

I am in no way judging or demeaning any of those thoughts, feelings or emotions. They are real, they may be valid, and they are certainly ones that many of us have struggled with over the course of our lives. But they also may be keeping us from moving ahead because we are being held back by the sheer weight and magnitude of our feelings.

If we really want to get serious about cleaning out the junk in our lives, we first have to admit that we own the junk (idea, attitude, or behavior) by uncovering it. Only then we can start figuring out what to do about it. This means that some “attitudinal spring cleaning” may be in order, no matter what time of year it happens to be.

Sometimes when I’m cleaning things out I experience the unexpected and delightful surprise of finding buried treasure among my junk. Knowing myself well enough to know I won’t remember to deal with it later, I do something about it immediately upon discovery. When I find a random photo of one

of the children I put it into one of my photo boxes. I drop an old but sentimental bracelet with a broken clasp into my purse so I can have it repaired and begin to enjoy wearing it again. The birthday card from my grandfather, probably the last one he sent me before he passed away, goes into my box of favorite birthday cards from years past.

When I find such a treasure I ask myself, “How did this get in here?” Then I make sure I don’t let it get away from me again. Thoughts that have crossed my mind with a new discovery include:

“I forgot how special this was to me.”

“I thought this was lost forever and now it’s found.”

“This brings back such happy memories. I’m going to put it in a place where I will see it daily and remember those good times.”

As you’re sorting through your “attitudinal junk” don’t forget to make a list of the “treasures” in your life right now. We are all blessed with someone or something in our lives we might be taking for granted. Or maybe we’re going through a difficult time and we’re so focused on the negative that we fail to see the small but important blessings that appear along our path.

These could include rekindling old friendships, forgiving someone, re-establishing a relationship that was lost because of

something one of you said or did, or trying something new and different that you've been meaning to do but haven't gotten around to yet. The list is endless, and your list will be very personalized based on your life and the people in it.

How will you sort your *treasures* from your *junk*? Maybe you will:

- Identify who or what is taking up valuable space.
- Admit to what is not working.
- Figure out why you're still hanging on to it.
- Look at what is working well and give thanks.
- Think about ways you could make it work even better.
- Distinguish between healthy and unhealthy relationships.
- Deal with a person or issue you've been avoiding.
- Rekindle a friendship or relationship worth saving.
- Refocus your priorities.
- Become more resilient to bounce back from setbacks.
- Redirect your energy to get more satisfaction out of life.
- Concentrate on the people and issues that matter most.

Cleaning out your personal junk drawer may demand hard work, time, and perhaps even some pain. As you analyze your life and your relationships and decide what to keep and what to discard, it's perfectly OK to talk to yourself. When you do, pay attention to what you hear. Whatever life brings us and whatever happens to us, we react not only to what happens but also to what we say to ourselves about it.

As for the “hard work” part, remember that when change presents itself and opportunity knocks, you have to get off the sofa or out of the bed to let it in.

As adults we are responsible for meeting our own needs. When we allow our self worth to be determined by the way others treat us, or by the fact that we don't respect ourselves, we are no longer in a good place. Those attitudes and behaviors are not healthy ones for our emotional well being. Each of us has value and worth. As the saying goes, “God made you. And He doesn't make junk!”

Questions for Reflection

Where are my junk drawers at home or at work?

List each location here.

Working up the energy and the courage to look inside each of them, I can now answer these questions:

What am I keeping that is of no value to me? (List)

Why am I still hanging on to it?

If I've been involved in a garage sale, how did it feel to de-clutter my surroundings and get rid of my "junk"?

What does my version of "junk drawer thinking" look like?

What does it sound like? What does it feel like?

Which of my attitudes, beliefs and behaviors are holding me back?

Which of my attitudes, beliefs and behaviors add to my stress?

How do I handle feelings of anger, fear or disappointment?

How do I deal with the challenges of marriage, parenting, career decisions, and other life choices?

What and who are the buried treasures – the blessings – in my life that I often take for granted?

In my relationships, how do I allow others to determine my worth?

Do I respect myself and treat myself with respect?

How do I demonstrate that I am responsible for meeting my own needs – in mind, body and spirit?

What changes am I willing to make to change my future?



CHAPTER 5

Closets and Attics and Basements, Oh My!

Closets and Attics and Basements, Oh My!

In our last chapter we talked about cleaning out your “attitude junk drawers.” If you’ve made the decision to tackle that project, I have no doubt you’ve been working very hard. But I hope you didn’t think you were finished, because we haven’t talked yet about cleaning out the closet, the attic, and the basement... of your mind and heart!

Going through my closet a couple of times a year and bringing things to the local thrift store has always been a chore that I don’t look forward to or enjoy. An event in 2005, however, gave me a new appreciation for its importance. After Hurricane Katrina destroyed so much of New Orleans and thousands of homeless people sought shelter in Baton Rouge, clothing drives were a daily event. Like many other local residents I did a serious purge of my closet contents and dropped bags of clothes off at one of the local shelters. It didn’t matter that I never knew who benefited from my clothes, but my dear husband Les had a much more personal experience when he cleaned out his closet after Katrina.

We sheltered 12 family members who fled New Orleans just hours ahead of the storm. Two of them were my Uncle Jerry and Aunt Helen, both in their 80’s and married for 60 years. With the exception of two changes of clothing they brought with them when they escaped, they lost their home and everything in it.

Uncle Jerry and Les are both six feet tall and weigh about the same. So Les cleaned out his closet and gave everything he could to Uncle Jerry – shirts, pants, shoes, coats, jackets and sweaters. In fact, Uncle Jerry still comments that thanks to Les, he now has the most extensive wardrobe he’s ever had.

Since the days after Katrina I’ve returned to my regular routine of cleaning out my closet twice a year. Despite my careful shopping I usually find a favorite skirt or pair of slacks that I haven’t worn lately because they no longer fit well. And I can always count on finding a pair of shoes that used to feel comfy but now hurt my feet. Then I have to make a decision. If I pay to have those clothes altered, will I wear them? Shoes that hurt don’t offer such options. If they pinch and bind – if they’re too tight – they have to go.

When you analyze your life at present, maybe you’ve come to realize that you’re in a job that just doesn’t fit any more. You’ve been working at it for years, and your *comfortable* job has gradually become a *boring* job. Or perhaps there’s a personal relationship that fits this description. What can you do to infuse some passion and excitement into one or both areas?

Thinking about those tight shoes I described earlier, I looked up the term *tight* in my handy Thesaurus and came across these words: *tense*, *stiff*, *rigid*, *unyielding*, *constricted* and *crowded*. Are you in a relationship that’s becoming defined by words like

these? Although it was once a comfortable fit, has it gradually become more and more painful for one or both of you?

What changes can you make – should you make – will you make? Perhaps there is something you can try to make that once special bond more comfortable. Is the connection or attachment worth enhancing? If you think it is, give it a shot. Make sure, however, that you give it your *absolute best* shot instead of a half-hearted effort. That's the only way you'll be able to know for sure if things can change for the better.

When it comes to basements I must admit that I don't know much about them because we've never had one. With parts of Louisiana below sea level, we worry enough about our homes flooding *above* ground. Having a designated living area *below* ground that might fill up with water is an added stressor we don't need. But I've been in basements that belong to family and friends who live in other parts of the country – above sea level – and I've eyed them as such handy places for extra storage.

Down here in Louisiana we have to depend on our attics to hold any possessions designated as “we don't need this right now” or (more commonly) “out of sight, out of mind.” When Les and I decided to buy a new home and move to a different part of town a few years ago, we had to come to terms with the contents of *three* attic areas. Other than getting the Christmas decorations down and storing boxes for our grown children

when they moved out, we hadn't done a thorough cleaning of our attics in *years*. This means that as we prepared to move to our new home, we had 27 years' worth of accumulated matter that needed attention.

It soon became quite evident that we needed more than the three standard categories labeled as "take to new house," "give away" or "throw away." There were certain things that belonged to our children that I definitely wanted to keep. Their baby clothes, school papers and artwork all had sentimental value for me. When they come to visit, our grandchildren now play with some of our own children's favorite toys and enjoy their much loved books. And what fun for their JeJe (that's me) to settle in with them on the sofa, Carter on one side and Hudson on the other, and say to them, "When your daddy was a little boy I used to read this story to him. And now I get to read it to you."

But back to our three attics and the realization that there was definitely more here than Les and I could manage. Multiple boxes held trophies that Steven and Michael had won for football, baseball, basketball, tennis and golf. Other large boxes were filled to overflowing with Jennifer's basketball and volleyball trophies along with a menagerie of stuffed animals, large and small.

Out of desperation we designated a new category and creatively named it "The kids' stuff that we are not taking with us."

A more literal translation would have been “These are the items we are not paying someone \$90 an hour to move to our new house.” If you’re the parent of grown children who still have their bits and pieces of memorabilia in *your* attic, even though they live somewhere else, you can appreciate the title of this fourth category.

At the time of our move Steven was married and living in Dallas, and Michael and Jennifer were still single apartment dwellers. Jennifer was working on her MBA at Tulane. Michael had finished LSU and was working in Baton Rouge. Les and I decided to invite all of our children home for one last weekend in “the old house.” It was a very sentimental weekend, to be sure, as this was the house in which they had all grown up. Naturally it held many wonderful and bittersweet memories for all of us.

Our adult children arrived fully prepared for a weekend filled with the laughter and tears of nostalgic “Remember when...” stories. There were sure plenty of those! But they were not prepared early on Sunday morning when Les got everyone out of bed with the words, “OK, everybody, rise and shine. It’s time to clean out the attic.”

I lost count of how many trips our kids made up and down the attic stairs that day. And remember, we had *three* attics so it took a while! Their dad calmly continued to hand down box after box until all three attics were emptied of all of their

personal belongings. At this point our entire carport was filled to overflowing and people began parking in our driveway, coming into the carport, taking a look around, and asking what time the garage sale started. They were so disappointed to learn that we weren't having one, although that might not have been such a bad idea after all.

Steven and Catherine had a new home and a new son, so they took some of Steven's toys and books for Carter to enjoy. Since Michael and Jennifer didn't have much room in their already crowded apartments, we agreed to store a small amount of their possessions until they became homeowners. I'm delighted to report that they all own homes now, filled with all their own stuff.

As you can imagine, all three of them had to be very selective in their decision making, especially when we told them about our "We're not paying someone \$90 an hour to move your junk to our new house" policy. We made them take ownership of their *junk* **and** their *jewels*, their *trash* **and** their *treasures*.

It turned out to be quite a fun filled day with much less stress than I had anticipated, and I have some wonderful photos to commemorate the event. In the end, what we essentially achieved was to put our kids in charge of what belonged to them. We accomplished our goal in a weekend. Unfortunately, it's not always as easy to do that in real life.

Most people are quite capable of taking responsibility for their attitudes and behaviors, understanding that they are accountable for both. But other folks can go an entire lifetime without taking responsibility for themselves and their actions. In fact, they don't take responsibility for much of anything at all.

Do you have people in your life, at work or at home, who need to take ownership of their junk as it applies to the attitudes and behaviors involved in "junk drawer thinking"? Are you tired of holding on to someone else's junk for them? Maybe you feel sorry for them. Or maybe they've made you feel guilty enough, or worried enough, or scared enough, that you have trouble standing up for yourself.

Whatever process they've used to get you involved and keep you involved, *their* burden gradually becomes *your* burden. This is because they have figured out how to manipulate you into helping them carry their burden, even when it's not your job. Quite often they are even skilled enough to totally transfer their burden to you. So now you are feeling overloaded while they are free and clear to make more poor choices and create more problems for themselves and others.

I'm not suggesting that we turn a cold heart to those who may be experiencing tough times and need our help and support. Like you, I've had my share of difficult times that would have been even more painful and much harder to bear without the support

of family, friends and colleagues. And I've done my part to pay it forward, as the saying goes. As inhabitants of this planet we all have an obligation to help others. How much we choose to help is up to us, but our duty to help is clear.

In His wisdom God has filled our world with compassionate and caring people who are ready and willing to take the time to help others. Sadly, our world is filled with individuals who will always need to accept that help. Those are not the people I'm writing about or the people I'm asking you to think about. I'm asking you to focus on the people in your life who *can* help themselves – but choose not to – those who have passed their burdens (problems, troubles, trials and tribulations) on to you.

Les and I didn't mind helping the kids out by storing some of their important things a while longer. But we were not willing to spend \$90 an hour to move their junk to the new house so we could continue to be responsible for it. What is it costing you in terms of money, time, worry, stress, anger or frustration to continue to be responsible for someone else's "junk drawer thinking"? How much longer are you *willing* to do that? How much longer can you *afford* to do that? What is one step you can take now to start putting certain people in charge of their lives and the decisions they make?

Well, I think we've covered the bases for doing your own personal version of "spring cleaning." Closets, attics and basements all

have one thing in common that we need to talk about before we move on. All of them are places to store items we know we will never use again, don't want to ever see again, and want to forget about – for good. For whatever reason, we still keep them around. The deep, dark corners of attics, closets and basements are where we tend to store our “out of sight and out of mind” possessions so we don't have to deal with them.

Maybe you have a deep, dark place in your mind or your heart where you are storing a memory or experience that you never want to think about again, or that you want to forget ever happened. But you continue to hold on to it. While that might seem like the logical thing to do, or the easiest thing to do, what is it costing you in terms of your peace of mind? In what ways is it affecting your ability to make good choices? How is it influencing your capacity to be in healthy relationships?

Reaching into the deep, dark places to clear out what you no longer need to carry can be hard work. It can definitely be painful. But you don't have to do it alone. Talk to someone who can help. It could be a friend or family member whom you trust, or it could be a paid professional. Speaking from personal experience, it can be one of the best gifts you ever give yourself, and one of the absolute best ways to bless your heart.

♥ *Questions for Reflection*

Using Jean's analogy of cleaning out the closet, are there parts of my life that no longer fit me well?

Has a comfortable job become a boring job?

Has a comfortable relationship become boring?

Is it worth the effort to try to reconnect with it?

What thoughts and feelings have I pushed down as "out of sight, out of mind"?

Is that healthy or unhealthy for me?

Are there people in my life who won't take responsibility for their actions and behaviors?

Am I carrying someone else's burdens and problems for them?

Is this temporary or have they unloaded their troubles on me without taking responsibility?

Does guilt, worry, fear, or some other emotion prevent me from standing up for myself? Which emotion is it?

What is it costing me in terms of money, time, worry, stress, anger and/or frustration to continue to be responsible for someone else's problems?

How much longer am I willing to play this role?

How much longer can I afford to play this role, in terms of my emotional and physical well-being?

Am I holding on to a memory or experience that is causing me continued pain and affecting my ability to make good choices?

With whom can I talk – a friend, family member or professional – to help me work through the issues to gain the peace of mind I need and deserve?

What changes am I willing to make to change my future?



CHAPTER 6

From Queen to Farmer's Daughter

From Queen to Farmer's Daughter

Even if you don't live in New Orleans the spirit of Mardi Gras can be quite contagious at that time of year. The Carnival season officially begins on January 6th, also known as Twelfth Night and ends on Mardi Gras Day, the Tuesday preceding Ash Wednesday. Some New Orleans residents are not as excited about Mardi Gras as others, so they plan their vacations to be out of the city during Mardi Gras weekend, which runs from Friday through Tuesday.

Although some Crescent City locals head for the ski slopes with their children to escape the crowds, many of them can't leave Mardi Gras *totally* behind. So they wear their Mardi Gras tee shirts and even bring beads to throw when spontaneous parades spring up among skiers and visitors at the end of the day.

This tradition has gradually expanded and taken on a life of its own. If you go to many ski areas in Colorado and Utah during that week, you can get a good taste of the *spirit* of Mardi Gras without actually being in the event itself.

Most cities and towns in close proximity have their own celebrations in conjunction with the festivities in New Orleans. Traditions that started out as small venues have expanded to include Mardi Gras balls complete with a king and queen and other royalty, as well as parades with marching bands and floats filled with masked riders who throw beads to crowds that line

the streets. Contrary to what you see on national television, Mardi Gras can be a very safe, family oriented activity.

Even if you're not riding in a parade, it's easy to get caught up in the spirit. Residents hang Mardi Gras flags on their front porches and festive wreaths in Carnival colors adorn many front doors. Without a doubt, everyone consumes large amounts of King Cake. In case you haven't had the opportunity to savor this unique and unforgettable treat, let me give you a bit of background.

The King Cake tradition came to New Orleans with the French settlers who baked them to celebrate the coming of the three wise men on King's Day. The oval shaped and braided cake is made from rich dough, then baked and covered with a sugar topping in the three official colors of Mardi Gras – purple to represent justice, green for faith and gold for power.

A small plastic baby is placed inside each King Cake, and tradition holds that whoever “gets the baby” has to host the next King Cake party of the season. In the workplace this means that the person who gets the piece with the baby brings the next King Cake to share. No actual party is held, but a LOT of cake is consumed in many a workplace during Carnival season. But it doesn't stop there. Many bakeries do a brisk business shipping cake to former New Orleans residents who live elsewhere but are longing for a “taste” of Mardi Gras.

When Jennifer worked in New York, Les sent a King Cake to her office on Madison Avenue. Of course the FedEx overnight shipping charges cost twice as much as the cake itself, but he wanted her to have a taste of home while she was far away. As soon as the King Cake arrived at her office, Jen excitedly opened the box and invited her Manhattan colleagues to try a piece.

Warily peering into the box their collective response was, “We don’t eat food that’s purple, green and gold.” When curiosity finally got the best of them they tasted it, they loved it, and by the end of the day the entire cake was gone. The following year Jen’s colleagues waited in anticipation for the day “the funny looking cake” arrived.

Because of Slidell’s close proximity to New Orleans we had our own, much smaller version of Mardi Gras complete with a parade and several Mardi Gras balls for young and old alike. During my senior year in high school, and as president of the Christian Youth Organization, I had the honor of reigning as queen of the CYO Carnival Ball.

What an experience it was to wear an elegant white satin ball gown and a gorgeous red velvet train with a large fleur de lis embellished with gold sequins in the center. OK, the terms *Mardi Gras ensemble* and *good taste* may not be synonymous, but you had to be there. The finishing touch to my royal regalia was the rhinestone studded tiara that my noble king placed upon my head

at the Coronation Ball. Then we began our royal march around the auditorium, waving to our loyal subjects – some of whom actually bowed low or curtsied as we passed by. What an exciting and memorable night!

The magic continued the next day as my king and I rode in the Slidell Mardi Gras parade, perched atop the back of a sleek red convertible. The streets were lined with hundreds of people who had turned out for the parade. Slidell was such a small town back then that everybody knew everybody else. This made it even more fun for me as I heard people call out my name as we passed by.

I now belong to a women’s carnival krewe (French for *club*) and I’ve ridden in my fair share of Mardi Gras parades. But none have been as memorable as that parade, or the one that followed it the next year. But I’ll get to that one in a minute.

The year I reigned as queen, Daddy had a float in the parade. It was actually a decorated flatbed trailer, pulled by a tractor that he drove himself. Quite fancy, it featured a pair of live swans swimming in a small pond under a flowing fountain. It was titled “The Swan Pond at Forest Lawn” and replicated the much larger pond we had in our cemetery. He was very proud of his creation, as well he should have been. Bless his heart, he won a trophy that year for having the fanciest float in the entire parade.

All of my siblings were involved in the “family float” except me. And I was fine with that, since they all had to wear swan costumes

to dress the part. (In case you're wondering, you can't just go out and *buy* swan costumes. They have to be custom made). I much preferred wearing my queenly garb as I happily performed my royal duties by waving to the crowds from the back of that convertible. I got to wear a tiara in that parade. The next year, however, I wasn't so lucky.

When I came home from college for Mardi Gras holidays, Daddy could hardly wait to tell me about our family's float. He had kept it a secret while I was away at school so he could surprise me. And surprise me he did. The theme of our float that year wasn't an elegant flowing fountain with graceful swans in it. Our last name was Barnett, so he named our float "Barney's Barnyard."

After proudly showing me the float in the driveway, he suggested that I drive over to the local feed store to purchase my costume. It would consist of a red and black plaid flannel shirt, a red bandana, bib overalls, boots and a straw hat. Recalling that I had ridden in a convertible the year before, Daddy wanted to make sure I understood that I wouldn't be *riding* in this year's parade. I would be walking alongside the family float. OK, I could do that. Then he explained how he would carry out the "Barney's Barnyard" theme.

Of course the flatbed trailer would be enclosed with wire mesh again, to protect the animals from falling off and injuring themselves. But instead of swans, the passengers on the float this year would be live ducks, geese, chickens, goats, sheep and lambs.

He had even rented a calf. It seemed to me that Barney's Barnyard was complete.... well, almost.

"Gosh, Daddy," I joked, "The only animal you're missing in your rolling barnyard is a pig."

"I've already thought of that," he answered with a grin. That's when I got the last detail of the part I would play in the family float plan that year. My father didn't need to put the pig on the float for one simple reason. I would be carrying the pig.

But I was not to worry, as this cute little pig would be wearing a diaper and pink rubber pants. (For those of you who have only seen disposable diapers, ask your mother or your grandmother about cloth diapers and rubber pants!)

OK, flash back to last year's parade when I rode in a convertible and wore a tiara. This year I was walking – and carrying a pig. To make matters even worse (could they BE any worse?) all those people who recognized me and called me by name last year showed up for this parade, too. And I think they brought a lot of their friends and relatives along.

For the next few hours I did my best to hide my humiliation, smile brightly and wave carefully – so I wouldn't drop the pig. That parade lasted only a couple of hours but it felt like an eternity to me. I kept asking myself why I hadn't colored my hair and worn

big sunglasses to make it harder for people to recognize me. But Daddy would have known how embarrassed I was to be part of the family that day, and I couldn't do that to him. So I carried my pig with all the Southern pride, gentility and grace I could muster.

By now you're probably wondering about the point of this story. In fact, you're not sure there *is* a point to this story. Of course there's a point. And this is it.

It doesn't matter who you are and what you do. It doesn't matter whether you're rich or poor, old or young, or somewhere in between. It doesn't matter that you try to be a good person and that you always try to do the right thing.

At the end of the day, when all is said and done, making it through life is a lot like being in a parade. Some days you get to wear your tiara and some days you have to carry the pig.

♥ Questions for Reflection

Am I usually open to trying something new or am I primarily a creature of habit?

When did I help someone even though the experience was embarrassing for me?

According to Jean, making it through life is a lot like being in a parade. On some days you get to wear your tiara and on other days you have to carry the pig.

From as far back as I can remember to the present time, here is my list of life experiences that reflect memorable days and moments for me.

My Tiara Moments:

Did I take time to enjoy and relish those moments or did I waste the time – and the moment – while I focused on the negative?

My Carry the Pig Moments:

Did I take those moments in stride, with a sense of humor when possible?

Or did I carry that memory long after I should have put it down?

How can I change my outlook to change my future?

Note from Jean:

I hope your “Tiara Days” far outnumber the others!



CHAPTER 7

*Staying Angry Is Way
Too Much Work!*

Staying Angry Is Way Too Much Work!

Just in case you're wondering, the title of this chapter has nothing to do with carrying that parade pig in the last chapter. It's actually about a life lesson learned on the job – one that I trust will benefit you in your personal and professional life.

To give you a bit of background, my preparation for a keynote begins long before I actually step out on the stage. First I do my homework to learn about the people who will be in my audience and the challenges they are facing. Then I choose the appropriate stories from my repertoire and blend them with the right amount of humor and content to get my message across. Part of my job is working very closely with the meeting planner or committee chair to ensure that the event is the success we all envision it to be.

If you've ever been in charge of an event, you know first-hand about all the details that go into that process. Naturally, my clients who plan luncheons for 50 people are not under quite as much pressure as my client who plans an annual conference for 12,000 members. Whatever the size of the event, I work closely with the planner and do my best to be as easy to work with as possible. During our initial phone conversation I explain that part of *my* job is to make his or her job easier.

I'm a very real, down-to-earth person who will do whatever it takes to help ensure the success of the event for which I am hired. Throughout my career I've been blessed to work with many

intelligent and articulate, kind and caring, funny and fascinating people. In fact, I've had to work with only one truly difficult person. Without going into detail, let's just say that this committee chair had "issues" with power, control and anger. She was quite the prima donna, bless her heart.

Even though her anger had nothing to do with me, this chapter isn't about *her* anger. It's about mine, and what I learned from that experience. As I took the stage and began to speak my first words, I was aware of a feeling in my head and my heart – a feeling I had never experienced in front of any audience. I was shocked to realize I was angry, which is certainly not a very positive feeling to have inside when you're about to speak to hundreds of people!

I'm always excited and eager to begin my presentation. Depending on who's in the audience I might also be a bit nervous, but that feeling goes away pretty quickly. Within the first few minutes I get my audience laughing and tuned in to my stories and my message. From then on, we are connected. This doesn't mean, however, that conditions are perfect every time I show up to do my job.

I've spoken after flying all night to get to my destination, enduring bad weather and cancelled flights and arriving at the hotel in time to change clothes for an early morning keynote, with no food and no sleep. I've spoken when I had pneumonia and a temperature of 103 degrees. And I've spoken when I was

so worried about other people in my life and what was happening to them at that very moment that I had to work extra hard to concentrate on doing my job.

Like everyone else in the world of work, my job isn't easy and it isn't perfect. I understand and accept that. But feeling *angry*? That was a new one for me! Based on her behavior over the previous few months, along with the stunt this woman pulled just moments before I stepped on stage, I had every right to be angry. But I knew what I had to do. I had to totally forget my anger and focus on the audience in front of me. What happened to me was not my fault and it certainly wasn't *their* fault, either. I was there to do my job, and they deserved my very best. And that's exactly what they got.

We waste a lot of time and energy being angry, don't we? Of course there *are* justifiable reasons to get angry. And that anger often gives us the energy we need to make positive changes in our own lives and in the lives of others. When expressed appropriately, anger can help us fight against injustice on behalf of people who can't fight for themselves.

Righteous anger gives us the courage to work hard to right a wrong, get involved and take a stand. It gives us the nerve to confront a bully. And it even gives us the strength to walk away from a job that is exhausting our hopes and dreams, or from a relationship that is depleting our spirit, consuming our soul, and draining the life right out of us.

Life is filled with many good reasons to be angry. Some people, however, spend their lives being angry about *life* for no good reason at all. You know a few of them. Like my difficult chairperson, they've been angry for a long time and it probably has nothing to do with you or me.

But that doesn't stop them from blaming others instead of *accepting* responsibility for causing some of their own problems and *taking* responsibility to do something about them. Instead, they would rather spend their time *shifting* responsibility for their misery. And then they wonder why they don't have many friends and why no one wants to spend time with them. They fail to understand – or fail to accept – how positive relationships work.

Perhaps this person is in your workplace or your personal life. If you're struggling with this issue, reread Chapter 3 for the ideas I shared there about dealing with difficult people. My other book, *Mama Said There'd Be Days Like This*, also has some very worthwhile ideas that my readers have told me really do work. And an added benefit is that every strategy I share is *legal!*

But let's get back to the focus of this chapter – the damage we do to ourselves when we hold on to our anger instead of resolving it, or letting it go and moving on with our lives. Medical research has documented that the physical effects of anger on our bodies can include headaches, skin problems, digestion problems, insomnia, increased anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, heart attack and stroke. It seems to me that experiencing any *one* of those

symptoms is a pretty high price to pay for holding on to such a negative emotion.

Research also documents that people whose bodies are constantly flooded with the stress hormones and metabolic changes related to anger usually experience more than one symptom. For some folks it's easier to endure the symptoms than to make changes. I know one such angry person who suffers from seven of the nine maladies listed in the previous paragraph.

This person is smart enough to see the correlation, but still won't let go of the anger. That's not so smart. If you knew you were allergic to blueberries and they made you break out in a rash every time you ate them, you would probably avoid blueberries whenever possible. That's common sense. Holding on to your anger, when it can lead to a lot more serious issues than a rash, makes no sense at all.

I can eat blueberries without any problems, but I can recall more than a few times when I've let my anger get the best of me. While I've managed to handle the upset stomachs and the sleepless nights thinking about what I *should* have said, or what I *would* say the next time, something happened one day that got my attention once and for all.

Hanging up the phone after a very disturbing conversation with an irrational and rage-filled person, I realized that I was as angry as I had ever been. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest

as it raced out of control. I couldn't catch my breath. Luckily we happened to have a blood pressure machine handy because a visiting friend had forgotten it. When I read the numbers on that machine, I couldn't believe my eyes.

Trying not to panic I thought, "I'm here by myself. There is no one here to help me. How can I calm myself and get these numbers down?" I picked up Katie, our Maltese, and headed outside for the patio. I walked around, praying, focusing on the flowers, breathing slowly and deeply while stroking Katie and talking softly and calmly to her. I even called up the faces of our precious grandchildren in my mind's eye. I gradually began to feel my heartbeat slow down and my pulse return to normal. That was an important day for me because it was the day I vowed that I would never again let *that* person or *any* person make me that angry.

The process I recommended in Chapter 3 has really helped, including distancing myself from those who raise my blood pressure. It's a defensive and protective step, but also a proactive one. Here are some other ideas to help you deal with anger, shared by audience members when we've talked about the issues and possible solutions. You know yourself well enough to know which ones will work, but don't be afraid to explore some new approaches you've never tried. It often takes a combination of action steps to help us achieve the peace we need to deal with our anger and move forward.

Do something physical to release the stress hormones that have built up. Take a walk, go for a run, or get on the treadmill. Any type of physical movement starts the process of releasing the tension. Let's clarify that to mean *positive* physical movement, instead of punching someone in the face, no matter how good you think that might feel.

If you're in a situation where you can't immediately take action like going for a walk, smaller actions also can work. Take some deep breaths, count to 10 – or whatever number you need to reach before you calm down – and step away from the person or the situation, even if just for a few moments. Use that time to clear your head and calm your heart. Focus on something or someone positive, or picture the face of someone you love and who loves you.

Once you've gotten rid of the negative energy within yourself, make time later to call upon the positive energy that is also within you. This may take the form of prayer or meditation. It may help to talk with someone. This could be a person who is a good listener and understands the issues. It's an objective way to get things off your chest. A word of caution: make sure you don't become the chronic whiner and complainer that people avoid at all costs.

You may decide to take the process one step further by talking with a counselor or a therapist. Some of them specialize in anger

management. Others can help you resolve your issues by giving you suggestions to follow, based on their years of experience and study.

An added benefit of talking with a paid professional is that you can be open and honest and not worry about hurting their feelings, as you might when talking with a friend or family member. Therapists can be very objective listeners and problem solvers because they are not related to you or your problem. It doesn't matter how much "personal baggage" you bring along with you to your counseling session. Everyone brings their fair share – which is often related to their anger issues on some level.

I'm not a therapist but I've learned that they are very good at helping you see the issues more clearly, including the fact that you might be contributing to the problem without realizing it. Forgiveness is another powerful tool to help you cope with your anger. Perhaps you need to forgive someone else, not for their sake but for your own. And maybe the person you need to forgive is *you*.

As you've read this chapter, have you thought about the last time you got angry, and how you handled it? Has your anger affected your ability to do your job and maintain your professionalism in the workplace? Is anger impacting relationships with your clients, customers, colleagues and coworkers? Could anger issues affect your future employability?

What about your personal life? Is your anger, and the way you choose to express it, actually keeping you from developing and sustaining healthy personal relationships? How is your anger influencing your role as a parent, spouse or partner? What are the disadvantages of continuing on your present path?

If you want to find out the answer to that last question rather quickly, write two words at the top of a piece of paper and draw a vertical line down the center of the page to separate them. The words are *Pain* and *Gain*. Then start writing words and phrases that come to mind under each heading. What *pain* is coming to you and others because of your inability to manage your anger? What *gains* will result when you deal with your anger in a healthy way by changing your attitude and behavior? The answers will be right there in front of you.

There is nothing wrong with *feeling* angry. It's a natural and normal human emotion. Feelings, however, are not actions. It's what we decide to do with our feelings that moves us into action in a positive or negative direction. Learning how to express our anger *appropriately* is of vital importance to the health, safety and well being of ourselves and others.

Once you realize that staying angry really is too much work, you'll have more time and energy to focus on the people and issues that really matter. That's another wonderful way to bless your heart.

Questions for Reflection

When have I been surprised to find that I'm angry about something that usually doesn't bother me?

What are some examples of righteous anger I have experienced?

How did I produce positive outcomes because I used that anger to right a wrong or act against injustice?

Which people in my life – at work or at home – have issues with anger, power and control, and how does that impact me?

Which people shift responsibility instead of accepting it and taking care of their own problems, and how does that impact me?

Am I holding on to anger instead of dealing with it and coming to terms with people and situations I have no power to change?

Could this anger be causing any problems for me such as headaches, insomnia, indigestion, anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, stroke or heart attack?

How has my anger affected my ability to do my job and get along with customers, colleagues and coworkers?

How has my anger impacted my future employability?

How has my anger impacted my personal relationships?

How is it influencing my role as a spouse, parent, partner or friend?

What defensive and protective steps can I take to protect myself from people and situations damaging to my health? What can I do to get my own anger under control? (Check those you can try, and jot down a few ideas of your own).

Do something physical – walk, run, etc.

Take deep breaths and count to 10 (or higher).

Use that time to clear my head and calm my heart.

Focus on something positive.

Picture someone I love and someone who loves me.

Make time later to pray or meditate.

Talk with a friend, family member or paid professional.

Forgive someone else, and forgive myself.

What can I do – beginning today – to change my future?



CHAPTER 8

Good Job!

Good Job!

One afternoon during the first week of January, as I tried to eliminate some of the “Christmas clutter” on my desk, I came across a program from a concert Les and I had attended over the holidays. Our Baton Rouge Symphony is an extremely gifted group of musicians and we are blessed to have such stellar talent in our city. While we thoroughly enjoyed their rousing rendition of Handel’s *Messiah* we didn’t seem to be as intensely involved in the experience as the young couple seated next to us. This was apparent because, unlike them, we hadn’t brought our own sheet music to accompany the entire performance.

Ever curious about why people do what they do, I struck up a conversation with them during intermission. They politely explained that since they were both majoring in music at LSU, they decided to bring their own sheet music so they could follow along with the score. And follow along they did – waving their conductors’ mini-batons that appeared, to this non-music major, to look a lot like pencils. Totally captivated, their eyes darted back and forth from the music on the stage to the music on the pages in their laps. They grinned, nodded and whispered phrases that included words such as *awesome, remarkable, magnificent, incredible, brilliant* and *wonderful*.

When the concert ended with the traditional *Hallelujah Chorus* (what holiday program would be complete without it?) the audience rose to its feet in a well-deserved standing ovation

complete with heart-felt cheering and thunderous applause. Our two students, however, didn't applaud for even a second. Instead, they snatched up their programs and sheet music and began to crawl over audience members who were still standing at their places. As they squeezed past us one of them said to the other, "Move faster. If we hurry, we can beat the traffic."

How sad. Although they had been given the glorious gift of music that evening, they didn't see the need to say "thank you." Their appreciation ended with the last musical note. Totally focused on themselves, they never even thought of taking 30 seconds to thank the orchestra for a job well done.

Now before you start shaking your head and muttering, "Kids today..." think about how this scenario may apply in your own life at work or at home. Let's look first at your workplace. (Even if you're not in the workplace now, you probably get your share of complaints and comments from those who are). Juggling multiple priorities and working on an endless "to do" list, it's easy to become so focused on your own needs that you miss opportunities to thank others for their dedication and hard work.

When you're busy, it's easier to *assume* that they know you appreciate their efforts instead of taking precious time to express your thoughts. No matter how talented they are, the people on your team cannot read your mind. So it's up to you to let them know. Tell them. Show them. A little credit and a bit of sincere

praise can go a long way. With budgets as tight as they are these days, a word of thanks and some well-deserved recognition can be very cost-effective ways to boost morale and improve productivity. The possibilities are endless and quite affordable.

The day finally ends and we leave the workplace and head for home to the people who are supposed to be the most important ones in our lives. But we often leave our good manners at work. Efforts large and small may go unnoticed and unappreciated. Think about those people in your personal life. When is the last time you thanked someone for cooking a meal, cutting the grass, doing the laundry, folding the clothes, taking out the trash or cleaning up after you?

I understand that you may be thinking, “Well, I don’t have to thank them. It’s part of the deal. It’s their *job*.” In my trusty Thesaurus the word job is defined as: *work, occupation, trade, profession, career* or *employment*. Granted, these are certainly appropriate definitions for any workplace. But the list of definitions also includes these words: *task, duty, responsibility, chore, activity, mission* or *charge*. OK, it doesn’t actually stipulate “taking out the trash and cleaning the kitchen” but you get the point.

No organization, workplace or home can run smoothly without a division of labor of some sort. But I often take for granted the nice things Les does for me. I’m working on saying “thank you” to him and others more often. And I’m making progress. While

shopping at our local produce market today I recognized Dale, a high school boy who works there. He picked out a watermelon for me a couple of weeks ago. I had enlisted his help after I'd thumped a dozen watermelons just as I had seen other people do at the market. Of course I had no earthly idea what a good watermelon "sounded like" after all that thumping and listening. So I asked Dale to choose one for me, and he picked a winner.

In a hurry as usual, I walked right past him. Then I turned around, walked back to where he was stocking some shelves, smiled and said, "You probably don't remember me, but I asked for your help a couple of weeks ago and you picked out the sweetest watermelon my family has ever tasted. I just wanted to thank you for helping me and for doing such a good job."

I wish you could have seen the smile that spread across his face as he accepted my compliment with a shy and soft-spoken "You're welcome, ma'am." I have no doubt that at dinner tonight, even if no one asks Dale how his day went, he is going to tell them about the lady who thanked him for that watermelon.

That encounter took 45 seconds of my time. How long would it take for you to thank someone at work or at home for a job well done? How much longer will you wait to show appreciation to someone who could really use a boost in spirit? Why wait until next week or next month instead of offering thanks today? After all, you know how it feels when you don't get the thanks and recognition you deserve for your efforts. We've all been there.

When Jennifer and Marston were married a few years ago, they chose to forego the standard guest book at the reception and do something a bit different. They provided small monogrammed cards on which their guests could share their thoughts. The note cards were then placed in a large apothecary jar and Jennifer later transferred them into their keepsake album.

As I gathered them up at the end of the evening for safe keeping, I saw that some of the notes were eloquently written and filled with best wishes. Others included comments on how meaningful the ceremony had been, how beautiful the bride looked, and how honored they were to be included in Jennifer and Marston's special celebration.

The words that really touched my heart, however, were written by our six-year-old grandson, Carter. Using his most grown up voice he had announced to his mom earlier in the evening that he wanted to write his own note. In his very best penmanship he had printed these words:

Dear Jen and Marston,

Good job.

Love,

Carter

Words of praise and appreciation don't have to be eloquent, fancy or profound. Sometimes the simplest words can have the greatest impact.

One more thought. If you do happen to live and work with people who never show appreciation for your effort and hard work (bless their hearts) it is perfectly acceptable – and even advisable – to pat yourself on the back as often as needed. You can be your own cheerleader if no one else is around to fulfill that role. And the good news is that you get to choose the words to your own cheers! Pompons and uniforms are optional.

Questions for Reflection

When have I been so focused on myself that I haven't taken time to thank others for a job well done?

At what times have I been frustrated with people who acted like I could read their minds when I had no idea what they wanted or needed?

When do I treat others the same way?

How do I demonstrate appreciation for others' efforts?

In what ways could I do a better job of that?

How do I reward myself when I don't get appreciation from others?

Who are the people who deserve a "thank you" from me?

What will I specifically mention to them?

Will I show my appreciation in person, on the phone or in a note or email?

To keep my commitment, I have written the person's name and the date on which I plan to take action.



CHAPTER 9

*Friends Are Like Flowers
in the Garden of Life.*

Friends Are Like Flowers in the Garden of Life.

Thanks to Hurricane Gustav we are experiencing Day Five without electricity as I write this chapter. Our trusty generator provides power to my laptop along with a variety of fans and small appliances throughout our home. Friends and neighbors are checking on each other and offering to share the precious gasoline needed to run our generators. Even though my Internet connection is down, I can still receive emails and text messages on my cell phone. And what a comfort it is as friends from around the country check in to see how we are doing. (We're OK.) It helps us feel less isolated and a bit more connected to the outside world.

As I respond to their concerns I reflect on the value of friendship while the words of a particular song run through my mind. The title is "Friends are like flowers in the garden of life." Perhaps you know it. Maybe you learned it in school, or you heard your kids sing it at a school assembly. Since this song was a standard when our kids were in grammar school, we enjoyed many renditions of it over the years. The title makes total sense to me. Friends truly *are* like flowers in the gardens of our lives.

While I've seen some beautiful gardens in other parts of the country, I'm always glad to get back home to my own Southern garden. Les and I derive a great deal of pleasure from our roses, azaleas, camellias, magnolias and hydrangeas. Through trial and

effort over the years we've mutually agreed to give up on the plants that were too temperamental and too much trouble. Some were high maintenance and required a lot of attention. A few wilted easily with too much afternoon sun so we had to be very careful where we planted them. Certain ones were more sensitive to extremes of hot and cold. And others were simply too much work for the amount of enjoyment they delivered.

Now we plant only hardy varieties that are beautiful and relatively self-sustaining. Although they require minimal effort on our part to help them show off their vivid colors at the appropriate times of year, they do require some semblance of care. Too much or too little rain, caterpillars and aphids, fungus and dry powdery mildew – all can wreak havoc on an otherwise healthy plant. Our biggest garden challenge is that weeds seem to flourish, no matter what we do. We spend a lot of time and energy keeping ahead of the weeds that can spring up in a flowerbed in no time at all and overtake even the heartiest plants and shrubs.

If friends are like flowers in many respects, how would you describe your friends? Like most of us, you probably have some who are high maintenance and require a lot of attention. A few may wilt easily under even minimal amounts of stress and pressure. Certain ones are overly sensitive so we have to be careful with everything we say and do. When it comes right down to it, some are just too temperamental and too much trouble for the amount of enjoyment they provide.

And then there are other friends who supply us with hours of fun and laughter in the good times, along with comfort and caring in the bad times. No matter what else is going on in our lives they are always there for us. Unfortunately these are often the very friendships we may take for granted if we're not careful, assuming they will always be there. But they still need our attention, too.

During a recent spell of very dry weather our son Michael offered some advice to newlyweds who had moved into a home just a few doors down. This adorable young couple (both apartment dwellers before they became homeowners) had been faithfully watering their plants, shrubs and flowers during our mini drought. But they hadn't paid any attention to their lawn. Michael never noticed sprinklers running whenever he passed by, so they apparently weren't too concerned as the grass continued to turn deeper and deeper shades of yellow, orange and – finally – brown.

Driving by one Saturday morning he saw both of them out in the front yard, dutifully watering their flowerbeds. As tactfully as possible he explained that they needed to water their grass, too. If they didn't give it some attention – and fast – it was going to die. By the looks on their faces, they were obviously shocked and surprised to acquire this tidbit of gardening information.

As they tried to explain to Michael, they simply assumed their grass was sturdy enough to take care of itself without any attention

(or water) from them. (OK, remember I did tell you they were apartment dwellers, bless their hearts).

Valuable friendships, the ones worth cultivating and keeping, are like flowers and lawns. Without the proper care and attention they may eventually begin to wither, dry up and fade away.

Who are your best friends? Take a moment to stop reading and think of them. Make a mental list, or even a written one. Now divide your list into two categories: *out-of-town best friends* and *in-town best friends*. I hope you're smiling as some of their faces come to mind. How far back do some of those friendships go?

Of my three *out-of-town best friends*, two date back to school days. Suzie and I have been friends since the seventh grade when her family moved to Slidell. Even now I laugh out loud as I think about some of our antics during the two years we hung out together. When her family moved back to New Orleans the year we both started high school, we continued to stay in touch and visit each other often. As luck would have it, we chose the same college, majored in Psychology and pledged the same sorority. We saw each other almost daily and through good times and bad, Suzie was always there for me.

She was also the one who highlighted my hair for the first time. (We called it "frosting" back in those days). I wanted to have those lovely blonde streaks in my hair like all the cool girls did. We bought a frosting kit at the local drugstore a few blocks off

campus. I didn't own a frosting cap, but that didn't deter Suzie. Oh, no, not in the least! She convinced me that a plastic bag would deliver the same stunning results. That was the day I went from being a brunette to being a blonde – with stripes, not streaks – that ran horizontally, not vertically – through my hair. When I looked in the mirror, I didn't look stunning, I simply looked *stunned*.

In fact, my hair looked so bizarre by the time we finished our experiment that I stayed hidden in my dorm room while Suzie went back to that drugstore to buy yet another coloring kit. It covered the stripes and made my entire head of hair the same shade of blonde. Suzie was one of my bridesmaids when Les and I married. She lives in Canada today and we stay in touch through emails, sharing pictures of our children and grandchildren, and bringing each other up to date on our lives. Even after all these years I consider her one of my best friends.

Mary K., my second *out-of-town best friend*, was my roommate during college days. She doesn't live far away so we see each other every few months. And when we do, we pick up our conversation exactly where we left off. I hope you have a friend like that.

My third friend in this category is Connie, another motivational speaker and author who lives in Dallas. Even though we have each written our own books, we wrote a book together several years ago. *How to Be the Person Successful Companies Fight*

to Keep was published by Simon & Schuster and translated into several languages for distribution around the world. We are very proud of the positive impact it has had in the workplace and with audiences as we presented the topic at conferences and conventions across the country for many years.

Since our book was written before the days of email, our process involved writing during the day and then reading our work to each other on the phone for long hours into the night. We would spend many more hours over the next day or two, making all the edits and corrections and doing more research in order to connect by phone and fax machine a few days later to continue the process. The book did well. But even more important than that, our friendship survived co-authoring a book. I'm told that is no small accomplishment.

Even though she's a couple of years younger than I am, Connie is the Big Sis I never had. Very creative and wise beyond her years, she always has practical advice to offer. Oh, did I mention that she's a licensed therapist, too? Without a doubt, free therapy sessions are a perk of any good friendship! When we're fortunate enough to speak at the same conferences, we get to catch up on our news "in person." Her husband Chuck and Les get along really well. We've taken several vacations together and we always come back "still friends." I'm told that is also no small accomplishment.

Without a doubt my *out-of-town best friends* have been a true blessing in my life over the years. I am also privileged to have some wonderful *in-town friends* as well. I have no idea how I would function without them! Some go back as far as the early days when we drove carpool for our kindergarten children or spent long weekend hours in the bleachers cheering our kids on for their baseball, basketball or volleyball tournaments. Our history together is based on our children's activities, and through that history some deep and lasting friendships have developed.

Other friendships are more recent and have nothing at all to do with sharing our children's activities. They have a *lot* to do, however, with talking about how difficult it is to be the mother of adult children! One group that I thoroughly enjoy is the Friday Therapy Lunch Bunch. Each week our diverse little gathering includes a doctor, a consultant, a trainer, an interior designer, an HR manager and a motivational speaker.

While we may not have much in common career-wise, what we do have in common is that we are highly opinionated women who love to laugh and share stories. That's excellent therapy in itself, isn't it? We don't waste time trying to solve the problems of the world because we barely have enough time to help solve each other's problems before we all have to go back to work.

Les' mother (her given name was Margaret but everyone called her Peggy) had quite a network of friends because of countless

opportunities to connect with them. In addition to her volunteer duties at school and church, she was also a “Pink Lady” volunteer at the hospital gift shop. Peggy belonged to a bridge club, sewing circle, book group and dinner club. Her friends were primarily in the Baton Rouge area because people needed to stay physically connected in those days.

How different from today when we can stay connected through email, the Internet, cell phones and even computer cameras. But that doesn’t mean that it’s any easier, does it? Maybe you’ve noticed, as I have, that a major challenge in maintaining friendships in the midst of all our business – and our busyness – is finding the time to do so.

Depending on my speaking and traveling schedule I may miss two or three Friday Therapy lunches in a row. When I do get to join my friends again, I feel like I’m out of the information loop – because I am. At times I think about emailing Suzie in Canada to bring her up to date on all our family’s events. But when I realize how long it will take me to give her all the details, I promise myself I will get to it later. Sometimes I do and sometimes I don’t. The longer I go without emailing her, the more news there is to share. That means setting aside a larger block of time to catch up. If I don’t eventually take that time, I begin to feel guilty.

Does any of this sound vaguely familiar?

The next time you're watering your lawn or garden or performing some other task that doesn't require a great deal of brain power, spend that time thinking about some friends you hold near and dear. Have you been meaning to call, write a note or send an email? What's stopping you? Whether they live across town or across the world, reconnecting could ease your guilt and – even more importantly – bring you great joy. Every friendship needs care and attention at some point in time. Make sure you tend to yours so they don't eventually wither, dry up and fade away.

(Update: Connie and I recently wrote another book together. *10 Ways to STAND OUT from the Crowd* has won several awards. And Connie and I are still friends!)

♥ *Questions for Reflection*

Who are my out-of-town best friends?

What is my history with them?

What do we have in common?

Who are my in-town-best friends?

How did we become friends?

What do we have in common?

Which friends have been with me in good times and in bad?

Which friendships have I taken for granted, assuming they will take care of themselves without any effort on my part?

How do I stay in touch to keep other friendships going?

If I don't stay in touch with certain people, why don't I?

Do I feel guilty for not working on certain friendships?

Is it time to admit that some friends ask more of me than I am willing or able to give?

Is this an issue I need to address with this friend or can I leave things the way they are for now?

Thinking about the friends who really matter to me, is it time to reach out and reconnect with one of them?

How will I do this – in person, by phone, note, or email?

If my circle of friends is limited and I want to expand, what groups within my community would give me an opportunity to do so?

How can I connect with like-minded people to cultivate new friendships? What are my options?

What steps can I take – and when?



CHAPTER 10

Casseroles and Front Porch Visits

Casseroles and Front Porch Visits

After you finished reading and reflecting on the previous chapter, I hope you took the time to reconnect with a friend you've been neglecting for a while. If you didn't, please don't worry. I'm not going to try to make you feel guilty for failing to follow my advice. That's not my job, since I am not your mother (a bit of wisdom gained at one of those Friday Therapy Lunch Bunch sessions).

Perhaps when you were going over your list a couple of friends came to mind and you thought, "We just don't have anything in common any more." If you have some friends who fall into that category, you're quite normal! In fact, if you and your friends have *everything* in common it's possible that your *comfortable* friendship could eventually become a *boring* friendship.

Most women experience changes in their friendships that often coincide with changes in their lives. In some instances the friendship remains strong even though they don't experience similar milestones such as marriage, separation, divorce, raising children, starting a business, building a career, moving across the country, experiencing the death of a family member, or taking care of aging parents. Although they may go through times when they don't feel like they have much in common, what friends do have in common is their desire to maintain a friendship based on history and connection.

Still a best friend to this day, Joell was also a bridesmaid in our wedding. Our lives have taken very different paths since we roomed together in college. While she worked for the same hospital from graduation until retirement, I've had a wide variety of careers. A widow with no children, Joell is busy with hobbies and activities with friends and family in Jackson, Mississippi. As a wife, mother and grandmother I'm still very actively involved in my dual careers as speaker and author, in addition to leadership roles in several non-profit organizations. Thoughts of retirement are very far away.

Despite our different life experiences, when Joell called to see how we had weathered Hurricane Gustav we had no trouble talking for at least an hour. We have shared so much together. I hope you have "a Joell" in your life.

By the way, since I've mentioned two of my bridesmaids by name, I must admit that after reminiscing over our wedding album on our anniversary several years ago, I called each of my bridesmaids and apologized for making them wear those dresses! We all had a good laugh and they were gracious enough to forgive me, bless their hearts.

Unless we have the luxury of vast amounts of free time, the effort it takes to nurture our friendships can become more arduous with each passing day. At some point, whether it's a conscious decision or not, we may begin to assess the value of certain friendships and prioritize those that are most important to us.

Along with this decision may come a better understanding of people with whom we would enjoy a deeper friendship if they weren't equally as busy as we are. I have several friends who fall into this category. While we would love to go to lunch once a week, we agree that it isn't even a remote possibility. So we are content with sporadic phone calls and chance meetings at the produce market or the drugstore when we can catch up with each other's lives.

Have you spent any time assessing your friendships lately? Now may be a good time to decide which ones are worth working on, and what that will mean for you. In the process you may identify some friendships that you've outgrown. Maybe your lives have gone in different directions. Perhaps whatever activity originally brought you together no longer holds any significance for you. You've moved on to new interests and are challenged with balancing your time to fit everything into your hectic schedule. When you're with this friend you notice that your mind wanders to people you would rather be with or to things you would rather be doing.

While I'm certainly not advocating that you "drop" a friend who needs you, it is perfectly acceptable to focus your energies on the friendships and activities that are more important to you. Taking this step will also ease those pangs of guilt you experience when you realize you can't stay connected to *everyone* because there are not enough hours in the day to make that happen.

Why not make a list of your current friends and spend some time reflecting on it? How would you describe your interaction with them? Do they energize and refresh you? Do they bring you joy and laughter in the good times as well as comfort and care in the tough times? How would you describe their personalities in relation to yours? Are you spending time with people who are whiners and complainers and who constantly bring you down? Do you have a friend who thrives on playing the role of the victim, even when she isn't? Is there a "drama queen" friend who saps your last ounce of energy every time you're around her?

How fortunate for us that although we don't usually get to choose our family, we do get to choose our friends! Given that gift, it's important to make wise choices that give you more time to focus on the friendships that are important to you, the ones that really matter. By the way, if you have someone you call a "friend" who is passive-aggressive, or a gossip and a tattletale who loves to stir up trouble and talk about you behind your back, be aware that you don't have a friend in this person. I'm not sure exactly *what* you have, but it isn't a friend by any stretch of the imagination.

There's another category of friendship that I must mention because it is so very important to me. As I'm sure you've already experienced in your own life, one of the greatest gifts you can give to someone else (and often to yourself in the process) is to be there for a friend in need. Without a doubt, the physical

part of that “job” can often be easier than the emotional part. Activities such as driving a carpool, picking up medicine, making and delivering a casserole, going grocery shopping, babysitting or mowing the lawn all take effort but produce tangible results. We feel good about what we’ve accomplished, no matter how large or small the task. My friend Claudette’s illness gave many of us such an opportunity to get involved in a very hands-on way.

At the time she became ill Claudette had two young girls, one of whom was in Jennifer’s second grade class. When it became apparent that Claudette wouldn’t be able to do the shopping and cooking for quite some time, everyone started asking what they could do to help. I volunteered to coordinate a schedule of evening meals to be delivered to Claudette’s home for five nights each week. We gathered volunteers from her two daughters’ homeroom classes, mothers of the Brownies in the Scout troop we led together, women in our church, and her friends and neighbors. With a united effort we were able to provide meals for her family for twelve consecutive months.

Since that was long before the days of email communication, there were many phone calls made to coordinate our efforts during the course of that year. At the beginning of each week I would check the master schedule and call the women responsible for delivering meals for the appropriate days that week. Imagine my surprise and chagrin the day I checked the schedule and realized that I had totally forgotten that it was *my* turn to bring

dinner the previous night! I immediately called Claudette and apologized profusely. After she finished laughing heartily she explained that I was forgiven – especially by her daughters. Since my healthy, home cooked meal didn't show up that evening, the girls got to order pizza!

Even though corporal acts of kindness can be time consuming, they are often easier on us than the emotional process of helping a friend through a crisis. In order to be there for the friend we care about, to be patient, understanding and supportive, we often have to put our own thoughts aside. These may include feeling stunned and shaken, frustrated and angry or worried and frightened. We may even feel guilty when we realize our thoughts include, "Thank God this is not happening to me." While those thoughts are all a part of being human and there is nothing wrong with thinking them, we often feel guilty when we do.

Whatever type of support we choose to offer a friend in need, we may not realize how small and simple acts of kindness and caring can make such a difference. When my friend Karen, who already suffers with multiple sclerosis, needed a hysterectomy I went over a few days after her surgery to see what I could do to help.

Of course I brought the traditional casserole, as any self-respecting Southern woman would do. I offered to run some errands, fold clothes, vacuum the den and mop the kitchen. All of those chores had already been taken care of by the time I arrived, so Karen suggested we go out and sit on the front

porch. When I got home that evening I told Les that I wasn't feeling like a very good friend.

"Why not," he asked, "what did you do for Karen?"

"Not much," I replied. "I didn't run errands, go grocery shopping or clean her house. All I did was sit on the front porch with her, tell stories and make her laugh."

A few weeks later Karen and I were at a dinner meeting for Quota International, a non-profit service organization to which we both belong. After we welcomed her back she thanked everyone for all their efforts on her behalf, recalling in detail what each friend had done for her. (There was certainly nothing wrong with her memory!) By the time she got to me I was already feeling inadequate and embarrassed, as I certainly hadn't done nearly as much as many of the women in that room.

Then Karen looked at me, smiled and said, "Now Jean Gatz didn't run errands or go grocery shopping for me. And she didn't clean my house. But what a gift she gave me. We went outside and sat on my porch, and Jean did what she does best. She told stories and made me laugh. And it sure felt good to laugh again."

I was stunned to hear my words – now her words – coming back to me. They were almost the exact same words I had spoken to Les when I returned from my visit with her. What a totally different perspective of the same event! I learned a lot from

Karen's comments that evening as I was reminded that we all have unique talents we can use to help others. And I learned that *everything* counts, no matter how insignificant our actions may seem to us.

If you've been given a healthy mind and body, don't ever take those blessings for granted. Use your gifts and talents to their fullest. Everyone is talented at something. Everyone does something well. Everything counts. What are your gifts and talents and how are you using them to be a blessing to others?

Without a doubt, friends can be a safe haven in a storm. At times they can even stand in for family. Depending on the situation, they can often be more effective because they *are* friends and *not* family. Have you ever been through a time when you didn't want to burden family members but you knew you could turn to your friends for the help and support you needed? I've surely been in that place a few times in my life.

Family can be there for us, and if we're fortunate to have a family that cares and friends who care we are truly blessed. When it's our turn to help, we must do everything possible to make sure that we are the friends others have been for us.

If you've ever attended any of my keynotes you know I like to use humor to lighten serious moments when appropriate. Going back to that meeting when Karen was thanking each of us in person, I must tell you that by the time she finished all of us were

fighting back the tears. Since I was the last person she addressed, the timing was perfect. And naturally, I couldn't resist.

“Well,” I said, “if I would have known you had something contagious, I never would have come to visit you that afternoon.”

“What are you talking about?” Karen asked with a shocked look.

“MS is not contagious!”

“I know *that*. But two weeks after our front porch visit, I found out that now I need to have a hysterectomy!”

As we all know, laughter is good for the heart... and the soul.

Questions for Reflection

Which of my friendships has remained strong, even though my friend and I are at different stages and places in our lives?

What do we still have in common?

Are there any friendships that I've outgrown?

Why has that happened?

Which friends bring me joy and laughter in the good times?

Which friends bring me comfort and care in the bad times?

Which friends are capable of doing both?

Do I have whining and complaining friends in my life?

How does spending time with them affect my attitude and behavior?

Do they drain the energy and joy from me?

Is there someone I call “friend” who is passive-aggressive, gossips about me, demeans me, or hurts me in other ways?

Why do I tolerate these behaviors?

What can I do to distance myself from this person?

Who are my friends in need of my time and my help?

What am I doing to provide that for them, while still managing my other priorities?

What small acts of kindness and caring can I provide?

Since everyone is talented at something, how am I using my gifts and talents to help others?

If I’m not doing a very good job of that so far, how can I think and act differently to make a difference in someone else’s life?

What is the first step I can take?

When will I take it?



CHAPTER 11

Planning the Trip of Your Life

Planning the Trip of Your Life

Watching the media coverage of the hazardous weather that impacted much of our country this winter, I thought about the everyday conveniences I often take for granted – a warm and cozy home, a car heater that works, and travel that’s relatively safe and painless. Like you, I watched television news video of automobile drivers trying to maneuver through snowdrifts on ice covered roads and highways, only to lose control and slide into other cars that were already stuck in a snow bank and stranded on the side of the interstate. The trip they *experienced* that day was obviously not the trip they *planned*.

As you reflect on your life at present, do you see any similarities? Are you feeling “stranded” in your career, in a relationship, or in your life in general? Even with technology at our fingertips, we are still at the mercy of uncontrollable weather. Down here in south Louisiana we struggle with the challenges of hurricanes. In other parts of the country the challenges include tornadoes, fires, floods, mudslides, snowstorms and blizzards, avalanches and earthquakes. Depending on the severity of any natural disaster, we are forced to change our plans in an instant. Likewise, we make plans as to how we want our lives to be, only to learn that life doesn’t always go as planned. It, too, can change in an instant. While we can’t be in charge of everything that happens to us (like bad weather) we can be in charge of most of the choices we make.

Let's momentarily move beyond that cliché that reminds us that "Life is a journey." Well, actually, it is. But for now I want you to think about planning your *Life* like you would plan a *Trip* you were about to take by car. Whether for business or pleasure, how would you prepare for that trip to ensure a minimum amount of stress and worry and a maximum amount of enjoyment? What would you jot down on your list of things to take along, and what details would you tend to before you set out? What would your *Trip Plan* look like? Then I want you to think about changes you can make as you approach your *Life Plan* from a totally new perspective. The result could be new insights and fresh ideas you can apply for a more rewarding life at work and at home.

If you're going into unfamiliar territory, doesn't it make sense to have a map of some sort? Whether you rely on the standard, tried and true folded paper variety or the GPS in your car or on your phone, it makes sense to know where you want to go before you start out. Otherwise, it may take much longer than you planned to reach your destination.

Since I mentioned GPS, I must tell you that I am fascinated by how those Global Positioning Systems work. My first experience with one was the year when we took a vacation to the Grand Canyon with two other couples and rented a car with GPS. If you have one, you already know it's an incredible piece of technology. Since my car didn't have one, I was astounded by the fact that you can program into this little dashboard computer the necessary information about where you are and where you want

to go. Then, low and behold, it talks to you and tells you how to get there!

Others in our party couldn't wait until it was their turn to sit in the front passenger seat so they could be in charge of the GPS. But I had no need or desire to learn how to work this thing. Do you ever have days when you feel like you have a limited number of brain cells at your disposal and you don't want to waste any of them on unimportant details and information you will never need? Those were exactly my sentiments – until Day Five when we were on our way to buy groceries and I found myself in the GPS Control Seat.

My traveling companions were goading me (in fun, of course) to step up, take charge and do my job to program the GPS and get us to our destination. Now the problem was that I had not been paying very good attention as a back seat passenger. We were, after all, at the Grand Canyon and the scenery looked a bit different than it does in Louisiana. I had spent the previous four days looking out the window. Naturally I didn't have a clue as to what I was supposed to do now that I was in charge. But they kept after me.

“Jean, figure it out. You can do this. We know you can do this.”

Fighting back the urge to bless their hearts in no uncertain terms, I was beginning to panic. Then in the next instant I realized they were right. I *could* do this. Communication is supposed to

go both ways, right? I had heard this box talk to us. And if the box could talk to us, then certainly we could talk to the box. So I leaned forward into the dashboard until I was at eye level with that little box. Then I spoke in my most commanding and authoritative voice.

“TAKE US TO WALMART!”

But I digress. I encourage you to think of your Life Plan as your *Life Map*. Without it you may take a lot longer to achieve your goals because you might get distracted – or possibly even lost – along the way.

On that trip you would make sure to bring your driver’s license, wouldn’t you? Why? Because it announces to the world (and to that nice state trooper who pulled you over) that you are a competent and capable driver. It establishes your credibility and proves that you have earned the right to drive. In addition to costing you big bucks in fines, failure to carry your driver’s license can make your trip a lot more difficult than you had originally intended. Without personal and professional credibility, your life’s journey could be equally as difficult.

Just as you had to earn your driver’s license, you have to earn credibility in all areas of your life. How is your credibility in your personal life? Do people trust you? Through your words and actions, attitude and behavior, have you earned credibility

and demonstrated your competency as a spouse, partner, parent, or friend?

How is your credibility at work? What are the skills, talents, abilities, education, and training you bring to your job? Do you need more of those to advance your career and bring more value to your organization? In light of tighter corporate budgets these days, you may have to enhance your education and be willing to pay for that education yourself. But lifelong learning is always a good investment in your future. It never goes to waste. Because it takes time and effort to go back to school and hold down a job or manage your other responsibilities, you may feel overwhelmed or think that you're temporarily getting off track. But furthering your education will ultimately help you get where you want to go.

On any trip it's always wise to pay attention and be aware of any detours that might suddenly appear, seemingly out of nowhere. They're important because they may protect you from a stretch of highway that's under construction and not safe for passage. While those detour signs serve a noble purpose, they sure make it a challenge for me to get where I want to go when I'm traveling somewhere by car. I get frustrated because they take me off track. What do your detour signs look like? How far off track are they taking you as you try to do your job, advance your career, be a better spouse or parent, or improve a personal relationship?

Detours can be tricky, but they're usually manageable. Although it may temporarily reroute you, it's important to remember that a detour is not a roadblock or a dead end. It's simply another way – a different way – of getting where you want to go. Sometimes in life we have to take a different route than the one we originally planned. But that doesn't mean we still can't get where we want to go or become who we want to be. It simply might take us a little longer.

To make sure your car is “healthy” enough to make the trip, you might service the engine and check the tires. Maybe those tires need to be rotated and balanced for safer driving. Have you ever felt like you're taking better care of your car than yourself? How healthy are you in mind, body and spirit? Is your life in balance? Is it time to “rotate” a difficult person to a place (in your mind and heart) where he or she can no longer do any more damage?

Planning along the way means making sure you don't run out of gas. With today's soaring prices, buying the cheapest gas possible is certainly tempting. And sometimes it's your only option. Unfortunately, cheap gas often makes your car sputter and hesitate. It doesn't operate as smoothly and it's certainly not as efficient for getting the best miles per gallon that you can. Putting unhealthy food in your body is like putting cheap gas in your car. What do you eat? How are you fueling your body?

When it comes to food we often respond to stressful situations in ways that can cause us even more problems. We promise ourselves that we're going to eat healthier. Then we unwind after a long, hard day by polishing off an entire bag of fat-free cookies while watching TV. What's the harm? They're fat-free, right? Deep down inside we know we've consumed a zillion calories, too much salt and lots of chemicals and preservatives that aren't good for us. Then we pat ourselves on the back for eating fat-free cookies.

And what about exercise? As you know, when a car sits in the garage for a long period of time without being used the battery eventually dies. It needs to be periodically revved up and recharged to perform at its best. What are you doing to keep yourself at your best so you can function at peak performance? Are you getting some sort of exercise to relieve your stress? What is missing from your work, your life or your relationships? Perhaps you're struggling with a health issue. Maybe you're feeling numbed by stress. No car can run without fuel. When you feel like you're "running on empty" what do you do to "refill your tank"?

Some road trips may include exploring new routes you've never traveled before. Have you noticed that you're a more attentive driver when you're in unfamiliar territory? That can be a good thing, especially when you recall the times you've arrived at work or any other destination – and you didn't remember driving

there! It's happened to all of us. We knew the route so well and we had so many things racing through our minds that we put our overloaded brains on cruise control. I think we can agree that it's not a very smart decision to drive a car, do a job, build a career or manage a relationship on cruise control.

When we're not happy where we are, we may find ourselves spending more time worrying about a problem than trying to deal with it. Notice I didn't say "fix it" because we don't always have that power or that luxury. As we allow apprehension and fear to creep in, we may become so anxious or depressed that we can no longer muster the emotional energy to handle the situation. That's usually when we begin doing our jobs or living our lives on cruise control. After we give in or give up, we wonder why nothing has changed and life hasn't gotten any better. Rather than giving in or giving up, what other options do we have? Actually, there are quite a few. As we know but sometimes forget, life is filled with options.

Are you ready to get "unstuck" where you are right now? If so, you can begin the process by jotting down whatever it is in your life that isn't working – whatever it is that you want to change. Start with these two questions:

1. What attitudes and behaviors do I want to change?
2. What is the outcome I want to see?

Your list may be long, short, or somewhere in between. Once you've answered these two questions, use the next two questions to help you formulate your plan of action.

1. What steps must I take to make the change happen?
2. How will I have to think and act differently to get the results I want and need?

Don't waste your time writing the names of *people* you want to change. Save your energy for tasks you can actually accomplish. Set short term and modest goals if you're feeling overwhelmed or you're trying to recover from a setback. Use your goals like building blocks that you can stack one on top of the other. Setting a time line with some reasonable deadlines will help keep you on track.

No one's life is perfect or predictable. Despite our best efforts we may not experience the trip of life that we planned. We can't take charge of details such as bad weather, detours and roadblocks. We can, however, take charge of the choices we make about how to handle them. Each of us has been given our own internal GPS. Our job is to listen to our minds and hearts to hear what our internal positioning system tells us to do and where it will lead us. Only then can we get where we really want to go.

Questions for Reflection

In what ways do I ever feel like the life I'm experiencing is not the life I planned?

Am I feeling "stuck" in a job or a personal relationship?

As I work on my Life Plan, here are things to consider:

My map – what are my goals and how will I reach them?

How does my internal GPS speak to me about the direction my life is taking?

How good am I at listening and readjusting my course as needed?

My driver's license: How is my credibility in my personal and professional life?

What steps could I take to earn more credibility where needed?

What and who are my detours?

How far off track are they taking me in reaching my goals?

Rather than thinking of it as a dead end, how can I maneuver the detours to get where I want to go and be who I want to be?

Am I taking care of myself in mind, body and spirit?

Is my life in balance? If not, what steps can I take?

If I'm ready to get unstuck, here are the questions I must answer:

What attitudes and behaviors do I want to change?

What is the outcome I want to see?

What steps must I take to make the change happen?

How will I have to think and act differently, and what attitudes and behaviors will I have to change, to get the results I want and



CHAPTER 12

Don't Get Your Wires Crossed.

Don't Get Your Wires Crossed.

Throughout my entire childhood my parents constantly preached about safety issues. In our younger years my siblings and I got the basics. Don't run with scissors, don't throw pencils, don't pet stray dogs and don't talk to strangers. When we became teenagers the list got more serious. Don't drive too fast, don't drink and drive, don't hang out with bad kids, and don't play the stereo so loud because you will be deaf by the time you're 30. No matter how old we were, however, they never wavered on their admonishments to be very careful around electricity. There were three primary rules in this category:

1. Never use an electrical appliance too close to water.
2. Never touch electrical wiring unless absolutely necessary.
3. Never use a fork to retrieve anything stuck in the toaster.

While all three of these rules made sense to me, I have to admit that I forgot to heed Rule # 3, but only once. I never made that mistake again! Even though Les and I didn't know each other when we were growing up, he got the same basic safety advice from *his* parents. So when we married after college graduation we were in total agreement about what we wanted to teach our own children about making safe choices.

One of our favorite wedding presents was an electric blanket. What a luxury it was to turn on that blanket a few minutes before we got into bed on a cold winter night so the sheets would be

warm and cozy! Even better, this blanket had dual control units so we could individually regulate the temperature settings on our respective sides of the bed. I usually kept my dial set on “3” and Les kept his at “1”.

Because Rule # 2 (Never touch electrical wiring unless absolutely necessary) had been drilled into me as a child, it took me a long time to feel safe sleeping under an intricate maze of electrical wires, separated from them by only by a thin layer of fuzzy cloth. I finally got used to it, although I was extremely nervous the first time I washed that blanket. I kept thinking about Rule # 1: Never use an electrical appliance too close to water. Now I was supposed to put this mass of electrical wires into my washing machine, get them totally saturated, put them in the dryer, put the blanket back on the bed and then plug it in to an electrical socket! As Les and I made the bed that night, I made sure that he was prepared to call “911” if necessary.

Busily talking about our day and what the kids were up to, we failed to pay attention to one small detail. As we reached for the wires under the bed to plug our controls back into the blanket, we didn’t realize that our wires had somehow gotten crossed. That meant that my controls were plugged into Les’ side of the blanket and his controls were plugged into my side.

Since it was a particularly cold evening I quickly turned my control unit from “3” to “5.” A few minutes passed and I still didn’t feel

any warmer, so I turned my dial up to “7.” Still nothing. Finally, around 3 a.m. I spun the dial up to “10.” About five minutes later Les threw back the covers, jumped out of bed and in a very distraught voice said, “I must have a fever. I’m burning up!”

“That’s strange,” I mumbled sleepily. “I’m freezing.”

It only took us a minute to figure out what had happened and to fix the problem. Ever since then, the phrase “we got our wires crossed” has held special significance for us. Recalling that night is always good for a laugh. If we apply the concept to communication today, however, it’s not such a laughing matter. But it’s certainly easy to see why communication breaks down and people get their wires crossed in our busy world.

In today’s competitive global environment management and staff in every company large and small are expected to work harder, smarter, faster and better – often with fewer resources and fewer people. Employees are feeling overworked and overwhelmed and stress is on the rise. Without a doubt, this scenario doesn’t apply only to the workplace, but to our personal lives as well.

People are busier than ever. They run households, volunteer in their churches, schools and communities, go back to school to continue their educations, and work part-time or full time while managing the responsibilities of paying the bills, raising and educating their children and caring for their aging parents. Some

are raising their grandchildren. And that's only part of the picture. But I'll stop there so I won't increase your stress level any further.

It's no wonder that communication at personal and professional levels begins to suffer when people think, "Who has time to *communicate*? There's too much *work* to be done!" While they may be right, unless communication can flow smoothly more and more wires will get crossed and things will only get worse. So how can we uncross those wires that can lead to misunderstandings, anger, frustration, resentment, low morale, less productive days at work and at home, and physical ailments related to increased stress levels? Here are some ideas to consider.

First and foremost, don't ever assume that people know you as well as you know yourself. No one in your family or in your workplace is a mind reader, so don't expect them to know what you want, what you need or what is important to you – unless you convey that information to them in some form or other.

Granted, some people will know you better than others as there are different levels of "knowing" in any relationship. Les and I have been married for 50 years and we definitely know a lot more about each other than we did when we walked down the aisle all those years ago. But we still can't read each other's minds – although every married couple would agree that's a very good thing!

We continue to work on our relationship as we keep each other updated on our daily activities and our ever-evolving needs, goals, hopes and dreams. We talk about what worries us, what brings us joy, and what we do or say that causes the other one to feel hurt, angry, frustrated or disappointed. We share our successes and our failures. Our relationship isn't perfect because it's between two *imperfect* people. We still get our wires crossed every now and then. But we keep working at it.

We're also working on doing a better job of expressing our needs and concerns to our grown children. So often we tend to see each other in the same role, no matter how old *we* are and how old *they* are. It takes adjustment on both sides to maintain healthy and loving relationships when everyone involved is an adult.

Young children rarely get their communication wires crossed because they have such simple ways of expressing their needs to adults and to each other. While their methods may not always be appropriate as compared to grown-up behavior, we can learn a lot from watching them.

As adults we inadvertently complicate communication problems, add to them, and even create problems that didn't exist before we got involved. One of the biggest dilemmas we create for ourselves and others is that we speak before we think. We react *emotionally*

before we take time to reflect *logically* on the best way to handle a situation or a conversation. Before you express your opinions to others, these suggestions may help keep you out of trouble.

1. Get your anger under control before you speak. Some people think that being “brutally honest” can clear the air and straighten out misunderstandings. While most people can benefit from honest communication, it doesn’t need to be *brutal* – which is defined as *cruel, mean, harsh, callous, merciless* and *unkind*. Think about it. Why would anyone appreciate being spoken to in such a way?

Because of their overly aggressive nature some people don’t know how to be honest *without* being brutal. But that’s really a limitation or weakness of their style and may have nothing to do with the recipient of their brutally honest comments. It does, however, have a *lot* to do with their ability to sustain friendships and relationships at work and at home.

2. Don’t exaggerate. Avoid phrases that begin with the words “You always...” and “You never...” When you do this, your listener immediately begins thinking defensively, “Well, I don’t always do that.” Once this happens they are no longer listening to you. They have tuned you out in self-defense and you have lost them. More importantly, you’ve also lost credibility that is often very difficult to recover and reestablish.

3. Choose your words carefully. Once they are spoken aloud you can never take them back. Even if you apologize, the words have been heard and the damage has been done. That phrase “forgive and forget” is a lovely one. It truly is. But the nature of our humanity is that although we can choose to forgive someone who has caused us pain, it is almost impossible to forget. Think about that fact as you are choosing your words before you speak.

4. Give the other person time to absorb what you have said. Don't make demands. Talk rationally about what you need or want to happen. While sharing your thoughts is important, don't spend so much time *telling* that you leave no time for *listening*. For a dialogue to take place at least two people must be present, and that means both people get a chance to talk.

This also means that when the other person is talking, you are actively listening instead of thinking ahead to what you will say when it's your turn to talk. If that happens and you do speak again, your interpretation could be off track because you weren't tuned in. At that point, don't be surprised when an exasperated friend, coworker or family member sighs and asks, “Weren't you even listening? Didn't you hear a word I said?”

It may be quite a challenge to get those wires uncrossed. Rephrasing until you can agree on what the other person *said* and what you *heard* is a good place to start. Listening with your *eyes* for body language and facial expression, as well as listening with your *ears* for the words that are spoken and the *tone* in which they

are spoken can help untangle those wires more easily and safely with less stress for all.

Countless books have been written about ways to improve your communication skills, so I don't plan to write another one here. If you want to learn more, there's a wealth of information available at your local bookstore. An invaluable resource is your local library, where your financial investment in lifelong learning (on any subject you choose) is a dollar or two for your own library card.

Life today is filled with challenges, obstacles and problems – many of which are totally out of our control. Thankfully, our ability to keep the lines of communication open and honest is totally *within* our control. In order for that to happen, we must each take personal responsibility for making sure our wires don't get crossed.

Questions for Reflection

When have I gotten my wires crossed when communicating with someone else?

What was the outcome when I tried to fix the problem?

Did I try to fix it? If not, why not?

In what instances have I assumed that people know my needs and wishes without sharing that information with them?

How has my communication changed with my children as they have gotten older?

Do we still see ourselves stuck in the roles of parent and child, even though the children are now adults themselves?

Do I take time to get my anger under control before I speak?

Am I one of those people who believes that being “brutally honest” can help a relationship or fix a problem?

If I've tried that approach, how did things turn out?

Do I tend to exaggerate with words like "always" and "never"?

Do I think before I speak?

Do I choose my words carefully, knowing I can't take them back?

Do I listen carefully while the other person is speaking?

Can I accept feedback that may hurt but may also be helpful?

Are there any people to whom I owe an apology because of things

I've said in the heat of anger?

Did my words impact our relationship?

Is there something I can do to repair the damage?

What is the first step I can take and when will I take it?



CHAPTER 13

Dance Class 101

Dance Class 101

In the last semester of my senior year of college I was lacking one Physical Education credit needed to graduate. Although I begged my counselor to let me take another Psychology class instead, he assured me that wasn't possible. I had two choices. I could earn the required P.E. credit or I could inform my parents that I would not be graduating on schedule. Since I was the first of their four children to attend college and there were three more to educate after me, I had no doubt that they expected me to finish on "the four year plan."

Because I wasn't a big fan of P.E. in the first place, I decided to choose a class that sounded like fun and would also provide me with a skill I could use throughout my life. Although I didn't go on to become a world famous dance artist, I learned a lot about leadership – and life – in the unique environment of Dance Class 101.

In the ever-evolving roles of men and women over the years, much has changed. Women can now vote, buy and sell property, have children AND a career, and make decisions for themselves in all areas of their lives. On the dance floor, however, some traditions haven't changed. The protocol remains the same. Just like it was in the sixth grade, the boy still leads and the girl still follows. At the University of Southwestern Louisiana the rules in Dance 101 were different – out of necessity.

Since we didn't have any guys in the class, each girl had to take a turn and assume the role of the male partner for part of the semester. While this worked well for me during the first half of the semester, the second half was a different story. In fact, it threatened to seriously damage my social life at parties.

At some point during each "slow song" my dance partner (usually some cute fraternity guy I was trying hard to impress) would look at me, grin, and ask, "When do I get a turn to lead?" How embarrassing! Thankfully, my tale of woe about Dance 101 was believable enough to get me off the hook and save me from further humiliation. I learned a lot about leadership during that class, including some lessons I share with audiences across the country.

As a leader in your organization, you may often feel overworked and overwhelmed. How many times have you wished there was someone on your team who could take on more responsibility and help lighten your load? As you look around you don't see anyone who's ready. Look harder. Perhaps you're overlooking people with great potential, some of whom would welcome more responsibility. Maybe you haven't been tuned in to the question they've posed through their words and actions. "When do I get a turn to lead?"

You don't have to be in charge of keeping all those balls in the air simply because you're a leader. That's not good for your heart, your blood pressure, your spirit or your emotional well-being.

Just because you *can* do it all, doesn't mean you *should* do it all or you *have* to do it all.

Delegation skills are important when it comes to tasks, but you must also be secure enough in your own leadership role to delegate responsibility and authority as well. Once their skills are in place, employees want to feel empowered to do their jobs without having to check in with you at every turn. Unfortunately, that's not always how it happens.

While visiting a friend in the hospital I decided to have breakfast in the cafeteria. The "Special" that morning was scrambled eggs, hash browns and sausage. When I politely told the woman behind the counter that I'd like to substitute bacon for sausage she quickly replied, "Oh, I can't do that. I have to check with my manager first."

Not wanting her to get into trouble on my account, I assured her that would be fine and asked if she could call the manager over to get permission. With an embarrassed sigh she answered, "Oh, she hasn't come in yet. And I can't decide that on my own." How's *that* for feeling empowered?

Your reputation for good service depends in part on your employees' abilities to make decisions when you're not around. So you must be able to let go and give them a chance to perform – and to shine. Will they always get it right the first time? Probably not. Dance Class 101 gave me a new appreciation for those boys

in the sixth grade who had to work up the courage to ask girls to dance and then try to lead well enough to keep from embarrassing themselves – all without any guidance, direction or support. Life in the workplace can be like that.

The future will demand that all employees learn new skills outside their areas of expertise and use them to support other team members, even when it's not part of their job. As their leader your job is to encourage them by asking questions, listening and tuning in to their needs. Only then will you be able to hear the unspoken question being asked by at least one person (and probably more than one) on your team. “When do I get a turn to lead?”

People in your personal relationships may be asking the same question. Perhaps a spouse, friend or relative is patiently waiting his or her turn to make a decision – about anything! From something as simple as choosing a restaurant for dinner to more important decisions such as planning the next vacation or buying another car, people want to be involved and included. If you're feeling overwhelmed at home, try letting someone else make some decisions (as appropriate) and then allow them to follow through. Give someone else a turn when you can. They will benefit and so will you.

As a parent, it's often difficult to give someone else a turn because it's your job to make wise decisions for your children until they

are old enough to make them for themselves. (Of course they will *never* be as *smart* as you are, but they *will* get older!) Then it's time to cut the strings, let them make their own decisions and run their own adult lives – for better or worse.

That's not always easy – especially when you've done your best to set a good example and model good decision making for them. At times you have to watch with feelings of helplessness when they make poor decisions on their own. And you will feel proud and grateful – and sometimes surprised and relieved – when you see them make good decisions and realize that your efforts have not been in vain. They really *were* paying attention!

On a trip to the park our grandson Hudson saw a teenager showing off for his friends with a dangerous stunt on his bicycle. Hudson stated, quite matter-of-factly, “That's not a safe choice.” He was four years old at the time. His parents, our son Steven and his wife Catherine, have taught their boys about safe choices. And Carter and Hudson, bless their hearts, have been listening so far.

Will they always make smart decisions? Probably not. Hopefully my prayers for ALL our grandchildren – Henry, William, Caroline, Carter and Hudson – will help. I think it's written somewhere that's what grandmothers are supposed to do.

As a parent or guardian it's always hard, and sometimes even heart wrenching, to watch your adult child suffer the resulting consequences of poor choices. Parents often pay the price as well. It may come in the form of anger, hurt, disappointment, feelings of betrayal and many other emotions that don't make your heart feel very good. But that's how kids learn. Come to think of it, that's pretty much how we all learn, isn't it?

Last night I tuned it to watch *Dancing with the Stars*. My reputation from Dance Class 101 has obviously preceded me, as I haven't yet received the phone call inviting me to dance on that show. But it sure is fun to watch! The costumes are spectacular and the intricate dance moves are mesmerizing. What impresses me most are the clips of the "behind the scenes" rehearsals that go on for hours and hours. Professional dancers work hard to teach "the stars" all the right moves, and their students work even harder to learn those moves. The end results are truly amazing.

I've noticed that while each couple is performing, if the woman is the professional dancer in that twosome ... the girl finally *does* get a turn to lead. And that makes my heart feel *very* good!

♥ *Questions for Reflection*

Which classes in high school or college did I enjoy?

Which did I dread and dislike?

How have I applied any of the skills I learned in those classes to my life up to this point?

Am I feeling overworked and overwhelmed at the present time?

Is it happening in my personal life or my professional life?

Is it happening in both?

How is that affecting my mental and physical stability?

As I look around, who else is available to help lighten my load?

Is there someone with potential who would welcome more responsibility?

Have I been ignoring the signals someone is sending: “When do I get a turn to (fill in the blank) ?”

How can I get better at delegating tasks along with responsibility and authority as well?

As a parent, how am I teaching my children to make their own decisions along with safe choices appropriate for their ages?

Am I modeling good decision making for them?

How am I handling things differently if they are now adults?

Do they tell me I'm still trying to run their lives?

How do I deal with that and what could I do differently?

Have any of my children made poor choices and bad decisions that caused me to feel hurt, disappointed, angry or betrayed?

How did I handle that situation and how is my relationship with my adult children now?

When I do have a chance to lead, do I give it my best?

What steps can I take to make positive changes in these areas?



CHAPTER 14

Open a Window.

Open a Window.

Before we moved to our current home a few years ago, we made some major renovations to the home in which we had lived for 27 years. We knocked down walls and put up new ones, pulled up the carpet, laid down hardwood floors and totally updated the kitchen with new wallpaper and all new appliances. It was quite an extensive project and we were delighted with the results. A few years earlier I had taken on a much smaller renovation project of my own. It proved to be equally as rewarding but for a very different reason.

To do my job as a motivational speaker and humorist I have to travel to wherever my clients are holding their conferences, conventions, workshops and church retreats. In the 25 years that I've been in this business, none of my clients has ever come to me.

It never made sense to spend the money to rent office space when no one would ever see it. Add to that spending more money on gasoline to get to work, only to find I've left valuable files at home. And I really do enjoy working from my home office. No matter how bad the traffic is, or how nasty the weather may turn that day, all I have to do is walk down the hall with my coffee cup in hand and I'm at work!

Although I do have dependable people who help me with various projects, my team is a virtual one. My web designer, graphic

artist and office assistant are located across the country. Members of my Board live in six different states. The only employees on site are my local office assistants, Katie and Abby (our Maltese pups). They provide me with excellent company and diversion, and they don't monopolize the phone with personal calls during business hours.

When Jennifer left for college I decided to upgrade my office space and move from my cramped guest room quarters into her spacious bedroom. The only problem with her room was that the windows were high and narrow. No matter where I positioned my desk in that room, all I had staring back at me was a blank wall. Not a very inspirational setting for an inspirational speaker!

So I set out on a research trip to Home Depot and Lowe's to buy the largest window I could find. Imagine my delight when I located a window that measured six feet tall and nine feet wide. Once I had it installed, I would have much more than a *window*. I would have an entire *window wall*.

I'll never forget the look on my dear husband's face that night at dinner when I explained my plan to hire a carpenter who would knock down an entire load-bearing wall and replace it with a window. That would, of course, also necessitate new sheetrock work as well as new paint, crown molding and carpeting.

The good news, as I quickly explained, was that I would pay for the project out of my office budget and it wouldn't cost Les

a dime. As a lifelong banker, this news pleased him immensely. I hired a carpenter and the project was completed in a relatively short time. Now I could hardly wait to walk down the hall each morning into my new office so I could enjoy the view of the world that my window wall had opened up for me. And what a view it was!

Although my office may look very different than the one in your workplace, we have more in common than you may think. Even if you don't have your own office, we still share a common challenge in that we all enjoy some parts of our jobs more than others. My job brings with it the excitement of traveling to interesting places to present keynotes and workshops and make new friends all over the country.

I enjoy the creative writing process and I'm always working on my next book. While I take my laptop along with me, most of my writing takes place in my office at my computer. That is also the place I create new material for my keynotes, work on my stories, answer emails, make phone calls and attend to the myriad of other duties that are part of my job. I have to admit that I don't enjoy the days when I'm in the office feeling trapped at my computer.

Since I can't eliminate that part of my job, I found a way to make my job more enjoyable by "opening a window" and adding my window wall. And what simple yet delightful daily pleasures I experienced as my window wall opened the outside world to me!

Whether the sun was shining brightly or rain was pouring down, I had a front row seat overlooking our huge back yard with its magnificent oaks and tranquil gardens. During that first spring a cardinal made her nest in the twisted vines of an old wisteria bush right outside my window. Although she couldn't see into my office, I could see directly into her nest, which was within 12 to 15 inches of my chair. I watched her build that nest, twig by twig, and then keep those tiny eggs warm for weeks and weeks until her babies hatched. She fed them and nurtured them and never lost patience with the process – or with them.

Watching her reminded me of the need for patience and determination on a project of my own that I had been procrastinating about for quite some time. Simple lessons learned from paying attention to the simple things in nature and in life – all good for the heart.

I mentioned feeling trapped sometimes. Do you ever feel “trapped” in your job, especially if you're doing the work of several people, with fewer resources, on a smaller budget? Are you worried about restructuring and downsizing? Maybe you're dealing with difficult coworkers and customers who don't appreciate you.

Have you noticed that although you're getting enough sleep and exercise and eating healthy meals, you still don't have the energy you need to do your job well? Has your *comfortable* job become a *boring* job? Are you going through the physical motions even though you “checked out” from your job – mentally and

emotionally – some time ago? Maybe you can't knock out a wall and replace it with a window. No doubt most companies would not be happy if every employee did that! So what can you do instead to “open a window” in your professional life right now?

And what about your personal life? Even though you may have plenty of windows in your home that offer great views, maybe you're feeling trapped in an unhealthy relationship. Or you're feeling isolated at home with young children during the day, starved for adult conversation and missing your friends at work. Even after all these years I still remember how that feels.

When Steven was born, I left my job as office manager of a small law firm to be a stay-at-home mom for a while. I wanted to give Steven a good start and I didn't want to trade those days of being with him as he discovered the world. I told myself I would know when it was time for me to return to work. My first clue came when Steven was about 18 months old and it wasn't even his fault, bless his heart.

One morning it dawned on me that I was structuring my day and planning to finish my housework, run my errands, do the grocery shopping and get dinner ready so I would be free to watch *Sesame Street* with Steven at 3 o'clock. While it was a wonderful bonding experience, I soon became aware that I was looking forward to spending time with Grover, Big Bird and Cookie Monster more than Steven was! It was definitely time to get back into the adult world.

My boss was desperate enough to take me back for two mornings a week. This schedule gave me flexibility and gave Steven the opportunity to interact with other children at the pre-school down the street from my office. As Michael and Jennifer came along later, I was able to work out the same arrangement of working part-time a few mornings a week. I'm fully aware of what a gift that was, and that not every parent is blessed with such choices. If your choices are limited at the moment, what can you do to "open the window" in your personal life right now?

You may not be able to remodel your workplace or your home, but with a bit of fine-tuning you can remodel your outlook as it relates to your circumstances. Begin by finding some creative ways to put more joy back into your life. What do you do – just for you – that brings you joy? If you're staring blankly into space and nothing is coming to mind, that is not a good sign! But you're not alone.

When I ask audience members why they're no longer doing the things they used to enjoy, they shout out the same answer in unison. "Not enough time." We're all busy people. But no matter how busy we are, we can make time to do something that brings us great joy and helps us recreate the spirit we need to give our best every day. The possibilities are endless. And quite often, they are right in front of you. How many times have you heard someone say that when God closes a door He opens a window? Look around. Perhaps He is opening a door – or a window – for you.

Questions for Reflection

In what types of renovation projects have I been involved?

Did I enjoy them or were they stressful, but with positive results?

Have I ever been involved in a personal renovation of my attitude or behavior?

Did I enjoy it or was it a stressful process?

Were the results positive, and worth the effort?

Which parts of my “job” do I enjoy? (This term can include jobs like parenting as well as the job of a career.)

Do I ever feel trapped in a job that is no longer rewarding?

Has my comfortable job become a boring job?

Has a comfortable relationship become boring?

Am I feeling isolated?

How can I reach out to others?

What lessons have I learned from observing nature?

When did I realize it was time for a change in routine or lifestyle?

What have I done about it?

What is there still left to do?

Is my current attitude in need of remodeling or renovation?

What do I do for myself that brings me great joy?

If I answered “Nothing” what steps can I take to change that?

Where will I start? Who will be involved?

What will I do first? Who can help?

What changes can I make now to change my future?



CHAPTER 15

*Don't Just Sit There.
Do Something.*

Don't Just Sit There. Do Something.

Although I've spoken in numerous healthcare facilities across the country, I recently had the privilege of presenting a unique program for a hospital's annual luncheon. The guests of honor were women living with cancer. When I got the initial phone call to see if I had the date available, my first thought was that they probably wanted someone who could deliver serious content about a serious disease. So I asked the event planner, "You do know that I'm an inspirational humorist and not a medical expert, right?"

"Absolutely!" she replied, "that's why we want you! Laughter is one of the best medicines we have! And we already know the program we want you to deliver. *Mama Said There'd be Days Like This* is exactly the message these wonderful women need to hear!"

Walking into the room on the day of the program, I wasn't quite sure what to expect. What I immediately saw and heard was animated conversation and laughter from women who were obviously delighted to connect with old friends, make new ones and celebrate the joy of being together again.

As I made my way among the tables to introduce myself I could hear bits and pieces of their conversations. Were they talking about their treatments, side effects, struggles and daily challenges? Nope, not by a long shot. They were sharing news about their children and grandchildren, their summer vacations, how things

were going at work, and what damage they had experienced from a recent storm. Many of them wore wigs. Two women wore hats complete with flowers, feathers and miniature blinking lights. Over the next several hours I never heard one complaint – only positive girl-talk.

After my presentation many of them came up to me and took both of my hands in theirs. They thanked me for spending time with them and giving them the gift of my humor and stories. As I accepted their words of gratitude I was acutely aware that it was I who owed them thanks. Sometimes I can get so wrapped up in the duties, responsibilities and problems of everyday life that I forget how truly blessed I am. Without a doubt, hearing their laughter and seeing their positive spirit was an inspiration to this inspirational humorist.

I've had another opportunity to see this positive spirit on a more personal level with my younger sister, Kathy. She's living proof of what it takes to handle one of life's greatest challenges with wisdom, courage and a sense of humor.

In 2001 when she was halfway through the arduous process of earning her PhD, Kathy was diagnosed with breast cancer. In addition to working on her dissertation during that time period, she was carrying her own load of course work and also teaching several classes at the university. In fact, she had just returned from giving her students their final exam when she got the phone

call from her doctor. He asked her to come to his office the next morning so they could talk about the results of her mammogram.

Kathy needed a mastectomy and there was no time to waste, so she immediately set out to find the best surgeon in the area who specialized in breast cancer. She began to learn everything she could about the surgery to be fully prepared before and after the procedure. Talking to several friends and colleagues who had been through the experience helped her see what lay ahead and the best approach to take in handling it all. Doing research on the Internet enabled her to make more informed decisions.

She didn't become a passive victim and allow others to make her decisions for her. Instead, she took a very proactive role to make certain she had all the ammunition she needed to fight the greatest enemy she had ever encountered. Lifelong learning is important for us all. Kathy's learning was focused on doing everything within her power so she could *have* a long life.

After recovering from a very difficult and painful surgery Kathy began the arduous and grueling process of chemotherapy and radiation. Through it all her courage was unstoppable. She continued to learn everything she could to prepare for the aftereffects of each treatment and know how best to handle them. Even though her life was certainly filled with many more bad days than good ones, she never wavered in her determination to get well, complete the course work to earn her doctorate, get

back to teaching her students and get on with the life – and the dreams – she had in mind.

On days when she barely had the energy to get up from the sofa, she somehow managed to get herself to class so she wouldn't fall behind in her studies. I never once heard her complain. When she suffered through particularly rough days she would repeat the encouraging words her oncologist had shared with her.

“There's a light at the end of the tunnel ... and it isn't a train.”

No matter what happened, her sense of humor always came shining through. Losing her hair because of the chemotherapy, she joked that a “bad hair day” was infinitely better than a “no hair day.” Because Kathy is so passionate about teaching, as soon as she finished all of her treatments and was pronounced cancer-free she got right back into the classroom to be with her students.

I knew she would be OK when I got an email from her one day, right before she left for class to give her students their final exam. It read: “I'm a little bit nervous about giving this exam. You know the last time I gave a final exam, I got cancer.”

Watching Kathy fight and win her battle made me realize that there are no excuses when it comes to facing challenges in our lives. Instead of whining, complaining and playing the role of the victim while we wait for someone else to solve our problems and fix our lives, we have to get involved. We have to do more

than hope for the best. My Thesaurus defines hope as “trust, anticipate, wish, dream, and look forward to.” Did you notice that none of those are *active* verbs?

No matter what challenges we face and what obstacles are in our way, we have to give it – whatever it is – our best shot. Even though there's nothing wrong with accepting help from others, as adults we are ultimately responsible for meeting our own needs and doing whatever it takes to survive. There are many forms of survival – physical, financial, emotional and spiritual. We all have to fight different kinds of battles – of the body, the mind, the heart, the spirit and the soul.

My baby sister is tall and thin with dark curly hair, fair skin and big blue eyes. Although she doesn't fit the physical description of a fighter, she truly is a warrior who fought hard and won. While there are not many things we can count on in this life, there are two things I know for sure. Kathy will always be my baby sister, and she will always be my hero.

Questions for Reflection

When have I attended an event, not knowing what to expect?

Did it turn out to be a positive or negative experience?

What did I learn from it?

Which have been my greatest challenges in my career?

Did I react as a passive victim or did I get actively involved in meeting the challenge?

What challenges have I faced in my personal life?

Did I react as a passive victim or did I get actively involved in meeting the challenge?

How did I reach out to others for help and support?

What did I learn and what would I do differently next time?

What changes in attitude and behavior could help me in the future?



CHAPTER 16

*Are There Squirrels
in Your Attic?*

Are There Squirrels in Your Attic?

This may seem like a really weird chapter title, but it definitely relates to a situation in which we all find ourselves at some point in our lives. Have you ever chastised yourself, head in hands, when a small problem has gotten out of control and become a big problem? Think about the last time that happened to you. As you're remembering the moment, along with the reason for your frustration, do any of these phrases sound familiar?

“If I'd handled this, I wouldn't be in this predicament.”

“Why did I ignore what was happening?”

“Why didn't I DO something?”

“What was I *thinking*? And now what do I do?”

The frustrating part of this scenario is the realization that had you addressed the problem earlier you would not be in the predicament you're in now. When the problem takes the form of a problem person and the resulting difficult behavior, we usually end up expending a lot of time and energy on it. And that's time and energy that could be spent on something a lot more interesting, rewarding, satisfying, or fun.

Les and I live in a neighborhood filled with majestic oak trees. That's not unusual because most of Baton Rouge (as well as

most of Louisiana) is filled with them. It's part of the beauty of our state. Our subdivision is called Oak Ridge and we live on Plantation Oaks Drive. Get the picture? When you have lots of oaks you also have lots of squirrels – which is usually not a problem. Notice I said “usually.”

Our Oak Ridge squirrels spend their days leaping from limb to limb, suspended in mid air just long enough to make me catch my breath and wonder if they will make it to the next landing spot. They always do. Over the years we've taken pleasure in the show that the squirrels put on for us, but we've always enjoyed that show from a distance. We never had any intention to invite them into our home and into our lives. As it turned out, one particular squirrel had other plans.

Our troubles began in the quiet of an early morning when I noticed the pitter-patter of little feet above the ceiling in our kitchen. This particular noise worried me because as far as we knew, no one was actually *living* in our attic at the time. Les tried to convince me that it was the sound of a squirrel scampering across the roof, but it seemed closer than that to me. After Les dutifully climbed the stairs to the attic, looked around and found nothing unusual, I didn't give it another thought. Over the next several weeks as the *scampering* turned to *stomping*, we had to admit that something was definitely living in our attic. Les set some mousetraps but the traps remained untouched and the noise grew louder.

A few more weeks passed and I was getting desperate. So I gave Les an ultimatum. If he couldn't find out what was in the attic with a cursory check, perhaps he should sleep up there one night to get closer to the visitors so he could identify them. That suggestion really got him moving! His next search, definitely the most thorough of all, solved the mystery.

With flashlight in hand Les spotted our guests tucked in the far corner of the attic in a tiny space under the eaves. A crafty mother squirrel had entered our attic through a loose dryer vent on the roof, built a safe and cozy nest, and then proceeded to give birth to three babies. Her parenting plan obviously involved raising her family in our attic.

Because the squirrels were in such an unreachable spot, we called a pest control company whose employee delivered a cage. The plan was to humanely catch and release our furry tenants into the trees in our backyard. Well, that little plan turned out to be much harder than he said it would be! We tried a wide variety of foods to entice them into the cage, yet each morning Les found the same scene. The food was gone and the squirrel family was back in the nest – safe, warm and well fed by the delicious snacks we continued to provide for them.

It took quite a while to outsmart this smart mama and her little brood, but we were finally able to catch and relocate them to a park across town. Yes, we actually got in the car and drove several miles away from our own neighborhood. Don't laugh.

We were not over-reacting. This was on the advice of several experts who told us that squirrels have very good memories and would find their way back to our home if we didn't relocate them far enough away.

For months after that episode Les and I scrutinized every squirrel we saw, trying to decide if it looked familiar and if our visitors had returned. So far, they haven't. I wish them well and trust that they are living the good life ... far away from our house in that park across town.

Reflecting on that experience, it's obvious that Mama Squirrel didn't *intend* to create problems for us. She was simply following her instinctual behavior by finding a safe place to make her nest and raise her babies. Unfortunately, part of her instinctual behavior also included chewing through some electrical wiring in the attic and causing us more expensive problems. Because we didn't take action when we first noticed the problem, what began as a minor issue eventually became a major one.

How might this story apply to your life at the moment? If you're in the workplace, let's go there first. Is there a coworker or colleague whose instinctual behavior is creating problems – expensive or otherwise? Perhaps that behavior is negatively impacting your level of customer service, or making it difficult for you and others to do your jobs effectively and work together as a team.

What about your personal relationships? Is there a friend or family member whose instinctual behavior is causing difficulties for you or others? Are minor problems, not addressed, becoming major ones? Whether the person in question is part of your personal or professional life, how much longer can you afford to avoid the issue and make excuses for that behavior because the problem isn't big enough . . . yet?

While you are not accountable for others' behavior, you *are* accountable for addressing that behavior and setting boundaries when it negatively impacts you or the people for whom you are responsible. We don't have the power to change other people, but we do have the power to decide how their behavior will impact us and how we will respond. When dealing with difficult behavior, we always have options. We can choose to:

1. Ignore the problem and avoid the issue.
2. Make excuses.
3. Acknowledge the problem and take action.

If you choose the third option, remember that you can communicate what you need to say without being disrespectful. Do your homework. Stick to the facts instead of letting your emotions take over. Set boundaries and let others know they must respect those boundaries. If this process doesn't work like you hoped (remember, we can't change other people) you still have options. Sometimes ignoring the behavior helps, as others realize

you will no longer reward them for their behavior. Choose your battles carefully and decide if addressing the issue will result in the best outcome for you.

Even if you can't "relocate" the problem person (boss, coworker, customer, friend, parent, spouse, child, neighbor, committee member, etc.) you can still stand up for yourself and set boundaries as necessary and appropriate. One option may be to "relocate yourself." If you're in a job you detest, working with people you don't respect, for a company whose values are not in alignment with yours, you have options. If you're in an unhealthy relationship without safe, secure and respectful boundaries, in which you feel drained of energy in mind, body and spirit, you have options.

Les and I lost valuable time in solving our squirrel problem because one of my challenges was convincing Les that the noises I was hearing weren't my imagination. I would pull him into the kitchen, make him stand directly under the spot where I had just heard the noise and ask, "Do you hear that?" Of course he didn't hear it because the noise had stopped by the time I got him there to focus his attention on the problem. Then the squirrels would choose that exact moment to stop moving around.

Difficult people can be like that. When you let them know you will hold them accountable from now on, they may stop the offending behavior for a time and then revert back to their

normal style. Or they may work hard to change their behavior but still experience occasional lapses into the old behavior, despite their best efforts. We can encourage their learning of new behaviors by practicing patience and understanding and coaching them if they ask for help.

People can change if they choose to do so. Depending on the severity of the situation and the nature of the offending behavior, we may need to give them time to learn and incorporate new and more positive ways of behaving.

In your personal and professional relationships who are “the squirrels in *your* attic”? How can you handle their instinctual yet pesky behavior before it leads to more serious problems? Taking care of small problems before they become big problems is a good way to bless your heart.

Questions for Reflection

Who and what are the squirrels in my attic?

Which big problems (persons or situations) started out as small problems that got progressively worse over time?

Would addressing the problem person, behavior or situation any earlier have made a difference?

Why or why not?

Has the problem been resolved or is it ongoing?

In my workplace is a coworker's behavior negatively impacting our service, or our ability to work together as a cohesive team?

Is a friend or family member causing problems for me and others?

How do I choose to deal with others' difficult behavior?

Do I ignore the problem and avoid the issue?

Do I make excuses for the person's behavior or circumstances?

Do I acknowledge the problem and take action when it is my responsibility to get involved?

Am I able to communicate without being disrespectful?

If I answered “yes” – does feedback from others confirm or contradict my perception? If I don’t know, I need to ask.

When preparing to tackle a problem, do I stick to the facts instead of letting my emotions take over?

Have I done my homework to be prepared?

Do I set boundaries and let others know they must respect them?

Which other options may be appropriate, such as ignoring the behavior instead of giving it credence, choosing my battles, or relocating myself – physically or emotionally?

What are my options in my career?

What are my options in my personal relationships?

What steps can I take to begin to change my future?



CHAPTER 17

Virginia Hams and Family Reunions

Virginia Hams and Family Reunions

The end of summer always reminds me of our annual August pilgrimage to Daddy's birthplace in Wytheville, Virginia for the Barnett Family Reunion. We had such a fantastic time each summer as we reconnected with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. I learned a lot about storytelling during those vacations, as I spent hours listening to some of my Virginia relatives who were true masters of the art.

Traveling there and back was not nearly as much fun as the reunion itself. Without the luxury of air conditioning the 24-hour trip (each way) in our trusty station wagon was long and hot. But at least that extra third seat in back provided my brother and two sisters and me with our own window views and enough space to stake out our territory.

Like all siblings who've ever had to share the back seat, we drew that critical boundary line – you know the one I'm talking about – that imaginary line we drew down the center of the seat, daring anyone to cross it and threatening dire consequences if they did. Actually, those dire consequences usually were nothing more than tattling in our whiney voices, “Mama, she's over on my side again. Make her stoooooop.”

All things considered, we were generally cooperative and well behaved kids. We played the car games of our generation: “I spy,” counting 18-wheelers and seeing who could spot the most license

plates from different states. When we were younger we sang songs and colored in our new coloring books with our brand new crayons (bought especially for this trip, so we were forbidden to touch them until we got in the car to begin our journey).

As we got older we brought along mystery books and our cool transistor radios complete with earphones and lots of spare batteries. What a relief to get a break from those boring radio stations that our parents always chose.

Riding in the third seat was a unique experience because it faced backwards. Looking out the window, you couldn't see where you were going – only where you had been. That seat did have one big advantage. We were farther away from our parents, which meant they couldn't hear our bickering. So we didn't get into nearly as much trouble as our siblings in the second seat. The one major drawback was that after riding backwards for a while we would get dizzy. Knowing our propensity for getting carsick, as soon as one of us announced that we "weren't feelin' so good" Daddy would quickly pull over to the side of the road and rearrange our seating assignments.

Of course no trip to Virginia would have been complete without a visit to Lookout Mountain in Chattanooga, Tennessee. As the numerous birdhouses and barn roofs painted with that famous slogan along the highway encouraged us to do, we always stopped to "See Rock City." The caves, the swinging bridge and

the underground waterfalls never lost their appeal no matter how many summers we visited them. When I spoke at a conference in Chattanooga a couple of years ago I couldn't resist buying one of those birdhouses at the airport. It currently sits on a table on our back porch and every time I look at it, I smile. And smiling, as you well know, is good for the heart.

While the trip *to* the family reunion was definitely part of our fun experience, the trip *home* was a totally different story. Since my father had been away from his business for two weeks, he was anxious to get back to it. He always hired someone to come and stay at the house to answer the phone, take messages and call him if any emergencies arose. But without the tools of technology we have today – the Internet and email and cell phones – Daddy really felt out of touch. That's because he was.

On the appointed morning we would hug and kiss all the aunts and uncles, say our final farewells and pile into the car, knowing there would be no stopping at Rock City on the way home. Bathroom breaks and meal stops would also be minimal. The fun parts of the trip were over and the ride home was to be endured, not enjoyed. Unfortunately, the breakfast our Aunt Nancy had so lovingly prepared always added to our problem.

Freshly squeezed orange juice, ice-cold milk, scrambled eggs, sliced yellow tomatoes (a favorite at any Barnett family breakfast), homemade biscuits and Virginia ham made for quite a feast. We

were instructed to eat everything on our plates so as not to hurt Aunt Nancy's feelings. (It's that Southern thing again).

The only problem was that Virginia hams are cured with salt. Lots and lots of salt. Within an hour of being on the road in that un-air-conditioned car we were all so thirsty we could hardly stand it. Since this was long before the days of disposable water bottles there was no reprieve in sight. We had to hope and pray that Daddy would take pity on us and stop at a service station for a soft drink before we all died of thirst. As we got older and tried to look out for each other, we would whisper a warning at Aunt Nancy's breakfast table while Daddy wasn't looking. "Hey, remember, DON'T eat the ham!"

While Daddy was anxious to get home, we kids were definitely ready to get home, too – not to the business, but to the air conditioning! By the time we were 50 miles from home all of us were whining and complaining about a myriad of sibling injustices taking place in the second and third seats. Hot and bothered, tired and cranky, we had morphed from happy kids on a fun vacation to irritating passengers who were no longer interested in being nice to each other in any way, shape or form.

Our parents handled our negative behavior and dealt with the situation in totally different ways. After dutifully listening to four conflicting renditions of the same story our dear mother would cajole, bargain and plead with us to behave. Turning around to

face us, she would try to *enlighten* us by *explaining* in great detail *why* we should behave.

When my mother finally gave up, sighed, rolled her eyes and shook her head helplessly, my father took over. His approach was quite different. Daddy didn't *explain* anything in great detail as to *why* we should behave. When it came to bad behavior, Daddy didn't waste time *enlightening* his children. Naturally, he couldn't turn around to face us because he was driving. Yet he handled the situation quite well, year after year, trip after trip.

His eyes never left the road and his hands never left the steering wheel as he looked in the rearview mirror and made eye contact with all four of us at once. When he had our undivided attention he spoke one simple yet distinct sentence in a calm and clear voice.

“Don't make me have to stop this car.”

Talk about an instant attitude adjustment! All four of us knew he meant business and our collective behavior immediately improved.

If you're laughing now, I have no doubt it's because you're thinking back to younger days when you, too, were in that car! Life today can be just as stressful as a long, hot road trip. In the workplace departments are short-staffed and everyone is working harder than ever before, often in close quarters. Problems arise.

Colleagues and coworkers sometimes make mistakes. Unhappy customers can be demanding and unreasonable. Days are long and patience is in short supply. Thankfully, most employees handle these challenges as true professionals because they understand what's expected. But every team usually has at least one whiner or complainer on board.

If you are in a leadership position, it is not your job to parent your employees. Once in a while, however, you may encounter a difficult staff member who creates problems for the rest of the team. You can then choose to handle problem behavior like my mother or my father did on those family vacations.

My siblings and I whined, complained and tattled on each other to get attention, knowing Mama would eventually give in and we would get what we wanted. Are you aware of any tactics your difficult employees are using to manipulate you so you will give in and they can get what they want?

To be an effective leader you must take a direct, calm and firm approach just as my father did with us. First, remove the emotion from the situation so you can deal with the facts. It's easy to get caught up in whatever emotion is clouding the issue. When that happens you lose control of your ability to respond in a logical, rational manner. Whiners have excellent memories, and they enjoy complaining about situations that happened long ago. Don't get stuck in the past. Help them focus on the present problem and how to resolve it.

Be careful of employees who start every conversation with the phrases “You always...” and “You never...” Those absolutes are rarely accurate. Complainers like to get attention and build a stronger case by exaggerating. Make sure you don’t buy into their overly biased assessment. Focus on the problem behavior, not on who’s right and who’s wrong.

I’m sure you’ve already figured out that these skills can be used in your personal life, too! There are many similarities between work life and home life today. Although the physical environment doesn’t look the same, family budgets are tight and stress levels can run high. The best-laid plans for saving money often go astray when someone gets sick or the car needs major repairs. So many families struggle with the problem of “too much month left over at the end of the money.” Days and nights can be long. And every family usually has at least one whiner or complainer under their roof!

What’s different is that, unlike your leadership role in the workplace, it is your job to parent your children. And that can be hard when they don’t agree with the rules and the boundaries you set. Think about parenting teenagers. On some days parenting a teen makes the job of managing a difficult employee look like a piece of cake! If you’ve ever been the parent of a teenager you’ve no doubt gotten the same song and dance that every parent gets at one time or the other.

“You always.... (Fill in the blank)”

“You never.....”

“I’m the only kid I know who has to....”

“How come I can’t (fill in the blank) when all my friends can?”

“All my friends get to stay out later than I do.”

“I get the cheapest allowance of any kid in my class.”

“If you really loved me, you would.....”

“That’s not fair!”

“You’re mean!”

“I can’t wait until I’m old enough to move out, get my own apartment, and be on my own!”

(Try not to smile and nod too vigorously when you hear that one.)

My father didn’t believe in rewarding his children for negative behavior. On those family vacation trips it was not his job to keep us happy. His job was to get us there and back safely. No matter what seat we were in, our job was to keep distractions to a minimum so he could do his job. He didn’t make it complicated. Instead he simply made us understand that the difficult behavior had to stop.

We haven’t had a Barnett Family Reunion in quite a while now. Only one of Daddy’s five siblings is still living and he’s

in very poor health. I've stayed in touch with a couple of my favorite cousins and when we get together we have been known to reminisce long into the night about the eccentricities (that's putting it politely) of some of our family members who have passed on.

A few of them represent "the stuff of which legends are made." Well, I guess you could say they are family legends, anyway. Sharing many laughter-filled stories over their now famous antics and idiosyncrasies, we seem to end a lot of our conversations with the words "bless his heart" and "bless her heart." After all, we are kind and gracious Southerners and our parents raised us right.

I have no doubt that our children will have similar conversations about me after I'm gone. Les and I raised them right, so I hope they will be kind and gracious enough to bless MY heart as they talk about me. Actually, I'm doing more than hoping they will. I'm counting on it. I'm not proud. I'll take a blessing any way I can get it!

♥ *Questions for Reflection*

What memories do I have of family reunions?

Were they happy or unhappy ones, and why?

Where did we go and who was there?

Who were (are) my favorite aunts, uncles and cousins?

Who were (are) my least favorite, and why?

Which family trips or vacations were memorable, and why?

If I grew up with siblings, do I have happy memories of that?

(I understand that “yes” and “no” are both appropriate answers.)

How are my present relationships with them?

If I was an only child, what were the benefits and what did I miss?

How did my parents or those who raised me handle discipline?

Have I incorporated their methods or made some changes?

In my role as a leader, do I try to “parent” my coworkers and take on their issues when it’s not my responsibility?

How do I deal with whiners and complainers who try to manipulate me to get what they want?

Am I direct, calm and logical or do I “catch” others’ negative attitudes when it’s not my job to fix things?

How do I respond when people start their sentences to me with, “You always...” and “You never...”? Do I instantly tune them out (because they’re wrong) or do I try to listen objectively?

Is it difficult to stay calm and logical when communicating with my children – especially when they are teenagers?

What “guilt trips” do my children, and others, try on me?

Which ones have I regretted buying into – either then or later?

What did I learn and what can I do differently in the future?



CHAPTER 18

Broadway Bound

Broadway Bound

So as not to mislead you with this title, I must readily confess that I've never been – nor will I ever *be* – invited to star in a Broadway play. I've been a fan of Broadway, however, since I attended my first play almost twenty years ago. As I listen to the music of *Les Miserables* today I'm reliving that experience with great joy.

Broadway tickets are pretty pricey these days. On a much smaller (and more affordable) scale I've found that a good movie, like a good play, gives me a chance to lose myself for a few hours and be transported to another world – one that's usually a lot more glamorous and exciting than the one I inhabit in real life. I'm not complaining. But don't tell me you've never sat in a movie theater, lost in the drama or the action or the romance and asked, "Why can't that be *me*?"

Although we know that most movies are based on fiction, the best film writers possess the ingenious talent to create scripts that help us identify with the characters and make them so believable that we feel like we've known them forever.

On the way home from a really good (and totally believable) movie one evening, I started thinking about my life at this point in time. What would it *look* like and *be* like if I had written my own script? Wait a minute. I've been doing that since I was about

12 years old. And so have you, whether you think of it in those terms or not.

In fact, we each work from our own life script – our plan for how we think our lives should unfold and proceed. The key word here is *think* – because life doesn't always unfold and proceed like we *think* it should. We may not be in charge of a lot that happens to us, but we are in charge of what we *think* about it and how we decide to respond. Our life scripts definitely reflect our personalities. Likewise, our strengths and limitations influence the decisions and choices we make.

Can you imagine the confusion and chaos that would result if actors in the same movie or play were all reading from different scripts? Or what if someone kept rewriting and changing everyone else's lines without their permission? The end result could be a comedy or a tragedy, even though that isn't how the original production started out. Maybe you've noticed that life can be like that.

Certain people may *think* it is their responsibility to rewrite your script for you, often without your input or permission. That's actually a polite way of saying that they want to run your life for you. As an infant unable to care for yourself and make wise choices, having someone else run your life was a pretty good deal. If not much has changed since then, that's not such a good deal. Think about Raymond's mother on *Everybody Loves*

Raymond, and you'll know what I mean. If you have a "Marie" in your life, you may have some decisions to make about who is going to run that life from now on.

When you're ready to write your own script you'll have to take charge. You will need to become the main character – the STAR – not in a selfish, egotistical way but in a way that enables you to live your life, do your job, and make sure you are in healthy relationships. People who want to run your life are usually the same people, bless their hearts, who keep comparing you to others they deem more successful. And doesn't *that* make you feel special?

Because I speak at conferences in New York every year or so, I've been fortunate to see quite a few plays on and off Broadway. While I've enjoyed some more than others, I've never been disappointed by a single one. *Les Miserables*, with its cast of hundreds, magnificent costumes, superb musical score and a stage floor that actually *revolved* was my very first Broadway play. In my naiveté (or ignorance) I assumed *every* play I saw after that would be its equal. No matter which fabulous play and famous person I had the privilege of seeing, my response was always the same each time someone asked how I enjoyed the most recent play.

"Oh, it was good, but it wasn't *Les Mis*." I finally had to ask myself exactly how many plays I had starred in that gave me the

right to be so critical. The answer was ... zero. Do you sometimes feel like people are criticizing, comparing and judging you when they've never done your job, lived your life, or walked in your shoes?

Once you've made the decision to do so, how will you improve on the life you have now without comparing yourself to others? How will you expand your horizons to make your world more complete, if that's what you want? Making such changes means that you're ready to be more than someone's boss, employee, spouse, life partner, parent, child, family member or friend. While these can be important and extremely rewarding roles, you can be of greater value to yourself and others if you are balanced in mind, body and spirit. We can examine some areas here that may need some work, but only you can decide where you want to focus your efforts.

How's your personal life? Are you in healthy relationships? Do you feel safe from abuse of any kind? Are there rules and boundaries? Are there consequences if someone breaks a rule or crosses a line? Do you have judgmental people in your life, at work or at home? Negative and critical people who constantly discourage you and your efforts should be assigned a much smaller part in your new script.

And since you're writing the script you will have to set new boundaries, explain what you will not accept, and stick to your plan. It will take negative people a while to realize that you're

serious, but if you maintain consistency in your behavior they will eventually get the message.

How's your health? Do you make a concerted effort to eat wisely, exercise regularly, and get yearly checkups? Do you drink too much? Do you smoke? Do you "know your numbers" that pertain to your cholesterol and blood pressure? How about your family history? Are there genetic issues that may impact your own health if you don't take the necessary steps to be vigilant?

How's your intellectual life? Are you expanding your knowledge in areas of interest to you? Or are you one of those people who is too old, too tired, too busy, too stressed or too important to learn something new? If you're still breathing, you can still expand your mind and widen your intellectual horizons.

How's your social life? What? Did I just hear you say, "Social life . . . is she kidding?" I understand that it's easy to feel so exhausted at the end of a hard day that you're too tired to get together with family or friends. Perhaps it's even an effort to call someone on the phone to catch up. That can be perfectly OK, as long as it doesn't become such a routine habit that you begin to feel isolated from the people and activities you enjoy.

Maybe your weekends are filled with projects and chores that you couldn't get to during the week. That's OK too – as long as you allow yourself some time for fun and relaxation. Make sure

that ongoing “to-do” list doesn’t keep you from developing and nurturing important relationships that are rewarding for you.

How’s your professional life? Do you still enjoy what you do, or have you lost your passion for your work? Has your *comfortable* job become a *boring* job? Are you working with a fair and trustworthy organization whose values are in alignment with yours? Or are you embarrassed to give people your business card?

While it’s great to love your job and take pride in your accomplishments, it’s not healthy to allow your entire identity to be tied up in your work. Some people equate being busy and overwhelmed with work as being successful and important. But your job should not define 100% of who you are.

How are your finances? It’s certainly difficult to feel good about the other areas of your life if you’re plagued by financial stress and worry. What could you do to lessen the burden, make better and more responsible fiscal decisions and get on more solid financial ground?

How’s your spiritual life? I’m not recommending any particular religious affiliation here, although my faith is a very important part of my life. What are you doing for your spirit, your soul, the core of your being, and the very essence of what makes you who you are? It’s important to nurture your spiritual life in whatever ways make sense and feel right for you. If you feel

like something is missing in that part of your life, there's a lot you can do to change that if you are willing to take the first step. As the saying goes, "If you don't feel close to God, guess who moved?"

Is there JOY in your life? Since we're talking about scripts here, I must mention one of my favorite movies. *The Bucket List* contained many theological messages about end-of-life issues and quality-of-life issues. At one point in the movie Morgan Freeman's character tells Jack Nicholson's character he believes that when we all get to heaven we will be asked only two questions that matter:

1. Have you had joy in your life?
2. Have you brought joy to others?

Two very good questions, don't you think? Joy is important, and so is taking care of yourself, no matter *who* you are and where you are in your life's journey. If you're not happy or satisfied where you are, editing your life script will be hard work. But it won't be impossible. You will need courage to make some tough decisions, especially when you realize that some of your choices may not be easy. Once you decide how you want your life to be different you can begin to move forward to create the life you've earned – the life you want – the life you deserve.

In any play or movie, when successful actors are handed a new script they know they will have to work very hard to learn their

lines and master the part. They commit to spending countless hours practicing and rehearsing to pull the very best from within themselves and give the very best they have to make their performance a success.

Like them, you have to keep practicing and rehearsing to play your part if you want to be successful in reaching your goals. You will need to reach for the very best in yourself and give your very best to create the changes you want to see in your life. But you have one distinct advantage over those actors. They can only work with the script that someone else wrote for them. You have the power to write your *own* script.

It's your life. Take center stage ... and live it.

♥ *Questions for Reflection*

What are my favorite plays or movies?

How did they make me feel and what did I learn from them?

Am I the Main Character in my Life Script, making my own decisions and choices to the best of my ability?

Considering where I am in my life now, can I take credit for writing and editing my own Life Script over the years?

If not, who has been doing the writing – and making decisions about my life for me?

How is that working so far? Am I satisfied or ready for change?

Since editing any script is an ongoing process, what types of editing – or changes – would I like to work on now?

Do I compare myself and my life to others?

How does that make me feel? Does it move me to make changes?

Referring back to Jean's questions in this chapter, what changes would I like to make – or do I need to make – in the following areas?

My physical health:

My mental health:

My personal life:

My professional life:

My intellectual life:

My social life:

My spiritual life:

My finances:

The amount of JOY in my life:

I understand that there will be challenges, many of which I do not have the power to change or control. I may not be able to overcome some or all of them. But I do have the power to write my own script by the choices and decisions I make.

What plan will I create and when will I begin it? I can start with small steps and grow from there. What changes will I make to change my future?

It's my life. What will I do to take center stage... and live it?



CHAPTER 19

Don't Worry, It's Just a Phase.

Don't Worry, It's Just a Phase.

As our family gathered around the dinner table that night I was feeling quite proud of myself. Totally calm, with my plan in place, I had practiced my latest “I’m your mother, that’s why” speech while the kids were at school. I was ready. After hearing about the events of the day and talking about everyone’s plans for the weekend, I cleared my throat.

“OK, everybody. I have an announcement to make. You won’t like it and you won’t be happy about it, but here it is.”

Instant silence. Forks are suspended halfway between plates and open mouths. All eyes are on me. I take a deep breath. Here goes.

“Dad works hard at his job at the bank. You all work hard in school. I work hard, too, and that’s all good. What’s not good is how hard I have to work after you’ve all gone to bed, picking up all the stuff you’ve left all over the house. I’ve asked you over and over to pick up your things and take them to your room on your way to bed. But it’s not working. Do I look like your maid? Well, I’m not your maid. And I’m tired. Very tired. So here is my new plan, and it starts tonight.

After you go to bed I will pass through the kitchen, living room and dining room and pick up anything that belongs to

you. I will put your things in a laundry basket. When you want those things back, you will have to BUY them back from me. I don't care what it is. It doesn't matter if it's one of your school books, a notebook, a signed test paper you need to return, a football, a doll, or your favorite jacket or sweater.

Based on the amount of stuff I pick up around here every night and bring to your rooms after you've gone to sleep, I do know this. Your allowance money won't be enough. You'll have to do extra chores to earn more money so you can buy back all the stuff you need. So, that's it. That's my plan and it begins tonight."

Four-year-old Jennifer and eight-year-old Michael were both speechless. They looked stunned, shocked and alarmed. To my surprise, their big brother Steven (12) didn't appear to be the least bit concerned. In fact, when he noticed the looks on Jennifer and Michael's faces he turned to them and smiled. Then in a very calm voice he announced, "Don't worry. This is just a phase. It won't last long." My son, the analyst. Bless his heart.

As it turned out, Steven was right. (Don't you *hate* it when your kids are right?) My new plan lasted for about two weeks. During the first week I was very proud of myself and pleased at the progress our children had made. Everyone picked up his or her own stuff and the house stayed neat, clean and tidy.

Then I'm not sure what happened. Maybe they got lazy, or they thought I wasn't serious, or they decided to test me. It was probably all three, but by the second week they had spent all of their allowance money buying back their possessions.

Even though my buy-back prices were quite reasonable, the entire situation got to be a hassle. I started spending way too much time inventing chores they could do – so I could pay them – so they could pay me – to get their stuff back. After a while I moved on to a new plan but I learned something valuable from that experience.

Looking back on my role as a parent, some of my phases were definitely better than others. I can say the same thing about other areas of my life over the years. I've been happier with my life and myself in some phases and stages. And there were definitely times that were difficult, frustrating, sad, and even painful. Those were phases too, and by the grace of God I got through them. I'm sure you can relate, which brings me to the point of this story.

Throughout the pages of this book I've shared stories and ideas to encourage you to think about the phases of your life, past and present. I've also challenged you to think about your future. Maybe there are some major changes you want to make or need to make. Or perhaps your life is going along fairly well right now and all you need to do is a bit of tweaking and fine-tuning. Whatever you decide to do, I want you to think of yourself as an

artist working on an original. There is, after all, only one you. And you're definitely an original!

One of my favorite artists is Claude Monet, the French painter known as the father of Impressionism. When I've had the privilege of viewing his paintings at close range I can literally feel the energy and love he put into his work. There I stand, only inches away from the canvas on which he poured out his talent. I'm looking at the very canvas he touched. No matter how many times I experience it, that's always an awesome moment for me.

Although Monet struggled financially in the early stages of his career, the sale of his later works allowed him to buy property in Giverny. Some of the flowers in the magnificent gardens he created there were the inspiration for his best-known series, *Water Lilies*. While I don't own any of his works, one of Monet's quotes has stayed with me for many years.

“Tranquility is the first necessity if one is to work well.”

How true.

As I've worked on this book I've tried to follow Monet's advice and surround myself with tranquility, also defined as *calm*, *quiet*, *stillness*, *harmony* and *serenity*. That hasn't always been possible. I've written parts of this book exactly like I've written my other books – on airplanes and in airports and hotels all across the country. The very nature of my business calls for

travel, so I can't tuck myself away in a quiet little nook until my book is finished. Just like you, my life goes on and I have to do the best I can with what I've got.

Some of my colleagues have managed to create that tranquility of which Monet speaks. My friend Leslie left her home in Michigan one winter and moved to the beaches of Florida to write her book there. She brought her horse with her, and enjoyed daily rides along the shore as a reward for her hard work. Doesn't that sound tranquil? My friend Phil writes his books in his hometown in Kentucky, but he escapes from his hectic office and spends his writing days at a quiet cabin on a nearby lake. Like Monet, Leslie and Phil both created the tranquility they needed to work well.

And me? Let's see. While I was trying to create my own tranquil environment in which to write – without leaving home – we endured two more hurricanes. Our first generator gave out after five days. That meant we had to buy another one.

Our alternative was to live without electricity for five days. We chose to buy the generator. Oh, and I almost forgot to mention that we had house guests, too – my 86 year old mother, my sister Kathy and Truman, her 75-pound dog.

Tranquility? I don't think so.

I share this because you, like me, may not have the luxury of surrounding yourself with tranquility while you work on making the changes you want to make. It's difficult to figure anything out in the chaos and confusion of doing your job, raising your kids and working on your relationships, commitments and obligations while trying to maintain some semblance of a personal life. So you may need to find creative ways to carve out some quiet time.

How about trying a couple of these ideas? Trade your kids' play date times with a friend so you can have a few quiet hours to yourself. Go to work a little earlier or stay a while longer after everyone else has gone home. Use that quiet time to think, make notes, reflect and work on your plan. A quiet – and free – place to think and work is your local public library. Tranquility is guaranteed there because people *have* to be quiet. It's a rule! I understand that none of these ideas may work for you. My intent was to get you thinking about what *will* work so you can find the tranquility of time and place and *get* to work.

The second of Monet's quotes I want to share with you is this one. "Find the subject and capture its perfect moment." Monet often painted multiple studies of the same subject as the natural light and color changed throughout the day. Only then did he feel like he had captured that subject at its perfect moment.

Unlike his paintings, however, his later life was far from perfect. When he began work on 12 large canvases of water lilies, each

measuring 14 feet in width, he quickly realized that such large scale mural art was very different from his usual style. So at the age of 80, in poor health and virtually blind, he began to learn how to paint in a different way. Famous as he was, Monet didn't consider himself too old or too important to learn something new. His life was a constant transition from one phase to another.

And the two of you actually have a lot in common. Like Monet, your life is in a constant state of transition. Each phase reminds you that no matter how hard you try, your life will never be perfect. You face setbacks. People disappoint you. Bad things happen. Yet good things happen, too! If you searched for the perfect word to describe your past or present life, *tranquility* might not be at the top of your list. Maybe it wouldn't even be among your "top ten" choices. Not to worry. As you know, there's a lot more to life than the tranquil moments. In fact, I'll bet that some of the perfect moments in your life have not been tranquil at all.

While we're on the subject, how long has it been since you thought about some of the perfect moments in your life? If it's been a while, now might be a good time to do just that. Some of those moments may be fairly recent and others may go way back in time. As you're reflecting on those blessings, remember one important fact. Although you don't have power over everything that happens, you do possess the power to take what is good about your life and move forward.

No matter what you're up against, you can still remember and celebrate the perfect moments you've captured from the past. And you can look forward to perfect moments in the future – because there will be more of them. While those perfect moments may not last long, the memories can last forever. When all is said and done, cherishing those memories may be the best way of all to renew your spirit, pamper your soul and bless your heart.

That is my wish – and my prayer – for you.

Questions for Reflection

What plans have I come up with that sounded like good ideas at the time?

Were they good ideas? How did they work out?

In what phases and stages of my life have I been happy?

In which phases have I been unhappy, disappointed, frustrated or confused about myself or someone else?

Jean's stories have helped me reflect on my past and present life while considering changes I can make to change my future.

With that in mind, are there some major changes I want to make or need to make?

Am I satisfied with my life at present?

If I answered "no" what steps will I take to change what I can and accept what I have no power to fix or control?

If I answered "yes" is there some fine-tuning I can do to make things even better, or is it wise to leave well enough alone?

Who are my favorite artists and why do I like their work?

What are my favorite books and songs and why did I choose them?

(Jean's note: Famous artists and inventors, singers and song writers, actors and authors rarely achieve instant credibility. Many say it took years of hard work to become an "overnight success.")

Am I willing to work hard to make the changes I want to see in my life?

Where do I find my version of tranquility?

What can I do to create more harmony and serenity for myself?

What "perfect moments" in my life can I recall?

(Jean's note: This may seem hard at first, but it will happen. Write them down so you can enjoy reflecting on them at other times. Once you open yourself up to let the memories come in, you'll be flooded with many perfect moments, large and small.)

How will I use what I've learned about myself throughout this book? What changes will I make to renew my spirit, pamper my soul and bless my heart – every single day for the rest of my life?

Meet Jean!

As a keynote speaker for clients in healthcare, corporate, education, government and non-profit associations over the last 30 years, Jean has met many women who are disheartened and discouraged, weary and worn out. Balancing demanding roles and responsibilities, they never have time to laugh, relax, and renew themselves in mind, heart and spirit. Even though they heard Jean speak on business-related topics, some of these women heard something else in her message. They heard encouragement and caring.

As these women began to invite Jean to speak at their faith based events, it soon became clear to Jean that God definitely had new plans in mind for her! So after much prayer, study and discernment she added another dimension to her keynotes. While she continues to do a significant amount of work with corporate and association clients, she's bringing a message of faith, encouragement and hope to Christian women at their conferences, conventions, retreats, mornings of reflection, breakfasts, luncheons and dinners.

“Jean Gatz is a MUST HAVE speaker! Her humor creates the perfect blend of inspiration and entertainment. She truly knows the woman’s heart – and she will connect with every woman in your audience!”

Bring Jean to your next event!

If you're ready to create a powerful, memorable and life-enriching event for the women of your community, **Jean Gatz** is the *perfect speaker* for you. Speaking to thousands of women every year, Jean knows they're searching for fresh insights to meet their challenges with wisdom, courage and confidence. And they want a speaker who understands them – who “gets who they are.” With her unique blend of Wit with Wisdom and Humor with Heart® Jean delivers all that – and much more!

As a wife, mother, grandmother, daughter, sister and friend Jean connects with women of every age and every stage of life. Whether they're married or single, career focused or retired, raising their children or caring for their aging parents (or both!) Jean's unique message leaves them renewed, refreshed and revitalized in mind, spirit and heart.

Can't decide exactly what you need? Explore Jean's programs at www.jeangatz.com. Watch her videos. Check out her extensive client list. Then talk with Jean about which programs are the best fit for the women of your community. Jean offers conference keynotes as well as half day and full day retreats. If you're new to conference or retreat planning, Jean can help with that too! She's created a very comprehensive Planning Guide for organizing and hosting your event, and she's happy to share that with you and guide you every step of the way.

Women are talking about Jean!

“What a refreshing and inspirational message! Your ability to focus on people and relationships is amazing. God has blessed you with a very special gift! Thank you for sharing your wisdom and humor with us.”

“This is the 12th year we’ve hosted our *Spirit of Women* event and the overwhelming feedback was that YOU WERE THE BEST we’ve ever had!”

“Women left our conference laughing and feeling good about themselves. Months later they are *still* talking about it. You delivered a heartfelt message, to which we could all relate, punctuated with your hilarious stories. I’ve attended many women’s events but this one was the best by far!”

“Your program *Refueling Your Spirit When You’re Running on Empty* was just what we needed! Your wonderful sense of humor kept us laughing while your message of the heart touched many lives in the time we spent with you.”

“You can always gauge the ‘enjoyability’ of a speaker by the number of times you check your watch. When Jean Gatz is speaking, you don’t even realize you’re wearing a watch!”

“Real-world information presented with humor and energy. Jean’s message is not only inspiring and uplifting but extremely entertaining as well!”

Jean's Promise to you!

As your conference keynoter or retreat speaker my # 1 Goal is to make your event a tremendous success and make you the HERO of the day! (OK, that's *two* goals, but you get the idea!) I'll deliver the message you want your audience to hear – in a way that connects and resonates with every single one of them.

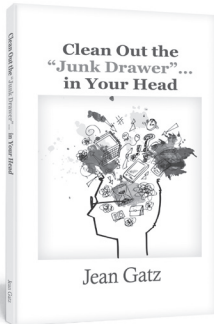
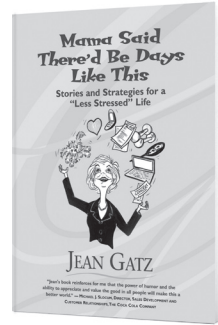
I've learned that every audience is filled with good, dedicated, hard-working people struggling with tough decisions about their families, relationships, kids, careers, health, financial security and their future. So I help them understand that although they may not be in charge of whatever Life sends their way, they ARE in charge of the choices they make to handle those challenges. I promise to deliver value-rich content in a way that gives everyone permission to laugh, relax, unwind and take a breather from the pressures of work and life.

Relationships built on trust are the cornerstone of my business – and my life. So I work hard to build trust with every client and every audience. My reputation is based on delivering what I promise. To stand behind that promise, you have **My Personal Guarantee:** I will learn everything I can about your organization and your attendees' greatest challenges. Then I will design a program that connects and resonates with them, accomplishes your goals and meets their needs. I promise to *exceed your expectations* and deliver *absolutely outstanding results!*

Jean's other books are ready for you!
Go to www.jeangatz.com/Shop

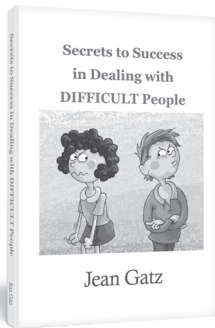
Mama Said There'd Be Days Like This

Does your day begin with promise – until you get out of bed and begin it, and then it's downhill from there? Do you feel pulled in a dozen different directions at once? Are people at work and at home getting on your last nerve? If so, this book is for you! Jean blends entertaining and heartwarming stories with insightful strategies to help you handle change with more flexibility, make tough decisions with more clarity, communicate more effectively, and deal with difficult people – without becoming one yourself.



**Clean Out “the Junk Drawer”...
in your Head**

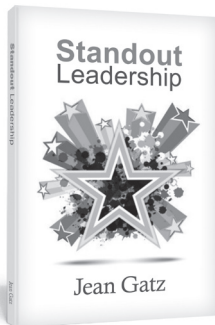
Why make life harder by holding on to limiting thoughts, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors? Jean uses real life examples to help you start fresh and get rid of whatever is holding you back. Understand how your attitude impacts how others perceive you and relate to you, and how making even minor adjustments can improve your career, your relationships and your life on every level. She also shows you how to put other people in charge of their own “junk drawer thinking” instead of unloading it on you!



Secrets of Success in Dealing with Difficult People

If you have difficult people in your life – at work or at home – this book is for you! Jean explains exactly how they manipulate you to get what they want. Then she delivers proven, time-tested strategies to make sure they no longer ruin your days! Learn the signs of healthy and unhealthy relationships.

Jean’s ideas are a great alternative to asking the question you really want to ask of difficult people: “I already took a pain pill, so why are you still here?”



STANDOUT Leadership

Discover the top leadership strengths you need to influence others in a positive way and set yourself apart as the leader successful people are proud to follow. This is an eye-opening book for seasoned leaders and for those who are new to their leadership position or aspiring to move up to

a leadership role. Use Jean’s strategies to develop advocates and allies at every level to help you get the job done. Learn how to lead with a voice that inspires, influences, and achieves results.

To order, go to www.jeangatz.com/Shop