

How Do You Point The Way

Bethany Chapter #9 - Green River

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When Mom and I were going through some of her papers last spring, I was stunned to come across a journal written when I was in high school. I didn't know that it had been one of those necessities that Mom had packed in that one steamer trunk of belongings that we were allowed when we moved from Canada to California. Mom said when she found it in my room, she thought someday I might get a kick out of it. So there we were, 48 years later, revisiting the past. Laughing and crying, thinking of people we would like to contact - people and places - influences.

There were several pages of notes on a class I had taken. Mom concluded that one class had shaped and influenced me more than anything else. A class about the practices, attitudes and habits necessary for happiness.

We had been given the option of taking some college classes, and I had opted for a Psych class to be taught by a Professor from McMaster University. The class would be twice a week from September to May.

The Professor had spent his career studying people and he said that often what people want and need is right in front of their faces - - if only they could see it.

He also said he could not teach us to see - - but perhaps he could point the way.

How often have you wished you could snap your fingers and make something go away, or make someone well again, or make someone happy? Unfortunately we can't change things with a snap of the fingers. What we can do is help people to see what is useful for them - - point them in a certain direction - and hope they look.

The professor said he could have made a nice career out of lecturing to his colleagues - doing research and publishing, but he felt that was like 'talking to the audience' and never sharing with anyone who really could use his insights. His classes with High School students gave him the most satisfaction. What made him a great teacher was that we all came to know that he truly cared.

He required all of us to journal each week. We had to write something - anything. What did we think about? What were our concerns? What were our hopes, fears?

Some of the students would share their notebooks with others. Not so much to be sharing their personal thoughts - but to be sharing the personal comments (insights) that the professor wrote back each week.

Max, one of my classmates, almost always wrote about his relationship with his Dad. Max was one of the few kids in the class that I had known since elementary school. He was an only child who never seemed to please his Dad - but then his Dad never seemed happy with himself, either. After a month or so, the professor's comment was "Max - for some people there are no victories, just alternate forms of losing."

Max shared that with me and I wrote it down. What exactly did the professor mean??? Eventually I came to believe that it was a powerful way of sending home the point that much in life is simply a matter of perspective. It's not inherently good or bad, a success or failure. It's how we choose to look at things that makes the difference.

“What do you make of life? That’s the question?” When that was asked during class, you had 17 and 18 year olds shaking their heads, thinking “I’ve just started life, how can I possibly answer that?” The professor’s comment was that a 50 or 60 year old might answer that based on whether or not he or she was by nature an optimist or a pessimist. A man might answer that based on his career or job success because so much of a man’s sense of self worth seems to be tied to his 9-5 success. 17 or 18 - 50 or 60 - - it’s all a matter of perspective.

The professor gave us this simple example. “Sugar, flour and eggs - are they good or bad? You could turn them into a cake - or you could just make a mess. But then you ask yourself: cake or mess - is it good or bad? Can you make it good? Of course. Can you make it bad? Certainly”

On our trip to French Polynesia, I knew I had four sets of remarks to write. The three days at sea obviously became days to write - while sitting on our deck. The fourth day that I had set aside was the day we arrived in Bora Bora. I had lunch on our stateroom deck, and watched as passengers took the tender to the island. Can I make that scenario bad? Of course I can. Why should I have to be on board, in my room, while others are going on tours - jet skiing, swimming with dolphins, taking a catamaran ride, snorkeling, taking the helicopter tours - or shopping. Can I make it good? Of course. How relaxing - and don’t you know it was absolute torture - looking at what some travelers, including James A. Michener, consider to be the most beautiful island in the world. The “Pearl of the Pacific” - a small volcanic island almost completely surrounded by a barrier reef of sand-fringed motos and a multi-hued lagoon. And here I was - jotting down my thoughts and looking up at that majestic mountain, while our anchored ship rocked slightly in the lagoon. From my perspective - this wasn’t just a good day - - I would make it an absolutely great day.

Another thing the professor impressed upon us was the nearly boundless capacity of humans to ignore the long-term implication of their decisions while they focus on short term effects. He spoke about the difference between the logical thinker who almost always makes long term decisions, and the person who can’t see beyond instant gratification. If in 1958 the professor was concerned about having an instant gratification society - - I wonder what his perspective would be in 2008 and what he’d be most concerned about now? He said you can expect a child to reach for a lollipop, the adult to think about nutrition and tooth decay. He stressed that as seniors in high school we were “at an age when we must strive to be the adult, not just living the moment, but seeing from outside ourselves what is happening, what should be happening, what things we are doing that will ultimately hurt us.” WOW re-think that as an adult - should we be adding in ‘what will ultimately hurt everything - everyone - we love.’

When I finished his class, I thanked him for making me a better person. His response - “But I didn’t make you a better person. All I can do is point, and hope you look. Be Happy.”

To this day, I love to read and often have self help books, positive thinking, insightful, thought provoking books around to read when I don’t have the time to start a novel. Mom said they are my ‘quick pick-me-up’ - that, and a cup of tea before bedtime help keep me grounded.

After sharing my journal, in a rather soul searching mood, Mom came to a few conclusions that she wrote down.

1. All too often we are guilty of not seeing what is right under our noses.
2. All too often we are so set in our ways, our opinions, that we either don’t, won’t, or can’t

look at an individual or situation with a different perspective.

We talked about a couple of life decisions that Mom had made under those circumstances. Not all negative but definitely a learning curve involved.

Over the next few days, Mom and I started jotting down things that we had found to make life full and satisfying and happy. It was a great exercise. We found that Mom's nurse, the minister, other family members, the neighbors, the grand kids - anyone who came over - was wanting to add to the list by writing down their quick pearls of wisdom either on Mom's message board or in her book. Here are some of them. I know I'm going to see a few heads nodding.

1. Believe in yourself - love yourself and honor your roots.
2. Turn off the TV - have a conversation with someone you love and care about.
3. Read a book.
4. Find balance.
5. Don't forget to have fun - laugh at life.
6. Have a close friend who cares enough to give you an attitude check when you need it.
7. Join a group - give and give back.
8. Don't forget to say 'thank you'. They are magic words. One of the grand kids wrote that.
9. Keep pen and paper handy.
10. Help the next person who needs a little assistance.
11. Take care not to criticize family and friends too harshly.
12. Do things your good at.
13. Visit your neighbor.
14. Smile (contributed by my youngest grandson - Aidan)
15. Remember you always have a choice.
16. Be agreeable.
17. Listen to music - contributed by my granddaughters Madison and Rhiannon when they came over to sing to Mom one night.
18. Let goals guide you.
19. Reminisce.
20. Don't dwell on conflicts.
21. Enjoy the ordinary.
22. Get a hobby.
23. Focus on hope.
24. Say 'so what'.
25. Enjoy sunsets.
26. Play cards. Sis Sharon & Mom played cribbage at least four times a week.
27. Play 10,000 - Grandson Austin wrote this - He played this dice game constantly with Mom.

The list went on and on - it was a positive, reaffirming exercise for Mom, and for all of us. Every thought brought back a memory, a moment in time, a laugh, a tear. They all were reminders of just how important we are to each other – how much we learn from each other – how

important family really is.

I think making such a list would be a fun thing to do in each Chapter. Grab a pen, maybe the first list can be done right after this meeting - - and then shared at the next. Maybe such a list is another way, as the professor would say, to point the way - and hope we each look.

I'd like to leave you with this thought:

The happiest people don't necessarily have the best of everything ----
they just make the most of everything that comes their way.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION