

Chapel Talk
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Cold steel, heavy on my lips, the gun barrel had no taste.... The most inspiring, life-altering moment in my life occurred on January 22, 1993. It was only 7:30 in the evening when tasteless, cold steel was pressed to the back of my throat. It happened on one of the more affluent streets of Boston's Back Bay area. The most memorable and amazing moment of my life occurred when a mugger's gun was shoved into my mouth.

Perhaps that was too dramatic of a beginning. Let me begin instead with a story from the present.

It is incredible what you can learn from every moment in your life, if you pause and reflect on its meaning and worth. Presently, I am taking a Spanish course here at SAS. Although it has truly been a rejuvenating and exciting experience to be back in a student's seat, at times I do feel like a "freak on the language corridor". Perhaps that emotion is a figment of my imagination, however that is certainly what I feel whenever someone walks by Senor's Spanish 1 classroom. Taking a Spanish course here at SAS has truly been an interesting and worthwhile experience on many levels. Of course, I am learning Spanish from a group of charismatic students and an inspiring teacher. But unexpectedly I have gleaned a few extra insights along the way. I have learned that it is immensely difficult to go from one class to the next, Spanish to chemistry, without pausing to reflect and process the material that was just presented in the previous 40 minutes of class. In fact, I tend to be a little foggy in the first 5 minutes of my own chemistry class, which of course, I have to teach, while I store away the topics presented by senor. I have also learned that there are unspoken expectations and assumptions that go into every student in every class. I never was forced to realize this as a teacher, but certainly now feel the burden of such assumptions as a student. Perhaps you are cognizant of what your student baggage is, or perhaps you were unaware your teachers and fellow students sum you up from day 1, either way, I am very aware now that I am expected to perform at a higher level because I am a teacher and an adult in Spanish 1. It makes things a little more intense to say the least. Lastly, I have acknowledged that there is a

certain circus-like affect resulting from students witnessing my attempt at trilling my rrrs or enunciating something more difficult than my trouble word, which is “specific”! So what is the theme of this talk this evening? I guess I am trying to emphasize that a lot of learning can happen from just one isolated event and it is up to you to pause, reflect, dissect and process all that has happened and how it has affected you as a person. Some moments will be big, others small like my Spanish 1 experience, but they all are important pieces to unraveling life’s complexity and your place in it. One of those big moments was indeed back on January 22, 1993.

First of all, when I say this violent moment was the most significant moment of my life that does not mean that the gifts that God has graciously bestowed on me are not as great. In fact, my amazing family, wonderful husband and daughters, and this job are all the more sweet because of this violent event. Because I appreciate every day the good in my life, I am forever indebted to the bad.

I was a freshman in college when I was mugged near my dorm in Boston. I had just had dinner with some friends when at approximately 7:30 I decided to get back and prepare for the next day. My friend Marco offered to escort me the 7 blocks back to my dorm. Approximately one block into our journey I became aware of a man following us- or at least I thought he was following us. I really don’t know by what mechanism I became aware of him. He certainly did not look out of the ordinary -- well dressed and definitely not malicious looking. And, although he remained an unthreatening one block away, he kept that distance precisely, despite my sporadic pace with my friend due to our conversation and of course my Italian gesturing! When we slowed, so did he. I hadn’t actually turned around, but through my peripheral vision I was aware of his presence. After approximately 3 blocks into our journey together, I asked Marco if he too was cognizant of our companion. He mentioned that he was aware that a gentleman was behind us but was not startled by his presence. Unfortunately, Marco’s assessment of the situation jarred my once confident understanding that this guy was indeed a threat. In the meantime, a large group of college students passed us by. I thought briefly, if I pretend to know them and strike up a

conversation or perhaps ask for directions, I could protect myself with the number of people that surrounded me.

Not listening to my gut, however, I continued the trek towards my dorm. Again, I formulated a plan of stopping at a 24-hour pharmacy that was located down an upcoming side street. At this time in the evening it would be bustling with customers- and yet I continued walking. Finally, I settled on merely lacing my keys through my fingers: because of the adrenaline that was racing through my veins I was sure I could give this guy an unexpected wallop to the face if need be. After several more blocks of walking, our friend began closing the gap between us cautiously. Considering there was only a block left, I had convinced Marco that we were indeed being followed and the plan of action was going to be a quick sharp turn up my dorm steps once we reached my residence. We needed to get through the locked double doors that barred our entry to safety as quickly as possible. If our quick bolt up the stairs was unnecessary, then we would just look odd. As we approached the dorm, I unlaced my makeshift weapon and got the appropriate key ready to unlock the first of the doors. As we were about to pass the dorm, we cut right and bolted up the stairs. Marco followed me and waited as I anxiously unlocked the 1st door. As the 1st door was swinging to a close, my key found the lock hole of the second. Since I was so focused on the door locks I didn't see the man race up the stairs right after us. As I was unlocking the 2nd door, I was pushed up against the door as Marco slammed into me. We were now trapped between the two doors in a small hallway by the man who had been following us for 6 blocks. To make matters worse, he had a gun! I can't remember much detail about the guy except that he was in great shape, well dressed and completely calm. I do remember, however, to this day, his eyes.

There are two ways to respond to a scary situation- 1.) remain calm while you assess the circumstances or 2.) emotionally breakdown and freak out. Unfortunately, Marco was the latter personality and was obviously going to be no help in the matter. My father always told me there was empowerment in eye contact and indeed there was: because I was able to hold the mugger's glare, I felt calmer and as in control as a person being held at gunpoint could be. Unfortunately, my confident stare, although calming for me, disturbed my assailant. While he was shouting expletives and telling us what he wanted, I strangely enough began

questioning him. I asked why he was doing this and when he mentioned that he was hungry, I spontaneously replied that he did not look hungry. I felt like I needed to understand why this was happening on a human level; he on the other hand, now wanted my jewelry. Marco's whimpering and my eye contact reminded him he needed to get out of there soon. He pressed me against the 2nd door, put the gun barrel in my mouth and proceeded to threaten us about waiting at least 10 minutes before calling the cops. He said he would be hiding nearby and would know if we had broken our promise. After pushing us around a little, he took the gun out of my mouth and was gone.

In retrospect, the scariest part was dealing with the inefficiency of the cops, who had shown up 40 minutes later. They thought that the best plan of action would be for me to look at thousands of mug shots to identify my assailant. None of the pictures had my mugger's eyes and he was never caught.

This incident was the most significant experience I had lived. Three immeasurable qualities were gained from that evening:

- 1) a full appreciation of life and all its happenings. It is amazing how a threatening moment brings tremendous clarity to all that is important and meaningful;
- 2) a new found trust in my instincts and a vow to always listen to my gut; and
- 3) I gained a self-confidence that I could remain rational and poised during a threatening situation.

All three revelations have become interwoven into my present day life philosophy and are directly responsible for the travel I have done, the career I have chosen and the path I choose to make through life.

I had never realized that I had grown complacent with the gifts and talents God had blessed me with prior to January 22, 1993. A new sense of life, its fragility, and our mortality was now implanted in my everyday consciousness.

Reminders of violence, despite being plentiful on the news, do not permeate our cloistered St. Andrew's world very often. In a way, we are quite isolated in our academic pursuits,

although your teachers put forth great effort to bring the pages of the newspapers alive in the classroom. Although the ripples of September 11th are still echoing, our Iraqi war still battles on and our voter turn-out yesterday was less than perfect, I fear we have once again grown complacent to the possibility of a less than perfect world. We know that the world outside SAS is less than perfect, but we forget our own St. Andrew's world can harbor bad times at any moment as well. This mugging reminded me that any day could be the last. This doesn't seem like a gloomy perspective to me, but rather an impetus to do the right thing all of the time-- and when you do wrong, to correct it immediately. Tonight before you close your eyes, mentally list all of the blessings that have been bestowed on you. Appreciate your family, your friends, and your community. Personally, I am so grateful to have met so many special people here at SAS. All of you offer so much to life with your talents, creativity, and compassion. Do not squander such gifts- promise yourself that you will make every day count.

Although I am so thankful that this mugging occurred, it occurred for only one reason: I did not trust myself. My instincts compelled me to investigate options for escape -- for instance the group of college students or the open store -- yet my rational side told me that I was paranoid. Never again has my brain ruled my gut, especially if the only consequence would have been someone thinking I was strange- like that has never happened before!

Although I am 32, I can reflect back on a lifetime of memories because I have in fact lived. Fear and insecurity have not prevented me from new challenges or exotic travel opportunities. Because this event left me tested, I rebounded from the experience knowing that I do not panic under pressure. What a gift that self-confidence has been! Later that year, I left with a small group of students for Prague to study the separation of the Czech Republic and Slovakia. 2 years later I lived in Ghana for 6 months while I conducted an independent research project. Later still, I spent a summer in northern Spain seeking employment as an English teacher. All of these trips educated me in life and humanity. However, they would not have been possible if I did not have the confidence and self-trust that I could leave the security blanket of my family at home.

Although I can say I have lead a charmed life so far, it was the most traumatic memory that served as my springboard towards a liberation from fear, death and most importantly, it has given me an appreciation of all that is around me, all that is life. Remember everything happens for a reason, whether you perceive it as good or bad at that distinctive moment. Pause and learn from every moment. Your life will seem richer, crisper and more meaningful if you seek value and knowledge in all you do.