

Chapel Talk
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It was Memorial Day Weekend in 1977. I was six. My family had recently moved into a farmhouse in Earleville, Maryland. My parents divorced when I was four. My family consisted of my mom, her boyfriend, my brother Donny, my grandmother and my uncle. It was Friday afternoon and we were finished school for the long weekend. I was looking forward to the first official weekend of the summer. I remember being outside playing when I heard our dog barking. I walked toward the dog and saw a car coming down the long driveway. The car stopped and a woman got out. She looked quite upset and she asked me if my mom was home. Before I could call to my mom, she was standing next to me. The woman told my mom that my brother was just hit by a car. I could see the sheer panic and fear on my mother's face. She jumped in the woman's car and they raced back down the driveway. My brother, Donny, was not quite ten. He had ridden his bike to meet up with a new friend from school. I don't remember much of what happened before Donny left that afternoon, but I know now that my mother did not want him to go. He pleaded with her over and over again. She finally gave in to his wish. We had just moved in and he really wanted to ride his bike up the road to play with his new friend. I remember waiting with my uncle; he was just a few years older than my brother. We were talking about how we were sure he was fine and that he would be hobbling in the house at any moment with a broken leg and a cast that we both had planned on signing.

I don't know how long we waited. What we were finally told would change our lives forever.

A drunk driver killed my brother that day. My memories are faint. I can remember only bits and pieces. I remember hearing that a young woman was on her way to a local bar. She was speeding and she had been drinking. I remember hearing someone say Donny was thrown a long distance from his bike and that he died instantly and he did not suffer. As a six year old this did not give me much comfort. I don't remember if I cried. I must have! I don't know if I even quite understood what death was. I remember asking my mom, "Why did Donny die?" Her response frightened me. She said that God decided who was going to live and who was going to die. I pressed her more. She told me that God must have needed my brother in Heaven. Again, I pressed her. She said that mostly grandmothers and grandfathers died and God once in a while

needs children to help them stay happy. I tried to imagine my brother in Heaven playing games with old people. I didn't press any more.

How else would a mother explain to her six year old daughter why her brother was just killed. I'm sure she had just as many questions as I did.

That day I learned that we are not in complete control of our lives and that life can change in an instant.

I try my best to live my life honestly, kindly and well balanced. Well balanced to me means to play as much as I work, to laugh as much as I cry, to spend as much money as I save and to eat as much chocolate as vegetables.

If life can change in an instant, I don't want to have any regrets.

I returned to school shortly after Donny's death. I'm sure my mom thought it would be best for me to get back into a routine. She would not have expected what happened when I got there. I'm not even sure I ever told her what happened. I was a shy little girl and had not made many friends at my new school. I was walking down the school hallway. A group of kids were walking towards me. One little boy pointed in my direction saying "her brother just died...her name is Diane...it used to be Anne but her parents changed it to Di Anne because they wanted her to die." The group of kids all let out a big roar of laughter and walked by me. To this day I can't understand why someone would say such a cruel thing. Did he mean to hurt me so deeply or was he merely looking for a laugh from his friends? Thirty-four years later does he still remember what he said that day or have any idea that, when I think of that moment, it still brings tears to my eyes? It's hard to imagine a second grade boy intentionally being so cruel. Maybe he was insecure and thought it was an opportunity to get a laugh and feel good about himself. I can think of many other scenarios but none of them justify what he said.

I learned that words could hurt deeply. My mother used to tell me if I couldn't say anything nice I shouldn't say anything at all. Imagine if everyone followed that one little golden rule. We should all choose our words carefully. We don't always know how our words will be heard. What might seem funny to some may not be funny to others. Words can have different meanings

to different people. The problem is we might not know how other people are hearing those words. We need to be sensitive that there are others around us and that we are not the only person within hearing distance.

Sometimes words are used in anger. When you're angry it's not always easy to hold your tongue or to choose your words carefully. Today I refer to it as my "filter."

We have all had those moments after the intensity of a conversation or an argument when we have calmed down and we begin to think more reasonably. You replay the conversation in your head. Maybe you said some things you didn't really mean or maybe you were on the receiving end of such words. And you start to wish life had an "undo" button like in Word or Excel. I heard a story many years ago about a boy and hammering nails in a fence that had a message that made real sense to me. I recently found the story but was unable to confirm the author. The story goes like this...

There once was a little boy who had a bad temper. His father gave him a bag of nails and told him that every time he lost his temper, he must hammer a nail into the back of the fence. The first day the boy had driven 37 nails into the fence. Over the next few weeks, as he learned to control his anger, the number of nails hammered daily gradually dwindled down. He discovered it was easier to hold his temper than to drive those nails into the fence. Finally the day came when the boy didn't lose his temper at all. He told his father about it and the father suggested that the boy now pull out one nail for each day that he was able to hold his temper. The days passed and the young boy was finally able to tell his father that all the nails were gone. The father took his son by the hand and led him to the fence. He said, "You've done well, my son, but look at the holes in the fence. The fence will never be the same. When you say things in anger, they leave a scar just like this one. You can put a knife in a man and draw it out. It won't matter how many times you say I'm sorry, the wound is still there and a verbal wound is just as bad as a physical one."

The next time you are about to say something in anger think about those holes you are about to put into your friend, parent, spouse and let's choose to use our "filters" instead!

When I'm angry I tend to get quiet. This might not always seem like the best thing especially to the other person who is involved in the conversation. But I would rather say nothing and take time to think about it then say something in the moment that I can never "undo."

I've been married to my best friend, Ben, for 17 years, and we have two incredible boys, Connor 13 and Eric 11. As a parent you learn quickly that your children rarely, if ever, miss what you say or do. You become acutely aware of your actions and your words. Just when Ben and I think we are alone and can share a story meant for adult ears, Eric will call from the other room. "What happened?" Sometimes, it seems that the boys hear us better when we are not talking directly to them. I think role modeling and teaching by example is crucial. As adults and members of this community, we should set good examples for each other. Ben and I want to teach our boys to live honestly, kindly and most importantly to have an awareness of other people around them.

I want to make sure that I'm clear that I am by no means perfect. I do my best to follow these life guidelines that I set for myself, but I am human. Sometimes my "filter" fails and I do make mistakes. After mistakes are made, there should be honesty, accountability and forgiveness.

I think about my brother often. What would life be like if he did just break his leg or if the woman driving the car that day had made a better choice? Donny would be 44 years old this year. Would he have married, had children, lived nearby? Would we have been close friends? Now that I have two boys who have lived longer than my brother, I often put myself in my mother's shoes. What would I have done or said? Could I have dealt with such a tragedy? I don't have an answer. Parenthood does not come with an instruction manual. We all do the best we can. I respect my mother's decisions and love her for raising me to be who I am today.

I have experienced other significant deaths during my life. My father passed away from liver disease and cancer when he was 54. A few months later my father-in-law passed away from cancer. He was 55. Both of these men died too young. Their deaths were a reminder to me that we are not always in control of our lives and that life can be too short.

My grandmother, who was living with me when my brother died, passed away a few years ago. She was 85 and struggled with heart disease. My grandmother was an amazing woman. She was strong, honest, loving, kind and always there for me.

My cousins and I stayed with my grandmother during her last days. Sitting by her bed was a surreal experience. My cousins and I quickly realized that we were not the only ones sharing this experience with my grandmother. I always believed in “ghosts” or “spirits” but I had never experienced it first hand. My grandmother’s organs were failing and the hospice nurse told us it wouldn’t be much longer. My grandmother was sleeping, but she was talking to people around her. My cousin and I were sitting on one side of the bed when my grandmother opened her eyes and looked straight between us and said rather impatiently “Not yet, Florence!” Florence was my great aunt who had passed away many years ago. My cousin and I both felt a cold sensation between us as we looked over our shoulders to see who was there. Over the next several hours, my grandmother talked to family and friends who had passed before her. She addressed her sister Florence a few more times. It seemed as though she was encouraging my grandmother to pass on, but she was not quite ready yet. At one point she told us she needed to use the bathroom. We were surprised by her request. She had been in this sleeping state for a while and had not been out of bed in a couple of days. We complied and helped her out of bed. We were about to lift her gown when she said, “Not in front of all these people!” My cousins and I stopped and looked around the room. We knew we were surrounded by loved ones. We told her not to worry we would keep her covered. We helped her back into bed. We sat and listened in awe. It seemed as though she was walking down a very long receiving line as she passed from the life we know into the next. There were some names we recognized and many we did not. At one point in time she began singing “Boogie Shoes” by KC and the Sunshine Band. My cousins and I danced and sang along. We all laughed until we cried.

Later in the evening, the hospice nurse asked my grandmother, “Who are you talking to?” She told the nurse, “Donny.” The nurse was being playful and asked her if he was good looking. She responded, “No he’s just a child.” At that moment I knew my brother was indeed in Heaven and soon he would be making **our** grandmother happy. My grandmother passed away peacefully early the next morning. She was completely surrounded by love.

My wishes for all of us are to speak kindly, to live honestly and to live life with no regrets.