

Chapel Talk
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“First Time”

So there we were, strutting out of McDonald’s, weighed down with Big Macs, French fries, sodas, hot apple pie bars – a welcomed mid-afternoon snack during the spring of my 10th grade year at boarding school. I was with Mike O’Malley, a junior, one of the really cool, flashy students: varsity heavy weight wrestler, starting tackle on the championship football team, a lead in the recent school production of *Guys and Dolls*. I think he bought two of everything – two Big Macs, two large fries, two large Cokes, two apple pies, probably two hot fudge sundaes. And I was also with the school’s driving instructor, a now face-less man who sat in the front seat with a small, slightly hidden emergency foot brake, and who told us bizarre stories of his own youthful exploits in Boston.

We approached the car, a large, wide, undercover cop-type vehicle, Mr. Whateverhisname opening the passenger door, and Mike getting into the backseat with his three bags of food and entire drink tray of Cokes. It was at this moment that I realized I was now getting in behind the steering wheel of a car for the first time. I’d never practiced driving with my dad down our driveway or in the church parking lot; I’d never raced go-carts or tilled the fields with a tractor. Yet here I was, sitting behind the wheel, slightly worried I might not be able to see fully over the dashboard, my Big Mac waiting deliciously but uneaten by my side, the drink in the car’s only cup holder beneath the radio. Did people looking at me from their cars see me as James Bond? Clint Eastwood? Elmer Fudd? I remember turning the key in the ignition, then awkwardly moving the gear-shift behind the wheel from park to drive as we gingerly exited the parking lot. The car seemed to drive itself, and I wasn’t very comfortable in the seat. A trickle of nervous sweat ran down behind my ear. I’m sure my face was flushed, despite how calm and normal I tried to project myself as. The driving instructor quickly deduced that he had a complete idiot on his hands, because he leaned over and with his left hand grabbed the

wheel and impatiently steered the car out of the parking lot, turning right on this tree-lined road which had a “STOP” sign about 200 feet ahead of us.

I recall that Mike and Mr. Whateverhisname settled down to their feast at this moment, and I started to relax in the seat, pretty sure that I could do this, that in fact driving this small tank wasn't that hard. So a few seconds later, when the driving instructor, his mouth bursting with two all-beef-patties and special sauce, casually mentioned, “OK, put your foot on the brake at the sign,” well, I did just that. I put my foot on the brake. Not gently, slowly, but directly, firmly – perhaps more like a stamp than an easing-down. Instantly, we all hurtled forward and then whiplashed back as the car slammed to a stop at least 100 feet before the sign. The instructor flew into the console, his drink, fries and hamburger splattering against the windshield. I smacked into the wheel; but what I remember most vividly was glimpsing – and feeling on my neck – all of Mike O'Malley's food and drink rocket from the backseat into the front of the car, bursting against the dashboard and splashing against the back of my head. Out of the corner of my right eye, I can still see his large Coke, horizontal in the air, the yellow and white straw pointed like a radar, flying past me before it crashed and exploded in a sticky, carbonated eruption against the rear-view mirror. As we three recovered from this gastronomical dousing, my driving instructor glared at me with ferocious eyes and snapped, “I said ‘Put the brake *on*,’ not ‘Slam it down’!”

You see, I didn't know how the brake worked; that the car's power brakes needed very little pressure; that stopping a car should happen not instantly but instead gradually; that, yes, Newton's 2nd law on force and motion also applied to large fries and 32 ounce sodas. Luckily for us, no one was behind our car when we abruptly and unexpectedly halted in middle of the road.

I've tried not to quake, like that driving instructor did with me in each of our subsequent lessons, as I've suffered through Christopher's early forays with his official Delaware's driving license, a condition that is much more about me than a comment on his actually quite fine driving skills. Doing something for the first time is rarely easy,

rarely done right, rarely understood. My age then at 16, your age now, in the heart of adolescence, is rife with “firsts,” with moments of cultural, social, intellectual, emotional, physical and biological rites of passage. Many such steps are filled with joy and celebration; some are confusing and uncertain; some, tragically, can be devastating, even fatal. This transition from speaking like a child to speaking like an adult lacks an easy guidebook, and teems with mixed messages. Everything that adults do *appears* so simple and uncomplicated to you – driving, being married, holding down a job, drinking, spending money – that it surely can’t be hard to duplicate. As you enter these exciting years, you are indeed more on your own, given more responsibilities, allowed to make more decisions. At family meals, you now sit with the adults, rather than being relegated to the kid’s table in the kitchen; you select what clothes you wear; you have a bank account; you’re aware that there are more people around you – and a lot of them are attractive, interesting, fun, creating a maelstrom of emotions. Possibilities, choices, temptations surround you; and it’s hard to discern which ones are feasible, which prohibited, and what are the consequences of experimenting with those that are off-limits. In thinking about these transitions, I keep coming back to that moment when I didn’t understand what the driving instructor meant about “put your foot on the brake.” It’s almost as if there’s a new language to learn. Maybe this is why adults and teenagers have trouble understanding each other: we are not speaking the same language any more. How can adolescents speak, understand, “do” the language of the adult experience, when that world isn’t quite what it presents itself to be?

Ironically, it was an incident with a car that confronted me with another “first” about this adult existence. Later the following summer, I was hanging out in the early evening with two cousins near our house in New Hampshire. I’d been allowed to use the family car – a blue VW Squareback – to pick up Sydney and Susan, all of us 16, and bring them down to a dock near our house. It was an entirely innocent evening of cards and teenage talking – they gabbed about their many boyfriends, and I shared stories about friends of mine who had girlfriends. We laughed and played Hearts, a small lantern glowing on the card table. Someone checked a watch after midnight, but we didn’t think there was a problem, or we tried to pretend that there wouldn’t be a problem, because our

parents went to bed early, and we weren't doing anything "wrong" – it wasn't like we were at a mall or drinking or listening to strange music or driving around recklessly. We were just sitting near the water, talking, playing cards, laughing – yet since our parents didn't know any of that, they couldn't possibly share in our idyllic relaxation.

Around 3:00 a.m., one of our parents suddenly woke up and realized she'd fallen asleep without seeing her child come in, so she nervously telephoned the other two homes; all of them confirmed that the three of us were missing. They hurried to their cars and drove through the woods frantically searching for us. Most of the dirt roads border a lake, and I later found out that my father kept looking to see if our car had tumbled off the road into the dark waters. Even though we were only a quarter of a mile away from my home, the parents drove terrified through the woods for almost an hour. When Sydney, Susan and I saw headlights and heard cars skid to a stop on the dirt road and then recognized scared voices yelling our names, we knew that something wasn't right. In silence, we each found our parents who had all arrived at this dock like a police SWAT team, and they drove us back to our homes in cars that were very quiet.

When I woke up late the next morning, my mother told me that dad wanted to see me down in his reading cabin about 100 yards away from our house. I remember going into this meeting pretty nonchalantly, a "What's the big deal?" bravado to my voice and my body language. After all, we hadn't done anything *bad*. We didn't drive fast – in fact, we didn't even drive! What was *their* problem with our staying up a little late and, OK, not letting them know where we were, even though they were asleep and didn't even know we weren't in? I expected to be yelled at, to be told how wrong I was, that I'd caused all these people to drive around frightened for an hour, and then my father would utter the ultimate condemnation: "Do you know what this did to your mother?" I also knew that I would be grounded but quick, and I could kiss good-bye using the car anytime soon.

Instead, the "big problem" was that my parents loved me. The "big problem" was they wanted me to be safe; they didn't want me to be hurt. My dad didn't get angry at me

in the traditional sense of screaming voice and shouted threats: he was mad at me because he loved and cared about me. That morning I realized that parents can express their love through anger, worry, new rules, tears from what might have happened. And, yes, there were consequences to my actions. I was “punished” by being reminded that I was connected to the people around me, and there was no way I could ignore those relationships. So my punishment was to go and talk to the four other parents. Surprisingly, Dad let me drive by myself to each home. Surprisingly, each conversation with these other parents ended in their hugging me.

I have a final experience to illustrate this enticing, problematic, tempting world just hovering past adolescence. I remember this moment as one of the first adult conversations I had with a grown-up. It happened at my home during a dinner party in the fall of my 9th grade year. I knew most of the couples, and I recall it was a buffet supper. That week, my best friend at school, Matt, told me that our headmaster had accused him of using drugs, “pills” he said. I was stunned. How could Mr. Stevens be so wrong? I felt betrayed by this headmaster, a man I’d known for years and who was also my English teacher. While I knew my friend played in the fast lane, what upset me about this situation was that I didn’t think the headmaster had a right to ask these questions. He didn’t have a right because Matt was my friend. I knew drugs were bad, but Mr. Stevens couldn’t make me question my loyalty to Matt. He didn’t have a right to make me see Matt differently. I decided to speak to Mr. Stevens and fiercely defend Matt. In truth, however, I was fiercely going to defend my denial of any other possibility.

At a break in the dinner I asked Mr. Stevens if we could talk, and we quietly left the others and went back to another room, the guest room, and sat facing each other on the edge of two twin beds. After whatever I said politely and naively, Mr. Stevens calmly but surely explained to me exactly why he had to ask these questions, that he had to think of an entire school, not just one person, and anything my friend Matt was doing was already starting to taint the health and safety of his students. I tried to be angry with Mr. Stevens; I tried to switch the focus away from Matt to what Mr. Stevens was inflicting upon my friend. My loyalty to Matt was blind and shallow, and it crumbled quickly as I

listened to Mr. Stevens state his responsibility both to Matt and the other students. He wasn't out to get Matt, which I had immediately assumed. Actually, the more we talked, the clearer it became how much Mr. Stevens genuinely cared about Matt.

This first adult conversation was both a humiliation and an epiphany for me. I was mortified because I failed miserably at being an adult; I pretended I could talk man to man on something I knew so little about. I truly didn't know the language – the meanings and implications of “responsibility” and “care” and “he can't.” As I look back on that scene, I see a little boy wearing clothes too big for him, exposed for the impostor he was. However, what saved me that night was how Mr. Stevens treated me. He heard me out; he listened to my pathetic and juvenile reasonings. A master teacher, Mr. Stevens taught me something larger by engaging me rather than dismissing me. As we walked back into the dining room, Mr. Stevens patted me on the back with his big, gentle hand. His acknowledgement let me know that I had not been rejected by this new world. But his touch also communicated that if I wanted to be an adult, I could no longer pose as one. Playtime was over.

An additional insight to this evening: also at dinner was a man whose marriage was breaking up, and I remember just as I was leaving with Mr. Stevens, my dad was pulling this man into a quiet corner to talk to him about his failing marriage. At one level I felt like my dad and I were both trying to help someone else – my image is of the clichéd TV commercial of the little boy who's trying to emulate his father, despite how little I knew *how* to be that adult. This evening was also the first time I saw that older people had problems. It was the first time I saw, I actually opened my eyes and understood, that not every marriage was a happy one.

For me these “firsts” were necessary, inexorable experiences that couldn't be told to me or read about in a textbook; I had to live them, go through them blindly and awkwardly. I had to learn what happened with car brakes, with love, with responsibilities; I had to see, touch and feel love's complex expressions. This departure out of childhood, a time when most of my scrapes and cuts had been external, ushered me into an age

marked now by internal pain and confusion. I had to battle with what meant the most to me in my life, even if I couldn't articulate what that marrow was. That's what we do as humans: we clash against the values and relationships we cherish because we are trying to discover them for ourselves. We test and question them, seeing if indeed they will sustain us in this unfamiliar and perplexing landscape. The paradox of our humanity is that we hurt those we love, and we assault those doctrines we need and believe in the most.

The hope for us through these transitions is to communicate and connect, that double "punishment" my wise father graced upon me. Those of you still in your adolescent years should continue what is so natural for you – question; ask why, ask how; demand convincing reasons; don't settle for simplistic explanations. Questions initiate dialogue, recognition, understanding, and those interactions consecrate our generations together, even when we disagree. Silence destroys more than argument; combative communication is at least communication. By embracing the tensions that divide our increasing years, we can navigate and even celebrate the cables that support us through turbulence, uncertainty, pretense and fear. Ultimately, these sacred connections grant us humor and hope and possibility and affirmation.