

How'd I Miss That?

*Gas Pump
Confessions,
Drive-Thru
Obsessions,
and Figuring
Out What
Really Matters*



C Y N T H I A Y A N O F

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150 YEARS STRONG
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Chapter 1

The Talk: A Cautionary Tale

The whole sex talk thing with our kids is dumb.

I hate to come out swinging on such a dicey topic, but it must be said.

There's virtually no conversation I shy away from—deep, shallow, marginally inappropriate, oversharing—except *the talk*. And honestly, the fact that we have to slap “the” in front of it like some ominous warning label should tell us everything we need to know. No other subject in life requires this level of verbal hazard lights.

Not once have I ever said, “Kids, we need to have *the talk* ... about new baseball cleats.” Nor have I called my daughter over with, “Sweetie, come sit down. It's time for *the talk* ... about whether you want to live in the dorm or get an apartment next year.” Nope. Only one talk in all of parenting carries such a weighty yet ambiguous title, and nobody I know thinks they've done it well. In a world where we

outsource literally everything—from waxing our precarious parts to hiring someone to pick up our dog's poop—can we not just Venmo a professional for this one too?

One time, my young daughter was riding in the car with my very pregnant friend Stephanie, who noticed little Kate growing very quiet and concerned. Finally, Kate mustered up the courage to ask Stephanie, “Is there any way I'm pregnant too?” Stephanie immediately called me and demanded that I have *the talk* with my child. Naturally, I suggested Stephanie just go ahead and do it since, you know, the topic had already come up organically. She declined.

My two older kids are practically adults now, and they'll tell you, without hesitation, that no one is worse at *the talk* than me. So if you're one of those parents who actually gave your kids the talk and then proudly checked the opt-out box to prevent their lives from being ruined in a cafeteria full of peers learning the inner workings of reproduction—saying, “I want them to hear it from me”—listen, I love you as my Christian brethren, but you are not my people. (I was over here looking for the box that would let me opt my kids into the afternoon session too.)

Honestly, I don't help myself here. I've never been great with anatomically correct terms. I didn't realize how bad it was until I caught myself teaching my kids to refer to their bits and pieces as their “front bottom” and “back bottom.” Somehow, that felt more respectable than *who-ha* and *tushie tush*, but only by the slimmest of margins. One night, I came home from a girls' night out and overheard my rule-following lawyer of a husband, Mike, course-correcting this disaster: “Okay, kids, Mommy was just kidding. Here are the real words ...”

Incorrect, good sir. I was not kidding. I was fully committed to using a more sanitized terminology.

I partially blame this on growing up in the purity culture of the '80s. Our parents were just as committed to avoiding *the talk* as we are, which meant youth pastors had to take one for the team. My pastor friend Steve still vividly remembers sitting in his youth group as their leader passed a white flower around the circle where fifty teenagers touched it, crumpled it, and generally destroyed it. At the end, the pastor held up the now-dirty, dismantled flower and dramatically announced, "This is what happens when you don't wait for your wedding night."

My three kids would have been sitting there stunned, asking, "Wait for what?" So now seems like as good a time as ever to apologize in advance to whomever marries my children. I did my best, and my best was clearly not good enough.

Neural Coupling: Where Brains Are the Only Thing Connecting

I bring all of this up because we should probably have *the talk*—you know, one of those conversations we all need to hear at some point in our Christian walk. Now, I'm also going to talk about seeds, and I'm a little worried you'll think somewhere between seeds and "the talk," I'm about to take a very awkward turn. So be assured, the version of "the talk" I'm giving is *not* the one you're thinking of, and hopefully, I'm better at this one than the one my kids are still waiting for.

My dad has always been a masterful storyteller. From my earliest days, I remember watching friends gather around whenever he would tell a story, captivated by the details and typically ending with peals of laughter. Yes, he's also funny, which is the perfect pairing for an

already great storyteller. I learned at an early age the power of a story simply from watching my dad.

I inherited the storytelling gene, which is a matter of opinion I suppose, and whether that's a gift or just a polite way of saying I talk too much is up for debate. But one thing's for sure—I love hearing people's stories and I also love sharing my own. And it turns out, science is on my side. Research shows that storytelling isn't just entertaining; it actually fires up our brains.¹

I recently read about neural coupling, a fancy term for what happens when the neurons in our brain sync up with someone else's while they're telling a story. It's also called mirroring, and here's why it matters: If I'm just rattling off facts or data, my brain and yours aren't really on the same page—literally. The part of my brain doing the talking isn't activating the same part of your brain that's listening, which is why you might start zoning out and thinking about writing a book someday titled *Broccoli's Never Made Anyone Fat*. Or maybe that's just me.

But the second I start telling a story? Boom!—our brains sync up, distractions fade, and suddenly, we're on the same wavelength. You've experienced it before without realizing it. Like when you're sitting in church, eyes glazed over, debating queso or guac at lunch—then the pastor starts a story, and suddenly, you're right back with him. That's neural coupling in action. It's not just storytelling—it's science (and probably a little Holy Spirit intervention).

Here's something else that's pretty fascinating: If you add visuals—pictures, demonstrations, or even vivid descriptions—while you're speaking, it significantly increases the listener's ability to remember what you said. Studies show that after three days, we typically retain only 10 to 20 percent of the information we hear or

read. But throw in a visual? Retention jumps to 65 percent.² Which probably explains why my friend still remembers the white-flower wedding-night illustration from high school (or maybe we chalk that up to trauma).

Stories and visuals keep us engaged, which is more important than ever in today's world of smartphones and cat reels. They help us absorb and store information in a way that simple words alone just can't. And that's exactly why Jesus repeatedly used stories in His quest to provide the ultimate playbook on kingdom living. He was a master storyteller who didn't just list rules and say, "Hey, do this because it matters." Instead, He told stories with images that stuck and made sense to people in their own context.

On one occasion, Jesus had *the talk* with the disciples and others about the kingdom of heaven. He told story after story explaining the upside-down economy of following Him. One of my favorite stories He told was the parable of the mustard seed. Just two short verses, yet it's packed with meaning.

The parable goes like this:

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches. (Matt. 13:31–32)

Now picture this: A massive crowd had gathered—nothing unusual, since people would travel great distances just to hear Him speak. People crossed lakes, climbed trees, dropped down from roofs,

and even skipped meals, all for a glimpse into who Jesus was. In this particular instance, the crowd had grown so large that Jesus got into a boat and preached from the water while a sea of people stood on the shore, eagerly listening.

He begins answering a question nobody is explicitly asking, but it's the elephant in the room for many in His Jewish audience in Galilee. They had always believed the kingdom of heaven would arrive with fanfare—trumpets blasting, a mighty Messiah commanding authority in packed synagogues, surrounded by the most powerful rulers of the day. They were not expecting a kingdom ushered in by a humble, common-looking man carting around a bunch of one-off disciples and giving sermons from the bow of a boat.

So Jesus tells a story that explains how big things of faith often come from small, humble beginnings. Yes, He's talking directly about His movement—but He's also talking about the small seeds of faith sown daily that are easy to miss and feel like nothing in the moment but have the capacity, through Jesus, to be profound. Tiny seeds with great potential.

Jesus wanted people to understand the *mustard seed mentality*: with Jesus, even the smallest acts of faithfulness have the potential for extraordinary growth.

Admittedly, the mustard seed imagery doesn't resonate as strongly with us as twenty-first-century Americans; today, maybe Jesus would

reference the power in investing ten dollars in Apple stock back in the early '90s—a tiny seed of hope that would one day buy you a Bugatti. However, the crowd in Israel lived in a countryside dotted with mustard plants, and mustard seeds were scattered along the very paths they walked. To them, it symbolized something small, almost insignificant, yet capable of growing into something vast and transformative, and spreading far beyond where the original seeds were planted.

Jesus wanted people to understand the *mustard seed mentality*: with Jesus, even the smallest acts of faithfulness have the potential for extraordinary growth. In other words, the daily, seemingly insignificant steps of faith accumulate over time in ways we cannot begin to grasp—unseen, yet unimaginably powerful.

But there's also a trap in the mustard seed mentality, one that we fall into too easily. It's the mistake of assuming that if we don't see immediate results, then nothing is happening. It reminds me of bamboo. When you plant a bamboo seed, you often see nothing for nearly five years—just bare ground, no shoots, no progress. But beneath the surface, an intricate root system is silently forming, spreading deep and wide, laying the foundation for a skyrocketing forest. Then, almost overnight, bamboo shoots up at an astonishing rate, sometimes growing several feet in a single day.³

The *mustard seed mistake* is being bamboozled into thinking that if we can't see the growth—of our efforts, our prayers, our faith—then nothing is happening. But that couldn't be further from the truth. Jesus is actively working beneath the surface, cultivating deep, unshakable roots, all while preparing us for the moment when those hidden efforts burst into visible, undeniable growth.

All of that takes time. Sometimes lots and lots of time.

Mark Batterson says it this way: “We want things to happen at the speed of light. In the kingdom of God ... things generally happen at the speed of a seed.”²⁴ So this is where I believe Jesus wants us all to have the talk with ourselves and with each other. Our job is to keep sowing the smallest seeds of grace, generosity, forgiveness, and love because a mustard seed mentality leaves the results to the only One who does immeasurably more than Apple stock or bamboo plants—even if it happens at the speed of a seed.

The *mustard seed* mistake is being bamboozled into thinking that if we can't see the growth—of our efforts, our prayers, our faith—then nothing is happening.

Throwing Shade

Many years ago, a dear friend became entangled in white-collar crime and was sentenced to ten years in prison. His wife and two children found themselves caught in the crossfire of his very public failure. In the midst of our heartbreak for our friend and his family, our pastor asked if he could share the situation with a few spiritual champions in our church.

One of those incredible people was Peggy Powell, an older woman in our congregation whom I had met a few times but didn't know well. She reached out to ask me for specific details about where our friend was incarcerated and how his family was doing, so she could pray with

purpose and intention. What she did next was something nobody would have expected: every single day, without fail, she wrote him a letter.

For the eight and a half years our friend served in federal prison, Peggy wrote daily letters filled with casual conversation about her family, newspaper clippings she thought he'd find interesting, and questions about his family's well-being. There was no agenda, no expectation of a reply, and no overthinking about how he might receive the letters. She simply committed to write letters to a man she had never met, who lived in a different part of the country, and to pray for him and his family as if they were her own—because, as fellow believers in Christ, she knew they were.

It's nearly impossible to grasp the depth of selflessness in a woman who, day after day, sacrificially sat down, found the right words, bought a stamp, and mailed a letter. She even urged him to memorize Scripture, and together, letter by letter, they carefully wrote out passages of the Bible they were committing to memory.

Our friend told me that, during the darkest season of his life, Peggy made him feel seen and acknowledged. Though he had made a monumental mistake, she was his constant reminder that wholeness was still possible through Jesus.

For years Peggy prayed fervently over our friend's marriage and his children, asking God to protect them and heal their hearts from the deep pain and betrayal at the root of the situation. One day, several years into her letter-writing campaign, I had the chance to ask her what prompted such generosity and kindness. She gave me two reasons. Practically, she had heard that prisoners who received regular mail were treated better by the guards. Spiritually, she wanted him to know that he was far from forgotten but loved and forgiven in Christ. And

this wasn't something she did just for my friend—but something she faithfully did for hundreds of prisoners over the years.

My friend finished serving his sentence and is back home with his wife and two children who are now young adults. He loves the Lord genuinely and remains incredibly sorry for what his crime did to his wife and children. However, at one point he told me that if incarceration was the cost of knowing Jesus the way he does now, then it was worth it.

Warren Buffett famously said, “Someone’s sitting in the shade today because someone planted a tree a long time ago.”⁵ Generations of children and grandchildren will sit in the shade from seeds Peggy Powell planted for her brother in Christ letter by letter over eight long years, finally producing a visible bloom the day he returned home with his faith deeply anchored and his family intact.

Sweet Peggy Powell has gone home to be with Jesus, and I imagine that now, in the presence of her Savior, she sees it all clearly. She knows—without question—that the little things, like writing a simple letter day after day, far outlasted her time here on earth. You see, she embraced the *mustard seed mentality*. And now, on the other side of eternity, I believe she’s witnessing the deep roots God has been quietly cultivating beneath the surface—roots that will one day bloom for all to see.

A Mustard Seed Mentality

Can we go back to neural coupling for just a second? I love that Jesus used stories to make a point because He wanted His audience to remember what matters. He could have just said, “In God’s kingdom, small things eventually become big.” But Jesus knew we probably wouldn’t remember it. Putting a visual behind His words with a story

meant that long after the crowd left the shoreline, His words would still be with them. Every time they walked by a field of mustard plants, or dusted a mustard seed off their sandals, or tasted mustard on their Ball Park hot dog (well, maybe not hot dogs for our Jewish friends), they would remember the truth Jesus shared that day from the boat.

I could easily just cut to the chase and say, “Love people well,” “show grace,” and “do hard things.” Best-case scenario, you’ll underline it with your trusty yellow highlighter and move on; worst case, you’ll make a mental note that will be gone in a few days. But my hope is that every time you hear the name Peggy or buy a stamp or learn of someone incarcerated, you’ll remember that small acts of daily obedience plant seeds that change lives and far outlive us.

So we’ve had *the talk* first thing out of the gate: small things make a big difference, and it takes a *mustard seed mentality* to keep going when the slightest bloom may be seven-and-a-half years in the making. But Jesus also said this kind of mustard seed faith moves mountains (Matt. 17:20). And I’m not sure about you, but some mountains need moving in my own life and the lives of my people.

So let’s follow Peggy Powell’s lead and commit today to remind those around us that they are anything but forgotten; they are loved and forgiven in Christ. And as you read the coming stories—both from my life and others’—remember that a picture is worth a thousand words (and neural coupling proves it). So don’t miss it: let each story be a visual cue that the mustard seed mentality is the little difference that makes a big difference. Because you can bet your “back bottom” that one day, when you least expect it, those little seeds of faithfulness will bloom into something beautiful.

Go and do likewise.

Don't Miss It

- Planting mustard seeds is playing the long game. So is explaining human anatomy without using anatomically correct terms.
- Big kingdom impact rarely starts with a spotlight—it usually starts with a stamp.
- It's not the size of the seed that's the difference maker but the One who makes it grow.