

Good morning! Like many of us, Michael believes that storytelling is a great way to illuminate truths about others and ourselves. When he asked me to tell you something of my personal story, he suggested that I use Fredrick Buechner's summary of the best times in life: "...when one's deep gladness meets the world's deep need." It feels a little presumptive of me to think that I can do anything significant about the world's deep needs, and yet I do believe we all can make small differences in that part of the world closest to us and feel joy in the doing. Sometimes those differences can ripple far beyond where we are as they touch different people in different ways and those individuals make their own new and important differences in the world around them.

I subscribe to the on-line version of the *Writer's Almanac*, and since I have retired have kept a running list of quotes I like from authors I read about there. I will tell you three short stories about myself and begin each of them with a quote I have saved. The first quote is from Paul Hawkin, author, environmentalist, and entrepreneur who said, "Don't be put off by people who know what is not possible. Do what needs to be done, and check to see if it was impossible only after you are done."

When Newt and I moved to Jackson County in the fall of 1968, I was pregnant and due to give birth in March. That summer we had purchased our farm in the Canada community. On the land was a house not good enough to live in but too good to tear down. We rented an apartment in Sylva, and every day after Newt's classes and all weekend long, we would drive out and work on the house. It was fortuitous that our neighbors in Sylva were the writer and environmentalist Edward Abbey and his wife Judy. Ed had also come to Western that fall to teach in the English Department, and he and Newt instantly became fast friends. Ed and Judy had a new baby, and as Judy and I became friends, she talked to me about this radical process they had participated in with their daughter's birth in Tucson called natural childbirth. She loaned me the book that was to become the bible of the Lamaze method of natural childbirth, *Six Practical Lessons for an Easier Childbirth* by Elizabeth Bing. Judy also promised to be our mentor and coach when it was closer to our time. Natural childbirth really appealed to the back-to-the-land, chemical-free- living we were embarking on, and both Newt and I were excited about this prospect.

Unfortunately for us, Ed and Judy left Western in December for Ed to take a job back in Arizona, and so we were on our own. We went ahead though, read the book, and practiced the techniques by ourselves. Remember now, this was 40 years ago, and so of course when I asked my doctor if Newt could be in the delivery room with me, he just laughed and said absolutely not, far too dangerous for everyone involved! C.J. Harris Hospital in 1969 was not exactly a medical backwater, but there was no anesthesiologist on staff. Palliative measures for labor and delivery were primitive by today's standards, and if anesthesia were needed, someone had to come from Waynesville. We felt lucky to have our own coping methods, and with Newt's support, on March 27, 1969, I made it through labor without too much difficulty and was ready for a joyful delivery around two in the afternoon.

The nurse who had been tending me up to that point had heard of Bing's book and natural childbirth and asked Newt if he planned to go into the delivery room to continue his support.

Without blinking an eye he said yes, and so she readied him with mask and gown and cap and paper booties. It was our luck, or fate, or God's will if you will, that my doctor was out of town that day. By the time his back-up physician arrived, there was too much happening in the delivery room for him to shoo Newt away. Therefore, Courtney was born without my having had any drugs and with her father participating in the event. The process was so natural and amazing to everyone involved that news of our experience traveled quickly all over the hospital. Different nursing and medical staff came to visit me to ask about our experience, and one physician from that day on always addressed me as the Lamazing Mrs. Smith. My own doctor, the late and great Dr. Philip Dewees, asked me the very next day when he returned if I would be willing to teach others to do what we had done. I was so excited and happy and thrilled with our experience that of course I said yes.

Not being a nurse myself, I teamed up with my friend and nurse Sylvia Smythe, who was herself pregnant and interested in natural childbirth. Over the next three years, she and I read our heads off, attended workshops in Charlotte where Lamaze were already established, and coached our friends who were willing to try childbirth drug free. I audited nursing classes at SCC and Western Carolina, and both Sylvia and I became ASPO certified childbirth educators. That's the American Society for Psychoprophylaxis in Obstetrics. For the next 20 years at C.J. Harris Hospital, we taught hundreds of prospective mothers and fathers that childbirth is an experience to be relished rather than feared and coached them in coping strategies for making it an experience to be cherished and remembered. Prepared childbirth and its attendant family-friendly policies, such as having your baby in your room if you chose, were well established in Sylva at least a decade before they became commonplace everywhere else.

My own deep joy always came from teaching Lamaze and hearing of or participating in the experiences of the couples in my classes. My ultimate joy was supporting and witnessing the births of our three nieces here in Sylva and then the births of two of our grandchildren. Courtney, Jackson County's first Lamaze baby, was steeped in the tradition from day one and wanted to go the next step and have a home birth. Zoe, her firstborn, was actually born at our house, the ultimate and nearly inexpressible joy for this grandmother.

My next quote comes from M.C. Escher: "We adore chaos because we love to produce order." In late 1993, a collaborative of human service agencies and individuals in the seven westernmost counties of North Carolina was awarded a Smart Start grant. The group was incorporated in early 1994 as the Region A Partnership for Children and included the counties from Haywood west to Cherokee and the Qualla Boundary of the Cherokee nation. Smart Start was Governor Hunt's initiative that continues today to ensure that all children reach school healthy and ready to succeed. The not-for-profit agencies across the state that received the grants were to assess the opportunities for young children and their families in their communities and to fill in any gaps that made it difficult for children to be ready for school and schools ready for children. They were to work collaboratively in new ways to make this happen.

What a charge that was for us! Childhood poverty, education's greatest enemy, was over 24% in Region A in 1994. Human service agencies were underfunded. There was little high quality, affordable childcare available anywhere. There were no family resource centers, no Early Head

Start, no library outreach in communities, no dental care for children whose parents were impoverished. Children with special health or educational needs often went unserved due to their parents not knowing what was available for them or how to access it. Early childhood professionals who spent more time with some children than their own working parents earned less money for their efforts than the lowest paid county employee. Mental health needs of young children were largely unaddressed. Parents who wanted to increase their knowledge of child development and improve their parenting skills had few if any resources. There was no Google in 1994! Add to this mix of conditions strapped human service professionals who were afraid they might lose their own scarce resources in this new process called collaboration, and you had enough chaos to produce 13 years of intense joy for me when I became the first executive director of the Region A Partnership for Children.

The underlying strength of Region A and the good news during those 13 years were the people I had the opportunity to work with—seriously independent mountaineers who more often than not came to the table unselfishly with their hands behind their backs and the outcomes for young children and their families foremost in their minds. Collaborate we did, giving and taking, meeting and planning, together creatively coming up with new and unique ways to support families and ensure school and life success for the children in our region, who are our future. As a not-for-profit organization, we set out to match our state funding with private and foundation funding in order to do more good for more children. We received contributions from countless individuals and prestigious foundations, including the Duke Endowment and the W.K.Kellogg Foundation. With all our funding and much creative thinking, we were able to enhance what we had and to create new early education, health, and family support opportunities for thousands of young children and their families beyond our most outlandish dreams. -

I was blessed over the years to be able to assemble a terrific staff, including two of our own here at St. David's, Vance and Terri. Working together, we ordered enough chaos to fill my joy quotient for years to come, and we met some great needs here in western North Carolina in the process. Pearl Fryar, famous African-American topiary gardener in Bishopville, SC, sums it up this way: "Gardening books will tell you that some of the things in my garden can't be done, but I had never read them when I started. Not knowing ahead of time that something is supposed to be impossible often makes it possible to achieve."

My final quote comes from the poet, environmental activist, and Buddhist practitioner Gary Snyder: "To restore the land one must live and work in a place. To work in a place is to work with others. People who work together in a place become a community, and a community, in time, grows a culture." For over 30 years, I have been blessed to be a part of the community of St. David's Episcopal Church, where I continue to experience the mysteries of God in Christ. I believe the world needs community in order to realize all of God's blessings for oneself and for the world. It is my deep joy to have been working in this place long enough to have had many exciting opportunities to help shape its culture.

Margot and Tom, Betty Lynn and Bill, and Newt and I are the only ones here this morning who will remember when we sang hymns off printed sheets in preparation for finalizing the 1982 hymnal or when the current Book of Common Prayer was adopted by General Convention and embraced by our congregation. Over time we have gone from having Morning Prayer and a monthly Eucharist on Sundays to celebrating the Eucharist twice weekly using gender neutral language. St. David's has been a pioneer in many ways. We were the first church in the diocese to call a woman priest. We initiated the Safe Zone movement for the benefit of students, faculty, and staff at Western Carolina University, and St. David's is a designated Safe Zone for all peoples, regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation. We embraced the opportunity to observe Creation Cycle when it was instituted and do all we can as a congregation to enhance and protect our natural environment.

Throughout all these changes, my own gladness has continued to grow as the words and peace exchanged in this place have enabled me to deepen my spiritual journey within St. David's community, a community whose culture of commitment to social justice, to a life of prayer, to environmental preservation, and to serving God by serving others is meeting the world's deep needs in our corner of the world. The last verse of one of Michael's *Songs for the Cycle* sums it all up perfectly:

“And this is the journey, God's gifts spread among  
all manner of people, community sprung  
in kindness, compassion, in simple good deeds—  
the mutual meeting of gifts and of needs.” - Amen