

The Power of a Woman's Words

SHARON JAYNES



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Contents

PART ONE: THE POWER WE POSSESS

- 1. Mixed Messages 9
- 2. God's Incredible Gift 13
- 3. A Woman's Life-Changing Potential 31

PART TWO: THE PEOPLE WE IMPACT

- 4. A BIG Impact on Little People:
The Power of a Woman's Words to Her Children 49
- 5. The Dripping Faucet or the Refreshing Well:
The Power of a Woman's Words to Her Husband 71
- 6. Come Sit by Me:
The Power of a Woman's Words to Her Friends 93
- 7. Cheering from the Sidelines:
The Power of a Woman's Words to Her Adult Children 113
- 8. Especially These:
The Power of a Woman's Words to Fellow Believers 135
- 9. The Woman in the Checkout Line:
The Power of a Woman's Words to the World 151

PART THREE: THE PURPOSEFUL PURSUIT OF TAMING THE TONGUE

- 10. You're Not in This Alone 167
- 11. The Graveyard of Grumbling and the Life Force of Gratitude . . . 185
- 12. The Melody of Silence 207
- 13. The Bucket Principle 223
- 14. Profound Possibilities 231

- Notes 235

Mixed Messages

Discretion of speech is more than eloquence.

FRANCIS BACON

My friend Catherine and I set out for a lazy summer stroll through the neighborhood just before the fireflies emerged to start their party. We chatted about raising boys, working husbands, and decorating dilemmas. When we arrived back at her house, she invited me to come in and look at some fabric swatches for a new sofa. Before I knew it, a few minutes had turned into a few hours.

“Oh, my!” I exclaimed. “It’s ten o’clock. I’ve been gone for over two hours! I bet Steve’s worried sick. He doesn’t even know where I am. I’d better give him a call before I start back home.”

When I dialed our number, the answering machine picked up. After I listened to my sweet Southern greeting, I left a bitter message.

“Steve, I was calling to let you know I’m at Catherine’s. I thought you’d be worried, but apparently you don’t even care because you won’t even pick up the phone!” Click. I said my goodbyes to Catherine and left feeling dejected. “I’m wandering around in the dark all alone and he doesn’t even care,” I mumbled to no one in particular. “I could be lying in a ditch injured, or dead for that matter! He doesn’t even care. I don’t think he even loves me.”

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I noticed someone coming

toward me. It was Prince Charming riding on his steed! Actually, it was Steve riding on his bicycle.

"Where have you been?" Steve desperately asked. "I've been riding all over the neighborhood looking for you! Do you know what time it is?"

"Oh, you do care," I said with a grin, giving him a big hug.

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, nothing. Let's go home."

When we arrived at the house, what did I do? You know it, girlfriend; I quickly erased the message on the answering machine before Steve could hear my caustic words. *Whew*, I thought. *That was close*.

A few days later, Steve called me from work.

"Sharon, have you listened to the answering machine lately?"

"No, why?"

"Well, I think there's something on there you need to hear."

We hung up and I reached for my cell phone to call my landline phone. The message on the answering machine went something like this:

(The voice of sweet Southernness) "Hello, you've reached the Jaynes' residence. We're unable to answer the phone right now... (enter the voice of Cruella De Vil) "I was calling to let you know I'm at Catherine's. I thought you'd be worried, but apparently you don't even care because you won't even pick up the phone!" (Return of sweet Southernness) "At the sound of the beep, leave a message, and we'll get back with you as soon as possible." Beep.

"Oh, my goodness!" I screamed. "How did this happen! How many people have heard this over the past three days?"

I called the phone company, and they explained that sometimes during a thunderstorm (which had occurred three days prior), lightning strikes the wires and answering machine messages get scrambled. My message somehow became attached to the greeting.

I was mortified. It sounded like Dr. Jekyll and Mrs. Hyde.

"Lord," I prayed, "this is so embarrassing."

"Yes, it is," He replied.

Well, He didn't really *say* that in so many words. It was more like

this: “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water” (James 3:9-12). As my country grandma would say, that means what’s down in the well will come up in the bucket.

“Okay, Lord, I get the message.” But, unfortunately, so did a lot of other people.

I am amazed how quickly we women can flit back and forth between blessing and belittling, praising and putting down, cheering and critiquing—all in a matter of seconds. God has given us incredible power in our sphere of influence, and it begins with the words we speak. Few forces have greater impact than the utterances that pass our lips. Our words can embolden a child to accomplish great feats, encourage a husband to conquer the world, reignite the dying embers of a friend’s broken dreams, cheer on a fellow believer to run the race of life, and draw a lost soul to Christ. Words start wars and bring peace—globally, and right in our own homes.

I am so glad you’ve joined me on this journey to one of the most powerful gifts that God has given each of us—words. We’ll discover how we shape the lives of others with words that speak life into the human soul or suck the life right out of them. In addition to looking at how our words impact those we come in contact with every day, we’ll also look at various women in the Bible and how their words influenced generations after them. We’ll explore the power available to each of us to harness this mighty force and use it for good. Most importantly, we’ll join hands and hearts and discover how to change the words we speak to become the women God intended all along.

Are words powerful? Yes! Just how powerful? We’ll learn together. Let’s take a look at one of God’s most incredible gifts to mankind and consider the potential we have right under our noses...words.

God's Incredible Gift

*The Bible has a lot to say about our mouths,
our lips, our tongues, for our speech betrays us.
What is down in the well will come up in the bucket.*

VANCE HAVNER

God has given us a valuable treasure—this gift of words, and with great riches comes great responsibility. The gift wasn't meant to be ill-used for selfish gratification, but invested in others for their edification. Speaking life not only changes that one person we're speaking to, but can affect generations that follow. Miss Thompson, a schoolteacher who taught fifth grade, saw firsthand how an encouraging word can change the course of a day...the course of a life. Here's her story as written by Elizabeth Ballard:

THREE LETTERS FROM TEDDY¹

Teddy's letter came today and now that I've read it, I will place it in my cedar chest with the other things that are important to my life.

"I wanted you to be the first to know."

I smiled as I read the words he had written, and my heart swelled with a pride that I had no right to feel. *Teddy Stallard*. I have not seen Teddy Stallard since he was a student in my fifth-grade class, 15 years ago.

I'm ashamed to say that from the first day he stepped into my classroom, I disliked Teddy. Teachers try hard not to have favorites in a class, but we try even harder not to show dislike for a child, any child.

Nevertheless, every year there are one or two children that one cannot help but be attached to, for teachers are human, and it is human nature to like bright, pretty, intelligent people, whether they are ten years old or 25. And sometimes, not too often, fortunately, there will be one or two students to whom the teacher just can't seem to relate.

I had thought myself quite capable of handling my personal feelings along that line until Teddy walked into my life. There wasn't a child I particularly liked that year, but Teddy was most assuredly one I disliked.

He was a dirty little boy. Not just occasionally, but all the time. His hair hung low over his ears, and he actually had to hold it out of his eyes as he wrote his papers in class. (And this was before it was fashionable to do so!) Too, he had a peculiar odor about him that I could never identify.

Yes, his physical faults were many, but his intellect left a lot to be desired. By the end of the first week I knew he was hopelessly behind the others. Not only was he behind, he was just plain slow! I began to withdraw from him immediately.

Any teacher will tell you that it's more of a pleasure to teach a bright child. It is definitely more rewarding for one's ego. But any teacher worth his or her credentials can channel work to the bright child, keeping that child challenged and learning, while the major effort is with the slower ones. Any teacher *can* do this. Most teachers *do*, but I didn't. Not that year.

In fact, I concentrated on my best students and let the others follow along as best they could. Ashamed as I am to admit it, I took perverse pleasure in using my red pen; and each time I came to Teddy's papers, the cross-marks (and they were many) were always a little larger and a little redder than necessary.

"Poor work!" I would write with a flourish.

While I did not actually ridicule the boy, my attitude was obviously

quite apparent to the class, for he quickly became the class “goat,” the outcast—the unlovable and the unloved.

He knew I didn't like him, but he didn't know why. Nor did I know—then or now—why I felt such an intense dislike for him. All I know is that he was a little boy no one cared about, and I made no effort on his behalf.

The days rolled by and we made it through the Fall Festival, the Thanksgiving holidays, and I continued marking happily with my red pen. As our Christmas break approached, I knew that Teddy would never catch up in time to be promoted to the sixth-grade level. He would be a repeater.

To justify myself, I went to his cumulative folder from time to time. He had very low grades for the first four years, but no grade failure. How he had made it, I didn't know. I closed my mind to the personal remarks:

First Grade: “Teddy shows promise by work and attitude, but he has a poor home situation.”

Second Grade: “Teddy could do better. Mother terminally ill. He receives little help at home.”

Third Grade: “Teddy is a pleasant boy. Helpful, but too serious. Slow learner. Mother passed away end of the year.”

Fourth Grade: “Very slow but well behaved. Father shows no interest.”

Well, they passed him four times, but he will certainly repeat fifth grade! Do him good! I said to myself.

And then the last day before the holidays arrived. Our little tree on the reading table sported paper and popcorn chains. Many gifts were heaped underneath, waiting for the big moment.

Teachers always get several gifts at Christmas, but mine that year seemed bigger and more elaborate than ever. There was not a student who had not brought me one. Each unwrapping brought squeals of delight, and the proud giver would receive effusive thank-yous.

His gift wasn't the last one I picked up. In fact it was in the middle of the pile. Its wrapping was a brown paper bag, and he had colored Christmas trees and red bells all over it. It was stuck together with masking tape. “For Miss Thompson—From Teddy.”

The group was completely silent and I felt conspicuous, embarrassed because they all stood watching me unwrap that gift. As I removed the last bit of masking tape, two items fell to my desk. A gaudy rhinestone bracelet with several stones missing and a small bottle of dime-store cologne—half empty. I could hear the snickers and whispers, and I wasn't sure I could look at Teddy.

"Isn't this lovely?" I asked, placing the bracelet on my wrist. "Teddy, would you help me fasten it?"

He smiled shyly as he fixed the clasp, and I held up my wrist for all of them to admire. There were a few hesitant *ooh's* and *ahh's*, but, as I dabbed the cologne behind my ears, all the little girls lined up for a dab behind their ears.

I continued to open the gifts until I reached the bottom of the pile. We ate our refreshments until the bell rang. The children filed out with shouts of "See you next year!" and "Merry Christmas!" but Teddy waited at his desk.

When they had all left, he walked toward me clutching his gift and books to his chest.

"You smell just like Mom," he said softly. "Her bracelet looks real pretty on you too. I'm glad you liked it."

He left quickly and I locked the door, sat down at my desk and wept, resolving to make up to Teddy what I had deliberately deprived him of—a teacher who cared.

I stayed every afternoon with Teddy from the day class resumed on January 2 until the last day of school. Sometimes we worked together. Sometimes he worked alone while I drew up lesson plans or graded papers. Slowly but surely he caught up with the rest of the class. Gradually there was a definite upward curve in his grades.

He did not have to repeat the fifth grade. In fact, his final averages were among the highest in the class, and although I knew he would be moving out of the state when school was out, I was not worried for him. Teddy had reached a level that would stand him in good stead the following year, no matter where he went. He had enjoyed a measure of success, and as we were taught in our education courses: "Success builds success."



I did not hear from Teddy until several years later when his first letter appeared in my mailbox.

Dear Miss Thompson,

I just wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class on May 25 from E_____ High School.

*Very truly yours,
Teddy Stallard*

I sent him a card of congratulations and a small package, a pen and pencil set. I wondered what he would do after graduation. I found out four years later when Teddy's second letter came.

Dear Miss Thompson,

I was just informed today that I'll be graduating first in my class. The university has been a little tough but I'll miss it.

*Very truly yours,
Teddy Stallard*

I sent him a good pair of sterling silver monogrammed cuff links and a card, so proud of him I could burst!
And now—today—Teddy's third letter:

Dear Miss Thompson,

I wanted you to be the first to know. As of today I am Theodore J. Stallard, MD. How about that???!!!

I'm going to be married on July 27, and I'm hoping you can come and sit where Mom would sit if she were here. I'll have no family there as Dad died last year.

*Very truly yours,
Ted Stallard*

I'm not sure what kind of gift one sends to a doctor on completion of medical school. Maybe I'll just wait and take a wedding gift, but the note can't wait.

Dear Ted,

Congratulations! You made it and you did it yourself! In spite of those like me and not because of us, this day has come for you.

God bless you. I'll be at that wedding with bells on!!!

Miss Thompson changed the course of one little boy's life. She gave Teddy words that built him up when he felt as though life had knocked him down for good. Can't you hear her now? "Great job, Teddy!" "You can do it!" She became the wind beneath his wings when he felt as though he had been grounded from flight. And years later, she had a front row seat as she watched him soar into his future. That is the power of a woman's words. An incredible gift God has given those created in His very image. You and me!

*Words weren't meant to be ill-used
for selfish gratification, but invested
in others for their edification.*

AND GOD SAID

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). That seems like a splendid place for us to start our journey—at the beginning of time. When God created the world and stocked the seas with marine life and the skies with winged creatures—when He caused the stars to ignite the night sky and placed the sun to light the day and the moon to illumine the darkness—He did so with words. "*And God said, 'Let there be light.'*" "*And God said, 'Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.'*" "*And God said, 'Let the water*

under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.’” “*And God said*, ‘Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night.’” “*And God said*, ‘Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.’” “*And God said*, ‘Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds.’” “*Then God said*, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’” And it was so. (See Genesis 1:3-26.) God spoke, and what was not became what is. When God created the heavens and the earth, He used a mighty force—words. “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth” (Psalm 33:6).

Amazingly, when God created mankind in His own image, He gave us that same powerful ability to speak words. He didn’t entrust words to zebras, birds, monkeys, elephants, lizards, or horses. He entrusted words to mere mortals. Our words also have creative potential. They can light up a child’s face disheartened by discouragement, lessen the burdens of a husband weighed down with worries, lift the spirits a friend who feels dejected by life, cheer on brothers and sisters in Christ to grow in grace, and bring the message of the hope and healing of Jesus Christ to a wounded world. Words are one of the most powerful forces in the universe, and amazingly, God has entrusted them to you and me. Words become the mirror in which others see themselves.

I’ve always been amazed at the power in a tiny atom too small to be seen by the naked eye. Fission (splitting the nucleus of an atom) and fusion (joining nuclei together) have the potential to generate enough power to provide energy for an entire city or enough destructive potential to level an entire town. It all depends on how and when the joining together or splitting apart takes place.

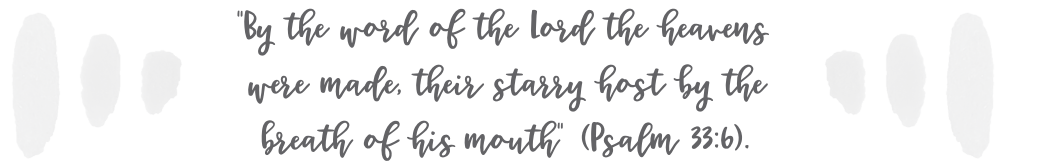
So it is with our words. Bound in one small group of muscles called the tongue lies an instrument with huge potential for good or evil, to build up or to tear down, to empower or devour, to heal or to hurt. It all depends on how and when the joining together and splitting apart take place. Our words can make or break a marriage, paralyze or propel

a friend, sew together or tear apart a relationship, build up or bury a dream, curse God or confess Christ. And even though the tongue has no bones, it is strong enough to break someone's heart.

Just as God used words to create physical life, our words can be the spark to generate spiritual life. Paul taught, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is *with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved*" (Romans 10:9-10). Wow! It is with our mouth that we are saved. That is incredible power right below our nose.

The words *talk, tongue, speak, speech, words, mouth*, and *silence* are used over 3,500 times in the Bible. Words that are used by men and women just like you and me. Some are examples of the damage words can cause, and some are examples of the life they can bring. We read about women who gossiped, whined, lied, manipulated, taunted, and caused many to stumble. We also read about women who encouraged, prophesied, saved lives, instructed warriors, and caused many to walk in truth. Some did both. You and I probably will too.

Just as we read the words, "And God said," one day people will say the same about us. "And she said..."



*"By the word of the Lord the heavens
were made, their starry host by the
breath of his mouth" (Psalm 33:6).*

RUDDERS, BRIDLES, AND FOREST FIRES

In the Bible, James paints a poignant picture of the power of our words:

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by

strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, *sets the whole course of one's life on fire*, and is itself set on fire by hell (James 3:3-6).

The ESV Study Bible notes: “The tongue is one of the smaller organs in the body, yet it has control over everything a person is and does. The tongue, ‘sets the whole course of his life, (literally “the cycle of existence”) likely means the “ups and downs” of life.’ The tongue turns upside down every aspect of life in the community as well as in the individual.”²

An average horse weighs 840 to 2,200 pounds. That's a big bulk of bone and muscle. And yet, a small piece of metal lying across the horse's tongue, attached to a bridle in the rider's hand, controls whether the horse moves to the left or the right. Pulling the bridle toward the rider signals the horse to stop, and slacking the bridle signals the horse to move ahead. Just to think that such a large animal is controlled by such a small piece of metal pressing against its tongue is mind-boggling.

I love how Peterson paraphrases James 3:3-6 in his work *The Message* (MSG):

A bit in the mouth of a horse controls the whole horse. A small rudder on a huge ship in the hands of a skilled captain sets a course in the face of the strongest winds. A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but *it can accomplish nearly anything—or destroy it!*

It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke, and go up in smoke with it—smoke right from the pit of hell.

On November 23, 2016, just such a spark ignited in the Great

Smoky Mountains National Park. The wildfire began on a steep, rugged peak known as Chimney Tops, about four miles from Gatlinburg, Tennessee. The fire burned for several days, mostly in the unreachable peaks of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, not far from the edge of one of the most popular hiking trails. The fire was small and so remote that for days firefighters couldn't get to it. Instead, they came up with a plan to contain it. But beginning Sunday afternoon and into Monday morning, the moisture vanished from the air, the temperature rose, and the wind began galloping through the trees. By Monday afternoon, there was no stopping the hungry flames.³

Aided by strong wind gusts up to 76 miles per hour and months of parching drought, the blaze sprinted toward the populated tourist attraction of Gatlinburg. At 5 p.m., there were no fires in Gatlinburg. Within one hour, 20 buildings were ablaze.⁴

For days, 780 firefighting personnel from several states fought wildfires that shut down the city of Gatlinburg at the height of its winter tourism. The blaze damaged or destroyed more than 2,400 homes and businesses. Fourteen people died, 134 were injured. Both local residents and visitors were among the dead. Many homeowners returned home to find all they owned in ashes. Sevier County and 17,000 acres of woodland were left a scarred and charred piece of earth. And it started with a careless spark.

Two teenage boys were horsing around with matches on a popular hiking trail. Another hiker apparently captured an image of the boys walking away from the trail with smoke in the background. Authorities were able to identify the boys by their clothes, and they were later arrested.

One match.

One spark.

Two careless people.

On average more than 100,000 wildfires destroy 4 to 5 million acres in the U.S. annually. In 2018, 52,303 wildfires destroyed 8.5 million acres. About 90 percent are believed to have been caused by human carelessness, and 10 percent by natural causes, such as lightning strikes.

While forest fires leave naked trees and barren hillsides that take

years to revive, lives singed by fiery words can be laid bare forever. We would never carelessly fling a lit match out of a car window while passing a national forest, and yet many times we carelessly toss fiery words about as we pass through life.

The writer of Proverbs notes, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21 NASB). Of all the spiritual disciplines, I believe bringing our tongues under the submission of the Holy Spirit is one of the greatest. Why? Because through our words we bring death and through our words we bring life.

There is a story told about Xanthus the philosopher. He once told his servant he was going to have some friends for dinner the following evening and instructed him to get the best thing he could find in the market. When the philosopher and his guests sat down the next day at the table, they had nothing but tongue—four or five courses of tongue cooked in various ways. The philosopher finally lost his patience and said to his servant, “Didn’t I tell you to get the best thing in the market?” The servant said, “I did get the best thing in the market. Isn’t the tongue the organ of sociability, the organ of eloquence, the organ of kindness, the organ of worship?”

Then Xanthus said, “Tomorrow I want you to get the worst thing in the market.” The next day when the philosopher sat at the table, there was nothing but tongue—four or five courses of tongue—tongue in this shape and in that shape. The philosopher lost his patience again and said, “Didn’t I tell you to get the worst thing in the market?” The servant replied, “I did; for isn’t the tongue the organ of blasphemy, the organ of defamation, the organ of lying?”⁵

I have never eaten tongue before, but I have had to eat my words. While words are one of God’s most incredible gifts, in the wrong hands—or rather, in the wrong mouth—they possess destructive potential. Our words are powerful, and they have consequences.

*Words become the mirror
in which others see themselves.*

LOOKING FOR A SAFE HARBOR

One day I was glancing through an insert in my local newspaper called *The Mecklenburg Neighbor*. A calendar of events for the week was listed on the last two pages. Entry after entry mentioned support group meetings: Adoptive Parents Support Group, Adult Children of Alcoholics Support Group, Alzheimer's Disease Support Group, Dementia Caregivers Support Group, Amputee Support Group, Breast-feeding Support Group, Codependents Anonymous, Eating Disorders Anonymous, Emotions Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Headaches Anonymous, Moms of Multiples, Sex Addicts Anonymous... All in all, 146 support group meetings were scheduled in my fair city in one week. A boxed message was posted above the upper right-hand column: "If you are looking for a support group not mentioned here, give us a call and we'll find one for you."

I closed the newspaper with a knot in the pit of my stomach. How desperately men and women long for an encouraging word. They need a cheerleader to tell them, "You can do it. Don't give up!" They long for a fellow journeyman to bolster them up when the road is too arduous to travel alone. They yearn for teammates to rally behind them, reminding them they are not isolated in this game called life.

Years ago there were no such things as support groups. Rather, we had family or neighbors who helped when burdens became too difficult to bear alone. Women talked over the fence as they raised children together. They canned vegetables together when the crops came in. They stitched quilts to keep bodies warm and chatted to keep their hearts warm. But times have changed. Many of us don't even know our next-door neighbors' names, our families live across several state lines, and we've lost that sense of community that was the mainstay just a few generations ago. Where once we had a welcome mat at our front doors, now we have warning stickers to let those who approach our homes know we have an alarm system. And if you're like me, you have both welcome and warning, which I'm sure is very confusing.

This lack of connection is prevalent in our Christian community as well. A few years ago, I was in a couples' Bible study. One man in the group had only been a Christian for a short time. "You know what I

miss most since I became a Christian?” he asked. “I miss hanging out at bars. I miss talking with other men and just being real.”

His confession broke my heart. Rob didn’t miss the alcohol. He missed the fellowship where no one would judge, condemn, or make him feel guilty. The bar was a safe place. I read something a few years ago that reminded me of Rob’s confession:

The neighborhood bar is possibly the best counterfeit there is to the fellowship Christ wants to give His church. It’s an imitation, dispensing liquor instead of grace, escape rather than reality, but it’s permissive, accepting, and inclusive fellowship. It is unshockable. It is democratic. You can tell people secrets and they usually don’t tell others or even want to. The bar flourishes not because most people are alcoholics, but because God has put into the human heart the desire to know and be known, to love and be loved, and so many seek a counterfeit at the price of a few beers.⁶

Why do spouses stop by the neighborhood bar before heading home? Could it be the same reason teenagers prefer peers over parents, the same reason church hoppers bounce from one church to the next, or the same reason hurting people attend support groups instead of sharing their struggles among friends? Could it be they are looking for a safe harbor, an uplifting word, a verbal pat on the back—grace for the grumpy, safety for the storm-tossed, and rest for the bone-weary? I’ve never met anyone yet who didn’t need a kind word. People need a place where they can set anchor without fear of pirates coming aboard and robbing them blind. I believe we can be that “safe place.” We can learn to speak words of grace that invite those around us to come ashore for a needed respite and then set sail once the storm has passed.

A SIMPLE CHOICE WITH LASTING RESULTS

We are shaped by words from those who love us or refuse to love us. We are shaped by the words of those who don’t even know our names.

It is the heart cry of all mankind to be loved and accepted, and sometimes a simple word of encouragement can make all the difference.

William Barclay said,

One of the highest of human duties is the duty of encouragement. It is easy to laugh at men's ideals; it is easy to pour cold water on their enthusiasm; it is easy to discourage others. The world is full of discouragers. We have a Christian duty to encourage one another. Many a time a word of praise or thanks or appreciation or cheer has kept a man on his feet. Blessed is the man [or woman] who speaks such a word.⁷

What exactly is encouragement? My dictionary defines it “to give courage or confidence to; to raise the hopes of; to help on by sympathetic advice and interest; to advise and make it easy for [someone to do something] to promote or stimulate; to strengthen.” In contrast, discouragement is “to say or take away the courage of, to deter, to lessen enthusiasm for and so restrict or hinder.”

Amazingly, our words have the capacity for both, and we are faced with the choice every time we speak as to which it will be. The Hebrew word for “mouth,” *peh*, is often translated “edge.”⁸ Like a knife, the tongue has a sharp, powerful edge that can either be used to hurt or heal. A knife in the hands of a skilled surgeon brings healing and life, but a knife in the hands of a murderer brings death. Like the surgeon, we can study how to use our mouths to bring life to those around us, and then make the simple choice to do just that.

How long does that one simple choice linger in someone's heart? How far-reaching are the echoes of a kind word? I believe the impact of a spoken or written word can remain long after our bodies have left this earth. Marie learned the lasting impact of words from a group of her students. Here is her story:

He was in the first third-grade class I taught at Saint Mary's School in Morris, Minnesota. All thirty-four of my students were dear to me, but Mark Eklund was one in a

million. Very neat in appearance, he had that happy-to-be-alive attitude that made even his occasional mischievousness delightful.

Mark also talked incessantly. I had to remind him again and again that talking without permission was not acceptable. What impressed me so much, though, was his sincere response every time I had to correct him for misbehaving. “Thank you for correcting me, Sister!” I didn’t know what to make of it at first, but before long I became accustomed to hearing it many times a day.

One morning my patience was growing thin when Mark talked once too often, and then I made a novice-teacher’s mistake. I looked at Mark and said, “If you say one more word, I am going to tape your mouth shut!” It wasn’t ten seconds later when Chuck blurted out, “Mark is talking again.” I hadn’t asked any of the students to help me watch Mark, but since I had stated the punishment in front of the class, I had to act on it.

I remember the scene as if it had occurred this morning. I walked to my desk, very deliberately opened the drawer, and took out a roll of masking tape. Without saying a word, I proceeded to Mark’s desk, tore off two pieces of tape and made a big X with them over his mouth. I then returned to the front of the room.

As I glanced at Mark to see how he was doing, he winked at me. That did it! I started laughing. The class cheered as I walked back to Mark’s desk, removed the tape, and shrugged my shoulders. His first words were, “Thank you for correcting me, Sister.”

At the end of the year I was asked to teach junior high math. The years flew by, and before I knew it Mark was in my classroom again. He was more handsome than ever and just as polite. Since he had to listen carefully to my instruction in the “new math,” he did not talk as much in ninth grade as he had in the third.

One Friday, things just didn't feel right. We had worked hard on a new concept all week, and I sensed that the students were growing frustrated with themselves and edgy with one another. I had to stop this crankiness before it got out of hand. So I asked them to list the names of the other students in the room on two sheets of paper, leaving a space between each name. Then I told them to think of the nicest thing they could say about each of their classmates and write it down.

It took the remainder of the class period to finish the assignment, and as the students left the room, each one handed me the papers. Charlie smiled. Mark said, "Thank you for teaching me, Sister. Have a good weekend."

That Saturday, I wrote down the name of each student on a separate sheet of paper, and I listed what everyone else had said about that individual. On Monday I gave each student his or her list. Before long, the entire class was smiling. "Really?" I heard whispered. "I never knew that meant anything to anyone!" "I didn't know others liked me so much!"

No one ever mentioned those papers in class again. I never knew if they discussed them after class or with their parents, but it didn't matter. The exercise had accomplished its purpose. The students were happy with themselves and with one another again.

That group of students moved on. Several years later, after I returned from vacation, my parents met me at the airport. As we were driving home, Mother asked the usual questions about the trip, the weather, my experiences in general. There was a slight lull in the conversation. Mother gave Dad a sideways glance and simply said, "Dad?" My father cleared his throat as he usually did before something important. "The Eklunds called last night," he began.

"Really?" I said. "I haven't heard from them in years. I wonder how Mark is."

Dad responded quietly. "Mark was killed in Vietnam," he said. "The funeral is tomorrow, and his parents would like it if you could attend." To this day I can still point to the exact spot on I-494 where Dad told me about Mark.

I had never seen a serviceman in a military coffin before. Mark looked so handsome, so mature. All I could think at that moment was *Mark, I would give all the masking tape in the world if only you would talk to me.*

The church was packed with Mark's friends. Chuck's sister sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Why did it have to rain on the day of the funeral? It was difficult enough at the graveside. The pastor said the usual prayers, and the bugler played "Taps." One by one those who loved Mark took a last walk by the coffin.

I was the last one. As I stood there, one of the soldiers who had acted as pallbearer came up to me. "Were you Mark's math teacher?" he asked. I nodded as I continued to stare at the coffin. "Mark talked about you a lot," he said.

After the funeral, most of Mark's former classmates headed to Chuck's farmhouse for lunch. Mark's mother and father were there, obviously waiting for me. "We want to show you something," his father said, taking a wallet out of his pocket. "They found this on Mark when he was killed. We thought you might recognize it."

Opening the billfold, he carefully removed two worn pieces of notebook paper that had obviously been taped, folded, and refolded many times. I knew without looking that the papers were the ones on which I had listed all the good things each of Mark's classmates had said about him. "Thank you so much for doing that," Mark's mother said. "As you can see, Mark treasured it."

Mark's classmates started to gather around us. Charlie smiled rather sheepishly and said, "I still have my list. It's in the top drawer of my desk at home." Chuck's wife said,

“Chuck asked me to put his in our wedding album.” “I have mine too,” Marilyn said. “It’s in my diary.” Then Vicki, another classmate, reached into her pocketbook, took out her wallet, and showed her worn and frazzled list to the group. “I carry this with me at all times,” Vicki said without batting an eyelash. “I think we all saved our lists.”⁹

How long will our words echo in the hearts and minds of our children, our husbands, our friends, fellow believers, and the world? For all eternity, my friends. To the end of the age.