

## Section 6: Early Life Wake up Calls

### **Vignettes: Only 1-2 paragraphs each**

A. Includes “It isn’t even funny” and three others

B. Includes “The birth of shame” and three others

C. Includes “How do you know you can’t do it if you don’t try it?” and three others

Poem to inspire this section:

(A poem I wrote in third grade)

After the rain  
On the shiny street  
I found a rainbow  
Right at my feet.

It might have spilled  
Down out of the sky.  
It was all mixed up—  
The colors weren’t dry.

They were pink and purple  
Blue, red, green!  
All the colors  
I’ve ever seen!

Oh yes, I know that  
Rainbows don’t fall.  
Know what it was?  
A greas(e) spot that’s all.

### **A. “It isn’t even funny!”**

Sibling relationships can be complicated. The range of experience between sibs in a family may include solidarity, chemistry, rivalry, jealousy, lethargy or animosity. My brother and I represented the last two primarily. With six years between us we had little shared interest to draw us together and he was really disappointed when I didn’t turn out to be a little brother. His comment when he first leaned over and looked at me in the crib was “It isn’t even funny.” Things did not go uphill from there. Although we did things as a family we just never

clicked and in our middle years we were estranged due to untreated alcoholism. Late in his life we had an hour-long conversation in his hospital room after he had almost died. We talked about our childhood and how we had grown up in what seemed like different families. We told each other in subtle and awkward ways that we cared for one another. I felt closer to him in that hour than any other time in my life. When he died I lamented the tragedies of his life, feeling very sad. At his funeral I found out that, through his police work, he had saved the lives of three people. At that moment, his goodness pierced through my grief. It somehow made all the difference.

**“Listens when others are speaking.”**

How do we cope when we are too young to know what coping is? My way of coping in first grade amidst big changes in my life was talking. I got an N (unsatisfactory) on my first grade report card in the category, “Listens when others are speaking.” The back story goes like this: my regular school, Morris Park, was overcrowded with post war babies. So while they were expanding the school some of us had to go to a decrepit school called Old Winona for a year. I was separated from a lot of my friends and in the same year my family moved to another home in the neighborhood. Everything was up for grabs and I felt pretty abandoned that year. I think I was pretty mad and lonely and talking was my way of coping.

My 6<sup>th</sup> grade autobiography claims that even though I was upset, I adjusted and even found new friends at Old Winona, but my long term memory lists it as a turning point, a point at which I decided to be more independent and self sufficient because I couldn’t depend on my family or my school being stable for me. Even though my dad had quit drinking the year I was born, he was still a dry drunk, and with all the change and the stress, it feels to me as if our family fractured my first-grade year. Now, ironically, one of my best ways of coping with stress is talking too, but a different kind of talk. I choose to share my stress with a few trusted people who help me to work it through and find a way to navigate it.

**“Howard should not have to walk to school alone.”**

My mother was a GCW (Good Christian Woman) of the 50s and she passed along her 50s Lutheran prejudice against Catholics to me in a memorable phrase, “Dorothy is a very nice lady, even if she is Catholic.” Yet out of that same mouth came the idea that I could walk to school with Howard, the only black child in

our school. So I did occasionally walk with Howard. He was nice. I often wonder where he is, what he thought about being the only black child in our school. And my question, still unanswered, is what it was that taught my mother, a rural farm girl from Cannon Falls, Minnesota, to have such varied observations?

### **My friends “saved” me from my church.**

What would we do without friends? The center of my world as a child was my friends—and the place we lived most of our lives, other than at school, was at church. Church friends saved my life even as the church paralyzed it. I realize now that the church did help me by providing fun activities and mostly kept me out of trouble, but also showered me with heavy guilt and intimidated me with the fear of eternal damnation. My friends, about a dozen young women and several young men were my center, my touchstone, my place of belonging. In that group I developed some musical skills and I ended up being one of the group leaders, which as I look back, was quite a surprise.

One of the reasons that leadership was such a surprise was that in those conservative religious environments girls were not usually allowed to be leaders since the theology was strictly patriarchal. But the pastor’s wife at this church was a leader herself so she was a role model for us, which may be the main reason I remember her. She was a mentor of sorts because she was true to who she was even in a conservative environment. I think she had more of an influence on me than I realized since my life, in that environment, could have been vastly different. And those early friends were so vital to my journey through the vagaries of childhood that some of them are still in my life to this day.

### **B. The birth of shame**

A few of my young friends and I decided to play doctor, as most kids do, exploring our bodies and curing our ills. In the middle of our doctoring, my mother walked into the room and reacted so strongly (she was a good Christian mother of the 50s) that, though I never knew what I was doing wrong and it was never explained to me, I blushed scarlet. In fact I’m still not sure what she was really reacting to exactly and I’ve love to hear about that episode from her now. Was it the actual body exploration or was it what the neighbors would say if they knew that’s what was going on at our house?

Whatever it was, it initiated a 35-year journey with shame and blushing that was only alleviated when, through spiritual direction, therapy and body-work, I got

back to the core of my shame and healed it. I'm quite sure her reaction was triggered by her own shame and whenever I see someone, including me, overreact now, I know that there is something deep within that is not yet healed and is being stirred up.

### **"Needless to say I didn't do that again"**

How do we learn what we know? In my case, trial and error! My best friend, Sherri, lived right across the street from me. We were instructed not to cross the street unless one of our mothers accompanied us. Usually we obeyed. But then I decided to try crossing on my own (who knows what inspired me to do that) and my mom caught me running into the street between parked cars. In my sixth grade autobiography I mentioned that I got quite a licken' after that episode. I don't remember any spankings from my mother but I do remember sitting in chairs facing the wall as time outs!

And my mother had another way of influencing my behavior. When I was misbehaving but with less risky behavior than running across the street, she would say, "I love you. I just don't love some of the things you do." I wonder if that was in Dr. Spock? I sense that the second way worked better than the first. But I still find it helpful to ponder my behavior by sitting quietly in chairs facing my inner walls.

### **Beauty: the "bigger picture"**

Nature and its beauty is just made to be shared; photos, poems, cards, bouquets. Since our family spent a great deal of time around water and woods I was comfortable in nature. At the lake cabin my father and his friends built for us in the 50s, I would often go for walks in the woods by myself and I always found a surprise from God there; moss, mushrooms, birds, bugs, flowers. On one nature hike I brought back a lovely bouquet for my mom, without knowing that I had picked six Lady Slippers, (Moccasins) the state flower, which meant I could be subject to a stiff fine for each flower. My mother accepted this beautiful gift and promptly put the flowers in water, thanking me for the thoughtfulness. I think she saw the bigger picture, of my yearning for beauty and the gift. Yet I understood that in the future I needed to leave them in the ground for others to enjoy! I've had a fondness for the beauty of Lady Slippers ever since.

### **"My best gift didn't matter much because it's not what got you dates"**

We all participate in life in different ways, from different lenses. And as children we bring that uniqueness to the world. Yet at times the culture doesn't recognize our gifts because they are different or not the usual desired gifts that the culture rewards. Some people are gifted at friendship, others at humor, some gifted with ingenuity, others with patience or generosity, some with intelligence, others with athletic ability. So in all of these choices how do we know what is valuable about us?

How do we find out our true gifts, the things about us that are our natural and God-given competencies, things we just take for granted? For many of us, these things need to be seen and commented on by others outside of us for us to truly trust that they are valued and that they are our unique gifts. External validation matters to us! I didn't know I was smart until I got a scholarship for scholastics. I either hadn't known that gift fully before or *I didn't think it mattered since it was not what made you popular or got you dates!* I started to recognize that gift when I got to college. Now I see it as the sheer gift it is and I've been grateful for that gift, which slowly became more of a blessing, all of my life.

### **C. "How do you know you can't do it if you don't try it?"**

You can tell a lot about a family by knowing its slogans—especially the things they say when times are difficult. I think of one of the most famous ones, "Keep calm and carry on" from the royals. My family had several mottos but the one that most affected me was one my dad would say when I'd shy away from a risk or say I couldn't do something. He'd say "How do you know you can't do it if you don't try it?" As a result there were several things I tried only once in my life, like eating oysters and driving a big tractor, yet there were many things I learned I could do by giving them a try. We had another slogan that was more problematic, "Don't cry over spilt milk." This helped us remain stoic in times of stress but kept our true feelings stuffed inside until they exploded. Now I allow myself to cry when I need the release. And I'm still (mostly) willing to try new things at least once!

### **"Why isn't falling into a hole sin?"**

When does our questioning start and how does it get addressed? For some of us, never, and for some it doesn't matter. For me it did matter! All my life I've had theological questions that at some times stimulated my faith and at other times confused it or radically changed it. I've wondered about the meaning of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, about my image of God, about heaven and hell,

about sin and grace and about how we can ever love God with all our hearts. Lord, have mercy.

I think this questioning and curiosity may have gotten started when I was in confirmation and took everything very seriously. Like when I was told that sin is “anything contrary to the will of God.” I thought about that for a long time. Then I asked, “Does God will us to fall into holes?” My teen leader said that, of course, God didn’t will us to fall into holes. I said, “Well then why isn’t falling into a hole sin?” She took me to the minister and his response was that God’s grace is sufficient, which raised another question for me. “What in the world does that mean?” Years later I found out.

### **High school memories haunted me for thirty-five years**

Some folks discover their gifts in high school and they soar, others peak in high school, and others, like me find ourselves later. I began to bloom in college and beyond. It’s not that I didn’t like high school. I did. I had good friends and I was active and I did relatively well in school. But high school had a much more narrow range of what was popular and acceptable behavior. So I have embarrassing memories of what I did in high school to be more with the crowd or to seem like I belonged when inside I really didn’t feel that. These strong memories lingered after high school so when each reunion came around I found myself fearful because even walking up to the reunion party setting, I could feel myself being pulled back into who I was in high school, and that was not the self I wanted to be. It took me about thirty-five years to be really comfortable at a high school reunion. Now I love my classmates. And I can now see that high school left an indelible impression on my psyche.

### **Healing high school trauma**

High school is precarious for many. For a lucky few it is a peak experience. Some of us spend the rest of our lives recovering from the high school prison of conformity. In my case I carried a high school trauma around with me for about forty years until I had a miraculous chance to heal it.

I had a few fledgling leadership skills in high school and was given a chance to try my hand at coordinating two social events. But after the first event I was “released” from my duties by the teacher’s committee. I thought I had failed at the only thing that got me some traction in my class. It ruined my whole senior year. I carried this shame around for about fifteen years until I happened to see

one of the teachers who was on the committee and learned the bigger perspective, which was not a judgment on my skills after all. But it was too late. The pain still lingered. Then an African American woman was chosen to be President of my high school. I met her and immediately liked her, which gave me an intuition that she could hear and understand my lingering pain. I wrote her, asking to meet with her. I did not want anything from the school, just a listening ear so I could heal. We met. I told her my story. We cried. She told me parts of her story. We cried. We hugged. I'd like to think maybe we both healed that day. I know I did. Alleluia.