

The Wedding, the War and the Speech

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My wife Gwynneth was flying into the East Bay from a meeting in New York, so I drove six hours from our home in Southern California, glad for the time alone because I had to prepare a speech. I never understood those surveys that claim 75% of Americans fear public speaking almost as much as cancer surgery. I was eager to make this speech the most brilliant I had ever delivered. With a track record of speaking to a couple of Rotary Clubs and literary groups that couldn't get who they wanted, I may not have been shooting much higher, but I swore that my coming address would glow with warmth and crackle with wisdom, and be funny to boot. So why was I sobbing with laugh lines whirling through my mind?

Because I would be saying good-bye to my daughter Nicole on the occasion of her wedding.

A line written by St. Paul, "Sorrowful but joyful," occurred to me as I remembered the infant I had held, bloody and wet when she was born. I had vowed that I would protect her against everything. But I could not protect her against sickness. I could not protect her against disappointments or how often life turns out to be unfair. The best I had done was buy her a new bike when I could barely afford the rent. I did not accept, "Nothing," as an answer for what she did on any day. I taught her to be honest in good times and bad. The boys who asked her out in high school had to get permission from me first. I told her as much as I knew about God and prayed that she would know more.

I liked the man she had chosen to cherish above all others. I respected him. He had a fine first name. By the next day, having grieved, I was ready to enjoy my daughter's last week as a single woman, and to get to know Jeff and his family better. They were so different from the edgier personalities in mine that I likened them the Cleavers in *Leave It To Beaver*. Everyone comes with emotional baggage, but theirs seemed to be only carry-on, with no steamer trunks going round on the luggage carousel just waiting to be claimed when you least expect it. Hence it was an a-symptomatic Saturday afternoon, watching the Oakland A's at my future son-in-law's bachelor party.

I never cared for baseball, so I don't remember who the A's played, but I did enjoy two over-priced beers in the luxury box we had rented, ate a hotdog that looked as big as my forearm, took a nice nap, and for some reason found myself suddenly thinking that the dozen or so young men who were there had lucked out. Although they were still technically eligible for the draft, they were in their late twenties, early thirties, so it was not likely that they would ever be conscripted for military service. As the doves of my generation so fatuously put it, war was about old men sending young men off to die. Under that warm late summer sun it didn't seem that there was any war on the horizon that would cloud the lives of these young men at all.

Two days later, about seven o'clock in the morning, I called a friend who had served in the Army during the end of America's sacrifice of old and young in Vietnam. He answered immediately and told me that I had better catch the news, giving no indication of what the news might be. I turned on my daughter's digital TV, getting in full screen clarity the atrocities most of us saw on the 11th of September 2001. The nation's capital was attacked for first time since the War of 1812, and the tip of Manhattan Island became known as Ground Zero.

As the day drew dark, I learned that Jim, a young man who had grown up with my children and worked in a building adjacent to the World Trade Center had telephoned his dad, a combat engineer in the Korean War. Young Jim reported that he was outside his office and was watching the first of the twin towers collapse. His mother spent the next eight hours in church until she received news that her son was OK but badly shaken.

My wife's boss, the CEO of a company in Midtown, took under his wing a couple of interns who couldn't get out Manhattan. They and the rest of the company's employees donated blood the next morning. That was when one of my future son-in-law's groomsmen wanted to play golf, wanted to do anything to keep his mind distracted from the fact that he hadn't heard from his father who was in the first of the WTC towers to be hit, doing an audit in a window office that was the point of impact of the missile. By Friday the son was driving back to Southern California to be with his mother, and they prayed for a miracle that would never come.

Joel, a freelance marketer for my wife's company, said that he also would be dead had it not been for a ham sandwich. On Monday his daughter complained that she was tired of taking peanut butter sandwiches to school; could she have ham? Joel replied that he would buy a ham sandwich at the Norwegian deli near their Brooklyn apartment the next morning. Running behind schedule, Joel had to drop off his daughter at school before he picked up the sandwich to deliver to her. That was how he was late for a meeting where 5,017 American citizens and nationals from sixty-six foreign countries had their lives cut short by the terrorist network that had declared war on the United States.

One of the more tragic stories in the aftermath came one from an acquaintance whose apartment is next to social workers who had taken in three small children from a daycare center. The little ones could say "Mama" and "Dada;" they could cry for them in the nights to come; but they didn't know their names, first or last, and they will never see them again.

Among my many thoughts during the remaining countdown to my daughter's wedding was what to say in the welcoming speech at the reception following the church service. Totally inappropriate were the humorous remarks I had prepared. Two quotes were going through my head, the one from St. Paul again and the other from C.S. Lewis. In prayer I got the impression that I wasn't supposed to prepare further. The words to fill in would come once I got to the country club. Given that I couldn't concentrate on much of anything, that seemed reasonable to me, and compared to my anxiety for the country, nervousness about speaking off the cuff got well and truly buried.

Two ministers were to officiate the service. One had been my future son-in-law's youth pastor and was on staff at the Presbyterian Church where the ceremony was held. The other, of Nazarene background, led the non-denominational church in San Francisco where the couple had gotten to know each other evangelizing high school kids for Young Life. Both men showed up for the rehearsal. The church's wedding coordinator told me that it would have been very unusual if only one had appeared. Either could perform the sacrament of

matrimony in his sleep, so apparently they thought this wedding was special.

Monetarily it was very special. My wife's and my budget might have covered a barbecue in the park, but from the engagement party in February to down payments on the cake and the designer dress and the spectacularly situated country club, the Lord kept telling us to trust Him. There could be no way of knowing the most probable reason for His extravagance. I suspect now it was meant as a tonic for people in despair for their country, people who would have steel themselves for the depredations of war in the years ahead, people who had need for the living metaphor of, "Where darkness increased, grace abounded all the more."

Provision came step by step in the form of bonuses, discounts and \$5,000 from my wife's boss who said, "I don't have any children. This is for your daughter's wedding." She and her fiance picked up the slack, including my tuxedo. I spray painted twenty clay flower pots to look like silver...well, pewter anyway...and \$68 spent at the San Francisco flower mart made them look like elegant table settings. \$10,000 worth of wide, ivory-colored satin, lavishly bowed at each pew, festooned the center aisle of the church, a vast aerie with successive sky-lighted peaks that folded downward to the altar. The ribbon that pointed the way made its debut two years ago at another wedding put on by a family I never met. The groom's mother wielded an iron and her friends laid out the ribbon to make it look like new again. We sent out 250 invitations, my wife sure that 180 people would be actual guests for the sit-down dinner. 196 said they would be there, but cancelled flights due to the war brought the number to 180.

On the day of the event I expected at least a moment of anxiety from the bride, maybe a few catty words from her seven bridesmaids. All the ladies, however, remained calm and collected, even when a dress needed to be altered at the last moment. The bridesmaids wore pale green outfits that to my untrained eye broke tradition in that they probably could be worn again in public. My daughter's white gown was beautiful but something of a shock. It was pretty much as you might expect from the hips down, but under the chin... I guess a couple of grand wasn't enough for the designer, so she had to skimp

on material and go for the serving wench look from *Tom Jones*. I said as much, and my wife huffed that I was just imagining things.

The little woman never has understood that's my job--to imagine things, and not just imagine but remember what I was thinking when I was single, she was a just a sweet young thing and I had no intentions that were honorable. For all the years that I've owned a gun, Gwynneth thought it was for housebreakers, rattlesnakes and IRS agents. Uh-uh. Boyfriends.

My wife sewed her own dress, just as she had for our wedding, and kept asking of its simple blue silk design, "Does this look homemade?" until I finally said, "Only when you turn around." The women shared a bottle of champagne, leaving me break off my pacing and somehow get the Mach 3 to cut the back of my ear shaving. I took a glance at a plastic bag accompanying my rented tuxedo and thought, OK, maybe white socks are the new accompaniment for formal wear but I'm going to put on my own dark socks. That meant my dinner jacket was the only one without a handkerchief in the breast pocket.

At the church, heralded by *Trumpets Voluntary*, I escorted a gorgeous stranger down the aisle. "At the double," a relative said later to describe the fact that I was not so calm as I had thought.

There was another stranger at the altar. He had been acquainted with Nicole in college. They had done two years of volunteer together before he got around to saying, "I'd like to get to know you better." Now he was looking at this woman on my arm with reverence appropriate to the setting, the love of a friend and the unabashed lust of billygoat. I was about to tell my daughter, "You go home right this instant and change that dress, " but another preoccupation was rapidly taking over.

Having been secluded in an anteroom with Nicole and her bridesmaids, I didn't see my wife and the groom's mother light the unity candle. I was expecting it to happen sometime after I got my daughter to the steps of the altar, during the two pastors' introductory remarks. When it didn't happen and they just kept on remarking, I felt as if I was in play in which one of the actors had just dropped two pages of dialogue and everyone else on stage was trying to make up

for it. I was convinced that my one line, “Her mother and I do,” had been skipped over, and that my duty was to get out of the way and sit down as unobtrusively as I could. I was mapping out a graceful move that would make the play appear as if it were preceding normally, knew that no one ever called me graceful and what I was about to do would look like a drunk clog dancer attempting a pirouette. But *somebody* had to do something, and my foot was just lifting off the carpet to step back when I heard my cue:

“Who gives this woman to be married?”

I’m sure no one understood why, “HER MOTHER AND I DO!” sounded so relieved. I kissed my baby’s cheek, shook my new son’s hand and sat gratefully with my own bride of thirty-two years, sure that we were in the right place at the right time doing the right thing. The couple had given about two seconds of thought to exchanging their own vows and gone with solemn tradition. Then they triumphantly marched out as man and wife to the theme from *Star Wars*.

During the photographic session of families afterwards, I felt right in my element, dwarfed length-wise anyway by my two brothers and my son Neil, none of whom had to work as hard at basketball as I did and don’t understand the extra effort that goes into a group photograph. As I surreptitiously stood on tiptoes and kept my belly tucked in and my head down to shadow the double chin, I didn’t get what my son-in-law’s father meant by:

“You must be nervous.”

“Oh no, I was calm the whole time.”

“I mean for the speech. That was the hardest part for me when my daughter got married. But I guess you’re pretty well prepared.”

My smile froze. In my family those would have been fighting words. Doves of relatives would instinctively know that you weren’t prepared, and the non-believers among them would be needling the insane notion that God had told you to wing it. You would begin to suspect that they were right: you had been crazy the whole time. The bills for this extravaganza hadn’t all come in yet, and when they did,

you'd be eating Quaker Oats for three meals a day for the next two years. How vain could you be to think you could just ad lib a speech for the most important day of your daughter's life? Surely, you must have something memorized?

Of course the only answer to that was, "Buzz off, pond scum," but I wanted this man to like me. I wanted him to think that I really had come off the plane with only an leather attache case and wasn't turning back to baggage claim to grab a cheap luggage set bugling with emotional garbage.

"But you've probably got it all memorized," he was saying.

"Well..." I was now sweating, thinking about getting to the country club and downing a half dozen tequilas with beer chasers. Or throwing up. Or buying a pack of Camels, tasty Larks, anything, and chain smoking, whichever coping mechanism was handiest. "...I...I hope you pray for me. "

He slapped my arm. "You'll be fine."

At the club, guests' name cards had been laid out on the entry table, some with a dot on them to indicate they had chosen to have the salmon, not the pork roast. Guests were to match their cards to a list showing where they would sit once dinner was announced. Wine and beer were being served before the wedding party arrived. A no-host bar for hard liquor was set up for some of the cowboys I had grown up with, but when I got there, even they seemed to be waiting for permission to have a good time. That weighed the speech with another layer of important I wished it didn't have.

There were the usual pockets of people who just don't know how to wait. They came from both sides of the guest list. A Mr. and Mrs. thought my wife and I should have been mind readers: didn't we know that they were not supposed to be seated together because they had announced their separation a week earlier? An ex-Mr. and Mrs., purposefully placed a football field apart, managed to get together to discuss alimony. From a political discussion in a bar the night before, a Marine veteran was showing off the bruises he had received, and a Navy reserve pilot wanted to shake his hand, only to be stunned that

ex-Marine couldn't stand President Bush. A young historian who thought Bill Clinton was the best President the country ever had wanted me to know that he didn't blame Bush for the current crisis. "It's the Jews." While I wondered whether that included the ones in the room, a twice-divorced feminist declared the defense of Western Civilization would be best served with women in combat. Meanwhile the Nazarene pastor and an Episcopal priest amicably discussed the Catholic writer Henri Nouwen.

Although I was getting more nervous, I was relieved that I would be speaking to people very much like me, very human, thus very flawed and often confused. Which is when I started thinking dangerously. I saw myself converting some of their confusion to my clarity. I saw myself in a tunic. Yes! With a brass breastplate and my head turned in profile...chin up and stretched out of course...because I would be Mark Anthony in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*!

"Friends, Romans and countrymen, four score and seven years ago the sunshine soldier and summer patriot will in the crisis fight them on the beaches, in the fields and in the streets because we have nothing to fear but retreat, hell! Pass the ammunition and Kismet, Hardy."

Someone said, "You're on."

I made a beeline for my wife, "You gotta hold my hand!"

With my free hand I picked up the mike.

And my mind went blank.

On my own I can't remember what I said. In the video tape I'm not speaking in my usual rapid-fire run-ons. I'm not filling in the pauses with "er"s and "uh"s. If God could speak through Balaam's ass, He apparently is able to speak through me. This is what came out:

"Welcome. Gwynneth and I are glad that you are here, glad that you can join us to celebrate the marriage of our daughter Nicole to our new son Jeff.

"But the pall of war hangs over our country, and it casts its shadow over our hearts tonight. Nearly everyone in this room knows someone

directly affected by the attacks against New York and Washington four days ago. One of our groomsmen cannot be here because his father is missing and presumed dead.

“The Apostle Paul wrote from prison, ‘I am sorrowful but joyful.’ He did not like his circumstances, but he refused to give up hope in the fact that a loving God was still with him, and he was happy to preach that good news, even to his guards. St. Paul’s sentiments mirror my own.

“I am happy that my daughter has married a decent man. I think each will bring good things to the other’s life. I have hope for their future. But I dread the uncertainties and sacrifices that war will bring to that future. Then I remember a line that C.S. Lewis wrote: ‘Heaven will not be held hostage to evil.’

“Good will not be held hostage. Hope will not be held hostage. Freedom will not be held hostage. Jesus Christ did not go to the Cross because he was a hostage to evil. He volunteered to take on the sins of this whole sick world so that we might have life and life abundantly. And life will not be held hostage!”

It was like the sound of thunder over water, the explosion of cheers. In the video my eyes sternly scan the room. I’m nearsighted and can’t see anything but a blur, but in the wake of my gaze, all become silent.

“Scripture tells us that there is a time for war and a time for peace. A time for tears and a time for laughter. A time for marriage. From the War of Independence and in more than 200 wars, campaigns and engagements that have forged this nation since then, Americans have been getting married. Thus we are gathered, at this time and in this place, to celebrate the marriage of two more Americans. And, by God, we are going to party.”

Joy broke out. Under it, I heard someone say, “Wha’d you expect? He’s a speechwriter.”

Not really. I give words to fictional characters, and in non-fiction there are times when I open my mouth and some damn fool speaks. That fool doesn’t like to edit, doesn’t like to throw material away, and he now thought he was George Burns turning the Gracie. I said to my

wife, “Would you like to say something before Pastor Mark gives the blessing?”

She gave quick, adamant shake of her head. Shortly after I brought her to this country from South Africa, we toured a Utah silver mine. The guide chose her to yell, “Fire in the hole!” before he touched off a quarter stick of dynamite. She kept shaking her head to his continued cajoling, and only a definitively muttered, “No,” got him to pick someone else. That’s how it played out when I took her to Sea World in San Diego. No way was she going to offer her cheek for wet kiss from Shamu. Not in public anyway.

But I was in baggage claim, ripping the duct tape off the luggage. “C’ m’ on, Honey. Are you sure you don’t want to say something? Why don’t you tell people how glad you are to have Jeff in the family? At last, someone who actually saves his money.”

“No,” was barely audible but firm.

“Then maybe I should tell them about Nicole. That time we were both so worried? You know, when she was a baby, and the Gypsies had kidnapped her, and she came back speaking Romanian.”

She leaned into the mike to resounding declare, “You’re finished.”

Not quite.

We ate. We danced. Generally, we did what our Commander-in-Chief told us to do, get on with our lives, albeit with more seriousness than we had given to life before. Two couples told us they had finally made up their minds to get married. One young lady said she was going to drag her boyfriend to church no matter what his intentions were. A confirmed bachelor started making moon eyes at a pretty young thing who had targeted him hours earlier. A mother was giddy that God had answered her prayers: her son had wandered off the with the girl next door.

And according to my older brother, I brought tears to my nephew’s eyes because he last saw me in the distance outside the country club with my arm lovingly around my son’s shoulders. Of course I love Neil, but for the photograph of us waving the newlyweds off into the

night and all the uncertainty of the future, I was straining to keep my son's feet firmly planted on the ground, the better to lever myself up to his height.

Yes, I am vain, but there was a small part of me thinking, Grandkids could see this someday, and I want them to say, "That old boy was just trying to stand as tall as his country."