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Contents

Introduction 9

SECTION ONE

EARLY INFLUENCES FROM HOME: 1938–1955

Life in Small-Town USA 15

At the Schoolhouse 22

At Church 25

Lessons Learned in the Neighborhood 31

The Decision That Changed My Life Forever 33

SECTION TWO

THE POWERFUL INFLUENCE

OF MY EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY: 1955–1967

Life in the City—Chicago: Moody Bible Institute 37

Lessons Learned in the Mountains of Tennessee 45

Exploring Anthropology—Wheaton College 49

Lessons Learned in Colorado Springs, Colorado 53

Exploring Theology—Southeastern and Southwestern
Baptist Seminary 55

SECTION THREE

LESSONS LEARNED FROM MARRIAGE:

1961–PRESENT

The Journey That Led to Marriage 67

The Slow Road to Unity 73

A Giant Step Forward 81

When Cancer Came 85

SECTION FOUR
HOW MY CHILDREN INFLUENCED ME:
1964–PRESENT

Learning That No Two Children Are Alike	91
Parents Are Older Than Children . . . and Wiser	95
Reflections from Shelley	99
Reflections from Derek	101
How I Learned to Process Anger	103
Lessons Learned from My Spiritual Son—Clarence	106
Grandparenting Is Fun	109

SECTION FIVE
THE CHALLENGES AND JOYS
OF MY VOCATIONAL JOURNEY: 1967–PRESENT

Rebounding from Disappointment	115
The College Ministry	118
The Single Adult Ministry	122
The Counseling Ministry	125
The Writing Ministry	128
The Radio Ministry	132
The Speaking Ministry	135
The Speaking Ministry: Around the World	142
Epilogue	149
Books Written or Coauthored by Gary Chapman	153
Acknowledgments	159

Life in Small-Town USA

What I share in the next few pages is designed to give you a picture of what life was like growing up in a small North Carolina town with my mom, dad, and sister, Sandra. The first seventeen years of my life, in that setting, greatly influenced my life.

After forty years of doing marriage and family counseling, I am keenly aware that children are strongly impacted by the family in which they grow up. My deepest emotional pain has come from seeing children who grew up with absentee or abusive parents. Much of my life has been spent in trying to help them break the destructive patterns learned in childhood.

Those of us who grew up in stable, loving families are given a distinct advantage in life. For that I am deeply grateful. Sam and Grace, Dad and Mom, were married for sixty-two years. They were not perfect, but they were a hard-working, God-loving couple who created a safe and loving environment for Sandra and me.

It all started in Kannapolis, North Carolina. When the boll weevil ate the cotton crop in Georgia, my father's family moved

from the farm to work in the textile mill in Kannapolis. At that time, Kannapolis was the largest unincorporated town in North Carolina. Cannon Mills owned the entire town. They owned and rented out all of the “mill houses.” They owned all of the stores and provided the police and fire protection for the community.

It was there that Sam and Grace met and fell in love. In 1935, at the ages of twenty-three and twenty-five, they eloped to South Carolina, where they were married. None of their parents were aware that they were married. For three months, each continued to live with their parents until they got enough money to rent their own house. Years later, I asked my mother, “Did you have sex during this time?” To which she responded, “No, not until we got our own place.” (Life was different in the 1930s.)

The doctor told my mother that she probably would not be able to have children. But she prayed, and one year later, on January 10, 1938, I was born. Four years later, my sister was born. Mom was always grateful for her children, and once I heard the doctor’s prediction, I always sensed that God had a hand in our births.

At the age of two, I moved with my parents to a new house that they had built in China Grove, four miles north of Kannapolis. (Not the China Grove that the Doobie Brothers sang about.) It was named for the chinaberry tree, of which there were groves. All of my childhood memories center around this house, which cost \$5,016 brand new. And it had indoor plumbing. (Life was different in the ’30s.)

Then came the war (World War II). My father’s brother had moved to Syracuse, New York, to work in a steel mill. The word was that if you worked in a “defense plant” you would not be drafted into the military. My dad decided he would rather

work in the steel mill than dodge bullets. So we moved to Syracuse. We were only there for eighteen months. My only memory is that in the winter, the snow was taller than I was. After the severe winters, my dad decided he would rather be in the military, whereupon he moved the family back to China Grove, and he joined the Navy.

For the next three years, Mom was the solo parent. She wrote Dad a letter almost every day. He was on board a ship without daily mail deliveries. He later told us that sometimes he received a bundle of letters, but he eagerly read each one. Periodically we would receive a letter from Dad. I remember listening as my mother read his letters to Sandra and me. At the end of the letters, he would almost always say to us, "Give your mother a big hug for me and remember to obey her."

Our house was the third house on the right on the one-lane dirt street that ended at the railroad track embankment. The houses were close and the neighbors were friendly. My grandfather lived in the first house with my grandmother, who was bedridden, and their daughter, Reba Nell, and her son, Kinney. My Uncle Bob and Aunt Hazel lived in the second house. They had two sons, Bobby and Darrell. We often played backyard basketball behind their house. On Saturdays, young men from the Black community half a mile away would come and join us. (These were the days of racial segregation.) We always enjoyed playing together, but when the game was over, they went back to their community, and on Monday, they went to their school, and we went to ours. (Things were different in the '40s.) But here the seeds were planted in my mind that all men are created equal. These seeds would continue to grow in the coming years.

Behind the house was a large garden space where I learned

to plant potatoes, corn, green beans, squash, cucumbers, tomatoes, turnip greens, and peppers. From my earliest memories, I helped my dad with the garden every spring and summer. Mom's job was to cook and can all that the garden produced. (This was before freezers.) Work was a part of my life, which, I am sure, impacted my own work ethic, which has served me well. I have never viewed work as a chore but as an opportunity to be productive.

To the left of the garden was a "car shed" big enough for one car and with two storage rooms on the side closest to the garden. One was used to store coal, which we burned in the stove to keep warm in the winter. The other stored our tools for working in the garden and mowing the grass. The plow was a "push plow," and the lawn mower was a "push mower." That is, your pushing provided the power. (Life was different in the '40s.)

Behind the car shed was the chicken lot where we always kept a least a dozen hens and one rooster. I often fed and watered the chickens and gathered the eggs. We had lots of deviled eggs and egg salad sandwiches. Behind the chicken lot was the pigpen. We had only one pig, and after he reached "eating stage," he was made into sausage, pork chops, and lard. I don't know why, but we never had another pig. I was elated because I never liked "slopping the pig."

My routine during my school years was to come home and eat a snack then do my homework. After that, in the spring and summer, I would help Dad with the garden. When I got older, I would mow the grass on Saturdays. As for work inside the house, my sister and I shared the task of washing dishes after the evening meal, a job I still enjoy doing. I like the sense of accomplishment that comes from filling up the dishwasher

and then washing the pots and pans in the sink. Of course, in my childhood, we did not have a dishwasher. We washed everything in the sink and put it on a plastic tray to dry. This skill has served me well in my marriage, since my wife, Karolyn's, love language is acts of service. "Thanks, Mom, for teaching me how to wash dishes. You made a great contribution to the success of my marriage."

When it got too cold to work in the garden or play outdoors, Sandra and I would play indoor board games together. Once or twice a week, as a family, we would listen to the national news on the radio. Then sometimes we could listen to one other radio program. The only ones I remember are *The Lone Ranger* and *Life with Luigi*. The latter was a situation comedy about the experiences of Luigi, a newly arrived Italian immigrant in Chicago. We would laugh together as a family. Those are still pleasant childhood memories.

Now if you are wondering, television had not yet come to our street. In 1946, only six thousand homes in the United States had television sets. That number rose to twelve million by 1951. By 1955, half the homes in America had television sets. Of course, it was all black and white; color came later. The first neighbors on our street to get a television were Uncle Bob and Aunt Hazel, who lived next door. That was 1951. I was thirteen years old. I remember the first time I visited and saw television. It was hard to believe that we were seeing people in other parts of the country!

As I remember, it was 1953 before we had a television set in our house. We mainly watched CBS News and the local news, which came out of Charlotte. I graduated from high school in 1955, so television did not play a major role in my childhood.

I have often wondered how my life would have been influenced had I been raised with television and computers. I know it sounds like an old man talking about “the good old days,” but I’m grateful that my childhood was filled with study, work, play, and church. I was not troubled with the trauma of world news, which now flows steadily into American homes. I was always busy doing the next thing.

To the parents who may be reading, let me encourage you to build structure into your child’s life. Children thrive in a structured lifestyle. By structure, I mean a time for study, play, work, entertainment, and sleep. In my years of counseling, I have learned that children who simply do what they want to do, when they want to do it, are often bored by the time they get to be teenagers. Children need guidance. They do not know what is best for them. Parents are older than their children and, for the most part, have more wisdom. Having a structured lifestyle gives the child a sense of security. Don’t allow your child to spend all of their free time watching a screen or playing video games. Such a lifestyle will follow them into adulthood, and it will not be beneficial to their wellbeing.

Let me emphasize the value of a set bedtime for children. I am amazed when I walk into Walmart at 9:30 p.m. and see four- and five-year-old children shopping with their parent. Even if you are a single mom, I would encourage you to establish a set bedtime for your children. Children need regular sleep patterns. Their physical and emotional health is adversely affected when they do not get adequate sleep. A set bedtime for the children is also beneficial to the parents. It gives them time to get special projects completed or to relax and enjoy time together.

Another important goal for parents is to teach the children

life skills. I would never have known how to plant and tend a garden if my father had not taught me. Recently, I was having dinner with a group of professional football players and their wives. In the course of our conversation, we talked about what happens when they “age out” of football. One of them said, “Our problem is that we don’t know how to do anything except play football. Since I was a child, football has been my life. I don’t know how to do anything else.” The others chimed in affirmation. I suggested that they make a list of all the things they would like for their children to be able to do by the time they are eighteen years old. Then at the appropriate age, teach them those life skills.

For years I have made this recommendation to parents. If you have teenagers, let them help you make the list. You might be surprised at what they suggest. There is an ancient Hebrew proverb that says, “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6 ESV). If as an adult, your child gets married, their spouse will praise you for how well you equipped your child for life.

At the Schoolhouse

When we moved back to our house in North Carolina, I was six. In Syracuse, I started the first grade at age five and a half, so when we returned to North Carolina, I had finished half of the first grade. Mom and the school administrators decided I was ready for the second grade. Thus, I was always a year younger than most of my classmates, graduating from high school at the age of seventeen. Every morning, I would walk to the bus stop located at the intersection of highway 29-A and Mt. Moriah Church Road, where I would ride with the neighborhood gang to Landis Elementary School. I caught the same school bus through elementary, junior high, and high school, which were all located at the same site, near the Landis textile mill.

Memories of my educational experience are pleasant, except for fifth grade. That's the year that I got a spanking from Mrs. Coffee. I don't remember what I did, but I have never forgotten the pain of the paddle she used. (Life was different in the '40s.) Other than that, school was enjoyable. I always enjoyed reading. In elementary school, my favorite series was *Silver Chief: Dog of the North*. I could almost see the breath of the dogs and feel the chill of the air. Maybe this is where the thrill of adventure was born in my mind.

In junior high (today's middle school) and high school, I enjoyed basic math but never got excited about algebra and geometry. Physics and biology were my favorite science classes. English was my favorite subject—both grammar and literature. But my favorite class was Introduction to the Bible. That's right, Bible was taught in the public high school. (Life was different in the '50s.) Miss Jabour was my Bible teacher, and she had a deeper impact on my life than she ever realized. In fact, it was her comment that later took me to Chicago and the Moody Bible Institute. But that's a later story.

One tragic event touched me deeply in high school. The county built a new high school building. In the process of construction, there was an explosion, and one of our janitors was killed. I never thought much about death until that event. I felt sad that someone's father and husband was now dead. I did not know him personally, but I felt the pain. I also reflected on the reality that life is temporary. Death can be sudden.

That was my first exposure to grief. Through the years as a pastor, I have stood by many open graves and have learned why Jesus wept by the grave of Lazarus (John 11). I don't think He was weeping for Lazarus, because He knew that He was going to bring him back to life. I think Jesus was looking down the hallway of the future and identifying with the pain that death brings to the human heart. I have learned to "weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15 ESV).

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My senior year, I was elected class president. I often wondered

why because I did not see myself as a leader. When it came time for the class to vote on “best this” and “best that,” I received five superlatives. We were only allowed to have two, so I chose “friendliest” and “most likely to succeed.” Those two seemed to go together in my mind. At the age of seventeen, I went to college in Illinois and never returned to live in China Grove. So I never kept up with my classmates. I’ve often wished I had made a greater effort to stay connected.

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