Dedication

I dedicate this book to my boys Caleb, Addison and Max. It is such an honor to be your father. I hope my crazy ways don't wear off on you. If so, I will come visit you every week in the insane asylum.

Love,

Dad

The front and back cover artwork, title, etc. were created by my son Addison (for a charge).

JD

Many years ago when I first moved to Lee's Summit, Missouri, I required the services of a reputable car repair shop. By happenstance I found a place in downtown Lee's Summit called "OK Tire" that served me well over the next twenty years.

Due to either bad luck or normal wear and tear, I ended up frequenting OK Tire throughout our twenty-year business relationship. These broken down vehicles allowed me to meet and become friends with the owner, Mr. Thompson, and his two employees, Gene Thompson and JD.

Mr. Thompson had been in the tire business at that location for at least thirty years when I met him. He had a great smile, always looked you in the eyes, and never missed a business opportunity to fix a car or sell some tires. Although I don't think it was always the best deal financially, it was an honest transaction, and when I drove away, my car was in better shape than when I showed up. Mr. Thompson wrote up the tickets and took care of all the money. I never actually saw him do anything besides this though. But he was always willing to listen while Gene and JD worked, and seemed to care about what was best for me. His son Gene was the main tire changer and repairer. He was a bear of a man, with a huge barrel chest and a grayish beard. He listened to Christian radio constantly, and loved to talk about the Lord. He would speak for a while, and then say, "You know what I'm saying"? I would always say "Yeah," but to my chagrin, he would always say once again, "You know what I'm saying"? This annoyed and perplexed me every time because I could never think of how to respond to this redundant question other than again saying "Yeah." He wasn't trying to be funny, that's just the way he expressed himself.

JD is the one that I think of the most, however, when I think of OK Tire. JD was the car mechanic and body repairman. He could

fix anything. He was such a unique individual, “Which is a rare quality these days,” as another great man, Del Griffith, once said.

I have a few specific memories of JD. First of all, his smoking habits. For one, he smoked constantly. He was the type that would smoke the whole cigarette, caressing and cajoling it, making it his own, becoming one with it. The cigarette ashes were a thing of beauty, defying gravity, literally approaching an inch and a half long before finally falling gracefully upon their creator.

The second thing I remember about this great man was his flannel shirt-jackets. The tire shop opened the bay doors often to allow cars in and out, so it tended to be cool (damn cold as I recall). As I often gazed upon JD in his flannel shirt-jacket, here indeed was a superhuman, totally oblivious to the winter gusts, capable of fixing multiple cars in one 8-hour shift. The flannel shirt-jacket became his calling card, his mantra, his canvas upon which the ashes, grease and grime of this world found their meaning, everlasting worth, and a place they could feel at home, content to know they were safe from ever being washed away (as JD wore the same flannel shirt-jacket for all of the twenty years I frequented OK Tire).

And finally, the thing that I remember most about JD was his word. When JD said he could fix it, he would. When he said I didn’t need to have a new part because a used one would work, I listened. You could count on him. You could take it to the bank. Even his answers to greetings were steadfast, dependable, constant. For twenty years I greeted him with, “How you doing JD”? And his reply, for twenty years was “It’s too early to tell.”

OK Tire no longer exists as it was replaced by the new Lee’s Summit City Hall a few years back. I haven’t seen JD for over 5 years. If I never see him again, I will always hold memories in my heart, for my friend, JD.

Three Ways of Saying the Same Thing

In the hills of life there are two trails. One lies along the higher sunlit fields where those who journey see afar, and the light lingers even where the sun is down; and one leads to the lower ground, where those who travel, as they go, look always over their shoulders with eyes of dread, and gloomy shadows gather long before the day is done.

Harold Bell Wright, The Shepherd of the Hills

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow is the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

Matthew 7:13,14

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —

I took the 'one less traveled' by,

And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost – The Road Less Traveled

Aging

From fitness to fragility, lives turn as a stone in a meandering stream.

Shaken leaves dislodged and sent drifting, later to be found lying with no tree in sight.

An unknown woman whose nametag reads ‘Carol’ urges you to take your meds and fall fast asleep, as visitors are promised tomorrow.

My blank, listless stare gives way to my last coherent thought, ‘There is nothing, no one.’

My last days are to be suffered in loneliness, until I pass away.

(I wrote this 2/21/05 when I was sick. A thought came over me that you really don’t have much to say about when you get sick, and maybe die. It starts out as a typical sickness, but then turns out to be the last time one is sick, and then the final lesson is about being thankful for anything, everything).

Weekend February 2005

Friday. Left work early (because someone blew up over some trivial matter and ranted and raved till they were blue in the face, myself shouldering the brunt of their frustration – and I didn't quite recover and was therefore useless to do any further work, so the option of leaving early was exercised).

Addison worked. Caleb and a friend drank a fifth of whiskey. I woke up when I heard the outside water faucet turn on. Looking out the window, I saw the two boys dutifully spraying puke off a car window. Max played video games.

Mary and I had dinner at the Hereford House. She had one of her favorite things, clam chowder and salad and hot bread. I had brisket and beans. Mary had coffee, and I had a Wisconsin draft beer. Afterwards, we went to Borders.

Saturday – slept in after the puke incident. Woke up and made bacon and coffee. Did lots of work. Fixed the attic vent so birds would not fly in, cleaned out the Barbeque pit. Went to the health food store and Zio's Italian Restaurant. Watched Jamie Cullen on Austin City Limits. Max and Addy had a few friends over. JC's mom called and said our boys had shot JC.

Sunday – me and Max went to church. Had coffee and donuts in between services. Greg Tyrell talked my ear off. Later that day, Addy was planning a youth trip to Utah. Later, we had dinner with everyone but Caleb, even the drive by shootee, JC Park, joining us. After that, we went to Jacob's Well Church and then came home, where Mary picked zits, and we watched Spiderman.

On Turning 45

Tomorrow I turn 45.

Yesterday my brother, Chuck, called with news that he and Dawn were proud parents of baby Kaitlyn. He reminded me that he was thirty-four years old. It's funny how my concept of time is: I thought he was maybe twenty-two or twenty-three.

I thought of getting a new mower, as the one I had was experiencing some problems. Mary said it was seven or eight years old. I thought I had owned it for two years.

"Life is a vapor and then it passes away" (James 4:14).

As I am getting older, I am seeing more of this. Although I still seem t myself to be as young as Chuck and my lawnmower, many more years have gone by; yet, I know at least that these years were full of Mary Shockley and my boys, Caleb, Addy, and Max, loving me. That I know for sure. Even if my concept of time is wrong, love is timeless.

Smoking and Its Lessons

A lot of things can be learned from smoking. From this simple act of lighting and then inhaling a leaf made by the Lord, I have learned:

People like things that provide pleasure.

Pleasurable things are hard to give up.

Pleasurable things are often costly.

Pleasurable things aren't always good for you.

People often criticize other people regarding their pleasures (but usually don't criticize themselves for their own pleasures).

People meddle too much in other peoples' business.

Some forms of smoking are more acceptable than others. An old man smoking a pipe on the front porch of an old rustic cabin relaxes people, but seeing a teenage girl smoke usually brings on a condescending attitude quicker than seeing your Baptist bible study partner drink a glass of wine.

I know what other people who smoke go through, as I have smoked. You only know if you have smoked. Smokers therefore have a bond – like bikers who wave at each other as they pass on the highway.

Pressure that non-smokers exert on smokers makes them feel unwelcomed. Therefore, it's hard to be honest about being a smoker. Most smokers don't want others to know they smoke. It is a terrible dilemma – and quite a lonely atmosphere for smokers.

Did you know that there aren't any smoking pews at church? Christians judge smokers the most, I think. Or maybe I just felt that way?

Caps

We have lots of baseball caps in our home. I have always enjoyed the feel and look of a new cap. So easily I fall into that 'lust of the flesh,' 'lust of the eyes' sin.

Malls full of sporting goods stores, specialty stores such as wagon-wheeled cap kiosks (manned with bored-out-of-their-mind jocks, pushing their goods), Royal's stadium souvenir shops: there is no place you can hide.

Having three boys has filled our home with lots of baseball caps; in bedrooms, closets, dresser drawers, car trunks and on every banister post. Why is it that boys always look good in ball caps, but Dads (especially Dads with engineering degrees and pointy chins) never do? And my wife generally lets me know this, usually by saying something nonchalantly like, "Take that hat off, you look like a dork."

The ‘Country’

I went to the ‘country’ recently.

The country for me is Iberia, Missouri. (Maybe the country is someplace else for others).

I stayed at the homestead of Hezzy and Crethen Hinson. Hezzy and Crethen lived about a stone’s throw away from my Grandpa and Grandma Herman and Cleo Shockley. (Crethen was Cleo’s sister). All of these great folks have passed away, but Crethen’s daughter, Leta, and her husband, Curt Tyhurst, still take care of the Hinson homestead, and they graciously let me stay there on my summer weekend getaways.

My trips to the country are peaceful. To get there I usually drive through Cole Camp, stopping at the Mister Freeze for a hamburger and shake, then continue through Eldon, crossing the river at Tuscumbia, and then pull into the IGA at Iberia. There I usually buy some beer, pretzels, bread, baloney and a copy of the Iberia newspaper. I end up a few minutes later on the most pleasant stretch of gravel road the world has ever known, passing Grandma’s home (where a man named Raymond Armstrong currently resides), where I played as a boy, and then seeing Hezzy’s place a little farther down the road.

By this time the sun has started to go down, so after unlocking the house and opening the windows to air out the house, I sit on the front porch and enjoy a sandwich, pretzels and a few cold beers as I look past the gravel road into the woods, as a million stars call out to me above.

These evenings have calmed my soul many a time.

I sleep like a baby, then wake up and drink multiple cups of coffee, sitting again on the front porch. In the distance I hear an old beagle bark, or an old pickup as it slows to cross the low water bridge down the hill not far from the house.

I usually make it a point to fish the Tavern Creek down below the old Moss homestead. (Mr. Moss built Grandpa's house). I take a few poles, a small tackle box, a sandwich and a few cold beers. My favorite lures are the top water minnow and the black Mepps spinner. I love to wade the creek, casting shadows back under the bridge, and seeing the shadows of overhanging tree branches. I have caught my fair share of red ear sunfish, goggle-eye and small mouth. This is a beautiful place to be.

Another thing I try to do when I am in the country, is visit my friend Fred Harris. He lives outside of St. Anthony. Fred is a giant of a man, very intelligent and unusually kind. He is a farmer, schoolteacher and represents his local community in many ways, such as petitioning for better roads, being president of the MFA Board, etc. He also has a great arrowhead collection. Sometimes we share breakfast together at the Hummingbird Restaurant in Iberia.

Then I pack up, look around the 'country' one last time, and come home on Sunday.

Spiral Notebooks

I love spiral notebooks. I usually get excited at 'Back to School' time, when spiral notebooks can be had for 10 cents a piece at Wal-Mart.

I must have 30 spiral notebooks sitting around the house in various dresser drawers or closet shelves. Most all are brand new, in pristine condition.

I can't figure out what draws me to them. Maybe their sizes, beauty, order? I think that it comes down to the potential in each. So many thoughts, observations, and orderly records could be noted and stored for future reference; to be available instantly for the benefit of me or countless other people who understand the significance of my brainpower.

So much to put in these spiral notebooks – so little direction as to what though. So, as I mentioned, most are still completely empty. But, oh how I love my spiral notebooks.

Groups

I have noticed certain groups lately that seem to think better of members than non-members. The one that I have noticed most often is motorcyclists.

One observation in particular is that motorcyclists almost always wave at each other when they pass on the road. Another is that they tend to ride in packs.

I feel left out, and quite frankly, overlooked; and at times shunned by this clannish activity. How dare they treat me this way!

How convenient it is to openly keep others out of their lives. I have strove to be acknowledged, but to no avail. I wave when they pass me on the highway, only to be ignored as they roar past my Ford Ranger, leaving me hanging, longing for any sign of recognition. I tell you a truth; I know how Samaritans must have felt.

I have even gone far, far, far out of my way to befriend motorcyclists, weaving through 3 or 4 lanes of traffic at a time, often speeding and endangering others, just to catch up to a pack, only to be looked down upon and grimaced at, to the point where I thought it best to back off (for usually you can tell when it is expedient to distance yourself from bikers).

How my soul experiences sorrow as the pack speeds away from me, often screaming what appears to be vulgarities.

Oh, to be accepted.

The Weekend Two Boys Left Home

This weekend two of my boys left home. Caleb left to start school at CMSU, and Addison left to start school at Azusa.

I was proud and happy that Caleb enrolled at a 4-year university – and I pray that all goes well. And I was proud that Addison continued the path that he chose last semester. Both boys will represent the Shockley name in the future, and more importantly, both boys must choose for themselves the rest of their lives.

After they left, Mom, Max and I started a new chapter of our lives. I look forward to each other's company and love. God, bless us.

Mom Still Listens To His Voice Recording

Today is the fifth year gone by since the World Trade Centers were attacked. The television show *60 Minutes* had a special with two features.

One documented the thousands of people who now have respiratory illnesses from breathing in the dust when the buildings collapsed.

The other described the 3,000 children who lost parents that day. A girl interviewed said something that stood out in my mind. She said that her mother saved her father's last telephone voice recording – and they listen to it everyday.

I wanted to note that. People need to know that.

Opportunities We Walk By

Early this morning as I was going to work, I passed by a broken down vehicle. I noticed the man was about sixty years old. But it was cold, and I wouldn't have made it to work on time if I stopped to help. Or, so was my reasonable excuse for passing this old guy by.

Later I regretted it. I now wonder how many times I have missed out on blessings that were disguised as inconveniences. I wonder what my life would be like (or the world for that matter) if I never passed by one again?

Culinary Skills

I learned to cook and get around the kitchen at an early age.

My parents both had mothers who were great cooks. My grandmother on my mom's side, Esther Werne, had a German influence in her cooking style. She made really great briskets and German potato salad. My grandmother on my dad's side, Cleo Shockley, had more of a prairie cooking style. She made simpler dishes, but with a systematic approach and patience level that imparted a loving taste to all of her meals. I especially loved her strawberry Jell-O salad, homemade dill pickles, biscuits and gravy, and cobblers. She even made fantastic oatmeal. *How can oatmeal be fantastic,* you ask? Well I am not sure how she did it, but the oatmeal was smooth as silk, and with a little cream and sugar, eating this oatmeal was like experiencing a spiritual rebirth.

So my grandparents' skills were passed along to my parents. My dad came into his own as a Bar-B-Que master. Mom was more of a fancy, Sunday-meal type of cook. So I took all of this handed-down knowledge and abilities, and embarked on my own cooking career in my early teens.

Mom and Dad worked during the summers, while my siblings and I were out of school, so I usually made breakfast and lunch for us kids. My specialty was omelets. My illustrious cooking career continued to bloom as I developed skills gleaned from numerous Home Economics classes that I took in high school.

Little did I realize how important these cooking skills would be to the well being of my wife, children, and countless other human beings later in life.

I married a girl for her good looks. She didn’t have a lick of cooking sense. In fact, she didn’t know the difference between beef and pork. I have been her cooking mentor now for many years.

However, even after this extensive cooking training, she still prefers to go out to eat. Go figure.

Day 17,162

With approximately 9,118 days left, it seems appropriate to log this day.

Awoke in darkness, followed by rapidly increasing heartbeat, as brain realized it did not force body out of the horizontal sleeping plane at the normal earlier electrical stimulus.

Cells washed with H2O particles and fabric-covered within fifteen units of time. Patronized global warming through transport in “humanity-as-we-know-it killer” Ford Motor Company means of movement.

Many time units (approaching 580) have elapsed, filled with fleeting material conversion and emotional trickery for base monetary units.

Replicate.

Hole In One

There are some milestones we hit which are usually celebrated such as Birthdays and Anniversaries.

I attended 1st Baptist Church on Longview Road in Lee's Summit, Missouri, where Ben Dobbs was the Pastor. At the beginning of the service Ben would ask, "Any birthdays? Any anniversaries?" Evidently, if you fit into either of these categories, you then had the honor of walking up front and handing Brother Ben a sealed envelope, and then everyone would clap for you. I guess there was money in the envelopes as Brother Ben drove a really nice car. I think I would rather someone buy me a beer on my birthday.

The thing about birthday and anniversary milestones is that you really don't have to do anything to attain these, except to have been found not dead that day. There are other milestones that take action, courage and perseverance. An example of one of these 'true' human milestones is hitting a hole in one – which yours truly did on July 2, 2007 (which was witnessed by my son Caleb, and friends Brad and Big John, and which was documented in the Kansas City Star).

Some say this milestone was pure luck. But, it was truly the result of years of training, incredible concentration the moment right before the swing, and perfect management of the Beers Drank/Holes Played ratio that day.

People are never jealous when you have a birthday or an anniversary. Not so with hitting a hole in one.

My Conversion

Growing up as a kid, my family attended a variety of churches. My earliest memory of a church was when we went to Grandma and Grandpa Shockley's church in St. Louis. I recall it being a large dark building made of bricks and/or rocks. Very traditional, conservative Methodist I believe. Then my family moved to Webster Groves, Missouri, and lived at 429 Newport.

There was a church one block away that rang bells on Sunday mornings, and I recall walking to that church with my Mom. My friend Jim Wolfington went there too. Later me and my brother, Matt, and my sister, Misi, started going to a Nazarene church. This church had a very active youth group (which meant something different in those days). The members had actually come door to door inviting us to church, promising to pick us up in the church bus in the morning, which was a relief to Dad I think.

The bus stopped at our home, and we jumped over the deep curb filled with leaves, into a new world of soon to be friends. The bus route was notorious for one particular hill that was capable of projecting anyone lucky enough to have gotten the very back seats, skyward. We actually became very involved in this youth group. It had a few sets of parents as leaders, and they would always have parties at their homes. One set of parents, the Rouses, invited the youth group over often. Mrs. Rouse was a very large jovial woman who loved us to death. I remember many Friday evenings in their basement, eating snacks and playing bumper pool.

I had a crush on two girls associated with the youth group. One was Cindy Sandbach, who was my age, and the other was Karen Blankenship, who was the pastor's daughter, about twenty years old, who often helped the adults. I could tell Karen secretly wanted me too, just by the way she ignored me.

Besides going to the leaders' homes, occasionally we would do some community event like singing at an old folks home. I was still young enough that this scared the crap out of me.

It was at this Nazarene church that I first recall hearing the gospel, and was moved to act on it. The pastor asked after the service if anyone wanted to come down front and receive Jesus. I really wanted to go down but felt awkward or scared, or was too concerned about what others might say. I definitely could have been saved that day. I believe that I was thirteen or fourteen, and I wish I would have made the walk then, looking back on it.

Mom and dad did not go with us very often, usually just on major holidays as I recall. And usually I felt awkward when they came, just like kids always feel when they are teenagers and they have to be with Mom and Dad. I do remember that Mom always wanted us to dress up nice for church, especially during holidays, so she would buy us "nice" outfits to wear. Once I got home from school a few minutes earlier than my brother Matt, and boy was I ever glad. For you see, Mom had gone out that day and bought us Easter outfits to wear to church the following Sunday. Mom called my name and said to come here so she could show me what she had bought (which even then made me say, "Oh crap"). So I walked into our room and there laid out on the bed was two matching outfits, one a light blue, and the other a bewildering mauve, pinkish color; and beside the suits were two pairs of white dress shoes. Mom asked the most ridiculous question ever, "Which suit do you want?" and of course I said, "I love the light blue one." She said, "Good," as she thought Matt would look cute in the other one. I new at that point that Matt most probably would need counseling later in life. Matt later came into the front door, and I heard Mom call him, then a silence as he realized how bad he had just been screwed over, and then a blood-curdling scream.

I don't recall going to any church in high school, or for that matter, in college. I just partied most of the time. I did have a fraternity brother named David Brewer, who some called Bird-Nob for some reason. He became "religious" suddenly, and started attending the Campus House (a religious group), and also going to Sunday morning Mass regularly. I must have felt like he was closer to God because I asked him to pray for my fraternity's (Triangle fraternity) intramural football team when we incredibly made the finals.

I met a girl named Mary Whitmer in college – and to make a long story short, she couldn't live without me, so we got married on April 23, 1983, at the Catholic Church in Rolla, Missouri. Our first son, Caleb, came along, and Mary wanted to have him baptized, so we did. Then our second son, Addison, came along, and I balked at having him baptized, because in that short time period between Caleb and Addison, I had decided that it was meaningless to baptize a baby.

Mary and I were living in Lee's Summit, Missouri, at 1606 SE 5th street during these years. We had a few Christians living in our neighborhood. Up the street lived the Busse family, Gary and Rhonda and their kids. They were always kind, but they never really shared the gospel with us. Other neighbors were Steve and Roxie Harper. Roxie used to walk through the neighborhood praying for homes as she went. Kevin and Kathy Baughn lived down the street.

I actually worked at the same company (Bendix) with Kevin. He was very gentle and a great listener. One day Kathy invited Mary to a bible study in her home. She really liked having some ladies to talk with, and She began to really like it, so she continued to go. There she heard the gospel message of Christ and about the salvation found in Him. She had always had a respect for God, as she was brought up in the Catholic Church. But this was new. Mary accepted Christ at the ladies Bible study one afternoon. She

said she skipped home that day. As she continued to go to the Bible study, the discussions turned toward her husband (me) and his need for Christ. Mary said that would never happen.

A little later, Kevin invited me and Mary to play co-ed volleyball at church on Friday night on the church league. I said I really wasn't interested. But about a week later, my mind changed for some reason, and I told Mary I thought we should go. She probably freaked out when I said it. So we went, and went back the following Friday. Out team had Kevin and Kathy, Mike and Kathleen Amaro, Skip and Sue Parsons, Randy and Shelley Collins, and Mary and I. I loved volleyball. I would make some miraculous saves, diving to the right, scooping to the left, and occasionally spiking on some unsuspecting opponent. Our team met about a half hour before each game, and Kevin would give a little Bible study, which I thought was kind of weird at a volleyball league.

Anyway, the league ended about eight weeks later. A few weeks later Kevin invited Mary and I to a Bible study on Monday nights. I told Mary playing volleyball was one thing, but going to a Bible study was something else. About a week later, again, my mind for some reason was changed, and I told Mary I thought we should go. I know she flipped out when she heard this. So we showed up for this Bible study, and there were about 300 people in the basement gymnasium, all carrying Bibles, and all for some reason happy, which I found odd for the setting.

A guy named Bob Alexander led the Bible study. It was an open question format where he would take about two or three questions, and then spend the next hour or so answering them by turning to tons and tons of Bible verses. I liked it. The Bible seemed to come alive. People were actually searching for answers to life's problems with the Bible. I had never seen this before. At the end of each study, Bob would ask "For every eye closed, and every head bowed." He then would pray, and then ask

if we knew if we were to die tonight, if we would go to heaven. He asked for you to raise your hand and stand up, and someone would come meet you and take a Bible and show you how you could settle the issue tonight. He did this every week, and I did think about the question, but I did not think it applied to me for some reason.

So we continued to go to this study for weeks and weeks. Finally, one week, when the question and answer part of the study was almost over, I began to get really hot, so I got up to go to the bathroom. I was in this huge bathroom with about ten urinals hanging from the wall, one of them occupied by me. I have a habit of spitting into the urinal when I take a piss, and that is what I did. Well when this spit hit the white urinal, my brown, coffee tainted spit immediately in my mind stood out like the difference between night and day, and somehow, some way, God spoke to my heart and said that's the difference between you and me. I don't claim to understand this realization, but it is true. So I spit a few times more, and each time the spit got a little less brown as it was mixing with new saliva I guess, but the distinction was always there. I could have spit a million times, and it always would have stood out against the white background. So right then and there, I told God I was going to go in there and raise my hand and stand up and accept Him as my Lord.

So I went back to the Bible study and sat down next to Mary. I must have looked weird because she asked if I was all right. So as Bob started his appeal, I reached over and touched Mary's leg before standing up. I was trying to say, that I love you, but now I have to stand up, and I hoped everything would still be good between us, but I was going to put God first. Well, when Mary saw me stand up, she touched Kathy's hand, who then touched Kevin's hand, and he stood up with a big smile and said to come on back to one of the offices. So we got back into one of the offices outside the gym, and Kevin took the Bible and reviewed some passages about my sin, and Christ's sacrificial death and how I could be saved from my sins by grace, through faith. He

then asked me if I wanted to pray to God and confess my sins and accept Christ as my Lord and Savior. And I said, “Yes.” I prayed as best as I knew how and said, “Amen.” I looked up and Kevin was smiling big. He gave me a big hug and said I love you brother. He then said, “How do you feel?” and I said, “I feel like throwing up.”

So Kevin and me walked back out to the gymnasium, and there was the volleyball team, and Mary, and they all came up and hugged me. Mary was crying. We drove home that night, and the stars looked so bright, I felt like a new person. Little did I know at that time, but I actually was new. (II Corinthians 5:17: “Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new.”)

As I look back on it, I think I actually became a Christian standing at the urinal, and praying just sealed the deal. Mary later told me her story of how she accepted Christ at the Bible study. We were and still are so happy for our sins being forgiven and being given eternal life. The date of my salvation was December 5, 1988. I was now a Christian, and Jesus was my Lord.

Missing Mary

Me and Max are alone in this big house. Caleb and Addy are at college. And my love, Mary, is on a cruise with her Mom.

Oh, the quietness. The loneliness.

I need her here. Max needs her here. The two quiet Shockley boys alone in a big house. The sounds of a big quiet home are actually very loud. When you are alone.

Mary bouncing around, her commotion, her constant stories, her loving the boys, her endless phone calls, her doing laundry, or writing consignor checks; her pricing jewelry, her folding clothes, her reading a book with a bag of chips, her fixing her hair, her calling me Mikie, her picking Max's zits.

I miss her. I know Max does too.

I can't wait to pinch her butt, and then listen as the home comes alive, as it always does, when Mary comes home.

A New Pappi's Pizza

Mary, Max and I went to Pappi's Pizza recently for dinner. We didn't recognize the usual faces though. The guy behind the counter said that he and his partner were the new owners as of the previous Friday.

Mary already knew something was terribly wrong, she said, when they charged $2.50 for an extra topping when we ordered a medium pizza with one half pepperoni and the other half sausage. (Honestly, they could have charged $10 extra, and Max and I would not have even noticed). "The 'old' Pappi's never pulled this trick," she said.

The place had been owned by 'Pappi' (a short, kind of cranky bald guy, who was probably a grand-pappy many times over) for at least the previous twenty years that we had been frequenting it.

We have many fond memories of "end-of-the-season" kids soccer and basketball parties held there. Kids running around, playing video games, riding the twenty-five cent mechanical rides (the horse, the donkey, or the elephant), as the parents mull around, talk to the other parents, round up the kids, drink a beer, and enjoy decent pizza in this dark and cavernous meeting house. The place is brightened only by little boys' smiles as their names are called to come up to shake the coach's hand and receive their gleaming trophies, and then turn to face the crowd so that moms could get a picture. These are treasured pictures for parents.

I even had my 40th birthday party there, which my wife organized. My friends Mike and Diane Smith, Cedric and Bonnie Saunders, Kevin and Kathy Baughn, all my boys and their friends, and many others came to celebrate (and get free pizza and their beverage of choice).

The new guys behind the counter promised that Pappi's would remain basically the same. That turned out not to be true. They remodeled the inside, removed the candy stripe carpeting, made it bright and clean with new fluorescent lighting, and took down all the Pall Mall and Makers Mark Whiskey signs which had once been used for someone's target practice. The walls no longer reeked of cigarettes, and the floor was not sticky from years of accumulated beer spills, which dads accidentally did as they clapped for their sons at trophy time, elbowing the guy next to them, and saying, "That's my boy."

Cruise Ship 80th Birthday Party

Margaret Whitmer turned 80! So her kids (Bill, Judy, Allen and Mary) organized a 3-day Carnival Cruise Line birthday party for 'Grandma.'

Besides the Whitmers were Margaret's sister-in-law, Mildred, and her children (Jimmy, David, Doug, Johnny, Dan and Mary).

Besides these were of course all the children and grandchildren, and many close friends too.

We had a great time partying, singing karaoke, dancing, playing cards, eating, hanging out at the pool, playing the slots, etc.

Grandma wound up in the slot machine finals and came in third place.

One of the best memories was just before the cruise ship departed, we all got to see the space shuttle take off. Grandma said it was like a giant candle for her birthday!

Fiction

I don't read much fiction. My bookshelves display titles such as, *Coal*, *Benjamin Franklin, The Great Influenza Scare*, *Good Poems, Sticky Wisdom*, and various Bible translations.

Being sick on this day (for the 2nd time already this year, which is rare for me), Mary got wise and gave me a book to read (much less stressful for her than hearing me whine all day long). The book was a fictional love story, of all things.

Redeeming Love retells the biblical book of Hosea. I actually surprised myself at the speed at which I turned the pages (although I often peeked around to make sure no one was watching me).

It was enjoyable to just sit and read fiction, not having to process information as I usually do with my selections.

I do like fiction. There.

Pack Rat

I believe most “pack rats” are known for accumulating lots of stuff and never actually using it. I don’t really know why I’m writing about this now; I guess I need to deal with issues in my life, maybe?

So I have taken time now to reflect on this subject and have concluded that I am not a pack rat (except for my pile of empty spiral bound notebooks, which I buy indiscriminately, and store in every dresser drawer in the house – and hardly ever use). I am something similar to a pack rat, but I am at a loss as to truly understanding what that is--I am-- exactly.

I have found that I have things, lots of interesting and useful things, usually one to three of each, but I never use them. And today this has made me mad.

Some examples are: tools, computers, a Solo Flex, clothes, crayons, an I-Pod, a Water Pic, a Shop Vac, a few shotguns, and a power sprayer.

I have no excuse for boredom.

Things You Hear

Thee are so many things we hear during a typical day, courtesy of hanging out at work, shopping, dining, listening to the radio, etc. Words and thoughts flying into our ears and brains non-stop.

It is hard to keep up with them, almost impossible to let them sink in, and actually contemplate them.

Recently, however, we had dinner at *Zio's*. Upon leaving, I passed by a complimentary basket of suckers. As I stood there trying to decide which color (or flavor) to select, I saw nothing but lots of yellow, and a few orange. I really didn't like the choices, and was about to pass on by when a waiter came up to me and said, "Have as many as you want – the good ones are always at the bottom." And sure enough, as I dredged the bottom of the basket, I began to see more oranges, greens, purples and my personal favorite, red.

On the drive home I couldn't get my mind off the phrase, "The good ones are always at the bottom." It was like a defining moment when you suddenly see life in a totally different way. So I resigned myself that night to search deeper for "the good ones" in life. In people, situations, nature, problems, relationships, etc. And it has made a difference.

Information Processing Rats

I have always been interested in the various ways people process information.

For example, I have for the last three years or so, been writing more. I have found a product that I like to log my thoughts in called a Moleskine. Basically it is a cool little black hardbound notebook. The first Moleskine I filled up took about two and a half years. It was basically a chronological journal with lots of miscellaneous information. It had lists of books I'd like to read, jokes, a golf score spreadsheet, pictures, and lots of other things that interested me. It was a microcosm of my life, so I thought I would share it with a few people.

So I gave it to Mary and then Addison. Mary finished it in one night. Addison digested it for about 4 months. That is a tremendous difference. It's not that one's rate of processing the information is better than another I surmised, it is just the way people process information.

On a personal level, Mary knows me like a book already, so this was essentially a summary of something that she had already lived through. And she is more of a doer than a ponderer. Whereas Addison is a contemplator, a searcher for nuggets; evaluating, reassessing, summarizing, categorizing and discussing.

Both information processing rates (and there are probably millions more) work. In the end, it was an honor that they gave of their time to review a subject such as me; husband and dad.

Flaws

Mary once had a Photo Journalist from the Kansas City Star come to her store (*Mary Margaret's Consignment Boutique*) to interview her and take a few pictures of the store for an article. The picture they took was very nice, so we made some 5" x 7" copies, and I sat one on my desk at work. It was a nice picture of Mary leaning over a chair with her beautiful dressing rooms (which I built) in the background, and Mary holding a few of the purses she carries.

I looked at this picture almost every day. About two years later, as I was looking at the picture, I noticed something that I had overlooked so many times before. There in the picture, on the back of the chair Mary was leaning over, was a very large piece of chewed bubble gum stuck to the chair!

I had looked at this probably 500 times and never saw this. But once I noticed it, every time thereafter when I looked at the picture, the first thing I saw was that wad of gum. I decided to tell Mary about it.

So I told her about it the next night, and she thought I was joking, so she went and got a copy of the picture, and as soon as she saw the wad of gum, it was a huge downer for her. She had loved that picture, and now she couldn't look at it either without noticing the gum.

What a lesson I learned. It was not enough that I saw a flaw, but I had to share it with someone else too. Moral: don't look for flaws, and if you find one, don't share it with others.

Cubicles

I now work (and always have) at a company that sees fit to house its employees in cubicles. I am so used to staring into cloth wrapped corners that even at night I can't fall asleep without a pillow wrapped around the side of my head that simulates the cubicle feeling.

I have been talking to my bay-mates over a six-foot fabric wall for over twenty-five years. I have often wondered what they look like. I recently got moved into another cubicle and realized a biblical prophecy had come true – Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you; in My Father's house are many mansions."

For some reason most cubicles don't come equipped with love-seats or coffee tables, which I find disturbing. Who designs these things? Possibly engineers sitting in cubicles all day long?

I once had a friend @ Honeywell named Dan Anderson. He hated cubicles. He begged me to promise that if I ever walked into his cubicle and found him having a heart attack, that I would pick him up and throw him into the nearest aisle, so that he would not die in a cubicle. Cubicles suck.

Morning Coffee

I am a morning person. I like to get up early, make a big pot of coffee, and read the newspaper. It's not that coffee is so great, it just relaxes me. I usually drink two-three cups in the morning, two cups throughout the day, and a cup after dinner.

I'm sure someday there will be a study that claims drinking coffee can lead to sore throats, diarrhea, constipation, chest pains, and sexual dysfunction. Maybe I should consult my physician before my next cup.

There have been a few occasions when my relaxing morning coffee drinking ritual has been interrupted – namely when my blessed mother-in-law has come to stay with us for a few weeks. She is really a sweet lady, and I love her like she is my own mother-in-law. Actually, we are very similar in two ways. First, she too loves to get up early. Second, she loves to drink coffee. However, that's where the similarities end. The one trait that she has that I don't, is that she loves to read the paper, to me, out loud. So my normally blissful mornings quickly evolve into me morphing into a nicotine-craving maniac.

My dad loves coffee too. And he likes it really strong. He puts in six-seven scoops, and then puts his coffee cup right where the pot should go, so that he gets the first blackest, strongest, thickest cup. And to beat all, he then puts salt into this first cup, because as he says, "It brings out the flavor." He definitely needs to consult his physician, or possibly his friendly neighborhood pre-planned mortuary sales specialist.

Churches

We have attended so many churches over the years. Various Catholic churches, Kansas City Baptist Temple, Lee's Summit Community Church, Jacob's Well, The Gathering, etc. And in each church, we have met and become friends with many people.

Each of these churches has had its beliefs, traditions, administrations, teachings, doctrines, methods of worship, Bible interpretations, unique leaders and their leadership styles. All have Jesus as the central figure, the Bible as the central text, and the general purpose of serving God and their fellow man.

Unfortunately, "judgment" has come into play in every church. Judging people, beliefs, other churches, motives, what is and isn't sin.

There have been things in each church that I enjoyed, disliked, believed in, or sometimes gotten totally disillusioned about. But even with all this, I know that the Church is something that Jesus himself is building, and therefore it has to be great.

Throughout history churches have been a huge blessing to the world. They have been a blessing in my life, for sure. Thank God he can work through all these to accomplish His will, and touch the hearts of mankind.

Fishing

There are certain activities that have entertained mankind for thousands of years. One of these is fishing.

My first memorable fishing trip occurred in Iberia, Missouri. I was fishing the creek with my brother Matt, Dad, Uncle John, Grandpa and Uncle Hezzy.

A total of twenty-three fish were caught that fine day, mostly by me as I recall (others may have a slightly different recollection). Most were probably hooked by one of the elders, and as they complained that the fish were too large for them to handle, the Zepco-33-reel-equipped rod was passed to me or my brother Matt so that we could dutifully reel them in. (I guess, even at that young age, I realized the physical limitations of old people).

Of course the fish were huge in our eyes, sunfish mostly. We took them all home, and the women were noticeably impressed. When the process of cleaning the fish started, Mom called me and Matt in for a bath, and when we came out, Grandma was already frying the fish. The fish somehow looked bigger in the pan, and to this day my thoughts were that Dad couldn't really have cleaned twenty-three tiny sunfish, so he threw them in the woods for the critters to eat, and what we ate that night were fish sticks that Grandma had thawed out from deep in the freezer.

Many more fishing trips have occurred since that day, but this one will never be forgotten.

Pocket Knives

I have always been in awe over anything that is made by craftsmen, especially if it has some wood on it, is functional, and looks manly. One item that meets all these criteria is pocketknives. Pocketknives are truly works of art, and if taken care of, can last a lifetime.

My Dad had one with a yellow body, a Case I believe, that he kept in his tackle box, so he didn't use it too often, but it was always there and ready to go when we went fishing. I remember looking at it often, touching it, opening and closing it over and over again. It had a unique smell to it also, one of 3-in-1 Oil mixed with tuna fish. Not a smell that you would want on your hands for very long.

Mary's Dad had one that he carried with him at all times. I believe this was a Buck. And he really used it. He cut apples, wild hairs growing on his arms, corns, and calluses off his feet (he had pretty rough feet as I recall), and even picked dirt out from under his fingernails. He would sit in his TV chair at night and meticulously sharpen that knife on an Arkansas stone, spitting on the blade as required (he was one of those rare guys who knew when it was required), while alternately saying, "Margaret, get me some coffee."

I bought Addison a knife when he was about sixteen, and extolled the values of a pocketknife, and encouraged him to carry it daily. To test to see if he was carrying his knife I would make up stuff and say something like, "Gee, that fingernail needs cutting off - let me see your knife," to which he would then often smile and admit that he did not have it on him. I'd like to think that after enough of these episodes that he got the hint and now carries it with him daily. If not, it is his sin, not mine.

Arkansas

It seems like people have been making fun of Arkansas and its residents forever. I'm not sure why though. My wife and I recently returned from a vacation there, where we just drove through miles and miles of gorgeous land, stopping in small towns along the way, eating at little Mom and Pop restaurants.

We drove from southern Missouri into northern Arkansas along Scenic Highway 7, going through Harrison and then all the way to Hot Springs. Why people make fun of this state is beyond me. It is as beautiful as any in the nation. They probably have never set a foot in it, that's what I guess, or they have had too much big city livin' to know any better.

The best part of the drive that I would suggest is to start at Harrison, Arkansas and head south too Russelville. One of the most beautiful stretches on this drive is the ten miles north or south of a town called Jasper, and the Elk River, which is a few miles north of Jasper.

As we crossed the Elk River, we were in awe of the natural beauty of this area. We did not take the time to stop the car and just sit by this river, and to this day I regret it. To canoe, or camp, or fish here would be so fantastic. A few miles south is the town of Jasper. When we pulled into this hamlet, they were having "Elk Days," so of course we stopped and walked around. They had great food, and an elk-calling contest. "Why elk?" I thought, but actually a few miles farther south is a gigantic elk population, and thus elk calling is taken very seriously.

I would seriously recommend seeing this part of Arkansas.

Sanballet the Horonite

Some people are fortunate, and some aren't, when it comes to our names that are given us at birth.

I have always liked mine – Michael Anthony Shockley. It sounds strong, implies a solid character, and the ladies have always liked it too (of course I am talking about my Mamma and my wife Mary).

Recently, I ran into a name that was so outrageous that I had to laugh. The name was "Sanballet the Horonite." Can you imagine filling out a job application with that name? It's hard for me to think the person reviewing the application would say, "That sounds like a nice guy, let's call him in for an interview."

Sanballet the Horonite turns out to be a really mean person. His life and actions against God and mankind were infamous, and they are recorded in the Bible in Nehemiah chapters 2, 6 and 13. One of his tactics was to invite people to one of his favorite hangouts – get this – the villages in the plain of O'No. And once there, bad things happened. Seriously – read it for your self. The name O'No should give an indication that there would be problems. Can you imagine a teenage girl telling her dad she was going to hangout with her friends at O'No?

Johnny Cash sung a song called, "A Boy Named Sue." Which is another example of how a name can alter one's life.

So parents, pick nice, conservative names. Please!

The Elms

Mary stole me away to Excelsior Springs, Missouri, this past weekend, where we stayed at the Elms Hotel.

The Elms is a very old hotel, built approximately 120 years ago. It was quite the swank place in its heyday. Al Capone and Harry Truman stayed there.

It has gone down hill a little but is still a fun place. It is known for its relaxing spa and multiple indoor and outdoor pools.

We sat in the bar for dinner and couldn't help but overhearing another couple's conversation, as they clearly were knocking a few drinks back. I thought their accent indicated a very rural background, and it must have been the case, for at one point I heard the woman tell the man that the next phone that she would get would be a Blackberry because they were more educational: "you have to use letters."

I've spent hours thinking about that statement.

Business Cards

Many things in life are the result of geniuses that create something out of nothing, and then people are convinced that everyone must have one, but nonetheless, the product is useless, but no one realizes it.

Thanksgiving is one. To this day I think the Cranberry Growers Association of America dreamed this holiday up and then lobbied congress to recognize it, just so they could create a market for cans of jellied cranberry sauce.

Another example is business cards. They are so popular that secretaries are conditioned like Pavlov's dog to say to new hires, "Well, I guess we better order you some business cards."

So, magically, a box of 500 fine printed business cards shows up on your desk one day. You pull one out and gloat over your name, address, telephone number, department, etc., and immediately your pride soars to new heights as you adore your new title. You then slip so many into your wallet that looking at your butt from behind, your coworkers mistake you for Sponge Bob Square Pants.

The remaining box of cards is then put into the back of your desk drawer, never to be seen again, until the same secretary unearths them as she is cleaning out your desk, after you have been fired.

It has been estimated that 93.2% of the contents of major metropolitan landfills are partial boxes of unused business cards.

Tomatoes

When I was a kid growing up in Webster Groves, Missouri, my mom and dad planted a garden in the backyard. Amongst all the garden's lush greenery (and weeds) were a few gigantic tomato plants.

They were meticulously tied up to stakes (you would have to know my dad to know just how meticulously) and approached six feet tall. This was in the sixties, and standing in the grove of tomato plants made me feel like I was in Vietnam.

This year I planted three tomato plants, and like-father like-son, I meticulously tied them up to stakes using the material that was handed down by my dad, pantyhose.

My wife didn't have a lot of extra pairs of pantyhose lying around, so being the cheap son of a gun that I am, I went to Dollar General to buy some. When I finally got up enough courage to walk down the pantyhose aisle, I selected four pairs of "Queen Size" and then headed to the checkout counter.

When I set my items on the check-out counter, the young lady looked up at them, then coyly at me, which put me under so much stress that I could not contain myself, and blurted out, "They are for my tomatoes!" which probably made absolutely no sense to her. I am sure she, and the few other customers standing behind me, all thought I was a cross dresser.

Well, we had had lots of rain, and along with a little weeding and an occasional fertilizing with ashes from my Weber grill, my plants were really putting on some tomatoes.

So I decided to walk the neighborhood and share my wealth. I went door-to-door with sacks of tomatoes. I'm not that close to my neighbors, so generally they thought I was a Jehovah's Witness at first. Once I explained who I was and where I lived, they reluctantly took a sack of my tomatoes, inwardly thinking that as soon as I left they would inspect them to make sure I had not inserted some razor blades.

So anyway, I like walking the streets distributing my goods. It makes me feel like I have made the world a better place.

Last Words

Caleb's friend Brad Overton received word that his grandfather Archie Overton passed away on September 2, 2008. Since Brad is a good friend of mine too, I went to the visitation.

Funerals are so hard. It is the end of life on earth. Death always comes seemingly without time to prepare for what is to follow for those left behind. The many relationships with family and friends cease. It sucks.

It struck me as I looked at the pamphlet that was handed out to the mourners as they entered the church, that the last words likely ever printed with Archie as the subject on that pamphlet were somewhat confusing. After a life of love and work and hardships and laughter, the pamphlet did not speak to this at all, but did for some reason mention the name of the organist.

Why?

There was so much more that could have been written to describe the seventy-eight years that Archie lived.

I am not complaining or trying to be mean, it's just that a little piece of paper handed out to people as they are mourning the loss of a loved one, seems so empty, so void of any meaning.

This is very hard to explain. Maybe Brad understands though.

Dana Conger

When I was in college, I became involved with Big Brothers of America. I became a Big Brother to a young boy named Dana Conger.

Dana was a feisty eight-year-old, with dirty blond hair. He lived with his mom; his dad had left them years before. He needed someone to talk to and someone who would do a few things with. And that was me.

We met once a week. I would usually go to his house, and we would mess around together. One day Dana dared me to let his gerbil crawl up inside my left pant leg, cross over at the crotch, and then go back down my right pant leg. So I accepted the challenge, and to this day I still have terrible nightmares.

The gerbil started up my leg at my ankle, and as it crawled higher and higher, the gerbil started to apply more force with his little claws as the area between my skin and pants became smaller. I must have looked noticeably disturbed because Dana started to laugh uncontrollably. Well when that gerbil got within four inches of my crotch, I couldn't take it any longer and jumped up saying, "Get that 'rat' out of my pants!" Dana just fell over laughing at that point. I literally had to take my pants down just to save my sanity, and the "rat" fell to the ground. Dana had a good day that day.

Another fun day I had with Dana was when he and I and my roommate, Todd Williams, drove to St. Louis in a borrowed old red truck, to pick up a couch for our fraternity room.

As we were slowly driving down a street in a seedy area of St. Louis looking for the correct address, Dana, who had been sitting

between me and Todd, suddenly jumped towards the passenger window and screamed, “Look at the pecker on that guy!” Besides scaring us half to death, we could not help but laugh at such a crazy statement from an eight-year-old. Well, we looked but didn’t see anything unusual – we didn’t really even know what we were looking for. But Dana forced us to drive around the block again to show us what he meant.

As we slowly pulled around and up to the same point on the street, Dana said, “There he is – drive slowly so you can see the pecker on that guy.” By now Todd and I were dying laughing and still had no idea of what we were about to see. So we continued to drive by the guy slowly, and, as God as my witness, it looked like the guy had a full-sized watermelon in his pants! It was so funny, we were all staring, with Todd having to physically constrain Dana so he would not fall out of the window.

We sped off laughing so hard. We laughed non-stop for five minutes. Then we started to discuss what we had just seen. Dana had a good day that day.

And that’s what it was really all about – spending time with Dana and hoping he would have a good day.

I lost touch with Dana when I graduated. But these stories still remain in my mind. I hope I made a difference in his life. He definitely made a difference in mine.

Dreams

I have often wondered why certain people have specific dreams, but I never have the same dream as them.

For instance, you hear of people flying in their dreams. I never had that one. Or others dream that demons are chasing them. This one is probably related to having drank too much the night before, or possibly their mother-in-law is coming to visit.

My wife always had elevator dreams, which I have attributed to her wanting to be the boss (mine).

So as you see, most people's dreams do not seem to be based in reality. And this is exactly what upsets me the most, because mine always are.

My dreams are always about real things, like work. So after I dream, I have already worked two-three hours before most people have even woken up.

In one recurring dream I have, I am tasked with increasing efficiencies by 15%. In another dream, I am trying to reduce waste. And finally, in another dream, I am ascertaining a manufacturing process and systematically creating a value-stream map.

I usually wake up very tired.

Hardest Working Person at White Castles

On the way back from a visit to St. Louis, we stopped at White Castle for a fix. Living in Kansas City (although at one point it was called "The Paris of the Plains") has never been complete bliss without a White Castle. So at 9AM we got a sack and headed west on Highway 70, the trail of cooked onions permeating the cracks and crevices of the vehicle.

Heading home I mentioned to Mary how I had noticed at the White Castle that only one person out of maybe six was actually working. She agreed. The hardest working person there was a small thin woman who was cooking, taking customers' orders, and cleaning at the same time, working circles around everyone else, as they just stood there, letting her do all the work.

And she did all this with a smile and a very good attitude towards all of the customers. She was the leader – the hardest working girl by far that day – and undoubtedly everyday.

The other workers stood out as well – but in a bad way. They were so slow, never doing anything without the prompting of the leader. Their eyes were glazed over, they didn't look at the customers, and they had a prideful look on their faces like they were above this type of work.

Hark workers are noticed.

Collections

I have met many people recently who have collections of one sort or another.

A woman I met at a garage sale collected colored glass bottles. A man I struck up a conversation with collected beer can openers. My wife, Mary, has over the years collected buttons and matchboxes.

One day, we were at a garage sale, and a lady was buying up dolls. I asked her if she collected dolls, and she said she did. She then began to tell me how long she had been collecting, and how many she had, and what her best doll was (about this time my eyes started to glaze over).

Just to mess with her (one of my favorite pastimes), I told her that I had a collection, but it probably wasn't nearly as nice or as interesting as her doll collection, and then I sheepishly looked down, like she and her collection were far superior to me and mine.

Out of compassion I guess, she said something like, "Oh, I'm sure your collection is nice. Tell me, what do you collect"? And without missing a beat, I replied, "George Foreman grilles."

The look on her face would have made Jan Whitmer smile.