

Parting Words

Good News, Bad News

By Jamie Odeneal

My childhood was ridiculously wholesome. Nestled in the suburbs, we lived at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac where we could ride our banana-seat bikes without fear of traffic or creeps. My mom was a stay-at-home mom before this was unusual enough to warrant the acronym SAHM. We had a scruffy mutt named Rags. My dad was a golfer. And, as I assumed most families did, we ate dinner at home together every night. This was just life to me. Sure, our family was mildly dysfunctional in our own unique way, but we didn't experience any trauma of the made-for-TV variety that sends many of my friends rushing to their therapists.

Looking back years later, I can truly appreciate our dinner ritual along with every other quaint middle-class tradition we incorporated. My sisters and I enjoyed an abundance of "face time" with our parents, and dinnertime was just one example. Discussion at our table used to begin with our parents asking us what our good news and bad news were for the day, and although the food didn't always thrill me, this nightly routine did.

"Good news, bad news," as we called it, was a chance for my two sisters and me to share what was on our minds and to get things off our chests. A typical "good news, bad news" for me was something like, "My good news was that I got a B+ on my math test. My bad news was that I lost my milk money." As benign as this "news" seems today, such events were earth-shattering to us.

Years later when I became an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, I decided to try out the "good news, bad news" activity with my high school students. When studying to be a teacher, it was always stressed that students need to feel we really care about them. While this seemed a little touchy-feely compared to the strict, humorless teaching methods I grew up with, I believed that this made sense, that teachers should give students a chance to share what's on their minds. I suppose my parents had subscribed to a similar philosophy for parenting in the '70s. I figured that my ESL class was, after all, a language class, so "good news, bad news" was a legitimate classroom activity. Plus, I was sure that having my students share their news would bond us as a class. I was eager to introduce my students to an activity that had pleased me so much as a kid.

Well, my students were happy to share. I just wasn't prepared for what I might hear.

One important thing to keep in mind in talking with



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high school students is that they are completely out of their minds. It's not their fault, and I really believe it's temporary, but it's a fact. Imagine how crazy adolescence is under the best of circumstances, and then consider the fact that my students are dealing with a new language and culture on top of the typical social and hormonal issues.

We shared our "good news, bad news" every Monday. Sometimes the news was cheery, sometimes heartbreaking, and sometimes flat-out hilarious, but it was never boring. I remember when Flora from Peru told us about the ups and downs of her weekend.

"My good news is that I went to a party with my uncle. My bad news was that I had to drive him home because he got too drunk."

It was my practice to ask follow-up questions for clarity or to demonstrate that I was listening and did indeed care. So I followed with, "I'm sorry, you say you *drove him home*? Are you old enough to drive, Flora?" The social worker side of me was trying to glean information without sounding judgmental or worse, embarrassing Flora.

"No, I'm only fifteen, but he was drunk, so I had to drive."

"Um, you know you could get in big trouble for driving without a license? Not to mention, I really worry about your safety. You really shouldn't have done that, you know? You could have gotten in big, big trouble or worse, in an accident." Okay, now I was being openly judgmental and downright preachy.

"Yeah, I know, but he couldn't drive, and we had no other way to get home." She shrugged.

"So... you got home safely, I hope?"

"Yeah, I did, okay. We got home pretty late, though, because my uncle wanted to stop for Chinese food."

"Chinese food? What time was this?" The class was now

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glued to every detail of the story, as was I.

"I guess it was about two in the morning. He wanted to stop because, you know how you get hungry sometimes when you get drunk."

"Sure, Flora. I...guess...so. Just be safe, okay? Maybe call your parents next time?" I learned later that her parents were still in Peru and that this uncle, at the age of 23, was her sole guardian.

How could I chastise Flora for driving underage when she had done it for a good reason? I could think of a million ways she could and should have dealt with the situation (calling a taxi immediately came to mind), but how did my opinion compare to what made sense to Flora and her family? At Flora's age, I ate shrimp cocktail with my parents at our country club on Saturday nights—not Chinese food at two in the morning with my drunken uncle. How could I begin to offer advice?

Another shocker came from Sang, a Korean boy who had come to the United States after spending the previous five years in Paraguay. His parents had moved there from Korea to start a business. Sang was an all-around good kid with regular attendance and good study habits. His usual "good news, bad news" had to do with his latest Tae Kwon Do tournament or a movie he'd seen with his friends—typical 15-year-old stuff. Sometime around January, Sang's good news was that his father had come to live with him. This didn't immediately raise red flags. Frequently, my students would be living with one parent while the other stayed and worked in their home countries. That was why I didn't really react until Sang admitted that he had been living alone for close to eight months before his father came from Paraguay to join him.

Sang was suddenly very open about a situation that would have alarmed school officials had they known. About a year ago he had begged his parents to come to the United States, and they'd agreed on the condition that he stay alone. They accompanied him, rented him a room in someone's house, registered him in school, and flew back to Paraguay. After eight months alone without much money, a car, or even a firm grip on the English language, Sang couldn't take it anymore. His father realized that, at 15, Sang wasn't ready to live on his own in a foreign country and came back to live with him until he finished high school.

Sang saw himself as a failure, and it absolutely broke my heart. Emotionally, he couldn't handle living alone, but he had miraculously maintained his grades and kept his secret from everyone for months. He was anxious to see his dad, but he felt he'd ruined his parents' lives and let them down. Considering that my parents and I stayed together in the same house my entire childhood, I didn't feel I could offer Sang adequate advice, or even relevant words of wisdom.

Stories like Sang's and Flora's made me want to scoop them up, drive them to my parents' house in Pennsylvania, feed them pork chops and applesauce, and protect them from the instability in their lives. However, I don't think for a second that my students' parents don't love them or aren't trying to do their best to get their kids an education and a decent shot at a future. They come here—or in some cases just send their kids—precisely because they care about them and want the best for their futures. But when I compare my wholesome, uneventful childhood to what these kids are going through, I should have expected that their "good news, bad news" was going to contain more drama than not being able to find a prom dress. At least they were opening up and sharing with me. After all, isn't that what I'd asked of them? I just hadn't thought about what I'd do with the information when I got it.

It's amazing what teenagers will tell you if you just give them a few minutes of your time. As a high school student, I don't think I would have shared anything nearly as personal with my teachers as my students routinely shared with me. Then again, my news was relatively un-newsworthy by comparison. When I asked them to share their "good news, bad news," my ESL students had no particular reason to trust me, or the other members of the class for that matter, with such deeply personal and sensitive information about their lives. And I don't think it had anything to do with trusting me in particular. I think they were just waiting for someone to ask—almost anyone would do. Thanks to their openness, I learned that they were sensitive, hilarious, fragile, and unimaginably strong.

I think my parents were on to something with this "good news, bad news." I am thankful to them for carving out some time each day to sit down with us at the dinner table and ask us how we were doing. I do realize, however, that such a routine is a luxury that my students and their families cannot afford. For one thing, many of them, both the students and adults, work multiple minimum-wage jobs to pay for their modest housing in a decent school district. Getting everyone together for a family dinner is not on the list of priorities. I am in no position to judge them.

By sharing their very candid "good news, bad news," my students, I think, were just looking for someone to hear them out. I don't think that ten minutes a week is too much to spare for that. I can't wait to hear what my students have for me next year.

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