

Chapter 1

Son of a Preacher Man

“My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love...”

Colossians 2:2

“When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro.”

~ Hunter S. Thompson

In January 2001, I took a communication class called “The Path to Dialogue,” which opened the door of my life into an altered reality. The course was later updated and renamed “Dialogue Smarts.” A couple of years later, the consultants who developed the course repackaged the program and wrote a book called *Crucial Conversations:™ Tools for Talking when Stakes are High*, which became a New York Times Best Seller. The Crucial Conversations™ training program has won numerous awards and is considered one of the most effective communication classes in the world. The course had such an impact on me that I became one of VitalSmarts™ (now Crucial Learning™) original associates and a Certified Master Trainer, selling, training, and coaching the skills set forth in the book. I have spent the last 24 years traveling all over the United States, Canada, and many places around the world, teaching the skills of Crucial Conversations™ to front-line workers, new managers, middle managers, directors, C-suite executives, business owners, and partnerships in every category of industry. Wherever there are people, I have been teaching, training, and coaching.

As I started teaching the class, I knew that I wanted to be the kind of instructor or leader who practiced what they preached. All too often, leaders expect their people to do what they are unwilling to do themselves. We can't expect perfection from leaders, just an honest effort to lead by example. I have all the room in the world for forgiveness of shortcomings, but no tolerance for entitlement, hubris, or double standards. I decided to challenge myself by creating a personal "game" that would

give me the chance to live and practice the skills necessary to hold impossible conversations. This wasn't just a theoretical exercise but about embodying what I was teaching.

The game itself? I made a list of all my incomplete relationships—any lingering conflicts, misunderstandings, or unresolved issues—and committed to cleaning them up. I approached these conversations one by one using the techniques I was teaching others, putting my skills to the test in real life. This allowed me to lead and instruct from a position of lived experience rather than relying solely on theory.

“Play is the highest form of research.”

~ Albert Einstein

I define an incomplete relationship as any relationship in which you feel uncomfortable or prefer to avoid another person. For example, imagine you're walking down a hallway and see someone you'd rather not interact with coming toward you. Instead of passing by them, you take a different hallway to avoid the encounter. That's a sign of an incomplete relationship—one that needs resolution or cleaning up to eliminate the discomfort and avoidance.

My list included old college roommates, past college professors, previous bosses, former colleagues and direct reports, numerous ex-girlfriends, one ex-wife, one current wife I was divorcing, and other assorted family members. The list totaled 36 names, taking me nearly two and a half years to complete. Some conversations were one-and-done. Many of them took several attempts, and one person required seven different tries (there is no perfection in doing this type of work).

Let me be clear: Addressing these relationships was never about attacking or blaming the other person. It was my way of applying the skills I had learned and *respectfully* speaking my truth! It was saying what I needed to say and taking personal responsibility for my role in what had occurred. It was completing or bringing peace to my relationships. Now, I didn't necessarily become friends with all of

those people, but there is something powerful about cleaning up all the random relationship missteps and moving forward with your head held high and zero emotional baggage.

Before I began to grind through my list, I called my mother and told her what I was going to do.

Her response: “I want to hear all the stories!” (Laughter.)

For the next two and a half years, my mother was my sounding board, cheerleader, and confidant, never making me feel wrong, always supporting me, and never saying no to the next person on the list. Two and a half years later, I called my mom and said, “I’m almost done with my list; I’m having my next-to-last conversation tomorrow with my old boss in Houston.” (Mom knew the background and the problems with my old boss.)

Mom: “Call me as soon as you’re done.”

The conversation went much better than I imagined and fell into the “one-and-done” category. I was elated and pumped. I called my mother from the restaurant parking lot and walked her through the conversation. She was celebrating with me. Then she said, “You said that this was your next-to-last conversation on your list. Who’s the last person?”

Me: “It’s DAD.”

Mom: “Oh, no, you don’t!”

Me: (I was shocked, but I understood.) “Mom, you know I have to. I can’t be a hypocrite teaching people how to have these conversations and not do them myself. I saved Dad for last because I knew he would be the hardest one, but now it’s time. I have to practice what I am teaching!”

Mom: “Son, those people don’t know your dad. If you have that conversation, I’ll never see you again!”

She was serious!

Step back and see the entire picture. My mother is my sounding board, cheerleader, and confidant. She and Dad had the best marriage I have ever seen. They were a true partnership and always had each other’s back. But Mom knew Dad, and she knew this conversation with him wouldn’t go well. Deep down, I felt the same way. That’s why I’d saved it for last.

Let me take a short detour to paint the entire picture so you can understand why she was so scared. When I was very young, my father was a hellraiser! When I was four years old, he went off to war in Vietnam. He came back when I was five as a very different man. A year later, around the time I started first grade, my father completely changed his life and became an old-time Southern Baptist, hellfire and brimstone, walking up and down the aisle, screaming preacher. Some of you know exactly what I'm talking about. Others may not.

Let me give you a couple of examples where my father had an almost cultish control tied into his religion. We lived in some small towns in deep East Texas. One town was Douglass, Texas, where my school had a total of 100 kids (that's kindergarten through 12th grade).

The nearest town to Douglass that had a grocery store was the huge metropolis of Nacogdoches, which also had a public library. My father would visit the public library, check out books and records, and burn them on the steps outside.

That's who my dad was. If you have ever seen the movie *Footloose* with Kevin Bacon and John Lithgow, multiply John Lithgow's character by a factor of ten. With my father, it was his way or the highway. Needless to say, I couldn't wait to get out from under his roof.

Three days before my graduation from Seagoville High School in Dallas, I walked into the house after playing basketball at the gym. My dad stopped me in the garage and told me he was resigning from the church on Sunday (First Baptist Church in Seagoville) and that he and my mother were moving to East Texas (Karnack) in one week, and he was going into full-time evangelism preaching at revivals.

He said, "Son, I was on my own at 17 and went into the service. You graduate in three days, so you will have a high school diploma." He then handed me a piece of paper and said, "I have spoken with these five families; each of them has said they would give you a place to live starting next Saturday for the entire summer. You need to choose one, get a job, go to the service, go to college, and get a job. It doesn't matter, but next week you are on your own. I will never let you starve, but never make the mistake of calling me and asking for money."

I was completely blindsided and had one week to figure out what I was going to do with my life. I chose Bill and Debbie Solomon. They had two children, both under the age of six. At the time, they were building a house and living in a three-bedroom trailer. Living in a trailer most of my life, I felt right at home. I chose Bill because he was the only person on the list who had gone to college, and that is what I wanted to do. Bill became a lifelong mentor, and we are still very close today, but that story is for another book.

When it came time to go to college, I decided to go to Baylor University (Bill's alma mater). Baylor is the largest private Baptist university in the country. It was more expensive than a state school and much more conservative. I was on my own and paying for every penny of my college education. You would think my father would be proud that I was attending Baylor, but he was extremely upset because he felt that Baylor was "extremely liberal and too wild."

To add another log to the fire in my junior year, my dad called me up.

Dad: "Son, you need to come home this weekend."

Me: "What are you talking about? It's the middle of the semester; I'm not coming home."

Dad: "We need you here. We're meeting with a lawyer on Saturday. We're disowning your sister and—"

Me: "Whoa, back up. What are you talking about? Why do you want to disown Wendy? What did she do?"

My sister is three years older than me. She was not living at home, and she was not asking for anything from my parents.

Dad: "We found out that she's dating and considering marrying a guy who has a terrible reputation. He drinks beer and alcohol, and you know we can't have that in the family."

Now, after being on my own for several years, I'd become quite the partier. I was never going to talk about my alcohol consumption, but I felt like I owed it to my sister to make the trip down to East Texas and try to talk them out of disowning her. Luckily, I was successful. But how safe do you think it would be for me to share my real life with my father? It wasn't. But it really didn't matter because I was

never going to have that conversation. Honestly, I didn't like my dad, and nothing good would ever come from having a conversation about how I lived my life, especially not with him.

It was now 15 years after this when I had this conversation with my mom.

Me: "Mom, you know how you raised me. I can't be a hypocrite teaching others what I am not doing."

Mom: "I know. If it helps, let your dad know I've known the entire time." (Mom knew I partied; it's the only thing she didn't tell him.)

Me: "Mom, I'm not going to throw you under the bus."

Mom: "If it keeps you in my life, let him know."

She handed the phone to Dad.

Me: "Hey, it's your son." (I rarely talked to him on the phone.)

Dad: "Hey." (Surprise in his voice.)

Me: "Dad, my roommate's going out of town in two weeks for an entire week. We've never spent any real time together since I graduated from high school. Why don't you come to Austin? Let's spend a week together getting to know each other."

Dad: "Oh, I'd love that!" (There was no hesitation. I could hear the excitement in his voice.)

Two weeks later, he pulled into the driveway at my home in Austin, and I will never forget the feeling. I'd been preparing for this moment for two and a half years. He got out of his car, and my stomach began to turn. Even though I'd been preparing for this Impossible Conversation, the fear took hold and set in. As Hunter S. Thompson might say, it was a "savage" and "sudden fear."

Dad gave me a hug, and then it got extremely weird. Neither of us has any idea how to talk to each other. To break the tension, Dad asked, "Where's your attic?" He decided to go up into the attic and look around the house for things that needed to be repaired. After about ten minutes, when I was sitting in the living room, Dad came down from the attic, walked toward me, and took a left into the kitchen. It hit me that I'd forgotten to get some things out of the fridge before he arrived. I heard the refrigerator door open, followed by a scream.

Dad: "Whose beer is this in here? You shouldn't have a roommate that drinks!"

When he started yelling, my entire body locked up with the fear that released all my adrenal reserves, and at that moment, I became five years old again. I began shaking, and I nearly blamed it on my roommate, but he spoke before I could get the first word out of my mouth.

Dad: "I raised you better than that! You know you don't let alcohol get past your front door. I'll stick around an extra day, and when he gets back, we'll kick him out together!"

Me: "Calm down, Dad!"

Dad: "I'm not going to calm down!"

Me: "Dad, that's my beer. I've been drinking since I was a sophomore at Baylor. Sit down. I have some things to tell you!"

My father looked like a deer caught in the headlights; he couldn't believe what he was hearing. At this point, I proceeded to tell him everything I had ever done, and I mean EVERYTHING. They were things you wouldn't tell the most liberal parent in the world, let alone one of the most conservative. After about 15 minutes of pure confession, Dad yelled, "STOP!" But he wasn't just crying; he was bawling.

Dad: "Son, I know what you're doing... I will always love you. But I do not like you! I do not like the man you've become! You're a hypocrite and a liar, and I don't care if I ever see your face again!"

When he said that, something inside of me snapped, and all my training and preparation went out the window. In that moment, a repressed memory of something I had overheard my sister and Mom talking about years ago came flashing back into my memory. It was something that my dad had done his entire life, something that he preached against, and I nearly threw it in his face. But something stopped me. I started asking myself questions.

What do I really want? For myself? For my father? For our relationship? For our family? At first, all I wanted to do was to hurt him because what he had just said hurt so much. I repeated the question in my mind: *What do I really want?* I realized I wanted a real relationship with my dad. I wanted him to see me for who I was, not for the things I had done, and I wanted our entire family to heal.

Another question came to me: *What's my role? How am I responsible for what is happening at this moment?* It immediately occurred to me that Dad was right; I was a hypocrite... to him. Here I was, practicing these skills, trying not to be a hypocrite to the people I was teaching, but to my dad, I was a hypocrite. Many times, we'd been in someone's house, and when we left, I'd point out to my father the bottle of wine on the counter or the beer in the trash can. I fed him my self-righteous judgment, diverting him from the fact that I did the same thing.

Another question came to me: *Why would a reasonable, rational, decent person act like my dad's acting like right now?* Based on what I had just told him, from his values and belief system, he felt like a failure as my father and as my minister.

Another question showed up on cue: *What do I do right now to move toward what I really want?* As I asked this last question, my brain's higher reason functions flipped on, moving me from my reactive brain to my reflective brain.

Me: "Dad, you're right. I am a hypocrite... to you. Mom knows what I do, and Wendy (my sister) knows what I do. All my friends know I love to party. I've kept it from you because I was afraid you would want to disown me. I can see I was right, but that's not what I want! You've always been a man of your word. You said you'd stay a week. You just got here, and I can see you're ready to walk out the door. Will you give me just three more days? But if you stay these three days, we have to talk about everything we've kept from each other, so if we never see each other again in this lifetime, at least we will know who we were to each other."

My dad stands up and puts his hands on his hips, tears still streaming down his face.

Dad: "It won't make a bit of difference. I'll give you three days. Then I never want to see your face again. I can't look at you right now. You make me sick!" He turned around and walked out, slamming the door shut.

Now, how's that for cleaning up a relationship? It certainly didn't go the way I wanted.

He came back about two hours later and slammed the door.

Dad: "Okay, let's do this talking thing."

So that was my audience. We sat down, and he started to open up and talk... I mean, really talk. I couldn't believe what had happened. I started to see why he was the way he was and how his experience in Vietnam had changed his life, as well as his abusive parents. It was the first time I truly understood post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

He started to see what it was like for me—how hard he'd been on me growing up. We began talking about all the things typically left unsaid between a father and a son. It was the very first time we'd ever connected. The connection didn't stop there. It kept going, getting deeper and deeper—day two, day three. I was so amazed by what was happening that I began asking why I didn't start with this conversation years ago rather than waiting two and a half years. I went to bed that third night, knowing that my dad would stay the entire week, and felt like I was on the way to having the relationship with my father that I always wanted.

On day four, I came out of my bedroom to find my dad standing at the front door, luggage in hand, his face and his entire presence reverted back to that first day. My heart sank!

Dad: "I'm ready to go. I told you I would give you three days."

Me: "Okay." (I was in shock; I didn't know how to respond.)

I walked him out the door. He threw his luggage in the trunk, closed it, turned, looked me dead in the eyes, and said nothing. He got in his car, drove away, and died three years later.

Now, why did I begin this book with that story? Here is the reality of it, folks... I am not on the line for your impossible conversations. I never will be, but I was on the line for mine. At that moment, I knew I did the best that I could do. I knew I did the right thing, but that was no solace for the pain I felt. No matter how right I may have been or how justified my motives and my actions, it did not take away the pain that I felt in that moment. I also learned an even greater lesson that day. I learned that you have no idea what can happen when you begin to respectfully speak your truth because my dad's car stopped about halfway down the street, sat there for a moment, then backed up and pulled back into my driveway. My father jumped out of the car, crying, ran to me, and gave me a bear hug.

Dad: "Son, I love you, AND I like you! I like the man you've become! Honestly, I always wanted you to be a preacher, but you like to party way too much for that. I will always be on you about the alcohol because you know it ruined my family."

Me: "Dad, I never knew anything about that until you told me this week."

Dad: "Can we start this relationship you've been talking about?"

Two days ago, it was a conversation; now, it's a relationship!

Me: "Of course, what do you want?"

Dad: "Can you do me a favor and come see ME in two weeks?"

I knew exactly what he meant because when I visited my parents, I only spent time with my mom and never spent time with him.

I said, "Yeah, I'll be there in two weeks."

Two weeks later, I walked into my parent's front door.

Dad: "You're not still drinking beer, are ya?"

You know how some people can push your buttons? What if there were no longer any buttons to push, and you could see what the person was really saying? I walked over to my dad, looked him in the eye, hugged him, and he almost pulled away because it was so real.

Me: "Dad, thank you for caring! I get how painful your childhood was because of your dad's alcoholism. If alcohol ever becomes a problem for me, would you be a rock and just help me out?"

Dad: "Yeah!"

He never brought it up again!

About six months later, as we both began to build our relationship together and I became closer to my dad, I asked him if I could use "our story" in my classes.

Dad: "What story?"

I told him the story, just as I shared it here with you.

Dad: "Son, I'm not that way anymore!"

As you read this book, please remember this one ultimate truth: You have no ability to change another person, but if you change yourself, others may change how they deal with you.

Over the next three years, my dad and I became closer and closer. And before he passed away, I can truly say he was one of my best friends—the most wonderful outcome I never even wished for because, in my mind, it seemed impossible.

Six weeks before my father passed away, he asked me to speak at his funeral. It was one of the most difficult things I have done, but also one of the most cleansing. The completion and joy I had experienced by being able to clean up, improve, and build a new bridge, bringing peace to our relationship, was one of the reasons I wrote this book and do the work I do.

If you possess the boldness and courage it takes to clean up the relationships in your life, be prepared, because if you are truly listening to others, it may change you as well. That is what happened to my father. He changed, and I changed. It was truly like a dance.

Before you read further, please understand I've been divorced... twice.

Several years ago, after teaching a Crucial Conversations™ class in Kansas City, an elderly gentleman approached me and said, "This was the best class I have ever taken! Will you do me a favor? Please don't tell people you were divorced twice at the beginning of class!"

Me: "Why not?"

Him: "Because when I heard you say you had two failed marriages, I stopped listening! You see, I've been married for more than 40 years, and honestly, I immediately judged you! I thought, *This guy has nothing to teach me!* I couldn't have been more wrong. I just don't want anyone else to miss any of the material I missed because many people will judge you for that, just like I did."

Me: "I really can't do that, but I have a request. Can I use this conversation going forward? You see, I have to bring my real, authentic self to the class. That means sharing many of the lessons, wounds, and scars that help me relate to others. Also, I would contest that I didn't have two failed marriages, but two successful marriages that ended. They provided me life lessons that help me help others, and I honor both of them."

I share his story with my classes just as I am sharing it with you. If you look at what my life has become, I suggest that I am blessed beyond what I could have imagined! Because I have put in the

work, applied what I learned, and openly shared my story, my life looks nothing like it did those many years ago.”

“The only thing more expensive than education is ignorance.”

~ Benjamin Franklin

If you want to put the book down because there is nothing I can teach you and you think it’s “weird” to go clean up your relationships, I wish you the best. If, however, you decide to keep reading and don’t mind being considered “weird,” make no mistake, doing this type of work is difficult and, at times, can be very painful! It is also one of the most rewarding and healthy things you can do for yourself. There will be times you may think it’s not worth it. Don’t listen to that voice. It’s a lie. Taking responsibility for your life and your relationships will be honored. In the end, it may not look like what you thought it would, but most likely, it will be better than you could have ever imagined!

Let’s get started!