

A Many-Splendored Thing

Winner, World Championship of Public Speaking, 1989. This is a Happy Speech - delightful but, alas, rare. You walk away from such speeches feeling good about the speaker, yourself, and the world, due to the speaker's positivity and to the commonality of the message. You will enjoy this!

A speech by Don Johnson (August 19, 1989)

Mister Toastmaster, fellow Toastmasters, Ladies and Gentlemen,
A family get-together can stir up a mixture of emotions.
Last Fourth of July for example
We had our traditional family gathering in the backyard.
What started out twenty years ago
To be a casual patio barbecue for the kids
Now rivals Easter weekend at Palm Springs.
All eight of our kids showed up
Along with their kids
And their husbands
And their wives
And their boyfriends
And their girlfriends
And their live-ins.
We call them our in-laws and outlaws.

As I was standing there
At my usual relegated place of that tradition -
In front of the charcoal grill -
My wife, Marie, came through the patio door

Carrying another load of potato salad and strawberry jello.
No sooner had she set it on the table
When she watched it disappear in one massive slurp.

And after patting the heads and tousling the hair,
And squeezing the bodies of all the little sibs within her reach,
She meandered over to the grill to see how I was doing.
As she did, the backyard din caught her attention.
With a broad dramatic sweep of her arm, she indicated the yard full of bodies -
"See what you did," she said.

"Now" - she said -
"You could have had a boat and ski trips and even a Ferrari.
Why, in the smiles of those three alone over there,"
And she pointed out Theresa, Bernie, and Celeste
"Are three round trips to Hawaii,
Two to Europe,
And six to Bakersfield."
I think she threw the last one in there just for the rhythm of it.
But I had never heard anyone describe our kid's orthodontic work
With such a poignant metaphor.

What she said though, started me thinking.
"Gee," I thought,
"I hope I've given them more than pretty smiles.
I hope I've put more into their heads than braces."
And I asked myself -
As I often ask myself and as I know you who are parents ask yourselves -
"Have I given them good values?
Do they appreciate what they should?
Do they treasure the things that should be treasured?"

Suppose we were allowed to pass onto our kids
Just one thing - one item - one jewel of wisdom
What would that be? - Work hard? Achieve? Be a success?
Those thoughts danced through my mind that warm July day
Along with the images
Of braces and metallic smiles,

Countless trips to the dentist,
And Ferraris that will never call my garage home.

And at that moment, Celeste - our number three - came prancing by.
She pecked me on the cheek, said, "I love you dad" and flitted off.
Well, the smoke from the grill got into my eyes and made them tear.
But her simple peck had answered my questions.
Squinting through the haze -
Drifting my way from the charcoal grill -
At that mass of bodies - yelling, laughing, talking, playing.
I could see it - I could feel it in the air -
Just as I could feel it every time that sea of humanity got together.
It was love.
It was a contentment in being together.
They truly cared for one another.

I can be sure that when growing up under one roof
I was certain they would end up slitting each other's throats.
But somewhere along the way this joy blossomed and there it was.
And as far as my teaching it to them
I think they taught more to me.
For when I was growing up
I could never tell my parents I loved them.
The words just wouldn't come out.
And they never said it to me.
Oh, there was love - but no one ever said it.
To say it in words
Would show weakness and vulnerability.
And by golly, we were always strong and invulnerable.

But then I married an Italian.
What a beautiful cultural background
That allows you to say what should be said.
And it lets you have more fun.
Oh, you can bet that I tell my kids I love them now
And I say it to them often -
And they shower it back on me -
And it feels good.

They've taught me this one thing.
That if we have that single possession -
That ability to love - and be loved - and say it -
Then all else falls into place -
Achievement, happiness, success.
Whether it's a close and intimate love -
Such as that between husbands and wives
Or parents and children
Or the fellowship in a group like this.
It's the most precious possession of all.

Perhaps, that's why Toastmasters is so successful
Because you not only learn and grow
But you give part of yourselves to each other -
Your knowledge, your experience, your encouragement.
And I don't have to tell you that you get so much more in return.

So if I could leave my kids with just one piece of advice,
I would choose to return to them
That which they and their mother gave to me.
Love one another.
Show it. Share it. Say it.
Make that a part of building a better you.
For that feeling we share -
Call it camaraderie, call it conviviality, call it whatever you want,
Will last longer than boats or ski trips or Ferraris.
We cherish it more than we will trips to Hawaii or Europe or Bakersfield.

A man named Franklin Jones said it like this.
He said, "Love doesn't make the world go round."
He said, "Love is what makes the ride worthwhile."

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Brian Woolf's comments: Wasn't it so easy to picture, and feel part of, this Californian extended family coming together for their 20th annual July 4 gathering in Don's backyard. The opening scene paints the picture and sets the mood: "What started as a casual patio barbecue for the kids now rivals Easter weekend at Palm Springs." We

immediately know we're in for a fun time and then get confirmation from the attendee list (8 kids with their "attachments" and their kids) that we know, from our own experience, will add color, confusion, and possible conflict, along with love and laughter. And so it goes: the interaction of Don and his wife Marie, and ruminations of what they have forgone for the priceless love of their children, and myriad vivid images, ending with the summation thought for us, the audience: "Love is what makes the ride worthwhile." We agree. Don is right: Love and family is what it's all about. This is, indeed, a happy speech.

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And there's more where this came from...

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