

The Story Behind The Story

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My parent's favorite place to eat was a restaurant called LaCucina located in our hometown. If they didn't eat at the restaurant, my dad always made it a point to order something for dinner almost each week for the last two years of his life. On his way home from work, he would stop by, place an order, and then sit at the bar and wait for the food to be prepared. I didn't know about this weekly ritual until after my father passed away. The hostess of the restaurant, Eileen, who was friends with my parents, shared this with me one evening.

Although I had met Eileen only a few times prior to my dad's illness, it was while he was sick that I got to know this wonderful lady. Each week, she would call me at the hospital to see how my father was doing. The tone of her voice clearly showed me her concern over my father's quickly deteriorating condition, as well as my mother's overall well-being. Each time we spoke, she offered to prepare foods from the restaurant for us and extended whatever she could to help us through that most difficult time.

After my father passed away, she invited me to come by the restaurant one evening because she wanted to make a meal for my family. We were so touched by her generous offer. I told her that I wanted to come by, just like my father did and hear about his weekly routine. She said she would share some things with me when we got together.

It wasn't until about 3-4 months later that I was able to muster the emotional energy to take up Eileen's offer and stop by the restaurant. As strange as it sounds, there were just too many wonderful memories connected to the restaurant which prevented me from taking that emotional leap. Even now, I can still see my parents sitting at a table, enjoying one another's companionship.

Finally, I scheduled an evening with Eileen to come by and spend some time with her. I looked forward to our meeting and finding out what made her so special. I also wanted to ask her about my father and what she remembered of him. I love learning new things about him and how he interacted with people.

When I sat down at the bar, Eileen handed me a menu and pointed out what my father used to order. I shared with her that I wanted to select the same things he ordered for my mother. She explained why he liked certain items, what his favorite dishes were, and what my mother liked. So I chose several dishes, just like my dad used to do. She then went on to tell me that he would order a particular glass of wine and enjoyed some freshly baked Italian bread. He would then dip the warm bread in virgin olive oil and savor each morsel. So I did the same.

I have to say that my time with Eileen was very special. She shared many amusing stories about my dad, of how he always brought a certain joy with him whenever he entered the restaurant, even after a long trip home from the city. Interestingly, that's how I pictured Eileen – someone who always had a genuine smile. That's perhaps why she was such a superb hostess.

With the few times we came in to the restaurant prior to my dad's illness, I took note of how Eileen greeted her guests. With almost every person, she addressed them with both a smile and a hug. She had an innate gift of welcoming people, of inviting them to partake in something far greater than just a meal. It was an experience they would never forget.

On this particular evening, I felt impressed to share this observation with her even though I didn't really know her as well as she knew my parents. Nonetheless, I felt she needed to hear that her gift of hospitality was most evident and quite rare. And even though greeting and seating people was part of her job description, she acted in a manner which it appeared like it was a natural extension of her, and not something extra

or added on to her life. On a far deeper level, Eileen not only invited people in for a meal but, to some degree, into her life. That's what made her real, that's what made her so approachable.

The more she shared, the more I caught the heart of this woman. It was evident Eileen had an enormous love for people, but it also became clear within our talk that she had faced many personal trials in her life, especially with her health. As she shared some of these challenges, she quickly connected some of these events to my father and how he demonstrated something she hadn't seen before in another human being.

As a hostess to a very fine restaurant, Eileen has served some very exclusive guests. Some are famous and have quite a bit of influence in the world we live in, but, unfortunately, their world revolves around them, and only them. Nothing else matters and, sadly, this includes people.

In many ways, Eileen's experience is all too familiar of the people you and I meet each day. People are often too busy to get "involved" in the lives of others. It's very sad to say that our lives are so filled with agendas, schedules, and well-intentioned commitments that we fail to remember what's truly of great importance. There are some who genuinely care for people, but it's their lifestyle which prevents them from having such meaningful relationships.

Yet, there was something about my father which stood out to Eileen. She specifically shared that each week, after he placed his order, he would ask her how her week went. In my opinion, this is a fairly common question. However, there was something distinctive about my father's questions which impressed her the most. With most of her guests, they simply walk in and talk mostly about themselves or their careers. And sadly, they never inquire about Eileen and her life.

But according to Eileen, "your dad was just the opposite." His focus was on her, her health, and her family. During a very tenuous period of medical testing, my father

was there each week actively listening to her share her concerns and worries about her future. In fact, what confirmed to Eileen that my father really cared about her were the questions he asked regarding conversations they had the week prior. More specifically, it wasn't only the fact that he asked questions from previous meetings, but at how specific and detailed his questions were which impressed her the most. Although Eileen knew how much my father loved my mother and the three of us, most of the time, the discussion was about her and how she was doing. She was the focus, not him. Eileen was stunned that someone really listened to her, that someone took enough interest and time to hear the struggles she was facing especially during a very shaky time in her life.

As Eileen was sharing this wonderful observation about my father, I was once again learning something new. By his careful attention to Eileen's words, he spoke something to her that he was, probably, unaware of. His questions alone had a powerful impact on her life. He made her feel important, that she was valued and worthy of asking questions about her and her family. Each passing day, I realize more and more that my father had a way of genuinely reaching-out by *reaching-into* the lives of everyday individuals.

The more I thought about my father's impact on Eileen, the more I began to consider our lives as humans and how we relate to one another. Each day, you and I meet people. With some, we pass by and say "hello" or "what's up?" And if we're fortunate, we find a few moments in our busy day to hear what's going on in another person's life. Often, what we hear is what I call the "surface story." Typically it's superficial and primarily focused on our day-to-day schedules. What we share is harmless? It won't make us vulnerable or place us in a position that might hurt us or perhaps place us in a bad light amongst our small circles of influence. Sometimes our responses are like a script we've come to recite, and we find ourselves saying the same thing over and over.

At the same time, I believe each of us have a much richer story which lies far beneath the surface. It's at the core of our heart. It's well-guarded and protected from any unwanted visitors. Your true story is unique because it's about you...the real you. It's a classic in the making and there's none like it, nor will there ever be a story like yours in all of human history. Sure, some have traversed down similar paths, but none have walked in the same exact shoes you have. Your story envelopes all of you: your joys and passions, your fears and worries, your dreams and desires, your hurts and pains. They are at the very core of your life, the very essence of your being. Unfortunately, they often go unheard.

Because of my brief time with Eileen and the mark my father left upon her, I now seek to listen and find the story behind the story. Each person has something they want to share, but often, due to a sundry of reasons, they're unable to tell their real story. I've come to believe that much of our day-to-day talks are just mindless chatter. Sometimes even our petty discussions are used to keep people at bay, preventing them from opening up with us and, for that matter, them getting to know us. Although I'm just as guilty as the next person, I must learn to listen for those small pieces of information which lead me to the authentic individual behind the skin.

I now understand why my meeting with Eileen has continued to resurface to my conscious awareness over the past year and a half. I have so much to thank her for especially her willingness to share a very personal part of her story with me. Little did she know that she was teaching me a lesson I would never forget. In a very small way, like a great book, I lifted up Eileen's story and picked up where my father left off.

Principle: As one who believes in intelligent design, I just wonder if by chance there was a specific reason why God chose to create human beings with two ears and yet only one mouth. Think about it!