

Week 24: The Other Most Important Thing to Look for in a Best Friend

In Illinois, spring means a lot of things—soft green grass, pollen everywhere, thunderstorms, soccer games, and the countdown to summer. It also means a big empty box sitting in the foyer of my daughter’s preschool, with a sign on it advertising the countdown until the chicks hatch. We arrive at the school on the day the sign reads zero and peer over the edge of the box.

Nothing yet.

I ask her where the eggs are. Caitlin looks at me somberly and says, “The chicks didn’t have a momma, so we needed to keep them warm in an escalator.” I think about telling her it’s called an *incubator*, but I know what she means and not every moment needs to be a teaching moment. I smile. She smiles and grabs my hand and we walk into her class together. How do we know when we’ve found a place of belonging?

The people we belong to know what we *mean*.

I’ve seen it countless times over the years. In the middle of a marital or family therapy session, someone will say something gutsy and loving and I know exactly what he or she means, but it’s stated clumsily and with an ounce (or more) of protectiveness and defensiveness. As an objective observer, I can see the tenderness through the messiness. I hold my breath, hoping I’m not the only one who knows what was meant. And then I cringe a little inside when the meaning of the words is missed altogether, when the heart of a loved one isn’t known or trusted or believed in. I cringe because showing that good heart took courage and now it will probably go more deeply into hiding.

But then there are the *other* moments.

Moments in which the heart stumbling through the words is seen and its goodness is trusted and its beauty is believed in. There are other moments in which a partner or a family member sees the incubator through the escalator.

A place of belonging is not the place where someone can anticipate what we might say. The people who love us best can’t read our minds—they don’t know what we’re going to say next—but they can read our *hearts*. A place of belonging happens when someone receives the words we’ve already said or the things we’ve already done and, sometimes, understands their meaning even better than we do. When we say or do something clumsy, they trust the goodness of who we are. In other words, they are grace to us.

Recently, my wife and I were having lunch in a fast food restaurant. We were talking about the many things happening in our life when I realized we had forgotten napkins. Mid-thought, I got up, retrieved a napkin for myself, and sat back down.

My wife looked at me and said, in equal parts amusement and annoyance, “Were you planning to get me a napkin, too?” I smiled sheepishly and retrieved one. When I sat back down, she looked at me and said, “I know in your heart you *want* to get me a napkin. You *want* to think of me and show me love. But sometimes your anxious brain doesn’t cooperate.” In a fast food restaurant, my wife knew what I *meant*.

In other words, in a fast food restaurant, I *belonged*.

Over the years, I have been messy and angry and distracted and absent and sad and confrontational and withdrawn and overjoyed and clueless and scared and a little too brave and I’ve made mistakes and I’ve hurt feelings and I’ve cared well for the people I love and I’ve cared poorly for them, too. But when my love has been an escalator, more often than not, my wife has known I meant it to be an incubator.

It takes time and courage and not a little bit of luck to find belonging like that. Even more, it takes time to trust and believe the way they see you is for real. To trust it isn’t going away. To trust they will be there for you, no matter how many napkins you fail to bring to the table.