

The Golf Outing

2014 Essay

1. The real secret to becoming a close-knit relationship is shared experiences that turn into shared trials.
2. Close relationships form after dealing with difficulties in a positive manner. An important part of how a shared experience can bond family members together is the opportunity to deal with difficulties in a positive manner.

~ Gary Smalley

My wife's brother, David, is one of my "golf buddies". He lives about 3 hours from us. To play golf, sometimes he comes down to our house; sometimes we go up to his house; sometimes we meet half way. He is always ready for a game of golf. We have enjoyed playing a lot of the courses in southeast Michigan, northwest Ohio, and around Fort Wayne, Indiana.

After hours and hours of playing golf with David, I can't explain why he is the way he is, but, I can describe his behaviour. I say that because I am going to use his communications behaviour to describe how men share their feelings on the golf course.

David can sometimes be a very taciturn communicator. You can ask him an opened ended question, trying to start a conversation, and get a 3-word answer. Q: "Tell me what's going on with your cancer." A: "It's alright." You are assured of a 1-word answer with any closed ended question that you mistakenly think might start him talking. Q: "You doing alright?" A: "Yep." He does have moments when he loosens up and talks freely; it just seems to not be as natural to him. One sure way for me to get a longer answer from him is to ask something like: "what is your favourite color?" I'm pretty sure his answer would contain at least seven words: "what the *##* are you talking about?" After spending days and days with him on the golf course, I can honestly say we have never shared serious feelings openly with each other. A few years ago he divorced his wife of 40 years. He has never really discussed any of the issues or pain they must have suffered as a result of the separation.

My wife is obsessed with this lack of "sharing feelings" between David and I. She asks me "what do you talk about all that time you are together on the golf course?" I thought about it, and answered "we talk about things and actions". We say things like "good shot", "great drive", "I'm thinking about retiring in a couple of years". We don't ask about feelings, or why things have happened, or even what is our favourite color. I'm not interesting in asking, and David is not interested in answering. She asks, "How can you be friends without sharing feelings?" My bemused answer is, "I guess it's a man thing." She once confronted David and I with this issue, and summarized her disgust by saying, "I bet you have never talked about your favourite colors!" Now, whenever we play, we ask each other several times a round; "what is your favourite color?" I still don't know David's.

My sister's husband, Merf, is also a golfing buddy of mine. He lives 1200 miles away and we only get to golf with each other a couple of times a year. Usually, we are with others and do not get a chance to discuss things very privately. If we do get a chance to talk, I am much more likely to discuss more private feelings with Merf than with David. We will touch on family issues; issues with our wives; issues with kids; issues with jobs. I'm not saying we are "sharing feelings" the way my wife thinks I should, but, it I am clearly more "feely" with Merf than with David. This suggests I am somewhat a chameleon: capable of changing my willingness to share "feelyness" based on whom I am with. As I contemplate both versions of communication, I have to admit I am more comfortable with my "feelyness" approach with David than Merf. It is less risky.

David has been fighting non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma for a decade. Early this year, he had a reoccurrence that required more chemo. He also went through two (yes, two, with one being very dangerous) different skin cancers this year. He has done fantastic physically and we have generally been able to play golf this year. At the beginning of the year, he started talking about having a bone marrow transplant towards the end of the year. I told him, "I want to take you on a golf outing this year; one where we stay overnight in hotels and play some nice courses." What started out as an effort to bring family together became a basic disaster.

In early summer, I searched the web looking for a golf package in southern Michigan or western Ohio. I seriously considered going to the resort at French Lick, Indiana under the theory that if the golf was bad, we could go see the boyhood home of Larry Bird. One package that interested me was associated with the Longaberger golf course that is 60 miles east of Columbus, Ohio. Merf and I had played that course in the rain, and I thought it would be nice to play it dry. I discussed dates with potential participants, and decided on the first week in October. Fall weather in Ohio is gorgeous, and with the trees just beginning to change colors, the first weekend of October looked like a good date. Merf told me, "it would be nice to play this course when it is dry."

David, Merf, and my number 2 son Ben, were all "a go" so I went ahead and bought golf packages for all of us. Merf would fly into Dayton on Thursday evening, with Ben and David driving to my house in Lima, Ohio, on Thursday afternoon. We planned a Thursday dinner of smoked salmon and asparagus. Friday we would play a "warm up" round in the Lima area before driving down to Longaberger on Saturday morning. Vacation days were planned, airline tickets bought, and the comedy began.

It started Wednesday evening when I got and forwarded an e-mail from United Airlines that basically said: *"You're screwed if you think you can fly through Chicago on Thr. We'll wait until the last minute to delay your flight to the point you can't make connections. Don't worry; your connection out of O'Hare will be cancelled if you are stupid enough to fly there. Because there will be thunderstorms someplace in the US, we'll be able to blame this on weather which means we owe you nada."*

The first, solid, sign of disaster surfaced early Thursday morning, the day Merf was supposed to fly out of Colorado Springs to Dayton. I gave up counting how many flights were changed to get Merf to Ohio a day later than originally planned. The following e-mail texts set the stage for the upcoming weekend:

Wednesday 4pm from Fred "Fri's Weather Downgraded":

In Columbus, Friday now calls for a 90% chance of rain w high of 73F, Saturday 40% with a high of 53F (chilly), Sunday 20% w high of 58F (still chilly). About the same in Lima, Ft Wayne, Cincy, and Lansing, so we can't drive out of the rain on Friday. Jeanne allowed me to take a \$100 bill to go buy booze for this weekend. Ben (with just a little bit of help from his father) drank my quart bottle of JD last weekend.

Wednesday 8pm from United: "Flight delays and cancellations in Chicago"

Due to weather and ongoing air traffic control issues, flights to, from and through Chicago O'Hare on Thursday may be delayed or cancelled. We will work to accommodate our impacted customers as quickly as we can if a disruption occurs. We also expect long wait times to speak with United representatives at the airport and by phone.

Thursday, 6am from Fred "Chicago O'Hare is Constipated"

They are really constipated at Chicago because of the fire that shut down their traffic control computers. I forwarded an e-mail United sent me last night (to Coy and Merf) that basically predicted that they would delay or cancel your flights in-out of ORD. I have never seen an e-mail like

that so I assume they know what they are talking about. (I then listed alternative airports Merf could fly in to if he his original flight thru Chicago got cancelled).

Thursday, 8am, from Merf-Coy “Merf’s Flight Status”

Flight out of Colorado Springs is delayed 37 minutes right now, which puts me in to ORD too late to make the flight to Dayton. However, I got on a later flight to Dayton goes out at 5:59pm and arrives Dayton 8:08pm. Helps to be a Premier on United. That gives me plenty of time to make the connection even if COS to ORD is further delayed, but it will mean a late pick-up in Dayton.

My response: It just begins. We just have to be patient and see “where you land”. You get here, we’ll pick you up.

Merf’s response to my response: You gotta have faith. Right now, we are talking minor inconvenience

Thursday, 11am, from Merf-Coy “Merf’s Flight Status”

10:53 flight to ORD cancelled. Now booked on 2:25pm flight to Houston arriving Columbus at 10:30pm.

My response: OMG..... you have changed today’s travel plans and your arriving CMH at 10:30pm. No smoked salmon and asparagus for you tonight! We’ll be there to pick you up. Give us a text as you get on the plane at Bush. I’ve flown out of Houston to CMH 4-5 times this year at the same time on United. Only thing that ever got me was the thunderstorms that always build up in the evening at Bush. Safe travels. Looks like this is the final version since you are now avoiding ORD both ways. I assume Coy is your travel agent? Glad I haven’t been fighting this.

Thursday, 4pm, from Merf-Coy “Merf’s Flight Status”

2:25 flight cancelled out of Co Spr. Plane couldn’t get out of ORD. Arriving Houston late and will spend the night there. Will get into Columbus at noon, Friday.

Jessica (Ben’s wife) had come up to Lima Wednesday evening with Ben, and she drove down to Columbus Thursday morning with Ben, Fred, and David, to pick up Merf. Friday for lunch, the boys and Jessica went to a fun restaurant called “BJ’s Brewhouse”. (That meal was a highlight of the weekend.) At lunch, we studied radar maps on our smart phones and decided we would try to play a course NW of Columbus at 2:15pm.

There is a “group think” process that occurs when four guys that want to play golf look at weather radar on their smart phones. We all looked at the same line of thunderstorms on our little screens, and convinced ourselves that they were moving in a way that would clear the golf course. This was “confirmed” when we arrived at the golf course and observed a thin line of sunlight breaking through the dark clouds. “Alright, looks like we can play golf! Yeah, the wind is blowing like a banshee and its only 42F, but we can play if it just doesn’t rain.” Fred, Dave, and Merf all got “senior rates” and thought we had a great deal.

We started off pretty good. Thru the first five holes I was just a couple above par, and nobody in our group was playing “stupid”. Problem was, we could see a squall line moving our way. We all judiciously studied the storm front and said things like; “It looks like it could miss us”; “it might just graze us”; “it’s moving so fast we can wait it out”; (etc, etc, etc). By the 6th hole, it was raining cats and dogs on us. In the middle of the 7th, I gave up and David agreed. We quit and went back to the clubhouse. Ben drove the golf cart for Merf as he finished 7, 8 and 9. We sat shivering in the clubhouse for 30 minutes, waiting for the rain to pass on. Luckily, the bar had plenty of bourbon, and I had brought two full flasks just in case. We gave up and drove to Lima where Jessica and Jeanne served us grilled NY Strips. (All the bourbon was drank up before we got home.) Twice in one day we had a great meal. Remember this: food was about the only thing that went well for this outing.

Saturday was coming the next day. Weather forecast gave us a 50% chance of rain, low 40s. We were stuck; committed to play because I had already bought the golf packages.

We left Lima early on Saturday morning, October 4th, with the car thermometer showing 34F. About 20 miles east of Columbus, we decided to stop and get coffee. As we pulled into the parking lot, I said "Oh my goodness, that is snow on those cars." The other guys took a look at it and said, "No, that's just small hail that has accumulated." The parked cars and edges of the concrete had accumulated a layer of small, round, ice balls. As we left the parking lot back to the highway, the car thermometer read 36F. A couple miles down the road we ran thru a solid snow squall. It limited visibility to a quarter mile. Others in the car finally admitted it was snowing. Then, we saw a couple of cars that had skidded off the highway. We slowed down to 30-40 mph as the roadway got snow covered. Longaberger was just 15 miles away from this lovely, winter, wonderland.

I called up the golf course and said, "We're 15 miles away in a snow storm. I want the latest tee-time I can get". The guy at the pro-shop said, "It's not bad here." (Obviously, his weather prognosis was as bad as ours). I insisted on changing the tee-time to as late as possible. My theory: maybe the snow would leave the area before mid-afternoon.

The Longaberger is on top of a ridge with a beautiful view of a valley to the west. As we sat for a couple of hours in the club house, waiting for our delayed tee time, we saw a beautiful sight: the clouds parted and bright sunlight lit up the valley. We high-fived each other and said "You the man, Fred, for getting us this bright sunshine." That was the last we saw of the sun for the rest of the week end. It drizzled a good portion of the round. The golf was miserable and cold: swing-splash, swing-splash, swing-splash (here's a variation), swing-splatter, swing-splatter.

An interesting thing happened to the man-communication process during this round. All of a sudden, all of us were expressing our feelings. Most of the feelings expressed cannot be printed, but they were openly expressed, from the heart, with strong emotion. To quote Merf "This sure is fun".

We spent Saturday night in lovely Zanesville, OH. Ate a huge dinner at a Red Lobster and that chain meal was the best thing about the actual outage. Sunday golf at EagleStick was cold, cloudy, no sun, but I don't remember much rain. To quote Merf "This course is kind of a goat track".

Merf told us on the drive to Dayton airport on Sunday that his wife thinks he has just one expression: angry. He admitted to practicing that expression during this golf outing.

All of us played horrible golf. All of us got cold and wet. None of us drank a lot, although David got a little tipsy on Friday evening and somehow, a fifth of Bullit and Jack Daniels disappeared.

All of us agreed to try this type of golf outing again; preferably in mid-July.

By the way, the following three weekends in October were full of bright sunshine and nice temperatures.

Fred's Modifications to Smalley's Observations (in italics):

1. The real secret to ~~becoming a close-knit relationship~~ *sharing manly feelings* is shared experiences that turn into shared trials. *The miserable time certainly improved our ability to share our man-feelings.*
2. Close relationships *do not always* form after dealing with difficulties in a positive manner. An important part of how a shared experience can bond family members together is the

opportunity to deal with difficulties in a positive manner. *Not one of us look back at this "family gathering" as nothing but a miserable time.*