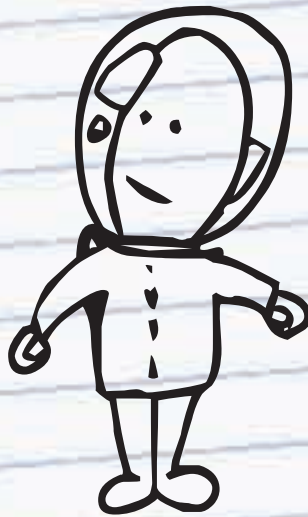


HEARTSPEAK

Everything I know I learned in the 7th grade

by Michael Mancha

You're never too young to learn a lesson in life.



Nothing good ever comes from anything prefaced with the phrase “Don’t be mad, but . . .”

Don’t be mad, but I drank all the milk.

Don’t be mad, but I lost your CD.

Don’t be mad, but you’ve been replaced.

Don’t be mad, but it’s over.

That phrase is a way of trying to soften the blow before delivering news that almost always hurts and, after the blow, is followed by a variety of apologies.

The element of surprise makes the news heartbreaking. You haven’t prepared yourself for this. When someone tells you something beginning with that little phrase, your life — even if for a moment — is completely altered.

My first “Don’t be mad” moment — the first one to leave a chip on my emotional wall — came in the seventh grade.

For the most part, nearly all the things young boys encounter at thirteen are met with great immaturity. We are awkward and confused and rarely think things out.

For example, in the seventh grade I fell completely and absolutely in love (or so I thought) with a girl named Jacee Means. She was a cheerleader, blonde and popular, and I was convinced I was in love. If you’re wondering what convinced me of this, it was a dream — the kind that plays out like a chick flick and ends with me standing outside her window holding a stereo. Clearly I wasn’t actually in love — just a victim of immaturity.

During my first year of junior high, I hung out with a group of people, all seventh graders and all band students — an equal mix of girls, guys, brass, and woodwind. Until that moment in my life, the attraction of the opposite sex had never been anything particularly important to me. And at that age I wasn’t particularly appealing to them.

But this time, by some twist of fate, I managed to catch the attention of one of them. Her name was Amy. She played the flute and had crazy curly hair and braces. She was my first girlfriend.

I would like you to think that I won over her heart, like a scene from **The Notebook**, but it didn’t happen that way. Actually I didn’t even try. It played out more like things typically did when I was in junior high. Amy went to her friend, who then came to me, who then told me that Amy liked me and then asked me if I liked her, and then she returned to Amy with the answer. Complicated, right?

Truthfully I had no idea what I was doing. I’d never had a girlfriend before. Sure I had written all these little movie-like moments in my head — scenes of romance and saying all the right scripted lines in perfectly crafted settings. But in real life I was the nerdy kid who barely said anything to anyone.

I tried all the typical boyfriend stuff. I sent her a teddy bear and candy for Valentine’s Day. We went on cute little

dates to the mall, and we held hands, kind of. But after a few months of blind boyfriendly-ness, the inevitable met me in the hallway. . . .

“Michael, don’t be mad, but Amy wants to breakup.”

I remember honestly trying to figure out how I should react. I had no clue how to handle a break up. So I just said, “OK” and walked to the bus and went home. That night, when I realized I had been dumped, I cried. It seems dumb, but I did. I cried real heartache tears. My lack of relationship experience and romantic judgment led to my downfall. My heart had been broken — supposedly.

For most of us, the impact of some “Don’t be mad” scenarios is momentary, and it teaches us small, valuable lessons. But sometimes the impact is severe and carries with it life-altering emotions and aftermath. And that phrase can make its way into our lives in many different ways.

I have some bad news . . .

I hate to tell you this but . . .

I’m sorry but . . .

There’s something I need to tell you . . .

All these phrases centralize around one thing: adversity. Really, any way you look at it, adversity on any level is still adversity. Realizing you woke up late or that you burned the waffles is only momentary, but finding out your father died or having your heart truly broken can be enduringly tragic. The point is that these moments, these phrases, cause a shift in your life, forcing you to find another solution or some way to deal with it.

The apostle Paul had an encouraging approach to adversity. He rarely complained about his struggles but learned to be content in every situation (Philippians 4:11, 12). He viewed struggle as part of the process, saying, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (v. 13). Paul accepted that if he was going to follow Jesus and be deeply surrounded by the current culture, he would have crosses to bear. With each struggle came new understanding and maturity. He confronted the shift, asked God for wisdom, and carried on.

I’m going to go out on a limb and say that Amy’s breaking up with me wasn’t the worst tragedy in my life. It didn’t take me long to get over it because it really wasn’t that bad of a deal. But it did cause a shift, one that I sincerely had to face. And even if only in the smallest way, after her I looked at things a little bit differently.

When the big things come along, feelings like fear, doubt, stress, or even panic are normal. Even Jesus asked God if He had second thoughts (Matthew 26:39). The process of facing adversity and overcoming it, no matter what level it’s on, will no doubt make you a little tougher, a little wiser and better prepared. But if left untested, it can leave you with your head in a hole in the ground — in other words, going nowhere.