

PEARLS *from* SAND

How SMALL Encounters
Lead *to* POWERFUL Lessons

Sample Chapters

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INTRODUCTION

As we go through life, we encounter a vast array of learning experiences. We go to school, learn to read and speak and write, and perhaps learn to play a musical instrument or a sport. We pick up knowledge—and a lot of opinions—from a variety of sources: from friends, teachers, and coworkers; from books and magazines; from the Internet and television; perhaps even from strangers we meet. All of this information goes into the repository of wisdom and experience that shapes our personalities, values, behaviors, and worldview.

At various times in your life you’ve no doubt encountered certain teachers, relatives, and friends who influenced you. If you’re paying attention, you’ll observe that some of your interactions with these people contain powerful messages that stick with you for the rest of your life. Such “pearls of wisdom” often emerge from small, everyday conversations and experiences, just as a real pearl can develop from the stimulus of a tiny grain of sand inside an oyster.*

I’ve been fortunate to have experienced a variety of such seminal encounters in my life. Often, just a single sentence that I heard from someone really opened my eyes and changed my behavior or thinking in a constructive way. I remember those moments with crystal clarity, down to the tone of the person’s voice and the

* Actually, natural pearls generally form when the oyster coats an invasive parasite, a bit of mantle, or another irritant—not a grain of sand—with nacre, but *Pearls from Parasites* didn’t seem like a good title for a book.

expression on his or her face. Rarely does a day go by when I don't think of one or another of these powerful insights and rely on them to help guide my actions.

To my surprise, when I asked some of the people mentioned in this book if I could share the lessons I learned from them, none remembered the discussion to which I referred. These messages have made me happier and a better person, but to the other people involved it was just another random conversation with a friend, colleague, or student. You, too, might have imparted valuable life lessons to people around you without even knowing it.

Each chapter in this book describes one such life lesson that has strongly affected me, along with the conversations or other experiences that revealed the pearl of wisdom and helped me understand and apply it. I have grouped the thirty-seven lessons in this book into six parts. Part 1 describes six “interpersonal pearls” that have helped guide my interactions with other people. Eight “personal pearls” appear in Part 2; they describe experiences that taught me something important about myself or my own behavior. The six “inspirational pearls” in Part 3 relate insights from role models whose positive behaviors helped shape my values. Part 4 features five “practical pearls” with pragmatic messages that can be useful to anyone in his or her daily life. Five “cautionary pearls” appear in Part 5 with warnings about certain dangers that lurk in the world and how to detect and avoid them. Finally, Part 6 presents seven “professional pearls” that I learned in various workplaces and which can be applied to almost any work environment.

While I deduced some of these lessons on my own, through personal experience and observation, others came from professors I respected, colleagues in the software development profession, my parents and other relatives, close friends, and fellow students. By sharing my observations—along with practical suggestions about how you might apply the lessons to your own life—I hope to serve as one of those useful mentors for you. All of the anecdotes I relate in

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this book are true, although some names and other details have been changed to preserve privacy.

So that you understand where I'm coming from and how I came to collect this particular set of lessons and insights, I'll provide a brief biography. My father, Bud Wiegers, spent the first half of his career in the United States Air Force, and as a result, my family moved around a lot. I was born in Japan in 1953 and lived in California, Texas, Maine, Iowa, Italy, France, and Idaho before I started eighth grade, when my father retired from the Air Force. Moving around so much provides a child with many interesting experiences but not with much in the way of family or community roots. I rarely saw my grandparents or cousins, and I have kept in touch with virtually no friends from the first nineteen years of my life.

I attended high school in Boise, Idaho, and received a bachelor's degree in chemistry from Boise State College in 1973. I attended graduate school at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where I received a master of science and a doctorate in organic chemistry. Following a year as a visiting assistant professor and a year of postdoctoral research at the University of Illinois, I went to work as a photographic research scientist at Eastman Kodak Company in Rochester, New York.

To my disappointment, my research work at Kodak wasn't much like the organic chemistry I found so fascinating. I had always enjoyed computer programming, so I transitioned into the field of software development a few years later. During the next fourteen years, I worked for Kodak as a software developer, manager, and quality engineer, eventually specializing in software process improvement. I left Kodak early in 1998 after launching my own one-person software development training and consulting company, Process Impact (Processimpact.com). I have written six books and many articles on aspects of software, management, chemistry, and military history (an interest that came from growing up on air force bases).

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My life has led me through a series of activities and people that imparted certain perspectives and values. I offer this collection with the hope that you will find these pearls of wisdom relevant to your life. Even if you can't relate to the specific experiences I describe, look for the lessons that came out of them and consider how you might apply those to yourself in some way.

I also encourage you to scour your own memory for significant insights that you can pass on to your children, students, friends, or coworkers. Everyone can benefit from people who teach those around them powerful life lessons. At Pearlsfromsand.com you can read more life lessons and even share your own pearls of wisdom with the rest of the world. The pearls are all around us, if we only notice, listen, and think about them.

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Chapter 9

LOOK! UP IN THE SKY! IT'S PERFECTMAN!

Pearl #9: Perfectionists will make their lives—and the lives of those around them—easier if they know when situations actually demand perfection and when “good enough” will do.

Some people would describe me as a perfectionist. That's not far off, but it's not quite right. I used to be more of a perfectionist; I'm a little better now, although I still have a ways to go. A Perfectman is more of a super-nuisance than a superhero. So instead of expecting everything to be perfect, I try to follow this philosophy: “Strive for perfection; settle for excellence.”

I do have high standards, and I don't apologize for that. I expect a lot from myself, at least in certain arenas. For example, when I'm teaching a class in my everyday disguise as a mild-mannered software consultant, I always do the best job I possibly can. It doesn't matter if I've taught that same class more than a hundred times and it's incredibly boring to me now. That's my problem, not the audience's problem. The students in the class are entitled to the best presentation I can deliver that day, so that's what I strive to give them.

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I don't have such high expectations of myself in other areas. I'm good at a few activities, but I'm less skilled or even completely inept when it comes to others. Construction projects around the house, for instance, are not my strong suit. Expecting perfection of myself in this area would be ludicrous. For such projects, I drop my standards down to "good enough." If that really *isn't* good enough to solve the problem, I'll bring in a professional to take care of it.

Perfection is more important in some situations than in others. I like to write and record songs, but I know my limitations. I'm not a brilliant songwriter, I'm not a fantastic guitarist, and I'm not a good singer. Through the miracles of modern recording and production software, I can compensate for some of my shortcomings and create songs that sound pretty good, if I do say so myself. I get a kick out of the composing, recording, and production process. It's a hobby, not a living. I'm just having a good time making music. I try to do the best job I can with the songs, but I'm not devastated if my efforts don't meet professional standards. Besides, you can never make a song—or a book—perfect. (Ironically, my most recent song is titled "Perfect," but it doesn't have anything to do with the theme of this chapter.) There's always something else you could tweak. At some point, you just have to declare victory and move on with your life.

I also expect a lot from others. I don't have much patience for either incompetence or incompetents, which does not seem unreasonable to me. If I send my local newspaper money for a subscription, I expect them to deliver my paper every day. If I hire professional roofers to repair the hole in my roof, it shouldn't leak anymore. Why should I expect less?

Last year I hired a handyman to replace a rotted exterior door that accesses the crawl space under my house. He sized up the job and concluded that he could handle it. Dan showed up on time, he seemed to know what he was doing, and the door looked sharp when he was done. However, when I tried to open the door a few months later, it was stuck fast. When the handyman installed it, he didn't

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allow enough clearance around the frame. The door expanded as it absorbed moisture in the wet Portland winter and was completely jammed into the frame. It took me a couple of hours to work the door open, followed by more hours to sand it down to fit properly and to repaint it.

But Dan disavowed any responsibility for the problem. He claimed that I had told him I wanted a snug fit around the door, which wasn't true. And even if I had said I wanted a snug fit, it's his professional responsibility to make the door serve its intended purpose. I didn't expect the door to be perfect, but I certainly expected it to open and close. That's kind of the point of a door. The handyman's work fell short of adequacy, let alone excellence, let alone perfection.

Being a perfectionist is hard. You set yourself up for disappointment at every turn, because people are not perfect, mechanical things are not perfect, and institutions are not perfect. I realize this. Still, I often believe things can be better than they are, better than we accept, and better than we demand. If you set perfection as a firm goal in life, either for yourself or for others, you will be frustrated more often than not. But if you set perfection as more of a hypothetical target and just aim for high quality, falling short may still leave you in the realm of excellence. That's nearly always a fine outcome.

Perfectionists are hard on the people around them too. They establish a reputation for incessant complaining, for being hypercritical and impossible to please. Consequently, any suggestion, observation, comment, or request Perfectman makes can come across as a scathing criticism, even when it's not intended that way. Thick-skinned people might not take the perfectionist's unreasonable expectations seriously. More sensitive people, though, will be hurt and will resent Perfectman's "suggestions." I regret the times I've inflicted this kind of pain on the people around me, and I keep trying to do better.

If you are a perfectionist, it can be liberating when the world pops your bubble. You buy a new car and it's gorgeous, not a mark on it. Of course, you don't want a door ding. So at first you park at the far end of the parking lot, well away from other vehicles. Or maybe you take the "I'm more important than you are" jerk approach and park diagonally across two spaces to make sure no one else's car door could possibly touch your baby. However, despite your best efforts, your flawless car eventually is going to pick up a little scratch or a tiny dent. When this happens, you're free! You can start acting like a normal automobile owner again.

Like many high-achieving students, I hoped to get straight As in college. I put a lot of pressure on myself, and I studied hard. Then I got my first B; I remember it well. This brought a sense of freedom, because then I didn't have to worry about trying to be perfect anymore. I still did the best job I possibly could in my schoolwork, but this relieved some of my internally generated pressure.

Parents sometimes don't realize how much stress they impose on their children by setting impossibly high goals. Many a child has felt like a failure because she didn't measure up to a parent's perfectionist ideal. The philosophy "Strive for perfection; settle for excellence" can perhaps reduce that stress, while maintaining the expectation of aiming high and doing good work.

If you're like me and expect much from yourself and others, you might consider whether these expectations are unreasonable or unrealistic. Think about easing off a little. Consider which situations really do demand perfection (performing surgery comes to mind), which ones will be just fine with mere excellence, and the situations for which "good enough" will suffice. It took me a long time to learn this lesson; I will probably never master it. It's in my bones to want everything to be just so. If perfectionists can channel their unrealistic demands into an expectation of high quality and even excellence, we'll all be happier.



Chapter 20

DO ALL YOU CAN, THEN GET HELP

Pearl #20: There is no shame in requesting assistance when you've reached the limits of what you can do in a difficult situation.

My father got sick in August of 2004 when he was seventy-five. He had been experiencing some cognitive and physical problems, so he went to see a neurologist. CT scans revealed three lesions in his brain that were most likely malignant tumors. Without drilling into Dad's brain and doing a biopsy to see exactly what these lesions were, it was hard for his doctor to know what kind of treatment to provide. The prognosis for such conditions at his age was not encouraging. My father opted for no biopsy and no treatment. "I'm seventy-five years old," he said. "I've had a good life." No one in our family argued with him about his choice to let nature take its course, although certainly we were all hoping that the situation was not as dire as it appeared.

Nature did take its course; it wasn't pretty. The immediate family—my two siblings and I, our spouses, and my nieces and nephew—convened at the family home in Boise on Labor Day weekend. The problems my father was experiencing were evident to all of us at that point. He had trouble finding words and completing sentences, which frustrated him terribly. He seemed overwhelmed by

the presence of so many people in his house and the associated hubbub. I think he just wanted to be left alone. Over the next several weeks, the brain tumors continued to grow. Dad experienced more and more problems with walking and balance, and his speech, understanding, and judgment continued to deteriorate. Brain cancer is not a nice way to die.

Dad remained at home as he got sicker. My mother cared for him to the best of her ability. She really was heroic. Despite her own physical limitations and pains, she devoted all of her energy to keeping Dad comfortable and happy. One time when he lost his balance and fell, she tried to catch him but strained her own hip in the process. The washing machine was running almost constantly as she tried to keep him in clean pajamas after he became confused about where the bathroom was. Poor Dad knew that he wasn't working right and that he was imposing a burden on her, but there was nothing he or anyone else could do. Other members of the family helped out as best they could. The onus was really on my mother, though.

Eventually, it became clear that Mom could no longer take care of Dad at home by herself. With considerable reluctance, she decided that Dad needed professional care in a safe environment. She looked into various options and decided to take advantage of the hospice service provided by the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Boise.

She felt guilty about this decision, but the rest of the family all supported her. We knew it was the only sensible thing to do. Dad was going to die soon no matter what anyone did. We didn't want our mother suffering along with our father any more than necessary. She did all anyone could have done to take care of her husband of fifty-five years.

My mother was always a deeply nurturing caregiver. I have this theory that, whenever you're sick or hurt or scared, no matter how old or mature you are, you want your mom, and any mom-type

person will do. My mom is that kind of a mom, the one you want to have around when all is not well. She took care of everybody in the family and did a terrific job, but even she had limits. She simply could not monitor my father twenty-four hours a day to make sure that he didn't wander around the house and fall down the stairs in the middle of the night, accidentally set the house on fire, or have some other accident.

One Saturday the time had come. My brother, my mother, and I took Dad to the VA Medical Center. The staff there did a fine job. They kept him safe and comfortable, and they treated him with respect. Hospice care really is a civilized way to end your natural life with dignity. Within a couple of weeks, just two months after his diagnosis, Dad passed away. He had a funeral with full military honors, which he earned for his twenty years of Air Force service.

I think my mother feels like she didn't do enough to take care of Dad. That's not the case, though. She did everything anyone in her position could have done and more. It's really hard when we have to acknowledge our limitations and solicit professional assistance, hiring strangers to do something that we thought was our responsibility. You never know when the right time is to make such a change. You never know if you're making the right decision. No magic little green light comes on that says, "Call the VA today." You just make the best guess you can with the available information. Feeling guilty about it doesn't accomplish anything, although it's a natural reaction to making such a difficult and uncertain decision. Everyone in our family was grateful to Mom for her devoted efforts. No one thought any less of her for concluding that it was time for hospice to take over Dad's care.

Through my Meals on Wheels volunteering, I've met a number of senior citizens, many in their eighties and some in their nineties. Two men on my route, Bob and Paul, were upset when their wives had to move into care facilities, one because of Alzheimer's disease and the other due to Parkinson's. Periodically, I would ask them how their wives were doing. I could see the sadness in their

eyes and hear the catch in their voices. Eventually Bob's wife passed away. Paul's wife is still in the Alzheimer's facility. Paul visits her there several times a week. He tells me that she always says, "I want to come home." Paul also wants her to come home, of course, but she probably never will. He did the best he could to take care of her. Then he needed some help too. That's just the way it goes.

These decisions are terribly hard. There often is no silver lining. Knowing our limits is the kindest thing we can do for ourselves and, ultimately, for our loved ones in need, because this will result in the person getting the best care in the end. You're not abdicating your responsibilities if you ask for help. Instead, you're fulfilling your responsibilities by arranging for the care your loved one really needs when you just can't do it yourself anymore.



Chapter 27

DODGING BULLETS

Pearl #27: A close call that scares you but doesn't do any real harm can lead to positive change—and might even save your life.

“Whew, that was a close one!” You’ve doubtless breathed this sigh of relief after the accident that almost-but-didn’t-quite happen. You take a deep breath, wait for your pounding heart to calm down, and drive on your way, relieved that no metal was bent or bones broken. Such a near tragedy provides an excellent learning opportunity if you think about why the accident almost happened and how you could avoid a similar situation in the future.

It’s true that we learn from our errors. Even better is to learn from a minor mistake that could have had much worse consequences. Let me tell you about some dodged-a-bullet experiences.

In 1986 I began riding a motorcycle. The mechanics of riding a bike aren’t particularly challenging, although there’s definitely some coordination needed among your right hand (throttle and front brake), left hand (clutch), left foot (gearshift), and right foot (rear brake). Once you’ve got those operations down, you can hit the road, right? Well, not really. There’s a lot more to learn about handling a bike properly and riding safely.

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Soon after I began riding, I was out for a cruise in the countryside in upstate New York. I came around a fairly sharp curve along the base of a steep hill that completely blocked my view to the right. The motorcycle drifted into the left lane. Either I was going a little faster than I should have or I just didn't lean the bike enough to the right, probably both. Had there been a vehicle in that oncoming lane coming around the blind curve, I would have been dead, no question about it. It was just good, dumb luck that kept me alive at that instant.

On the plus side, this experience scared the dickens out of me. The message that flashed through my mind was, "Whoa, you can really get hurt doing this if you do it wrong!" I wasn't riding like a madman, but obviously I wasn't adequately skilled in handling the motorcycle. In the past twenty-five years, I have always stayed aware of the hazards of motorcycle riding. Since that frightening day, I have not drifted into an oncoming lane or onto the shoulder, dumped the bike onto the ground, or had any other mishap. This was one of those near misses that got my attention and taught me a valuable lesson.

Some years ago, my wife went out to run some errands. She phoned me minutes later to report that she'd been in a car accident just a mile from the house. The accident was minor, and no one was hurt. I drove over anyway. A boy of about seventeen in a small pickup truck had rear-ended Chris's car on a major street. He just wasn't paying attention. The damage to both vehicles was trivial, merely some scrapes on the bumpers. The boy's mother offered to pay for the repairs to avoid involving the insurance companies, which was fine with us.

The boy was planning to go to his high school prom that night. He was pretty shaken up, as he should have been. I said to him, "Take this seriously, but don't let it ruin your prom." I actually think it's a good thing if young people can have a small accident like this shortly after they start driving. That way, they can grasp how easy it is to have a big accident and just how much damage a motor

vehicle can do. A similar minor wreck just weeks after I first obtained my driver's license made me a much more careful driver. Because we never repaired the resulting dent in my father's old Opel, I was reminded of the experience every time I saw the car.

A lot of these dodged-a-bullet lessons deal with motor vehicles, because driving has the potential to become so dangerous so quickly. Once I was getting ready to make a right turn at an intersection. I saw a break in traffic and started to turn. Suddenly my passenger warned me about a pedestrian right in front of my car. If I had been alone in the car, I'm certain I would have hit that pedestrian. I simply did not check the crosswalk in front of the car before I started to move. Twenty-eight years later, I still remember the churning in my stomach at that way-too-close call, and I still diligently check for pedestrians, particularly when turning.

Near-misses can also motivate you to improve your safety practices around the house and workplace. I used to be an organic chemist. There's a lot of nasty stuff in the chemistry lab. Prudent lab workers use a variety of protective gear, such as goggles, face shields, rubber gloves, and aprons. I always wore a clear plastic, full-face shield when handling particularly corrosive materials. Before long, the shield was covered with pits from splattered acids that would have scarred my unprotected face. If that doesn't motivate a lab worker to take simple precautions, I don't know what will. I've had the same experience when using a string trimmer to edge my lawn. One time a tiny, but painful, speck of dirt landed in my eye. Ever since then I've worn goggles while using the trimmer. They are always speckled with dirt by the time I'm done. It's not an accident if you're prepared for it.

Sometimes people don't have the opportunity to learn from a small mistake before tragedy strikes. There was a horrible automobile accident in upstate New York in 2007. Two vehicles full of teenage girls were driving to a lakeside excursion, one week after they had all graduated from the high school in the same town where I used to live. The cell phone belonging to the driver of the lead vehicle was

being used to exchange text messages with someone in the second car, although it's not certain who was using the phone. That driver smashed head-on into a tractor-trailer rig. All five girls in the lead vehicle were killed in the fiery crash.

Wouldn't it have been better if this inexperienced driver had run into something small like a mailbox, just enough of an accident to scare her and get her attention? Or, even better, if she had heeded the warnings of more experienced drivers about the dangers of distracted driving? These five girls never got the chance to learn a critical lesson.

Can you think of situations where you changed your safety behaviors because of the accident that didn't quite happen? It doesn't have to be something with a car. A relative of mine found a lump in her breast one day. A biopsy revealed that it was a benign tumor. She now has annual mammograms to find any future lumps as early as possible. Perhaps your neighbor's house was burglarized, finally motivating you to install those deadbolt locks.* Maybe you lost your purse, but instead of stealing your identity, some Good Samaritan returned your purse to you, cash and cards intact. This would be a good time to make copies of all of the cards you carry in your wallet in case it ever happens again. You might also remove from your wallet anything you don't really need to carry, like your Social Security card.

The next time you experience a close call, don't just breathe a sigh of relief. Look for ways to change your behavior to be more alert for similar problem situations in the future. Heading a problem off at the pass is a lot better than taking a trip to the emergency room.

* One night my neighbor's house in Rochester *was* burglarized. There were footsteps in the snow leading to my back door, then over to his back door. All of my doors had deadbolt locks; his did not. His house was burglarized; mine was not. Deadbolts are a cheap investment in security.



Bonus Chapter 1

DID YOU SEE WHAT I SAW?

Pearl #38: No matter how confident you are regarding your memory of a specific experience, there's always a chance that your memory is not accurate.

People like to believe that they are good observers, that they notice what is going on around them, and that they would be good witnesses to a crime or an accident. However, when I witnessed an accident some years ago, I learned that perceptions, memories, and eyewitness reports are not as reliable as we might think.

A friend and I were out one night for a stroll along the quiet, tree-lined street where we lived in Rochester, New York. Suddenly, a car came around the curve at the far end of the street from us, headlights slewing from side to side. The driver was clearly out of control. We heard a loud bang as he slammed into a parked car. The driver continued weaving down the street and pulled into his driveway two doors down from my house.

While a neighbor called the police, my friend and I ran a couple of hundred yards down the street to examine the scene. By the time the police arrived, several neighbors who also saw the accident had joined us on the street. A policeman approached our

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group and asked what happened. We all began talking at once. The officer held up his hand and asked us to speak in turn.

As I described the incident, I found myself adding an interpretation that went beyond the facts. When I ran up to the house where the car had smashed into the parked vehicle, I noticed some deep, curved tire tracks dug into the soft muddy edge of the lawn; we had had a lot of rain recently. I said that it looked like the car had swerved into the yard after striking the parked vehicle, then backed out and continued down the road. However, my mental movie of what took place didn't include that detail. I remember it now as vividly as when it happened decades ago. The car came around the curve, banged off the parked vehicle, swerved back into the road and kept coming on. It never stopped. Yet as I described my observations, my story was colored by what I surmised "must" have happened because of the tire tracks in the mud in that same place.

As it happens, those tire tracks were caused earlier in the day by some trucks driven by workers performing maintenance in that area. We neighbors finally got our stories straight and gave the policeman a coherent picture of what had happened that night. But I took home a powerful insight: the memory you have of an incident, no matter how vivid or detailed, may not be accurate.

I've always prided myself on having fairly good powers of observation and a good memory. This experience drove home the importance of relying only on what you really saw, not any assumptions or interpretations you might be making. It also helped me appreciate how two observers of—or even participants in—the same incident can retain very different memories of it.

Have you ever found yourself debating with someone about an earlier incident where you clearly do not share the same recollection? Each of you adamantly insists that a certain thing happened in a certain way, yet you don't agree on exactly what took place. You were both there; how can your memories be so different?

Naturally, we place much more credence in our own recollections than in someone else's. We defend to the death our own memory and wonder how the other person can be so mixed up. However, it's more sensible for each of us to be a little more skeptical of our own memories and allow for the possibility that the other person is right, no matter how accurate we think our vivid recollections are.

Here's an example. In October of 2000, my wife and I moved from Rochester to Portland, Oregon. Despite our excellent planning, things begin going awry almost literally the moment we pulled out of the driveway. I'll spare you the gory details, but for some years I wondered whether Lewis and Clark had had an easier trip west (okay, they didn't). The culminating catastrophe was a serious car accident in Boise, Idaho. Fortunately, no one was injured, but my car spent the next two and a half months in Boise being repaired.* Chris was driving at the time, although the accident was eighty percent my fault—a combination of errors and poor judgment from being tired after six stressful days on the road.

I distinctly remember the first thing I said following the impact: "Please tell me that didn't really just happen." However, Chris remembers—just as vividly—that my first words to her were, "You're going to get a ticket." Of course, my first words should have been "Are you okay?" In my defense, it was apparent that, despite the explosion of automobile fragments all over the road, we were both just fine, thank goodness. But it's striking that each of us holds a different, and equally powerful, memory of that traumatic instant. Perhaps I only thought "Please tell me that didn't really just happen" and actually spoke some other sentence aloud. Nah, I'm sure that's what I said.

Erroneous memories and embellished observations can have profound implications. The testimony of eyewitnesses to crimes is

* Safety tip: If you have to have an accident while you are traveling cross-country, having it when you are just two miles from your parent's house is not a bad thing.

notoriously unreliable. In some cases a witness has picked an alleged perpetrator from a police photo array with absolute certainty, only to be told that the person he identified was incarcerated at the time of the crime and could not possibly have committed it. Terrible miscarriages of justice have taken place because of false memories, often those of children who were led through manipulative questioning to describe abuses they never really suffered. Psychologists who study such things have found that humans are so susceptible to suggestion that they can conjure—and embellish—vivid recollections of experiences a researcher told them they had had, but which were entirely fabricated.

This phenomenon of incorrect memories raises its ugly head in various situations. Perhaps you're having an argument with your husband. He swears he gave you an important paper, yet you are equally adamant that you've never seen it. "You were sitting right there on the couch, reading," he insists. "I handed it right to you." Voices are raised and blood pressures go up. The next day your husband finds that piece of paper at the bottom of a pile on his desk. He never gave it to you at all, despite his "memory" of doing so. A good clue that someone near you has experienced one of these memory gaps is hearing a muttered sentence that begins "I could have sworn...."

It's worth keeping in mind that all of us are subject to these kinds of memory flaws. The next time your memory is at odds with that of someone close to you, consider the possibility that you just might be wrong before you get too worked up about it.



Bonus Chapter 2

DADDY DOESN'T ALWAYS KNOW

Pearl #39: Despite how it seems when you are a small child, adults don't always know the best way to handle a difficult situation.

A human infant is totally dependent upon its parents for survival. For the first dozen or so years of life, a child relies on its parents to keep it safe, fed, and healthy. Parents always seem to know what to do whenever there's an injury, an illness, or a family emergency of some kind.

I remember growing up with this sense of confidence that my parents could solve all problems. One of my earliest memories is being in a car with my mother and siblings, my father standing outside in a blizzard holding a shovel and trying to free the car from a snow bank. "I'm going to catch pneumonia out here!" he shouted. I was worried about him, but sure enough, he cleared the snow and we drove on down the road. Sometimes when we were on a trip, Dad would get frustrated as he stopped at one hotel after another, all of which were full. Somehow, though, we never had to sleep in the car. He always managed to find us a room at the inn.

Eventually, of course, children grow up and become parents themselves, or at least adults. I don't know when you're supposed to reach the point where you really feel like an adult and have the

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confidence that you, too, can deal with whatever life throws at you and your family. Maybe it's when you have children of your own. Having never had children, I didn't go through that stark transformation where all of a sudden you're faced with a vast new array of responsibilities without much training. Yet somehow, I still had the sense that now I was supposed to know how to cope with life's many challenges effectively. Even though I don't have children, I felt like I was supposed to be the "daddy" of the family, with all the attendant capabilities. In general, I am pretty resourceful and self-reliant, but one day my daddy limitations became startlingly apparent.

I mentioned earlier some of the difficulties Chris and I encountered on our move from Rochester, New York, to Portland, Oregon, in the year 2000. Another problem arose when we hit the world's largest pothole in the middle of South Dakota. Both directions of Interstate traffic had been merged onto just one road because of construction. We slammed into the pothole before we could avoid it. The right front wheel immediately began vibrating badly.

We took the next exit just a few miles up the road and went to a truck stop to check out the damage. The impact had dented and cracked the aluminum wheel rim on my Acura. The man who examined the wheel said there was nothing he could do about it. Perhaps we could get a new wheel in Rapid City, another hundred miles or so up the road, which was our destination for the night anyway.

Chris and I were both upset by this latest development on our problem-plagued journey. I frankly wasn't sure what to do. My brain said, "You're the daddy. You're supposed to know what to do when these kinds of things happen." But it wasn't at all obvious to me. That was a disconcerting feeling. I'm used to being able to handle most problems that crop up, but here I was at a loss. I felt I was letting us both down.

We decided to creep on up the road to Rapid City, vibration and all. There I discovered that there are no Acura dealers in the entire state of South Dakota or in Wyoming, the next state we had to pass through on our way west. I called the local Honda dealer at his home that night and asked if a Honda wheel rim might fit my car. That idea didn't pan out. The damaged tire was steadily leaking air. I could always put on the emergency spare tire, but then our speed would be limited to 50 miles an hour. Wyoming is an awfully large state at 50 mph. What to do? We chose to proceed with our journey, stopping frequently to top off the air pressure. I called ahead to my father in Boise and asked him to line up a new wheel at the Acura dealer there.

We were able to keep going with the damaged wheel, pumping up the air pressure every hour or so. Amazingly, the vibration and air leak both gradually subsided. By the time we got into southern Idaho we could whiz along at highway speed again. This came as a surprise, because mechanical things do not normally heal themselves. I never did figure it out. We made it to Boise, tired and upset. Then we had the wreck I described earlier. Suddenly the damaged wheel was no longer our biggest problem. This was just not our week.

Well, we finally completed our long drive to Portland, flying the last leg from Boise as my car stayed behind for its extensive repairs. Chris and I settled into our new home, everything eventually got fixed, and we moved on with our lives. But I'll never forget the feeling I had at that truck stop in the South Dakota desert, without a clue as to what I should do next. I had never felt so at a loss. As the "daddy" of our two-person family, my responsibility was to take care of Chris, myself, our cat, and our belongings. I thought I was always supposed to know what to do. But I didn't.

This insight made me realize that perhaps there were times when my parents also did not know what to do when smacked in the face by the vicissitudes of life. My parents were very smart people with a lot of worldly experience, which doubtless helped them deal

with unforeseen eventualities. Military life provides you with some of those coping resources. In her early thirties, my mother had moved three children under the age of seven from Iowa to Italy to join my father, who was already established at his new Air Force base assignment. This was before jet airplanes made such travel relatively fast and comfortable. It was a tough trip, but she pulled it off. Luckily for us, mommies also can figure out how to deal with obstacles and solve problems.

Sometimes daddies decide not to deal with an obstacle after all. Chris's father once went out to the garage to drive to some errand. He came back inside a few minutes later. "Car won't start," he said as he resumed his position in the easy chair and turned on the television. Perhaps the errand wasn't that important, but you'd think he might want to have the car ready for the next essential trip. "Car won't start" has become our family's catchphrase for a situation in which there's some sort of problem, but we decide to let it slide. Really, of course, that just defers the need to cope with the problem.

My parents were confronted with all sorts of challenges, but they managed to figure them all out. As a child, I always felt safe with them, knowing that they would have the right answers (at least until I became a teenager, when my newly-acquired wisdom convinced me they had all the wrong answers). In retrospect, sometimes they were probably as perplexed as I felt in South Dakota. They just made their best guess about what to do, and most of the time those guesses worked out fine. I wish I felt more confident that I, too, will know how to deal with all of the challenges that daddies encounter in life.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



After growing up on air force bases around the world, Karl Wieggers landed in Boise, Idaho, at age eleven. He received a BS in chemistry from Boise State College and MS and PhD degrees in organic chemistry from the University of Illinois. Karl spent eighteen years at Eastman Kodak Company in Rochester, New York, where he worked as a photographic research scientist, software developer, software manager, software quality engineer, and software process improvement leader. In 1997, he launched Process Impact, a software process consulting and training company based in Portland, Oregon.

Karl's professional interests include requirements engineering, project management, risk management, quality improvement, and process improvement. Karl is the author of six popular books on software development and management, including the bestselling *Software Requirements*, as well as 175 articles on computing, chemistry, and military history. He has delivered more than five hundred keynotes, presentations, and training classes worldwide.

When he's not at the keyboard, Karl enjoys wine tasting, reading about military history and science, writing and recording music, playing his Les Paul and Stratocaster guitars (loudly), and riding his Suzuki motorcycle (quietly). Karl lives in Happy Valley, Oregon, with his wife, Chris. Visit Karlwiegers.com for more information.

A keen observer of daily life, Karl realized how everyday encounters can impart significant life lessons—if you're paying attention. His recollection of many such “pearls of wisdom” that emerged from conversations and experiences in his own life led him to write *Pearls from Sand: How Small Encounters Lead to Powerful Lessons*. Karl's hope is that you will find many of these lessons to be relevant to your own life, and that you'll reflect on the life lessons—your own pearls—that help you live a happier and more fulfilling life.