

UU Church of Waterville
“Life Lessons from Uncle Chester” by Terri Hibbard
Sunday, October 10, 2021

My talk today is about how one person can make a huge difference in the life of another. For me, it wasn't my mother although she surely influenced me in many good and not-so-good ways. Not my father, he dropped out of my life when I was about 10.

The person who made who I am today, for better or worse, was my great uncle – Chester Hibbard. He taught me that persistence counts for more than brilliance, that good manners are important, kindness toward all living things is a must and he tried to teach me patience. He also taught me to eat a good breakfast and to make wonderful biscuits.

Uncle Chester was a prominent businessman in his community. He lived in Benton and owned the Fairfield Creamery located on Main Street, in Fairfield. I lived with him, first during my sophomore year at Lawrence High School and next during my freshman year at Colby College.

Chester or “Unc” as I called him, was a big man, always well-dressed in a suit, dress shirt and tie with shined shoes and a large diamond ring on his right hand.

He never married or had children, but he was the ultimate family man. He looked after and kept close contact with his brothers and sister, nieces and nephews, including me, his great-niece.

Every member of Uncle Chester's family was entitled to free ice cream whenever they came to the creamery. Can you imagine what that was like for a kid?

My daily stop at the Creamery to fortify myself with plenty of ice cream always included a visit with Unc. And on this day, I complained bitterly about moving with my parents to Clinton. Leave my friends? Give up my role as a drum majorette? Tragedy!

“Now Darlenie,” Unc said. (My real name is Darlene Terri Hibbard.) Anyway, “You'll meet new friends in no time and you'll be just as happy as you were here,” he told me.

“No I won't! Never!”

A few days later when I stopped by the creamery, Unc asked if I might like to live with him during the next school year. Would I ever!

And so, I moved in. It never occurred to me to wonder why he was willing to interrupt his peaceful routine life to take in a feather-headed and moody teenager like me. At 14, I was all about ME.

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Unc first taught me to eat a real breakfast: cereal, juice, egg, toast, and a doughnut. Because I was pale and skinny, he had decided I didn't eat enough. At home I was used to grabbing whatever was in the breadbox for breakfast, generally cake. I suffered through those big breakfasts at first but soon we agreed a slightly smaller one would do.

Uncle Chester always regretted that he hadn't been able to graduate from teacher's college, or normal school as it was called then. When his father committed suicide, he had to leave school and go back to the farm to care for his sick mother and younger brothers and sister.

He had always urged me to study hard in school, and as I approached high school age, he said “If you study hard, I'll see to it that you go to college.” College was an exotic place, far away, where smart rich kids went. I was an ordinary kid with a truck-driver father and a waitress mother.

Still, I wanted to go to college because I had discovered Brenda Starr, Girl Reporter, in the comics and decided that I wanted that kind of exciting, adventurous life. That meant I would have to have an education and learn to write

During my sophomore year living with Unc, I bumped up against geometry. I broke out in shingles that year and old Dr. Edgar Smith blamed it on stress. I blamed it on geometry.

I was at the kitchen table after supper one evening, whining about the impossibility of solving a particular geometry problem and complaining about having to deal with this stuff when I was never, ever, *ever* going to use it in real life.

“There is no way I can solve this problem because it's wrong. Whoever wrote this book made a mistake and IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO SOLVE THIS CURSED THING! AND THAT'S IT!” I slammed the book shut.

Unc stepped in, settled his bulk into the kitchen chair, took the book and open it to page one.

“Now, Darlenie,” he said, “let's see what the trouble is. You know, dear, you have to understand every single step along the way to the problem before you can solve it.”

And so, we began.

Uncle Chester had never taken geometry, but he'd learned how to deal with problems, both in life and in business. He had worked at a creamery long enough to learn everything about it. Then he went out and started his own creamery. To grow his business, he hit the road and tried to convince every store and eating

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place in the state to sell his “Pine Cone Ice Cream.” Then Unc began investing in houses and apartment buildings.

Through the years, whenever his old equipment failed, he hauled on his overalls and fixed it. When his employees had personal problems, he sat them down in his office and gave them advice, and sometimes a little money, so they could get on with their lives,

He certainly wasn’t going to let a little thing like a geometry problem stymie either of us. So, there he sat and patiently worked his way through the book to the problem that had conquered me as I sat and sighed. Until – late in the evening – both he and I understood how to solve that unsolvable problem.

Unc’s method of dealing with problems was simple: Look at it this way and that way and if that doesn’t work, turn it upside down to get another angle. Keep tackling it with one tack or another until it’s conquered.

Before supper we had a comfortable sit-down in the living room and talked about the doings of the day.

“What did you do in Home Economics today, Darlenie?” Unc would often ask.

“Oh, nothing much. We just practiced how to set the table with more silverware than anyone could ever possibly ever use. All kinds of special forks and spoons and she even taught us what a fingerbowl is. *As if!*”

“Well, that’s good, dear. It’s important to know about those things. When you get out into the big world, you’ll be glad you know the proper things to do. You pay attention to Miss Brophy. You might not think so now, but she’s teaching you how to be a proper young lady.”

He hadn’t learned about table manners much at the farm, he said, and as a businessman going out to nice restaurants, he was tense until he learned the proper things to do by watching others.

After supper, clean-up was no lick and a promise at Unc’s house. Although he had a dishwasher—incredible luxury! – we still had to wash the dishes before they went into the dishwasher. Then we cleaned the stove and I mean *cleaned* the stove. First, I washed down the stove top. Then I got the cake of scouring stuff, *Bon Ami*, and with a damp special cloth using my index finger in the cloth, I rubbed it on the *Bon Ami* and then rubbed it over the chrome rings around the electric burners. The stove shone as though it had just been installed.

Taking good care of things helps them last.

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Before I graduated from Stephen’s High School in Rumford in 1953 at the age of not-quite-17, Uncle Chester told me that if I could get accepted at Colby College, I could live with him once again and he would pay my way at Colby.

Then he explained that I would be the housekeeper and cook at his home during the summer before I started college. My uncle believed that if I was going to college, I should know how to be a good homemaker because what else did a woman go to college for in the 1950s except to get her Mrs. Degree?

Every morning Unc explained carefully step-by-step what I was to prepare for dinner (the noontime meal) and supper. He patiently taught me how make biscuits, Boston baked beans and brown bread, roast chicken and gravy, beef stew, fried pork chops with apples and, of course, fried salt pork.

Because I’d rather hang out with my friends, talk on the phone, or read *True Romance*, I often had to rush things a bit. The beef might not be browned up nicely for the stew, the baked potatoes might be hard in the middle, and the chicken might be rushed through cooking at such a high temperature the skin was more blackened than golden and the meat dry.

But I heard no grumbles. Unc endured my cooking without a wince or a grimace, praising every meal. Then, during the after-supper clean-up, Unc made gentle suggestions.

“You might want to try cooking it just a mite slower,” Unc would say about the dried-up chicken. “And, if you stick a fork into the potatoes before they bake, they’ll usually soften up nicely. But they still taste good even if they’re not quite soft.”

The apartment was always tidy and there were few knickknacks so keeping things in good shape meant only vacuuming and dusting once a week. But glitches appeared. Fortunately, Uncle Chester had a lovely sense of humor. When he sat at the piano to play a tune before supper, he’d occasionally put the cover back down over the keys and write on it: *Dusty ain’t it?*

But he never said a critical word.

When I hung my nylon stockings on the towel bar in the bathroom, he might come out of the bathroom and cheerfully mention that the new “towels” weren’t all that absorbent.

Because everything was up to date here, I asked one time if he had an electric popcorn popper.

“Of course,” he said and headed to the kitchen, got out a saucepan and cover, plunked it on the electric burner and said, “That’s the electric part.”

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Uncle Chester was providing the wherewithal for me to attend college and although I had no clothes appropriate for Colby, he wasn't about to allow me to shop for college clothes alone. As a wealthy businessman, he had developed excellent taste in clothes as well as everything else. So I had to wait and whine and remind him day after day that I needed a nice wardrobe. He kept assuring me that, yes, we'd go to Stern's – the only department store with everything a college girl needed that met his exacting requirements for good taste. But Unc was a very busy man.

“Uncle Chester, please, please, please. School starts in two days and I haven't got one single thing to wear. Not one thing. Nothing.”

Finally, we headed to Waterville. We parked and went to Stern's front door. It was locked. **Closed** for *Rosh Hashanah*, the sign said.

“Oh, great. That's it! I can't start college! I have *nothing* to wear.”

I turned and started back to the car but Unc Chester pressed his face to the glass in the door, cupped his hands around his eyes and looked in. Then he began knocking.

“Come on. They're closed,” I said.

“Wait a minute. I see someone in there.” And he continued knocking.

“Uncle Chester! The store is **CLOSED!**”

But there was a man coming to the door, opening it up a crack.

“Hello, Mr. Hibbard,” he said.

“Oh, Mr. Stern. I'm awfully sorry to bother you. This is my niece, Darlene. She starts at Colby tomorrow and she's telling me that she hasn't got a thing to wear and she'll have to go to school stark naked unless I can outfit her today.”

Both men chuckled as I stood there wanting to die.

“I don't suppose you would let us pick out a few things, would you? It won't take but a minute.”

Before I knew it, we were in the store and Mr. Stern was smiling and nodding and telling us he was just doing inventory anyway. For the next couple hours we had the store to ourselves as I chose the skirts, sweaters, blouses, slacks, jacket, rain coat, shoes, and purse that Unc and Mr. Stern agreed would be perfect for a Colby girl.

Persistence and patience. Unc had surely mastered those skills.

He saved me many times at Colby, but one memory stands out.

Before the spring semester final exam in Sociology, I procrastinated about getting the required reading at the college library until the last possible second and

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then it wasn't available. I panicked, rushed to the professor's office and told him my sad story. I always had a story.

“I live in Benton . . . can't always get to the library, blah, blah, blah.”

He listened, smiled, and finally said “I've got an idea.”

“Okay. What?”

“You've lived around here for years, haven't you?”

“Yes. I was born in Benton.”

“Okay. Here's what you can do. Instead of answering the questions concerning the book you did NOT read, give me the directions to a great fishing spot. People around here won't tell me because they don't want anyone else to find their special spots.”

“Great! I'll do it. Thank you!”

Of course, I had no idea whatsoever where there were special fishing spots near Waterville and surrounding towns. As soon as I got home, I told my uncle what had happened. I expected a lecture about my procrastination, and I got it, with no sympathy. But he didn't want me to fail so I also got his assurance that he'd find a fisherman and somehow worm the directions out of him.

Unc' came through. I memorized the directions and duly recorded them on my final.

Several days later, a postcard arrived from the professor. On it was my passing grade alongside a little sketch of a fisherman, sitting on the bank of a stream, fishing pole in hand and a great big grin on his face.

I didn't graduate from Colby. I wanted to study journalism, so I transferred to the University of Maine. Unc was disappointed but still hopeful I'd graduate. We split the cost my sophomore year and I paid my own way the last two years. No one was more proud than my Uncle Chester at my graduation.

My uncle was an immense blessing my life until the day he died at age 75.

I wish I had said thank you more often.