

## **“The Word” exercises with West High School | April 5, 2022**

**By Craig Lancaster**

### **Funny**

You could say a lot of things about Chuck Worley. He was short. Real short. Never-got-picked-for-basketball short. He was poor. He was so poor his parents sometimes “forgot” his birthday, so I guess you could say that however poor he was, it wasn’t really his fault. I mean, who does that to their kid?

Mostly, though, you could say Chuck Worley was funny. The funniest. Man, I miss him.

I’ve been thinking about Chuck a lot lately, and by lately, I mean since last week, when I heard what happened. I mean, it’s not every day that Pete Sturm, your best friend—not *yours*, of course, but mine—calls you up and says, “Jeez, man, did you hear about Chuck?”

“Chuck?”

“Yeah.”

“Chuck Hopkins?”

“No.”

“Chuck Aden?”

“Carl, no.”

“Who, then?”

“Chuck Worley.”

Chuck Worley. There’s a name straight out of 1989. That was a long time ago, long enough for me to meet other Chucks. But here it is, 2022, and here I am thinking about Chuck Worley, something I hadn’t done in better than half my life. I suppose it’s natural, though,

considering the way in which he emerged from the mists of time. He robbed a chicken farm and got killed by a truck as he crossed the road afterward.

Get it? Chicken? Crossed the road?

See? Funny.

Of course, the humor is hitting me just now. At the time, with Sturmsie going on and on about this guy we knew during a glimmer of our lives, it was mostly just shocking. How bereft does a guy have to be to rob a chicken farm? Where does he even get the idea? What the hell?

Anyway, that was Chuck, I guess. Always a surprise with that guy. If you think about the whole picture, it probably couldn't have gone another way. If you disassemble the football coach's car, piece by piece, and raise all those pieces up the flagpole one Wednesday morning, wheels and carburetor hanging there in the wind, there's not a lot of upward places to end up. You've topped out at age 17.

Yeah, Chuck did that to ol' Coach Cashion. We couldn't believe it. Cashion hated Chuck, hated that rat tail he wore, cut it off, in fact, one day at practice. There's Chuck, in a three-point stance, and there's Cashion, with a pair of scissors, behind him, lifting the rat tail and ... snip. Gone. Cashion tacked it up on the locker room wall, like a hunting trophy. Chuck smiled and took it and silently seethed and plotted, and in time, Cashion's Ford Ranger is up in the air with Old Glory.

Like I said, funny.

**Dog**

We met in the park across the street from the thing where we went that one time when things were better between us. I'd been pleading, for weeks, in text messages she didn't answer and emails she didn't return and singing telegrams that only came back with sad songs.

And then she called one day and said, "What?", and I said, well, I'd like to talk to you one last time. And she said we'd said everything there was to say, and she was probably right about that, but closure is worth something, at least to me. So she said, "OK, where?" and I told her—the park across the street from the thing where we went that one time, only now it's a froyo place and not a yarn store, but whatever. We both know where it is.

And she said, "Funny. Weird choice."

Yeah, OK.

The thing was, I thought if I went there—the park, not the froyo place it is now or the yarn store it was then—and I said, look, here I am and I'm facing it and I'm owning it and I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry, she might reconsider what she thinks of me. She might. She probably won't. I wouldn't, were I her, but I'm not her. I'm me. With all my blemishes and failures, I'm me.

She was sitting on a bench on the northwest side of the park. Took me a while to find her, since we hadn't specified. She was as far, physically, as she could be from the site of what can only now be called the precipitating event, another bench on the southeast side of the park, another actor in her role.

"You look good," I said.

"I didn't come here to be looked at," she said. "What do you want?"

"You know what I want."

"No."

“You asked.”

“And you answered predictably,” she said. “Are we done?”

“No,” I said. “Please, no.”

“So talk. Get it over with. I have things to do.”

So I told her. I told her that I was acknowledging it. That I was owning it. That I had learned from it and I was sorry and I could be the better man she always thought I could be.

“I don’t think that anymore,” she said.

“Really?”

“Nope,” she said. “Not anymore.”

I can’t say I was surprised, but surprise isn’t really the point or the goal. I wanted to be heard. I wanted to say my piece. And I did.

“Well,” I said, “OK. I’m sorry.”

“So you said.”

“Well, I am.”

“So you said.”

The thing to do, I know, was to turn on my heel and walk back to the car and not look back, because over is over, right? But I couldn’t. I was rooted there, like one of the trees covering us.

“It had to go this way,” she said. “You know that, right?”

“Why?”

She looked at me, incredulous.

“Why?” I pressed.

“Why?” she repeated.

“Yeah, why?”

“Dave,” she said. “You’re a dog.”

## **Lightning**

When we got the dog—a 48-pound, 40-inch-long, 14-year-old basset hound—I named him Lightning because, among other things, I was into irony.

Lightning’s name was Dexter when he was stuffed in a kennel at the humane society, on account of his previous owner, an 84-year-old woman named Mildred, up and died one day and Dexter was found sleeping in the small of the back of her tumbled-over carcass, and Mildred’s kinfolk didn’t want him. And you might say that if a dog has borne a name, any name, for 14 years, he ought to be allowed to keep it for the rest of whatever time he has left. And, OK, that’s a fair point, but Dexter is a crappy name and no more fitting the hound he was than Lightning was. So I changed it. My prerogative.

We didn’t get off to a good start, Lightning and me. First night, I put him up on the bed, and he walked around behind my shoulder, I thought he was snuggling in, and he lifted a leg on me. New house, new bed, new people—I guess I can’t blame him, but come on, man. He pooped on the rug the next day—the good rug, that was the problem, not that frayed thing in the den—and I thought, well, Lightning, you ain’t long for us if you don’t straighten up and fly right soon.

I needn’t have worried, as it turned out. I’ve come to believe, in the looking back, that the speed of him—opposite the name we’d hung on him—was the secret to his longevity. That dog just wasn’t in a hurry for anything, which kept his heart rate low and his blood moving agreeably. “Lightning, dinner,” we’d say, and we’d wait for the lumbering, this long dog who could have two feet on different sides of a corner, and he’d come into view and he’d eat at a

luxurious pace, like a cow working its cud. “Lightning, let’s get in the car!” Same thing. That dog moved in a way that would make a sloth say, “Damn, that’s one slow-moving animal.”

Ironic, then, that the event for which he gained his fame around our house, the reason Judy would grip him by those jowls, unbidden, and say, “You’re the best dog ever, yes you are,” was a moment of alacrity. Megan, our youngest, just a baby, crawling for the curb and the traffic beyond, we’re bound up in watching Mitchell show us his batting stance there in the front yard, and she’s nearly to the asphalt, and here’s Lightning, moving at his bah-doop-dee-doo pace and he snags her diaper in his teeth and pulls her back.

That’s a good boy.

We said goodbye to him last night, the fadeout that we’d seen coming and were still flabbergasted by when it arrived. Lightning, staring up at us, our expectant faces in his, our tears surfacing, and here’s that old floppy-tongued kiss, the one we’d had a thousand times and would never have again, and he’s gone, gone, gone, not so much a flashing discharge of electricity but a shattered star lighting up our days and nights.

## **Butter**

Here’s the thing about distance: Sometimes, you can see what needs seeing only by getting away from it, from getting far enough away that you can see the contours and shapes of not only the thing but also the things that lie adjacent to the thing, that influence where it is and how it is and why it is and, in the specific case I’m thinking of, why it is no longer.

So, if I stipulate that, let me also stipulate this: Your marriage is in trouble not the first time you tell her you’re going somewhere other than you end up. It’s not in trouble the first time she says everything is fine when you know it’s not. No, sir. Your marriage was in trouble long

before that, I'm suspecting, and it's only in the fact that you lie to her and she lies to you that the fundamental truth of that trouble starts to make itself known. Then, you must deal with it.

But let's face it: You could have dealt with it before, if you'd been more attuned to the subtleties of what was going on there. You might have brought her into your world and showed her around. You might have taken her bid when she said, "Isn't that a pretty cardinal there on the fence?" and you'd said, "Uh uh," and you hadn't even looked. The point of the thing is not the cardinal. It's the bid. It's the invitation. You left it hanging out there in the wind. You blew it.

But, look, here you are and here's the damage done, and you can either accept it and process it and pack it away, or you can ruminate on it ad infinitum. No choice, really. And, yes, certainly, if you want to hold everything up to the light and examine its finest threads, you can reconsider every interaction and every word and find a new name for everything. Your choice. It's not my thing, though.

You want absolution in this thing? Fine. Here it is: It's not all your fault. Nothing ever is. It's like ol' Howie Jones used to sing, "No one is to blame." Except, you know, some people are, and you and her both have a portion of it to shoulder. Make peace with it, brother. Move on. Be done.

And in the moving on, if you decide that you really need to fixate on a moment when the slide began, there's one you can find. It may seem picayune, but it matters as much as anything else.

"Can you pass the butter?" you said, the morning after the first fight you can remember between the two of you, a week after the honeymoon, a week before the foreclosure began.

"It's over here," she said. "You've got legs. Use them."

## **Osmosis**

My mother often told me that I never learned, which, if you ask me, was overly judgmental and a bit cruel (not to mention shortsighted and myopic, but if I were to list every adjective I associate with my mother, we'd be here all day).

I did learn. I just wasn't available for her lessons, which I think was the point she was really driving at every time she'd bring it up. Which was a lot. I mean, it was. Let's be fair.

Imprecision was a thread running through my family, it seems. Mom staked out the land of "never": I never learned, Brandon never listened, Margo never cared, Bobby never shut up. Dad was partial to the "always" side of things: Mom always missed the point. I always had a smart mouth. Brandon always was getting his undies in a wad. Margo was always tramping around like she was boy-crazy. Bobby always took what wasn't his.

If I'm being honest, it messed us up pretty good, these extremes amid all the actual subtleties. Being the oldest, I lit out of there first and stayed gone for years at a time. Brandon, the No. 2, took the longest of any of us to find his niche, but once he did, man, look out. He's the road manager of that band everybody's into these days—you know the one, with the lead singer who wears the makeup—and mother will be the first to tell you that he never stopped believing in his dreams, although Dad will say that he always had an ear for music. Me, I think they always loved Brandon best, although they never said as much. What difference does it make? Margo stayed behind, lived at home the longest, took care of them into their dotage, gave up her own ambitions. Bobby? Who can say anything about Bobby? Whatever he's picked up along the way, it's been by osmosis, because he doesn't have brains enough for book learning.

Anyway, that's us, the ill-fitting four kids and the two polarity parents. When Mom passed, just a week and a half after Dad, we gathered again and said our goodbyes. I tried to let some stuff go. I hope the others did, too.

Margo, of course, couldn't help but needle me about it. We're gathered around a table, filled with food that the neighbors brought by along with their condolences, and she leans in close where only I can hear and she says it.

"You said you'd never come back," she said. "You've been back twice in a month. I guess you're not so smart after all."

"Me?" I said. "I always come back. You never left. What's your excuse?"

Yeah, OK, I twisted the knife there at the end. Maybe I was unfair. I don't know.

In any case, I've never seen anybody look so hurt.