

SINKHOLES



BEWARE OF FALLING



Dennis Family Christmas 2024

Thoughts on Sinkholes and Sorry Choices

Over the past 40+ years I have been writing Christmas stories to remind us to reset our personal GPS to guide us toward the things that are really important. Regardless of the world events or even elections, it is too easy to allow ourselves to be so consumed by the stress and busyness of life and schedules to the point that we fail to recognize how important and impactful seemingly common everyday interactions with our spouse, our kids or with friends can be.

American writer, journalist and cartoonist Allen Saunders was quoted as saying that “Life is what happens to us while we’re busy making other plans.” Many of us either have or will wake up one day and realize that in spite of our masterfully designed plans, the life we envisioned turns out to be something totally different from the life we find ourselves living.



During the evening of May 8, 1981, Mae Rose Owens of Winter Park, Florida, was surprised to hear her dog Muffin loudly barking at her back door. Going to check on what was causing the ruckus, she saw a rapidly widening hole in her yard. Within hours, a decades-old sycamore tree had disappeared into the void, roots-first with what she later described as a "ploop" sound. Mae Rose was witnessing firsthand, a sinkhole.

Her family did not evacuate until the following day, shortly before the hole opened further and took with it her three-bedroom house. Before stabilizing, in addition to Mae Rose Owens’ house and tree, the sinkhole consumed a German car dealership, five Porsches, parts of two separate streets and the town's Olympic-sized swimming pool. Eventually the sinkhole grew to a width of 350 ft and a depth of 75ft, at the time making it the largest sinkhole event ever in Florida, according to geologist Jim Jammal, Florida's foremost expert on the phenomenon at the time.

As it happens, Florida is an area largely underlain by limestone and is highly susceptible to sinkholes like Mae Rose Owens’ home-yard-

tree-car-dealer-swimming-pool-eating-hole. In addition to Florida, other high-risk states include Texas, Alabama, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania. So, with the exception of Pennsylvania (and Arkansas), the Southeast Conference (“SEC”) states not only offer the most competitive football, but they also pose the greatest risk of sinkholes.

Alabama boasts the largest sinkhole in America. On the night of December 2nd, 1972, a Calera, Alabama resident reported that they heard ‘a roaring noise,’ ‘the sound of breaking trees’ and ‘the shaking of his house!’ A huge crater was found two days later by some hunters, whose first word at finding the epic hole was ‘Golly’ – hence the sinkhole became known as the ‘Golly Hole’. The crater is located just south of Birmingham and 46 miles east of Tuscaloosa, and spans 325 feet long, 300 feet wide, and 120 feet deep. Today, it is filled with water.

Donna and I got married in 1975 in Fayetteville, Arkansas while we were in college. Since our married life began 49 years ago, assuming we make it to Christmas day this year, two twenty-something worldly unwise kids were granted 18,106 days to spend wisely. Of course, neither of us had a clue about how a marriage was supposed to work or what the future would hold. I seem to remember that since Donna wanted to be a lawyer, she didn’t want any children, and I think I voted for one and a half. In spite of our naiveté on family planning, life happened moment by moment, and we began the process of growing up, sometimes without even knowing it.



Early in our marriage, I started writing short Christmas stories to friends and clients encouraging them to slow down for Christmas. Over time though, as our family became larger, the Christmas stories changed and grew from a few paragraphs to small booklets. I wrote stories about meeting my wife at a chicken plant at a summer job in 1974; waiting on the hospital steps for thirty minutes with friends in Springdale, Arkansas at 11:30 pm in 1977



to have our first child (to avoid paying for an extra day of hospital care); carting our seven kids over 10,000 kilometers of roads in Europe and England in a nine passenger Peugeot J5 diesel van; physically losing many of our 7 kids, (our youngest in Europe and some in the US more than once); losing my dad to cancer; a friend losing his wife to cancer when she was in her 40's; and perhaps one of our most painful life events, recently watching a dear family member lose independence and memories as she slid into dementia.

Each story was a snapshot of our family's life over the 49 years of marriage and 18,106 days of hard work, fun, tears and family raising by Donna and me. Together, we birthed eight children, lost one back to the Lord at a full-term birth, and parented seven children (five boys and two girls) to adulthood. By now it should be clear that Donna's plan for no kids and my plan for 1½ obviously fell to the wayside along with her plan to be a lawyer. Thankfully, all our children are healthy, independent and now the proud parents of 26 children of their own.

This all occurred through countless moments and times where young kids preferred to talk rather than sleep, or we had to have discipline applied downstairs where the kids' rooms were. "Applied" discipline always took too much time as I refused to leave a kid angry or crying after punishment. I stayed with them until they were laughing again, which often took some time. At the moment, it seemed to be a waste of time, but now I think it was best to take the time. But feel free to ask my kids.

All are happily married except for our baby girl, Rachel, who is single, 35, and living in Paris as a missionary. Our kids and their families are scattered across the US (Phoenix, Little Rock and Chicago) and the world (Cali, Colombia and of course my little girl in Paris, France) and our grands range in age from 3 to 18.



The thing is, neither families nor sinkholes are random events. The Dennis family began 49 years ago when two young people fell in love and got married. We had very little money, but plenty of hopes and dreams. During those 49 years, there were very good times and

very bad times, but through these events over the years, our family has grown and developed as a result of good parenting decisions and despite bad decisions.

Every sinkhole began sometime in the distant past as a small hole hidden underground with no natural external surface drainage. Over time, as it rained or flooded, underground water built up and slowly dissolved the cavity, expanding its size before it drained. This process took a great deal of time, and if you are unfortunate enough to live above such a disaster area, you are none the wiser until the underground hole becomes too big and the surface weight too heavy, and it experiences what my Chicago-based-Floyd grandkids call a “collapsion.”

Whether we realize it or not, every one of us are currently living lives that may inadvertently create personal sinkholes. Marriages and families don’t fall apart overnight. I’ve never met anyone who started out with the goal of their marriage ending in divorce. Neither jobs nor lives consumed with busyness are the real causes of these sinkholes called divorces. Sure, they may be factors, but it takes years of unappreciation, hateful or bitter comments, missed moments with your family and wrong priorities to create those sinkholes that lead to broken marriages and broken children.

Perhaps not 18,106 days’ worth, but a lot.



I remember those early days of marriage myself. Days, which in hindsight, could easily have been setting the stage for a future sinkhole event. Donna was busy managing a large family and serving as an unpaid mom Uber shuttle service for 7 kids while I was busy with work, travel for work, coaching and church duties. For many families, just when the main breadwinner is hitting their highest earning years, and the spouse is facing empty nest syndrome with kids going off to college, a husband and wife wake up and realize that they lost their marriage to sinkholes of busyness, separate schedules and wrong priorities. I even wrote a Christmas card about this point in my life when I realized that marriages really weren’t a 50/50 partnership, but a 100/100 commitment.

I knew my priorities needed to change, and it was up to me to decide which was most important, work or family. I chose to make my wife and family a priority, so that I wouldn't end up creating another sinkhole. Luckily, I was not addicted to hunting, fishing or golf, so I was able to adapt and take up Razorback football (to facilitate my wife's love of the Hogs) and chase dead people's tombstones across the country (Donna also loves genealogy).



Somewhere along the way many men like me, have forgotten to make their spouse a priority because they thought marriage should be 50/50, or they were too busy and allowed other things to become more important than spending one on one time talking together. Without realizing the danger, a family-your family-can collapse in a massive sinkhole called divorce.

I remember a time when Donna and I had an argument when our kids were growing up. One of our kids intervened (probably a future missionary or pastor) and asked if we were going to get a divorce. From the question, I knew that our kids had learned from their friends in school that when a marriage breaks, the children end up being the broken pieces. Many of their friends were proof of what these potential sinkholes looked like.

It may just be a coincidence, but teenagers tend to be at just the right age to be most affected by parents as they grow more distant to each other. The kids react by hiding behind closed doors to their room, getting lost in headphones or cell phones or retreating to "friends" on social media. Of course, sometimes they may express their fear and frustration through good old fashioned arguments with the parents. Children become lonely just like their parents, which contributes to an over 60% increase in teen suicides in the past ten years.



Perhaps your stress or frustration from work makes you prone to angry responses to your spouse or kids or maybe it's your high expectations for your kid's grades or athletic performances. Maybe you're just too tired to take time to really listen to your spouse or child or teenager who wants to talk about a problem. This is prime

sinkhole territory as your spouse becomes more distant and your kids find it easier to pull away and rebel.

Sinkholes are a terrible reminder that the devil really is in the details. Both land-based and family sinkholes are potentially growing all the time but can be hidden for years until the unseen hole (like loneliness or a wounded spirit) becomes so large that major cracks appear. Compared to land-based sinkholes, family sinkholes can have a much more devastating impact on spouses, children, families and even friends. A major sinkhole event in our family would not only affect mine and Donna's lives, but also the lives of our kids, their spouses and their children (39 mostly innocent bystanders) and that's not even considering friends or other family members.

After reading this card, you may feel some guilt, recognizing that you have been inadvertently excavating multiple sinkholes with your spouse and your children. However, even with all the potential destructiveness of personal and family sinkholes, it's never too late to repair the damage if you are willing to lay your pride aside to save your life and your family.

Talk to your husband or wife or kids and apologize for putting other things first instead of them. Ask them how you can be a better husband, wife or father or mother. You may be surprised by what you hear.

Over 2000 years ago, a young Jewish couple traveled about 70 to 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem for a mandatory census issued by Caesar Augustus. The young girl, probably no older than 15 or 16, was in the late stages of a pregnancy, so the two-week trip on foot was likely very difficult. Neither Mary, nor Joseph her betrothed husband, had any idea of the future events they would face when they set out on the trip to Bethlehem.

They didn't know there wouldn't be any rooms available when they arrived in Bethlehem and would have to stay with cattle in a stable. They didn't know how close Mary was to delivery nor that their baby, Jesus, would be



delivered beside livestock. They didn't know that they would be visited by shepherds or by eastern kings. They didn't know that their son would grow up to begin a movement that would forever impact the world. They didn't know that He would end up being crucified to die for the sins of the world and then rise from the dead in three days. They had no way of knowing that over 2000 years later, the life of their baby child would change the direction of my life and my family forever.

While I have made a lot of mistakes and missed a lot of opportunities, (unknowingly starting to dig one or more potential sinkholes), thanks to Donna, I did not miss the most important opportunity of my life. Donna was serious about her faith and prior to our marriage, introduced me to Mary and Joseph's baby, Jesus.

Thanks to Donna and her example, the Baby-turned-Savior has guided both of us through our marriage and lives, directing us around potential sinkholes. No matter what you think, you always have the same opportunity I had - to meet with Him personally. He still specializes in saving people from sinkholes of all types. In fact, He's the only One who truly can restore sinkhole damage, repair marriages, heal broken hearts and offer salvation and hope.

