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CHAPTER

4

The Rude Awakening

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*A*s Cameron trudged home from school in the pouring rain, it was all he could do to hold back the tears. This has been the absolute worst day of my life, he thought. Why me?

For a split second, he allowed his mind to think back on his math class at 1:40 that afternoon. That's when his nightmare had started – exactly at that moment in time.

He knew he hadn't done that well on the test, but he reminded himself that he had tried, and at least should have passed. As the paper slid off the desk into his lap, he took a sideways glance at the mark. 26 out of 80. It couldn't be. He looked again at the numbers staring at him from the page. It was true. 26 out of 80. Five light strokes of a red pen had sealed his fate. He was a failure.

His stomach churned as he walked out of one deep puddle into another. The sound of his boots dragging through the water weighed on his heart. I'm not going to think about it anymore he told himself. If I do, I'll be sick.

As the wind picked up and blew relentlessly around him, his hands began to feel cold from the stinging droplets of rain. His mind raced. Maybe I should run away from home. I could stay up in the tree house for a few days – no one would think to look for me there. No one would even care to look. Who would want a failure like me in their family? Maybe I could throw the test into the garbage can beside the fence – no one would know.

Oh, no! My parents – they'll kill me. Mom warned me this would happen if I didn't pay more attention. But to what? How was I supposed to know? Math was beyond me. My scrambled brain just didn't get it. Besides all that, why do I need to know math anyway? It's just a bunch of stupid numbers. I can't do it. I don't want to do it. I'm not going to do it.

For a moment, that last thought made him feel powerful – but

only for a moment. Then grim reality set in. No matter which way he thought about it, the horrible numbers didn't lie – 26 out of 80. He was still a failure. The tears began to flow freely.

Angela looked up as she heard the screen door slam. There he goes again, she thought. Why can't ten-year-olds just close the door like everyone else? Why do they have to slam it? She began to deliver lecture 48 – the one about not slamming doors – when Cameron poked his head around the corner. Angela knew instantly that this was not the time for a lecture about doors.

He was a mess. Muddy shoes. Wet shirt. No coat. Stringy hair. But it was his face that worried her. His red, swollen eyes told the whole story. What on earth had happened?

He just stood there, staring at her.

“Do you want to talk, son?”

He hesitated, then fell into her arms. She hugged him. He cried, then tried to talk, then cried some more. Cameron had totally crashed. His heart was heavy with a deep sense of hopelessness. Math had defeated him and he knew it.

Slowly, the sobbing and crying stopped.

“Oh, Mom, I'm stupid. I'm a doughhead. I can't do math. I won't ever be able to do it. I'm a failure just like that ugly duckling in the story you used to read to me. What am I going to do?” wailed Cameron. He poured out his heart to his mother, as only a defeated child can – the whole embarrassing, frustrating story, injury upon injury.

As a devoted parent, Angela's heart went out to him, yet an encouraging feeling came over her. She had been trying for months to help Cameron; he wouldn't let her. But now? Much as she hated to see her son in such a state, she realized that finally, the all too familiar “*teachable moment*” had arrived.

“Why don't you go and clean up a bit – put on some dry clothes and wash your face. Then I have something to show you.”

You see, Angela was an accomplished student in the school

of life. She had learned that if there comes a time when humility can replace stubbornness, an opportunity for learning occurs. On several occasions, Angela's older sister Rita, her surrogate mother, had utilized such key moments to teach her some of life's necessary lessons. She realized that now was the time for her to do the same for her son.

Cameron returned to the kitchen a few minutes later. Angela had finished cooking the macaroni for the dinner casserole, and was now preparing to make some chicken noodle soup, a Mother's bullet-proof pacifier.

She peered out the window to see the dull effect the rain was having upon the day. Calmly she said, "I'd like to talk a little bit about water."

Water? thought Cameron. What's that got to do with anything?

"Where do we get water, Cam?" asked Angela, as she poured the soup mix in the pot.

"Just look outside, Mom, there's enough out there for a year."

Angela looked at him with that "Okay, you're witty" look that only a mother can deliver, and said, "Seriously, there's more to it than that."

He thought for a minute. "Well, it rains, like it is today. The water stays in puddles, lakes and oceans, then it evaporates, makes clouds, it rains again – you know, that whole water cycle thing. Mrs. Kennedy made us learn that stuff in science class."

"Obviously, you learned it well," said Angela. "You see, school does have a purpose."

Cameron groaned.

"Now," continued Angela, "did you consider that water needs to be organized in order to make use of it?"

"Organized? You mean like the clothes in my drawers?" A typical sarcastic statement – Cameron was on his way back.

"Not quite. I was thinking more of this. How is the rain that is pouring down today eventually going to come out of my tap here at

the sink?”

“Oh,” said Cam, “you mean like a bunch of pipes to bring the water from up there into our houses. They need to be good ones so that stuff doesn’t get stuck in there and stop the water from moving. I hope they keep them clean too – I sure don’t want to drink dirty water.”

“You’re right, Cam. All of those things need to be considered when organizing the water for our use. Now, can you see how this idea of organization can apply to your math?” asked Angela.

Cameron thought for a minute. Math and water? Together? No way. Water’s cool – math isn’t.

Angela interrupted his thoughts. “Think about this. When we want to have running water in our house, what has to happen?”

“We need to turn on the tap?” quipped Cameron mischievously.

Angela rolled her eyes.

“OK, OK. I suppose we need to gather it up into those big reservoirs we saw last summer.”

“That’s correct. Then?”

“Somebody has to put pipes in the ground so the water can come into the house.”

“That’s right, but don’t the workers have to know what they’re doing and why they’re doing it before they start moving dirt to put those pipes in the ground?”

“Yeah, but what’s that got to do with math?”

“There are lots and lots of numbers out there, but math involves organizing them in certain ways for certain purposes. For instance, when you want to add numbers, you’ve already learned that you need to put them together – like what we do when we gather large volumes of water in those reservoirs. When you subtract, you need to take something away, which is what the workers do when they put the pipes in the ground – they remove dirt.”

“Oh,” said Cam slowly. “And when you multiply, you organize numbers into groups and put them together to get an answer. When

you divide, you separate them into groups to get an answer.”

“Exactly,” continued Angela. “When we organize numbers, we get useful information. When we organize water, it also works for our benefit. If you organize it correctly, it can become useful in lots of ways – like making this bowl of soup.”

She now had Cameron’s complete attention.

“Order is also a very important thing to remember when we use water. Do you remember what I was doing when you first walked into the kitchen?”

“You were yelling at me about not slamming the door,” said Cam.

Angela looked sheepish – she really should have let him come in before she started talking – then she would have known not to mention the door. Next time, she thought. Next time, I’ll look first.

“That’s OK, Mom. You’ve told me a million times not to slam that door. Anyway, I think you were cooking macaroni,” said Cam.

“Right. How do you think order applies to that process?”

“You need to boil the water first, then add the macaroni so it will cook. If you tried to cook the macaroni first, and then add the water, what a mess!”

The confident tone was returning to his voice.

“Absolutely!” Angela joyfully affirmed. “Now...”

Cam interrupted. “I know what you’re going to say. Order is also important in math. Like when I do that order of operations thing. I have to figure out the answers in the right order, otherwise, the whole thing is wrong. Or, like positive and negative numbers. When I’m adding them, I have to go in a certain order or I get the wrong sign and the wrong number.”

“That’s right, Cam. We organize numbers into certain orders so we get useful numbers that give us answers to our questions, such as how much water is needed in the pot to cook enough macaroni for dinner tonight.”

Angela noticed that Cam’s facial expression had changed.

He was no longer as anxious and frustrated as he had been at the beginning of their conversation. Hope had replaced fear. There was just one more thing she had to help him understand.

“OK, Cam, now tell me what you’ve learned so far.”

Catch the rest of Cameron’s Teachable Moment in:

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Discover
the
Essential Foundations
of
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