

I'm reuben strayer. marlene entered my family and my life in 1988, when I was 12. she entered a family in shambles. I was the oldest of three, am still the oldest, now of five. and the three of us were not easy to manage. and we were difficult to manage in totally different ways. looking back on it, it seems like the three of us were in a sort of competition to find new and creative ways to make the people looking after us miserable. and then there was my mom and my dad, who weren't easy to manage either. it was apparent to me then, not even bar mitzvah age, I clearly remember thinking that marlene was the only one in my family with any sense. besides me.

it's not possible to imagine my family making it through that period without marlene. when I think about those years, the way it feels to me is that we were a family lost at sea, and really there were lots of moments that it felt more like I was floundering down a raging river without a life jacket, struggling to keep my head up. marlene was a life jacket for me and my family.

I come from a home of very bad communicators. in my home, you cannot talk to anyone about anything. and then came marlene, and wow can marlene talk. I learned from marlene the power of words. I have a vivid memory of marlene moving in, we were in our living room in houston, she was busy unpacking a box of books, and I was busy being a 13 year old asshole. the books she was unloading were the Time Life cooking series, one book on soups, one book on breads, one book on chicken. I noticed there was no book on beef, so I said, where's the beef? no beef, marlene said. how can you have a book on chicken but not beef? I wasn't being curious, I was being difficult. marlene said, well, it looks like steve (that was her ex-husband), looks like steve got that one. we split them up. I thought that was just hilarious, you split up the time life books? I'm laughing about it. how did you decide who got which book? did you draw straws?

I remember what happened next with incredible clarity, like it happened this morning instead of 25 years ago. she was silent for a moment, and then said, reuben, it's a very painful process. what you're saying right now is hurting me.

what you're saying right now is hurting me. it was the most honest thing anyone had ever said to me. I didn't know what to do with that sort of honesty, but over the course of a thousand more honest conversations with marlene, I slowly learned that you can talk about things that matter, and that what you say to other people matters.

A few years later marlene and my dad moved to philadelphia and I went to college. marlene was now raising two teenage girls who were very, very difficult to manage, and two small children, while working full time, and also being a wife to my father, let me tell you none of that was easy. When I would visit, it was

routine that she and I were the only ones up at 1am, me writing emails on my laptop, her cleaning the kitchen. And so we had a lot of honest conversations at 1am, mostly conversations about the challenges everyone was facing as we were growing up. And over the course of many years of honest conversations, we all grew up, and stopped being so difficult.

Having successfully steered this family lost at sea to shore over 25 years, marlene was just transitioning to her next set of challenges when she got sick. she got so sick, so fast, and now she's gone, even though we still had a thousand more honest conversations in store. I don't know where those honest conversations are going to come from, but now our family can swim without a life jacket. thank you marlene, for teaching us to swim.