

Jeremy Wilson  
Journalism  
Dr. Bednar  
06/13/2019

## My Turtle Shell

When observing the chronological order of an individual's life, it can be broken down into segments with recurring themes. From the time someone can speak until adolescence, individuals do not have a full understanding of secrecy. Children build trust with their parents and loved ones and readily engage in conversations, even when they are questioned about certain aspects of their lives. However, when an individual reaches adolescence, they begin to analyze how one response differs from another and how impactful that response is. This is the stage in which individuals begin to keep secrets.

One day at school, in 2010, I had just gotten out of football practice and seen a voicemail from my girlfriend. I listened to it and she told me that things weren't working and that our relationship was over. I was dumped by voicemail. I was really upset about this and my mom felt it. She asked me, "what happened at school?" I didn't want to tell her what happened so I just said "nothing" and to my surprise, she accepted that. It's not that I wanted to keep a secret from her, I just wanted to grieve without constant bombardment from my family. I didn't like telling family some aspects of my life and I didn't know why. There was no level of comfortability in telling someone I had a bad day. I had countless family members pass away, growing up. When my grandmother passed away, one of my elementary school teachers told the entire class; I guess so that they would treat me better or at least not treat me poorly. Everyone knew about it and my friends came up to me and asked me about what happened but again, I just didn't want to talk. This carried over into middle school, but then it dawned on me that if no one knew about it, I wouldn't have to talk about it.

At first, I thought that I was different for not opening up, but then I discovered that most of my friends did the same thing, to a certain extent. Most of their parents received the same "school was fine" and nothing more. That was comforting, but as I progressed into high school I realized that I was still doing the same thing. I gradually began to see my friends grant miniscule amounts of information to their families and I longed to know why I felt uncomfortable doing so.

Growing up, I played a variety of sports: baseball, tennis, basketball, and football. My freshman year of high school was when I made the decision to pursue tennis exclusively. Tennis has had one of the biggest impacts on my life and it will always be something I hold near and dear to my heart. It has to be one of the most mentally exhausting sports out there. It's really difficult to balance your feelings and ideas, and it's all on you because there's no one else out there to help you with that. The ability to problem-solve demands absolute focus: trying to figure out which shots work best against my opponent and thinking, "my backhand isn't really working, maybe I should use more slice," or trying to anticipate where your opponent is going to serve and then return a ball at 115 miles per hour, all in a tenth of a second. It's mentally exhausting and that exhaustion takes a toll as the match progresses. You will notice that tennis players are some of the most mentally unstable people when they're on the court. People smash racquets and verbally abuse themselves over the slightest mistake. The most successful players are able to overcome this instability and resume play as if nothing happened.

During one of my matches, I was down 2-6; 2-4; 0-30; and I was making a fool of myself. I went as far as to tell someone's parents to "shut up" when they were just cheering for their son and I ended up smashing one of my racquets. Everything in this match was going downhill and I was looking like a jerk. I don't know if this is a good piece of advice, but my mom told me a few times that if I'm going to "be a jerk" on court that I had to win. I eventually channeled that energy into a stronger sense of focus and won the match 2-6; 6-4; 7-6;

As instances like this happened more and more, my problem-solving skills began to mature and it became one of my strong suits. However, you can't win everything. During one of my matches, I was up 6-1; 5-2; and ended up losing the match. I was four points away from victory and when the match was over, my coaches asked me "what happened?" I felt much better about myself when I told them "I don't know, he was just better than me" and dedicated more time to internalizing the situation, rather than absorbing their criticisms. I went to college to play tennis and when I got there, I began to question my morality: why I thought a certain way, spoke a certain way, and treated people a certain way. Why did I internalize everything? Why did I get over things so quickly? It was all thanks to tennis. Tennis had prepared me for these situations in my entire life. Life and the tennis court are the exact same for me. When something both good or bad happens, it's internalized. My growth and development was centered around internal problem-solving. I didn't feel the need to talk to anyone because my daily issues were on the tennis court and when other issues arose off of the court, my skills translated over into real life. It was the only way I knew how to analyze obstacles.

It's easy to say that because I played all of these sports that I chose tennis, but looking back on everything, I think tennis chose me. I've been like this since I was a little kid and although tennis definitely helped me get over many obstacles in my life, I think that I possessed the necessary skills to succeed at it. There must be more to my decision than "I like it the best."

Eventually, I began to open up to my family and close friends. I remember how uncomfortable I was in middle school and high school to tell my parents I had a girlfriend. They usually just found out on their own (somehow). I called my mom, my freshman year of college, and told her I had a new girlfriend and although it was slightly awkward for me to tell her that, the feeling of accomplishment, in the sense that I knew I did the right thing in telling her, outweighed that.

As I met more and more people at Southwestern, I began to find it strange that people I had only met a handful of times knew things about me. It wasn't general information like where I'm from, what my major is, or what fraternity I joined; it was very specific information about my life. Not that it was a huge issue, but I just found it strange that someone at a party approached me because they knew someone who knew my ex-girlfriend from high school. At the time, it was kind of a touchy subject, but that was where I clocked in to the Mouthwestern experience. I remember telling one of my older friends on the tennis team about how that situation was kind of off putting and they explained to me that everyone here talks. I guess I thought it would take more than a few months for people to start keeping tabs on you. The same thing happened growing up but I always assumed it was because my school district had one kindergarten, two elementary schools, one middle school and one high school, so everyone has essentially known each other for the past 13 years. I gradually became more and more accustomed to people knowing things about me and as unsettling as it was for strangers to talk about you in this campus-wide game of telephone, I learned to accept it.

There was a specific turning point, during my time here, that made me resort back into my shell. Up until my sophomore year, nothing that I told my friends had anything to do with

family tragedy. Nothing tragic had happened to me or my family in years. One day, a few days prior to me moving back to Southwestern from summer break, my mom discovered she had a lesion on the upper-right side of her mouth. She went to an otolaryngologist to have it examined and he said that it was most likely nothing. He ran a few tests and she was on her way. Two weeks later, I received a phone call from my mom mid-day. That was nothing out of the ordinary; she usually calls me a few times a week.

“Hey Mom, what’s up?”

I did not anticipate what followed. Her voice began to break and I knew she was crying. The lesion in her mouth was cancer.

I went back to my room and was overwhelmed with emotions. The only person that knew was my girlfriend. I didn’t want to tell anyone else. Weeks passed and I began to handle it internally. One night, I was hanging out with some friends and I broke down in tears. I hid it well and went outside to our backyard. I was out there for hours talking to my girlfriend about it. I felt like she was the only person I could talk to about it. Her mom had a heart attack a few days prior and our conversation was more centered around validity of emotion and comfort. It was different from someone on the outside just mindlessly confirming that “everything is going to be alright.” Eventually, a few of my friends found us and asked what was going on. I didn’t really know what to say. I didn’t want to tell them but it didn’t seem realistic for me to say “nothing,” so I told them. That was the moment where I began to reenter my shell.

Over the next few days, more and more people found out. People started to pop into my room and say that they were sorry and that they were praying for me and my family. I never overlook or perceive such nice gestures as rude. It’s more about who I am as a person. I don’t like the constant reminder of something that’s going to stay on my mind. Why would I want the thought of my mom being really sick when I need to study, take an exam, play a tennis match, or enjoy down time with some friends? I loved that people were checking in on my mom and making sure she was doing okay. It was just something that I didn’t want to talk about, especially when it was getting worse. It brought back some emotions that I hadn’t felt in a while and it was really hard to figure out how to deal with them. This was the side of Mouthwestern that I despised.

An exception that I have when it comes to informing someone about something I don’t want people to know is, for example, when I have to contact a professor about missing class. I contacted a few of my professors because I had to miss a day of school to go home when my mom was having surgery. I was always the last person to leave one of my classes, but almost every week my professor would come up to my desk and ask about how she was doing. I love that this school has professors that engage with students in aspects of their lives beyond the classroom and again, I really appreciated that she was worried about her, it was just something I didn’t want to answer. I remember going back to my room afterwards and it was the only thing I could think about. I didn’t want to think about it.

Talking personal things through has an interesting place in my heart. I feel like sometimes I resort back to that stage in my life where I didn’t want to open up to anyone. At the same time, I’m definitely not the same person I was eight years ago. I have great relationships with my family and they do, in fact, know everything about my life. I think things changed when I was given some space from them. Not in a bad way, but I think that drive to get even closer to them stemmed from the physical distance between us. Regarding Southwestern, I love the tight knit community that we are. It definitely has some consequences regarding the informative set of personal files that anyone can access at any given time, but it’s a community of love and care. As

much as I dislike those unwanted personal reminders, people are just looking out for one another and I feel like everyone is in the same circle. I love meeting alumni or interested students and telling them about my Southwestern Experience. It has been a rollercoaster over the past three years and as much as I dislike how Mouthwestern operates, Southwestern definitely nudged me out of my shell. Southwestern's motto is also something that I will always hold on to (well, the opposite of it). The motto is "*Non Quis Sed Quid*," or "Not Who But What," but if my experience here has taught me anything it's "Not What But Who." Everyone here has shaped me into the best me I could be and I couldn't be more grateful.

I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not.



Author's Afterwards:

I was really nervous when I was writing this because I felt like I was all over the place. However, I think that everything that I incorporated was all a major part of my growth and development. I can't envision another way of leading up to the climax and overall moral of the story. There were definitely times that I didn't know what was going to appear on the paper but I think that's normal for a personal narrative. If I asked anyone to provide me with a narrative about an aspect of their life, I think they would feel the same way.

I enjoy this story, ironically, because it's something that's important to me. It's about my life, how my morality was shaped, and the impact that others have left on my life. Like I said in the conclusion, Southwestern has gradually nudged me out of my shell and although I consider sharing this story risky, I think that there's no better way to tell it than to the community that has given me so much.

I think that my mindset and behavior is what caused me to gravitate towards tennis. The reason I say that tennis chose me is because I never had training in the psychology of the sport. I think that I was made, at least for now, to pursue it. It helps me figure out so many things in my life.