

“At the Table”
Mitch Baker

If there are two things in this world that I love, it's hanging out with my family, and drinking coffee. How awesome is coffee, right? It picks you up, it calms you down. Coffee is the life blood that drives the dreams of champions. But what I love way more than coffee is to be with my family. They're pretty neat in the most random ways, and we have some really fun conversations about music and life – filled with Saturday Night Live one-liners and random movie quotes. There's always a lot of laughter when I get to go home and visit them. Actually, I guess you could say one of my favorite things to do is eat with my family. It only takes us 30 minutes to eat, but we'll easily spend two hours at the dinner table drinking coffee and catching up on what's going on in our lives. Some of my happiest times have come from sitting in a chair just like this and talking to my family. Like the time I came home to the dinner table, and my sister Abbey was telling us how she managed to fit our dog into one of her jackets.. She then showed us this picture, and explained how the dog ran across the street to show off his new biker swag. You see? Perfect example of the stuff that happens at our table. My family feels open to sharing a lot while we're at the table, so we get to hear what each of us is going through at a really deep level. Because of this, we all come away a little wiser. Today, just like at my family's table, I'd like to share with you some of the lessons I've learned along the way.

If you and I were hanging out around a table just like this, there are three truths that I would share. Our high points and our low

points are meant to teach us, that it is dangerous to cling, and that life is always getting better.

I can remember this one story I told my family at the table that still makes me laugh today. If you're like me, some of the funniest moments you've experienced have happened over the most unplanned, spur-of-the-moment kind of stuff that you just walked into. That's been true pretty much all my life. I'll explain. We've all dreamed about it. We may already have it, or we're studying for it right now. It's the first step into the world of freedom and adventure. That's right- getting our driver's license. Getting my license was one of the biggest accomplishments in my entire life right next to discovering coffee goes great with ice cream and being born. The day finally came. On a cold February morning, I, a high school sophomore, jumped into my 2004 red jeep wrangler and sped off to school, driving myself for the first time, proud as could be. I pulled into my school's driveway and rolled right past the students who still had to get dropped off by their parents. Ha! I bet they were telling their mom or dad they had all their homework done or when they would need being picked up from practice after school. But not this guy. Instead, I wheeled into the student parking lot, parked my jeep, and strutted into school like I owned it "why yes, this IS my Jeep, ladies". So I walked into my ag mechanics class – you know, the one I took mostly because I wanted to keep ag my schedule, certainly not because I had any talent for ag mechanics. I walked into class, and from across the room a group of the ag mechanic guys shouted "Hey Mitch! Is that your jeep?" With a big ole grin, I said, "It sure is." The guys were impressed, I could tell. Then they asked me, "Is it four-wheel drive?" And I said, "Nope. Automatic."... Half of ya'll

may be laughing because you know how hilariously dumb that sounds. The other half of you have no idea why people are laughing. That's exactly what I was feeling! My first day of freedom suddenly took a hard turn toward humiliation. From that point on, I was known as the boy in ag mechanics who didn't know a triple carburetor compressor from a flux capacitor . Am I right? Stupiddd. It was embarrassing. People are mean. Their jokes got harsh. That day and for the rest of the semester, I was a misfit-in that class. My day of feeling on top of the world came crashing down like that.

Odds are great we've all said something just as embarrassing as that once or twice in our lives. Some of us, like me, may have let those moments bring us down into the gutter. When we think about it, we can either classify our life as going good, bad, or a state that can be best described as "blah".

Maybe you're on top of the world right now- you just nailed that test last week. You shot a three pointer in basketball and everyone was watching. That cute girl you've been thinking about- ya'll are texting everyday now. But there's always a flipside to that. Some of us may be going through some really tough stuff right now. Some of us here are freshmen, and this new life in high school is not the cool party that it felt like everybody said it would be. Some of us were trusted to make that game winning play – and missed it. Some of us just broke up with a person that meant a lot to us, and we're definitely not over it.

Whether you would describe this moment you're living as a high or a low – I can tell you that where you are right now is exactly where you are supposed to be to get where you are going next.

Each experience that comes our way is meant to shape us, teach us, and grow us. For example, from that day in ag mechanics, I learned that when I'm full of ugly pride, I say some really dumb stuff. So live your moments. Observe it. Look for the lesson. Make adjustments. And walk on. Love where you've been. The good days and the bad days lead us to where we're meant to be.

What can you learn from where you are? Think about it. Either way, it's cool that you're there. If it's good, enjoy it, because trust me when I say it's temporary. If it's bad, keep on going, because trust me when I say it's temporary.. Celebrate the good, embrace that bad. We need both in our lives to get us where we're going.

If it's true that these moments are leading us to where we're meant to go, then we can't cling to any of them. Don't get me wrong, clinging isn't the same as valuing the relationships we have, or appreciating all that's been given to you. We're told to seize the day, and we should, but when we cling, we try to preserve moments in our life that aren't meant to be preserved. Most of us here know an old guy or girl who's stuck in 1992 when they lead the team to the state championship- that's clinging: Letting memories consume you.

Sometimes, when we win – we want to just freeze life right there. Winning feels good – why move on when we could just talk about this the rest of our lives? But that's not how we were meant to live. That's the same as quitting after one defeat, or worse, before we've given our all. When we hold onto the past, it prevents us from getting ready for future victories. There are other dreams to dream. There are other wins that we gotta

straight up chase if we really want them. Giving up and telling ourselves we're satisfied when really we're scared is not an option. One loss shouldn't be enough to stop you. One win shouldn't be enough to satisfy you.

Application Let's break this down. We can think of life as light. If we hold our palms up, with open fingers, we can let life pour through our fingers. Go ahead, try it out. Every victory, disappointment, everything that we've experienced up to this point in our life is literally passing through the palm of our hand. In life, there will be some great days: we won that CDE we prepared so hard for at National Convention, the coolest, prettiest girl in the whole chapter is your girlfriend or maybe we're having a really great hair day. It's completely human nature for us to want to cling (*close one palm*) to those good times as hard as we possibly can.

And it works both ways. There will be days in our lives that feel so dark. Maybe the people we thought were our friends decided you're not cool enough to be a part of their group. Maybe family life is kind of rough right now. Maybe we look in the mirror, and we don't like what we see. We're still clinging, but here we're clinging to the idea we aren't good enough to have friends, or a happy family or confidence. We believe a lie- and then cling to that lie to protect ourselves from getting hurt. What we're clinging to is a false sense of security. But look what we've done. No light can pour through these hands. Life hasn't stopped shining. We just experience less of it. When we hold onto what's behind us, good or bad, we lose the ability to move forward with our life. We have to let go of the good and bad so we can receive this moment.. Love where you are- just don't cling to it. It's the way we were meant to live.

Let's take a look at one story at the table that showed me just what can happen when we don't cling.

My brother Nick is a great football player - middle linebacker to be precise. Now if you've watched very many football games, you've seen some injuries. On the field Nick had the reputation for being fearless. He played hard and tackled hard regardless of the size of his opponent. During one particular game, Nick went in as hard as he could for the tackle. Honestly, he bounced off the guy like a racquet ball, crashed to the ground, and didn't get up. He lay on the ground, still. That's when we heard him all the way up to the pressbox where I sat, shouting in pain. It was bad. He had to be helped up, put in the car, and driven to the emergency room. We found out later that night that both bones below his elbow were snapped in two. A late night surgery, two rods and thirteen screws in his left arm meant that his football season was over. Nick was heartbroken. Football was his passion. He had played with his teammates since third grade. In the weeks that followed that night, I saw my brother experience the lowest and saddest time in his entire life. If you know Nick, you know Nick doesn't do "sad" very often. It was awful. Now this may sound strange, but I think it's awesome that my brother broke his arm! I know, I know, I'm a terrible person, but hear me out. Nick's injury happened his freshman year of high school, about the same time he was deciding that FFA just wasn't for him. While his brother, me, was doing the FFA thing, Nick was going to invest all his energies into his favorite pursuit - football. With his football dreams for that season destroyed, Nick had some unplanned free time on his hands, so he decided to tag along with me to Indianapolis for his very first FFA National Convention. With a borrowed jacket and low

expectations, he walked into the convention hall and felt the energy and saw the excitement of this nation's amazing FFA members. My brother immediately developed a new passion – FFA. Those three days changed his life. From then on, he knew he belonged in the FFA. Nick rejoined his football team his senior year. He started every game as middle linebacker and led the defense to the team's first undefeated season in more than sixty years. His leadership on defense was key to his team's success and his passion ignited those around him. But he didn't give up on FFA when he could play again. He went on to compete in national CDE's, serve as a chapter officer, and this morning he's in the crowd as the State Secretary for the Tennessee FFA Association. No one could be prouder of him than me, his big brother.

Every moment of our lives is preparing us for something bigger and better. Nick didn't know it at the time, but as he sits here today, he understands. Had he not broken that arm, he would most likely not be here as a state officer and would not have benefited from all that FFA has to offer. We have to believe that our best days are ahead of us and that the experiences we're going through today are preparing us for something bigger and better than anything we can imagine. When I think about my time in the FFA, I realize that these have been the greatest days of my life - so far. At the same time, as awesome as this is, I have faith the best days of my life are yet to come.

Please understand what I'm saying. I'm not talking about a cotton-candy, no-pain-ever future when I say the best days are yet to come. There will be a day that the people that sit at my table won't be with me any longer. Chairs will go empty. It

won't be long from now that I'll have to walk away from the table I grew up around as life moves on and changes occur. Life will never be exactly as it was growing up. But that's ok - it really is! Because soon I'll be at a new table. Maybe it'll have some really close friends sitting here with me. Maybe it'll be filled with my wife, and our kids. Regardless, I have faith that it's going to be better than where I am right now - just different.

There will be tough days, but our lives are like waves. Why would we let our wave crash when high school ends? Or FFA ends? Or when we win? Or when we lose? Let those events make you stronger. Make that wave stronger. And have hope - because the plans that have been made for us are bigger and better than we could ever dream.

For the longest time, I had no idea what should be said here on this stage. I lost sleep, I wandered around random parking lots, ate a lot of Taco Bell, hoping that the message I'm meant to share was revealed to me. But the truth is these aren't profound stories that I've shared here. They're the simple truths that we've all experienced those highs and lows in our life, and we can't cling to any of them, all because we're in a pursuit of a better tomorrow than we're having today. Instead, I'm here to share with you the best truth I've ever learned at the table, and it really is that simple.

Love where you are. Love where you've been. And love where you're going. Because there's a lot of life left to live.