



JOHN CHECK

Don't hang up too quickly

I'd like to throw out a suggestion – and I know I'm hardly wise enough to offer dead-on, always correct advice in this column.

But just hear me out. When you pick up the phone and the person on the other end has evidently dialed a wrong number, don't simply dismiss the call and hang up (except for those dreaded recorded political messages we'll likely be hearing soon).

On a Friday afternoon in mid-November, 2010, John Check evidently misdialed his telephone, and connected with me instead of the person he intended to call.

The first moments of our conversation were a bit clumsy, as you can imagine. He didn't know who I was, and I didn't know him. So we chatted, at first, about that. And to give him a point of reference, I let him know he had called the Plain Talk, and was talking to the paper's editor.

If memory serves, he tried to explain that he was trying to reach someone who wanted to hear him play his concertina.

I replied that I wasn't sure I had ever heard a concertina performance. Accordion, yes. (I've covered a few polka festivals). All I knew was a concertina was different from an accordion, and I wanted to hear one. Plus, I thought it would be neat to do a story about a man, now residing in Vermillion, who possessed such musical talent.

He invited me to his apartment. We met the next day, early in the afternoon. Three hours later (a very FULL three hours) I left, my notebook bursting with information and my mind and soul touched in a special way. That's one thing about the job of a newspaperman – you get to meet a lot of people. A lot of normal, everyday, hard-working people.

And every once in a while, you get to meet an extraordinary person.

John Check was extraordinary. It was with sadness that I discovered, earlier this week, that his obituary had landed in my work e-mail. While editing it, I recalled that wonderful afternoon we spent together.

He was a retired professor – a scholar. But we spent most of that afternoon talking about music. About how we were first introduced to it. My dad and uncle were both dance band trumpet players in their youth, and were constantly singing and whistling tunes from the "Great American Songbook" to pass the drudgery that always accompanied the tedious task of milking a huge herd of Holsteins.

BETWEEN THE LINES



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John grew up on a farm, too, during the Great Depression. He told me of how he received a harmonica when he was a young boy. His brothers did, too. He was the only one, however, that

seemed to be interested in making music.

Music changed his life. After mastering the concertina as a teenager, John played at house parties, weddings and dances near his farm home in Rosholt, WI. By the time he was 18 and had left home to attend college, he had formed his own six-piece orchestra. The music just followed him. He played with the Michigan Dutchmen from 1959 to 1966. The orchestra was regularly featured on WJRT-TV. And from 1966 through 1995, he was a member of the Wisconsin Dutchmen musical group; the musicians' sounds were broadcast over the airwaves regularly on WRJQ television.

He earned a doctorate in psychology, and taught and lectured on a Wisconsin university campus during the week and communicated with a completely different audience in a completely different way during the weekend, when he was on stage in a dance hall.

His students often heard him play on local radio stations, and would provide positive reviews.

"In a way, you are communicating with people, because they are listening – not just to one person, but to everyone in the hall," John said. "To some degree, it's like giving a speech to a crowd, except that you do it with music, and not through your voice."

We talked at length about how important music is to one's existence. And, he noted that he would never, ever stop performing or composing.

"When I die, God promised me that I'll have a teaching position," he said with a grin. "And incidentally, he also promised that I can take my concertina with me."

I'm certain that all the harpists that hang out around the Pearly Gates have received orders to "take five" and give their fingers a rest from all that plucking.

John and his concertina have arrived. And the music is indeed heavenly.



'No, make that double yuck'

"The facts of life are very stubborn things."
– Cleveland Amory, American author

It was the first Saturday in June when my older sister was about to sit me down to quiet my questioning.

I was going on 13 and Sis was turning 18 in January.

"How did Jackie get pregnant when she wasn't even married?" I spouted.

The usual sparkle in her eyes dimmed as they rolled over and over again at my incessant grilling.

"Is it true what Mom said? Her running round drinking beer with boys got her pregnant? Is that how you get pregnant? Drinking beer and running around with boys?"

"Well, not quite," came her intentionally slow and drawn out response.

Cloaked in "the birds and the bees" analogy, Sis proceeded to issue her explanation of the facts of life, which was my one and only lesson on how babies were really made, since Mom and Dad weren't chatting up the human reproductive process.

My inarticulate response: "Oh, yuck. No, make that double yuck."

Though I didn't realize it at the time, subconsciously, I really wanted my sister's answer to be delivered to me on a golden platter of abstinence with no physical contact whatsoever in how Jackie got pregnant.

Unfortunately, I learned quickly that was, is and never will be the case. And after

MY STORY YOUR STORY



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learning about the "birds and the bees," I formed a grotesque picture and then painfully and slowly began to envision a dreaded future for myself.

The next day in church, you could say I was in a state of shock, as I surveyed the many couples in worship. Pairs of males and females for as far as I could see with their children all lined up on either side of them, as they had every Sunday - like rows of chickadees balancing on a high wire.

For the first time I carried the image of how they really begot those little ones, and the lens through which I perceived life had changed forever.

Overwhelmed and thoroughly nauseated, I then daringly cast a long narrowly focused glance at my own parents, running my eyes over them from head to toe while they knelt at the end of the pew filled with their brood of six.

As the Lord's Prayer emerged in whispers from their lips, I hastily catapulted into a deep dark cavern of disbelief.

That summer, my life's content had been darkly remade. Longingly, I wanted the whole notion of procreation, every cotton-picking detail, to be a grotesque falsehood.

And, if by some chance it were true, I ever so desired that it not apply to my parents. "Please, God, not them."

While other congregants were spouting "thy kingdom come, thy will be done..." I was begging that same deity to turn back the clock and make me ignorant of all such matters.

"Return me to before yesterday," I prayed. "Let me once again walk lightly and not have to think of reproduction or have any a part in it – ever!"

From that point on, the sun shone dimly on my future. The crisp pre-established markers I had previously constructed between males and females completely dissolved. No longer would naively illuminate shadowy corners or brighten dark hallowings of my childhood.

Forlorn and beside myself, I had serious thoughts of becoming a nun. I'd run away to a convent and dedicate my life to seeking the faith, while making a grand escape.

Instead, my existence became an endlessly ticking time bomb, counting down minutes, hours and days until I would have to marry and succumbing to s-e-x.

Like most others, I fought my passage into adulthood, leaving claw marks down a long narrow road from innocence.

Postscript: Nearly seven years after Paula learned the facts of life, she was betrothed to Brian Damon. After 41 years of marriage, the couple has three the children and four grandchildren. (In other words, she got over it.)

Guest commentary:

Noem: Honoring our fathers

By Rep. Kristi Noem

I'll never forget the day my dad and I were checking fences on our ranch and he pointed out the prairie pasque flower to me. He told me how it was a special flower and how it only grew on native ground that had not been developed, plowed or disturbed.

As we talked about how rare it is to find land like that and how a person had to search to see the small, diminutive flower tucked away on the hillsides, I remember thinking how this was such a different conversation than I was used to having with my tough, cowboy father.

Usually, he was busy giving me my next list of chores to complete, or asking why I wasn't done with the list of chores he had given me earlier. He was a hard worker and it wasn't often that he took a break to point out the special beauty of the land around us.

The pasque has been my favorite flower ever since. Not

only does it reflect the hardness and beauty of the South Dakota people, but every time I see one, it also reminds me of my dad.

I have shared the same story and facts about our state flower with my children. We go out each spring as soon as the snow melts to look for the pasque flowers that appear before the grass dares to turn green. They realize that their backyard – and the pasture beyond – is not only special, but now part of our family heritage.

Perhaps your father shared a story with you that you've never forgotten or maybe certain holidays or events remind you of your dad or grandfather.

As we near Father's Day, it can bring a range of emotions for people. Whether you're a new dad celebrating the birth of your first child or mourning the recent loss of a father, I hope each one of us can honor our fathers or father-figure by thanking them for their impact on our lives and being grateful for

each day we have had with them.

While I miss my father every day, I also choose to be happy for every day that I was blessed to be his daughter.

Dad and I shared a love for cattle, horses, and the land. Every day was an adventure with him, even though some of them were challenging. He pushed us kids, made us work hard, and woke us up most mornings with the phrase, "We're burning daylight! Get up! More people die in bed than anywhere else!"

We weren't always happy to be crawling out of bed so early, but today I am thankful for the example he set and for teaching me to tackle a difficult job when it needed doing.

While I am in Washington, D.C. my husband Bryon is back home on our ranch with our three kids. Often he is doing chores, juggling meals, doing laundry, planning family activities and running the family business. He's busy! I could not do my job representing South Dakota

without his support and willingness to do whatever it takes to help keep our family healthy and happy. Cassidy, Kennedy, Booker and I try to show him every day how grateful we are for all he does, but we try to make an extra special effort on Father's Day. He is such a blessing to all of us.

Spending time away from my family is not easy, but like many South Dakotans, I wake up, remember the lessons my dad taught me, and continue to work to provide a better future for my kids and grandkids. I encourage you to share lessons your father taught you, or lessons you're hoping to teach your kids with me and others. I'd love to hear them!

I also hope you will join me and thank all of the fathers and male role models across South Dakota for all that they do to make our lives better every day.

Happy Father's Day from my family to yours!

Vermillion



Since 1884 • Official County, City and School District Newspaper

201 W. Cherry, Vermillion, SD 57069 • Publication No. USPS 657-720

Publisher: Gary Wood • Editor: David Lias

Published weekly by YANKTON MEDIA, Inc. • Periodicals postage paid at Vermillion, SD 57069. Subscription rates for the Plain Talk by mail are \$27.56 a year in the city of Vermillion. Subscriptions in Clay, Turner, Union and Yankton counties are \$41.34 per year. Elsewhere in South Dakota, subscriptions are \$44.52, and out-of-state subscriptions are \$42. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Plain Talk, 201 West Cherry Street, Vermillion, SD 57069.

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