

Bless Your Heart
*Stories to Renew Your Spirit
and Pamper Your Soul*

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Introduction

To fully appreciate and understand how and why the phrase “Bless your heart” originated in the South, it helps to understand that most southerners are very gracious, kind and thoughtful people. Our comments are genuine, sincere and heartfelt. For instance if we say to someone, “You look just lovely” or “Your baby is just precious” both of these may be interpreted as real and sincere compliments. *Darlin’* is also a good word, especially when combined with *precious*. To say to a young mother, “Your baby is darlin’ and her little outfit is just precious” will truly make her day.

Because we are often overly concerned about offending someone by a harsh word, we will go to great lengths to avoid hurting someone’s feelings. So in order to be able to talk to each other and express how we *truly* feel, it became necessary to come up with a secret code that Southerners understand but most other folks don’t. This code was created years ago when our great grandmothers established the Fundamental Rules of Southern Communication. Once you understand how they work, it makes total sense.

For instance, if you’re out shopping with a friend and you both notice someone in a truly awful and unbecoming outfit, you wouldn’t say, “Isn’t that the tackiest thing you ever saw?” That’s because the person *in* the tacky outfit might overhear you and get her feelings hurt. So instead you would smile and say to your friend, “Look at her outfit. Now isn’t that *interesting*?”

We are always delighted when our friends share their good news – whatever it may be. And we are there to be supportive as we listen to stories about difficult situations and sad times as well. We also enjoy sharing stories and anecdotes about our families, children and grandchildren. While imparting good news is one thing, some women can go on and on and *on*. We all know someone who enjoys being the center of attention, assuming that no one else could possibly have information as fascinating to share.

For example, even though we are happy that a friend's nine-year old grandson won first place in his swim meet, we don't need to listen to the details for 30 minutes. Maybe someone else is waiting for a turn to talk, and short of raising her hand to be called upon by the non-stop talker, that isn't going to happen.

While listening to the woman who is prattling on about something or other when the other women in the group have obviously long since lost interest, a genteel Southerner would never call attention to this rude behavior outright. She would simply interrupt with a smile and say, "Well, isn't that special?"

Then before the offender could take another breath and continue, our heroine would change the subject with a comment or question and deftly turn the conversation to another person in the group, or to another topic. This is a finely honed skill among southern women, as great finesse is needed to spare any hurt feelings.

While "Isn't that interesting?" and "Isn't that special?" are two examples of Southern shorthand that every self-respecting southern woman understands, the phrase "Bless your heart" is a bit more complicated to interpret. That's because its meaning can

vary widely, depending on the nuances of the voice, body language and facial expression of the speaker.

We learn how to use and interpret this phrase from a very early age, usually from our mothers, grandmothers and aunts. And it has its place in a wide variety of situations. If someone is going through a challenging time or has suffered trauma or tragedy, it's often difficult for us to find exactly the right words to express how we feel. (That happens to everyone, no matter where they live). The phrase "Bless your heart" is another form of Southern shorthand. Spoken among Southerners, the message is clear.

In the case of bad news it conveys our concern and care, our sympathy and support. Often accompanied by a kind gesture such as a hug, an embrace, a gentle touch on the arm, or a tender pat on the back, it is a sincere and heartfelt expression we use when other words fail us. These three simple words can speak volumes.

The phrase is also used in another positive way when we defend someone who has said or done something inappropriate because they just don't know any better.

I remember telling my mother one night at dinner about a girl in my fourth grade class who was really fun to be around. But she had such terrible table manners that no one wanted to sit with her at lunch.

After listening quietly to my critical comments my mother asked, "And where did you learn your good table manners?"

"From you and Daddy," I replied in a matter of fact tone, not seeing where this conversation was going.

“That’s right. And maybe her mother and daddy haven’t taught her good table manners because they don’t have good table manners themselves – because nobody taught them. Perhaps your friend doesn’t know any better. Maybe it’s not her fault, bless her heart.”

I gave Mama’s comment much thought. A few weeks later my classmate invited me to her house to play after school and stay for supper. After sharing a meal with her family I realized my mother was right. It wasn’t her fault, bless her heart. That experience has stuck with me all these years and is probably one of the reasons I try to give people the benefit of the doubt more often than I should. Perhaps they truly *don’t* know any better. And maybe it’s not their fault ...bless their hearts.

My audiences always have great fun when I teach them how to use this phrase in yet another way – when dealing with difficult people. In this instance, knowing you have no power to change a difficult person’s behavior, it helps to use coping skills. And one of our best coping skills is humor. So I ask my audience to get a picture in their minds of the most difficult person they know. It might be someone at work or at home.

Then I ask them to think about what they would *really like* to say to this person – what would give them great satisfaction. Of course they can’t say what they’re really thinking. I tell them I completely understand that they might want to look this person in the eye and ask one question in all seriousness.

“I already took a pain pill, so why are you still here?”

That phrase is actually the title of one of my most popular programs on dealing with difficult people. Meeting planners are already chuckling when they call to book it, and they appreciate that audience members will learn appropriate skills to deal with difficult people and will obviously have fun in the process. Laughter is such an important element of learning.

As I explain in my keynotes and workshops, when all else fails you can smile, look the difficult person in the eye and in your most sincere voice say, “Bless your heart.” Of course you’re really not saying it for *their* sake. You’re saying it for your own benefit in hopes of retaining your sanity when interacting with this person.

Then we all practice together so they can look and sound convincing. Body language, tone of voice and facial expression all have to convey the message that they really care. That’s the secret. That last piece of advice is what leaves them laughing and saying to each other, “That’s you!” and “No, that’s *you!*”

“Bless your heart” often becomes the most popular phrase of the conference and brings more laughter each time it’s used. That’s because I have instructed everyone to count how many times they get their own hearts blessed by the end of the day – which might reveal how their colleagues and friends *really* feel about them. At one conference the CEO of the company spoke following my keynote. A very serious boss and stern taskmaster, I wasn’t sure how well he would appreciate my humor. Without cracking a smile he worked “Bless your hearts” into his speech three different times – and brought the house down.

In the more serious parts of my presentations, I've begun sharing with some of my audiences all the different ways we can bless our *own* hearts – in mind, body and spirit. If we are so busy taking care of other people, we are often the last people on our own “to-do” lists. We miss opportunities every day to lighten our spirits and pamper our souls. Discovering simple ways to do both is the focus of the book you are holding in your hands.

If you've heard me speak or you've read my book, *Mama Said There'd be Days Like This*, you know that I use personal stories and life lessons learned to connect with my audiences and my readers. In this book you'll find some long chapters and some short ones. Some are funny and others are more serious. They're not in any particular order, so you can start wherever you want and pick up later where you left off. Each story is meant to make you laugh, think, reminisce about your own life experiences, and reflect on ways you can bless *your* heart.

Depending on where you are in your life right now, several of the positive changes you decide to make (that's what blessing your heart is about) will be easy. Some will be more difficult. A few will call for compromise. And other changes will require your dedication, determination, courage, sacrifice and hard work. Some people aren't afraid of hard work, especially when they are wise enough and practical enough to foresee the positive results their efforts will bring. Others have the idea that life is supposed to be happy, require little effort, and never call for compromise.

Most of us have figured out that *everything* positive in life requires hard work including (but certainly not limited to) relationships, family, marriage, parenting, career and job success, friendships, education and financial security. In addition to hard work, don't forget courage and determination, too.

Parenting is a good case in point. As a mother of three, I believe that raising a child is one of the most rewarding experiences on earth. I fully understand that everyone will not agree with me, and that's OK for both of us. As a parent you will make enough special memories to last a lifetime, long after your children are grown and out of your nest, perhaps with children of their own. Being a parent also provides memories and moments you would prefer to forget – like countless sleepless nights, changing thousands of diapers and nursing sick children back to health.

One thing for sure is that parenting is never boring because there are always too many activities and obligations to fulfill. Parental duties keep you busy attending school plays, sporting events and a myriad of other pursuits. Other activities include years' worth of teacher conferences, homework, conversations about report cards, and arguments over bedtime when your kids are young and more frustrating conversations about curfews when they're older. And don't forget being a Scout leader or a room mother, or serving on the board of the Parent Teacher Association, driving carpools, and hosting sleep-overs (when you know *you* won't be the one getting any sleep). All of that takes work.

Teaching your children the values you hope they will live by as adults is an awesome responsibility. Modeling those values takes commitment and effort. You have to practice what you preach - every moment of every day. And let's not forget the years of worrying about all of the things in their lives that you won't be able to control, no matter how good a parent you are.

Without a doubt, hard work certainly isn't limited to parenting. There are hundreds of thousands of other choices that demand daily effort. Every goal, every hope, every dream and every vision requires work.

How's your life at the moment? If you're stuck where you are, or not yet quite where you want to be, change is going to be inevitable, unavoidable and even necessary. Maybe you're in a job or a relationship that has left you feeling discouraged, weary, frustrated or confused. You're trying to maneuver back onto the path in the direction you want to go.

It could be that you've reached a point where you're feeling stuck, stalled, spinning your wheels and getting nowhere. People and projects constantly pull you in another direction – often to a place you didn't want to go. It's a challenge to stay in control of your day, your job, and your life.

Perhaps you're feeling stranded, isolated and alone, afraid to reach out to others because of bad experiences in the past when you tried to do so. You have to make some difficult decisions and none of your choices are easy. Of course there is always the possibility (and my sincere hope for you) that your life is good at the moment and all is well.

It's easy and natural to fall into habits of behavior and ways of thinking because they are just that – habits. Wherever you are in your life right now, I hope my stories will provide you with insights and ideas, inspiration and encouragement, laughter and joy. If you decide to make any changes, don't be surprised when people begin to notice a change in you. And more importantly, don't be surprised when *you* begin to notice a change in you.

When your mind and heart are open to looking at life from a different approach and a fresh perspective, you can renew your spirit and pamper your soul on a daily basis. You'll discover countless ways to bless your heart and the hearts of others.

That alone just might qualify you as an honorary Southerner even if you weren't born and raised in the South... Bless your heart.

Oh, and I meant that in a *good* way!

Enjoy!

Jean