

My name is Elizabeth Alling Sewall, and it is a joy to speak to you this morning. For those of you whom I do not know, my parents are Duncan and Cynthia Alling of Charlottesville, Virginia. My wonderful husband, Gordon Sewall, and I, are the proud parents of Scott, who is 10, and Duncan who is 7, and we live in Milton, Massachusetts. Since we met twelve years ago and married almost eleven years ago, we have been here every August. In fact, Gordon didn't really have much choice about where he would vacation in August! Less frequently seen on the Vineyard but the one with the traditional summer experience of bunking down in a small house with lots of college peers, and doing whatever job was to be found, is my brother Greg Alling. He and his wife, Chimi Thonden, and their 4 ½ year old son Rinzin and 2 year old daughter Khenzom live in Pakistan, although they are currently residing in Nepal for obvious reasons, and will be joining us in a week, a visit that we anticipate greatly as we last saw them here two years ago.

We Allings originally found West Chop in 1980. We didn't actually come to West Chop that summer, rather, by chance and sight unseen, we stayed in the white garage apartment that is on the curve of Franklin Street just past Dudley. Like many houses on this island, it's no longer just a garage apartment! On the last day of that vacation, my parents took a walk around the Chop and noticed the Whitemans' sign, as it still is, on the circle. They recalled that it must be the Whitemans' as in Harold and DeDe, as in my father's freshman dean in college and former President of Sweetbriar. A strong friendship and connection was re-made, and subsequently, with a few summers in other places, West Chop became the vacation spot of choice. So while I did not experience Group and some of the other goings-on during later years and much later hours that I now hear about from those I would have known then, West Chop has become a deep part of our lives.

After dropping a huge hint to Malcolm that I just might consider speaking one Sunday, knowing that he would pass the word, Anya lost no time in approaching me to fill one of the spots available. I didn't know what I would talk about but I knew where I wanted to begin: by sharing a two-line poem that my father read to you about ten years ago when he spoke one Sunday. Because it is, I think, more than worth sharing again and because some of you will hear it for the first time. Because it makes the extended Alling family, who spend 2-3 weeks a year here, think of West Chop. Because it connects with what I want to share with you this morning. The poem reads:

*Sometimes I get caught in a time breeze, and think about when I was young.*

This room is filled with parents who have had far more experience than I in raising children, more joy, more challenge, more grief, more wonder, more frustration, more patience, more loss, more wisdom, more bewilderment, more acceptance, more laughter and just more. I wouldn't presume to talk about as delightful and overwhelming a topic as parenting to this crowd. Let's not even mention the parenting guides which fill multiple shelves at bookstores – it's too intimidating just to begin reading them. Yikes – my own parents are in the room! And I know for some of you, given the ages of our children, we probably haven't even begun!

Yet what at first only dawned on me, and then becomes more than obvious as each year passes, in my eleven years of parenting, is that our children's questions -- your children's questions -- your grandchildren's questions -- and how we answer them teach us more than books, more about ourselves as individuals and as parents, more about what we honestly believe. Of course, when Scott and Duncan were still cooing in my arms, I swore that I would write down everything wonderful and funny that my boys said, including their questions. Then my boys really started to talk, walk, and run, and somehow that plan never got underway. But when a question stopped me in my tracks, I knew I needed to truly pay attention to my response for the opportunities it offered -- knowing that the trick involves keeping one's explanation short and to the point -- not always easy for me -- but thus guaranteeing attentive ears.

Last summer, however, for whatever reason, I did decide to write down Scott and Duncan's questions for the year -- omitting the 365 "what's for dinner, Mom?" and 211 "are we there yet?"s, and the now twice -- thrice? -- daily "can I go to the Chop shop?"

So I want to share with you just some of the questions in our household this year, with a few thrown in from friends and family. You no doubt responded to similar ones. How did you answer them? How would you answer them?

Last August, little did I, little did any of us, have a hint of what our year would hold.

- What comes first: the words in your brain or your mouth saying the words?
- Why don't adults read aloud, and why aren't there pictures in your books?
- Can you change your mind about being a daddy or mommy?

- Can't you see that I am crying and don't you even care?
- Why didn't people understand Jesus?
- From our 9 year old friend Conrad: Am I going to grow up to be *just* like Daddy?
- What are terrorists?
- Did the buildings implode or explode?
- It was an accident right, not by accident, but it was an accident?
- Why do people hate us so much?
- When someone dies, do they become a bright star in the sky?
- Do we know anyone who died?
- How on earth do you do long division?
- Is it your job to keep me safe?
- At age 6, without the full facts of life: what happens if you have 4 sperm and 4 eggs?
- How can he be a hero if he bombed us?
- From our 5 year old friend Carter, upon learning that Colonial Americans didn't have can openers: "well, how did they open their cans?"
- Why does he hit me for no reason?
- When you are up in a space shuttle, can you see the Earth move?
- So, Mom, just how did you get breast cancer anyway?
- If he broke the law, then why doesn't he go to jail?



- When you get to college and if you haven't saved any money, how do you get food?
- Why can't we see the air, and why can't we see the wind and only feel it?
- What does home away from home mean?
- Are everybody's veins in the same place?
- From a dear high school friend's 7 year old son Thomas: does everything have a consequence?
- Will they change computer games and games on the Internet that destroy buildings?
- From my 4 year old nephew Rinzin upon learning that his aunt is taking strong medicine that makes hair fall out: why don't they give her soft medicine?
- Why can we see the moon in the daytime but we cannot see the sun in the nighttime?
- Again, from Carter: Does the Grinch hate Hannakuh too?
- Is fog dust with water in it?
- If I was an astronaut and I made a crash landing on an alien planet, how would I get home?
- On the Olympics: how did the French judge get pressured and why didn't the Russians get in trouble too?
- What do you mean by stress?
- Isn't it another beautiful day?

- What did those priests do exactly?
- Can we talk about nature cycles and can I tell you what I know about nature cycles?
- I want to fill up on love: do you ever run out of love?

*Sometimes I get caught in a time breeze, and think about when I was young.*

A seven year old wrote that poem. When young, at age 5, at 7, at 10, you ask any question. When not so young, answering them allows for – dare I say *should* allow for – a pause, another word perhaps for time breeze. The best questions are the ones when we say “I don’t know, let’s go find out together.”

May we all find more time breezes, pauses, questions and answers in our time here. Thank you.

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West Chop Sunday Service*