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Bestselling author discusses choosing words wisely

By Lou Fancher



Kelly Corrigan Photo provided

In an era when difficult conversations are the norm, there's good reason to be grateful for Kelly Corrigan. Following her New York Times bestselling memoirs, "Glitter and Glue" and "The Middle Place," the Oakland author delivers 12 essays based on hard to say phrases in a new book, "Tell Me More" (Random House).

Corrigan is well known in the Bay Area as creator of Notes & Words, an annual benefit featuring music and literature luminaries in a program that raises proceeds for Children's Hospital Oakland. She is the host of KQED Radio's Exactly and a contributor to The Nantucket Project, a national organization that supports community health and well-being through small group conversations held in homes throughout the United States. She is married and has two teenage daughters.

Appearing March 23 before an audience of roughly 170 people gathered at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Foundation's Distinguished Speaker Series, Corrigan demonstrated her signature verve and voracity for speaking the truth.

Honesty can be exactly what causes commotion in today's conversations held at family dinner tables, on the internet, in neighborhoods and throughout Congress and between countries. But laced with humor-adult appropriate, often self-deprecating and particularly appreciated by women and men in relationships, raising children or caring for aging parents-a keynote presentation by Corrigan is more likely to cause laughter or poignantly surprising tears than to deliver low blows.

Cutting herself out of a too-tight Lycra top, daily hygiene including (hilariously) the rarity of hair-washing and (tenderly) a pile of cut toenails, her husband's stop-it-or-else ultimatum concerning Costco clothing, parenting as "the ultimate improv," and taking two years to write a book that people tell her takes only an afternoon to read-the time it takes laundry to dry-and many more asides had the audience appreciating Corrigan's entertaining storytelling.

Divergent streams in Corrigan's life intersected and propelled her into an exploration of why the exact, right words at the right moment can make all the difference in sustaining positive long-term relationships. Contrasting "I'm sorry," and "I was wrong," she and her husband decided during a dinner table conversation, was vital because although the former can be false or flimsy, the latter is firm and unties people in a way that makes love and connection possible.

Corrigan thereafter embarked on a listening tour: keeping tab of phrases that held up, like "I don't know," which she said can seem "waffle-y or lame," but in one chapter of her book is revealed as admirable and truthful.

The second stream was the loss of her 85-year-old father (chronicled in her memoir) and of a dear friend, Liz. Death or serious illness-Corrigan has had cancer and said her friend's death left her with survivor's guilt-that has a way of jolting a person into a re-examination of life and relationships. Corrigan said, "How many conversations do you go into and come out with different views and perspectives?" That's the beauty of (the phrase) "tell me more," which she used to good purpose with her teenage daughter.

"I love you" was a phrase so worn she wasn't certain she could add anything unique. But finding forgiveness embedded in the phrase, she exposes parallels and writes, "Immediate, unsolicited, sometimes underserved forgiveness-that is what turns the wheel of family life." In other words, despite the imperfections and reality of long-term relationships, saying "I love you" is foundational.

Laura Halpin of Walnut Creek said she felt a connection when Corrigan spoke about the loss of her best friend. "I lost one too. It was touching to hear her say that after a death, even simple things like doing dishes you used to do together can get emotional. Her words impacted my psyche. Isn't that why we read books?"

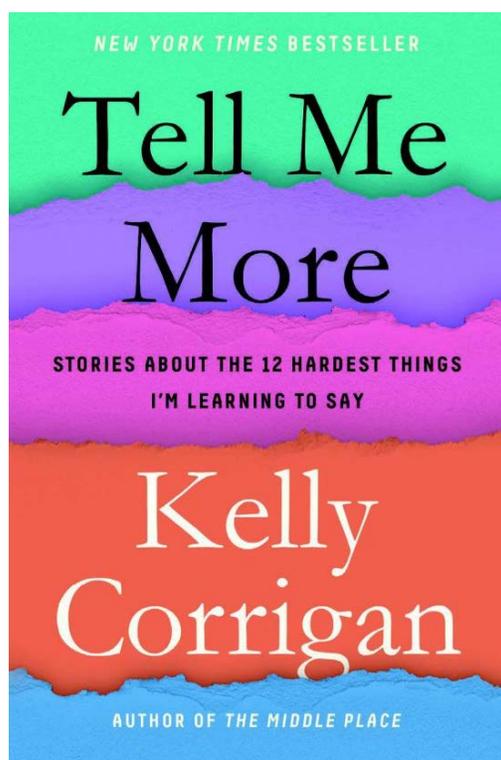
During a Q&A, Corrigan said her husband is always "the last eyes on the page before I hand it in. When he says it's good, I know it's ready." About her children she said that after 10 years of contemplation and writing she finally realizes that listening to her "profoundly ordinary kid" singing in the shower is one of life's most precious moments.

Five-year library volunteer Judy Kirkpatrick said she takes pride and pleasure in the library's approximately 10,000 programs presented over the last decade. "They have something for everyone: young, old, men, women, black, brown, white-everyone." The Lafayette resident liked Corrigan's emphasis on listening fully in conversations.

Arguably the most moving chapter, "No Words At All," pays tribute to silence. Used when enough has been said or when skin-to-skin touch reigns supreme during Corrigan's once-a-week visits to the children's hospital to hold premature infants, she reminds herself-and us-that blessings can be found in communicating with no words at all.

Upcoming LLC Author Discussion

Jason Fagone, an author and journalist who covers science, technology, and culture who was named one of "Ten Young Writers on the Rise" by the Columbia Journalism Review, will discuss his latest book "The Woman Who Smashed Codes: A True Story of Love, Spies, and the Unlikely Heroine Who Outwitted America's Enemies" from 7 to 8 p.m., Thursday, April 19 at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Community Hall. Visit www.llcf.org to register.



Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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