

Intro: [00:00:01] Hello and welcome to 15 Minutes with Charlie. I'm your host, Charlie Mechem. I want to help you communicate more effectively and I believe the use of anecdotes can get you there. Explore this with me as I share anecdotes from my book, Total Anecdotal, and ask guests to react in relation to their own experiences and careers. Christine Brennan is a sports columnist for USA Today, a commentator on ABC News, CNN, PBS NewsHour, and NPR and a best selling author. She was the first female sports reporter for The Miami Herald, the first woman on the Washington Post Redskins beat in 1985, and the first president of the Association for Women in Sports Media. She is from Toledo, Ohio and graduated from Northwestern University School of Journalism. Christine is my good friend and I know you will enjoy our discussion.

Charlie: [00:01:09] Now the first one is on page 64 of the book, and the line goes, "There is no credible evidence that the tongue is connected to the brain." I'd like your thoughts on that.

Christine: [00:01:25] I read that Charlie, and I love your book, thank you so much for sending it. That one, I thought immediately of my father. My late father Jim Brennan just was a force of nature. I was so lucky that both he and my mom as parents and raising me and encouraging me, and always very ahead of their game in terms of-- My dad was my own personal Title 9 in terms of allowing me to play sports. Not even allowing me, when most girls were told no, my dad said yes back in the 60s and 70s. Dad always had a great line, and it was "Put your brain in gear before you put your mouth in motion." I thought of that one, and that could be an addendum. It's a footnote to that great anecdote that you have in the book, because I think frankly we're in a stage in our country and in the world where everyone is just blabbing away and not thinking about anything they're saying.

Charlie: [00:02:35] Another companion line that I thought about the other day, that I ran across years ago, was the line that goes something like this: "I never learned anything while I was talking."

Christine: [00:02:49] That is a good one, too. I'm with students a lot. I was just at Northwestern, my alma mater, speaking to students. I love doing that. I may do more mentoring and talking to students than anything else at this stage of my career, Charlie.

Charlie: [00:03:05] Right.

Christine: [00:03:06] I'm really heartened by them, but everyone is on their phone and everyone is texting and not necessarily speaking.

Charlie: [00:03:18] Right.

Christine: [00:03:18] Maybe that's a positive, because maybe everyone's taking a second as they type to think of what they're saying before just--

Charlie: [00:03:24] True, very true.

Christine: [00:03:25] On behalf of everyone just, again, blabbing away. But it's certainly not good for the country, for the culture, for the world that people are not listening. So as a journalist I might shock people, but I do more listening than anything else. I love to get opinions. You know that I'll call you, we'll chat, I might even be writing a column at that moment but I'm wanting to listen. So certainly, anyone listening to us right now, I do think it is wise advice. But we've also fallen into that trap, haven't we?

Charlie: [00:03:58] Amen.

Christine: [00:03:59] It's human nature to do that, but I think we should all do our best to listen first and talk second.

Charlie: [00:04:09] Thank you very much, it's insightful and I agree totally. The next anecdote is on page 84 of the book, and it says-- I say in the anecdote that I can't remember the author of the line, but this is particularly I think apropos of my conversation with you, and it goes like this: "Women who seek to be the equal of men are not setting their sights high enough."

Christine: [00:04:36] Exactly. I remember when the Equal Rights Amendment was being first discussed, and in our home my dad was Bush's vice chair in Ohio in '88, George Herbert Walker Bush, and we were a moderate or liberal Republicans. Which means, well, I guess I don't need to go there but we're shaking our heads every day and horrified by some of the turn of events in our country. I'll just say it, in this president, I'll

just say it. But back then, and still, I'm still in that same spot as a liberal Republican in terms of my feelings. But Mom and Dad were also that, very much pro-- Three daughters and one son, so very much pro-girl and pro-woman. But my dad, I remember saying something to my mom like, "Why would you want to be equal after you've got all this?" And we all laugh, but that was one aspect of this, and it's a fun one. The flip side is of course we know exactly what that means for equality, and my mom laughed at this. It was only a few years earlier that she would have needed my dad to get a credit card.

Charlie: [00:05:52] Oh God, yes.

Christine: [00:05:53] Shameful. So we absolutely know that equality for our daughters and our nieces and the girl next door and our granddaughters is essential, but it is funny. It's kind of an old school line, but I do think it's really not true. Because I do think women, there's so many things like Title 9. Thank goodness for Richard Nixon, and it was Richard Nixon folks that signed Title 9, June of 1972.

Charlie: [00:06:15] That's right.

Christine: [00:06:16] We would have loved to have it happen-- I've had conversations with friends, including George Will who lives about a mile from me here in DC, and we've talked about this, that we didn't need Title 9 and that it was going to come anyway. I said, "George I'd love to agree with you as someone who doesn't necessarily believe the government is the answer, I'm that way of course, but I think we needed Title 9." We women now are still fighting that battle.

Charlie: [00:06:47] Thank you, and it will continue. But progress is certainly clear.

Christine: [00:06:51] Yes.

Charlie: [00:06:52] The next anecdote is on page 82 of the book. I love this, and I thought that you would as well. Augustus Caesar reportedly said, speaking of an author, "He wrote as though he wanted to be wondered at rather than understood." I just think that's so common, maybe not always, but certainly in today's world.

Christine: [00:07:18] Absolutely, Charlie. I think that as a writer myself, yes, the idea of "Let's just make a grandstanding statement here. Let's get everyone's attention. Let's shock and awe. Let's get something crazy." I've never done that. I think I can safely say in 37 years in the business of writing for The Miami Herald, Washington Post and USA Today, as well as as you mentioned my TV work and speeches and other things. I've always wanted to stand by what I've written or said, or an opinion I'd given, not only at that moment but but a month later and a year later, and want to really be proud of it. I tell students all the time, "It's my name on there. It's much more than a paycheck or making money," and I've been very fortunate in that area as I know you have, and so many of us have. But at the end of the day it's all about your name and your reputation, and if you're just blabbering, or if you're just throwing something out there--

Charlie: [00:08:17] Right.

Christine: [00:08:18] A fact, if you're just doing it for shock value, which I think is happening a lot in our culture today.

Charlie: [00:08:24] More and more.

Christine: [00:08:26] It's a terrible thing to do, because you're serving no one except yourself and it's going to die faster than you realize, and it's going to fade away. Versus the long lasting, wonderful, well thought-out respectable opinions and reporting and things like that, that are so important in our world. That those will last the test of time.

Charlie: [00:08:46] If people don't understand what you're trying to say it does very little good for you to even say them. Nobody is going to come back, I think, to read or listen to somebody that they really don't understand. So, thank you for that thought. This was one that made me think of you because of the sports connection. So, on page 110 of the book, Harry Neale who was a professional hockey coach once stated about coaching: "Last year we couldn't win at home and we were losing on the road. My failure as a coach was that I couldn't think of any other place to play." I thought that was wonderful.

Christine: [00:09:30] I love it. I do love it. Home and away, and where else? If there's a third option, take it. Funny. What's striking about that one, Charlie, is the humor

involved. So many coaches I've covered including Hall of Fame coaches and Olympic coaches, NFL, Joe Gibbs and Don Shula. They were at their best when they used humor, and sometimes it was rare, sometimes everyone's pretty serious these days. But for example, Joe Gibbs was, I think maybe you could make the argument was the greatest football coach or NFL coach, pro coach ever. Won three Super Bowls with three different quarterbacks, not a one of whom will make the Hall of Fame. Joe Theismann, Doug Williams and Mark Griffin. That's extraordinary. I don't know if any other coach has done that. Vince Lombardi had Bart Starr, Hank Stram had Len Dawson, on and on it goes. I do think Don Shula with Unitas, and then with [inaudible], whatever.

Charlie: [00:10:38] Right.

Christine: [00:10:38] But the bottom line on that is that Joe Gibbs was a very serious man who was known for sleeping in his office for several days each week. The three years I covered Washington in the 80s, and those were great years for him, for Joe Gibbs and the team. Still, the things I remember most is when he would make us laugh. So the idea that this quote is such a fun quote, it's filled with humor, and it's self deprecating. I would encourage more coaches and more people in general, everyone, to use self-deprecating humor. It really works. It endears you to an audience, or a friend, or a person one-on-one, a cup of coffee you're having with someone. One of my favorite ones was when we were all-- We would tape record most of the interviews, and I was there, Baltimore Sun was there, Washington Times, New York Times, other local Virginia papers, Richmond and Norfolk, and whatever. One day Gibbs was complaining about being misquoted. We all pointed out to him that we had it on tape. Of course, I'm meticulous about that. That is one of the most important things. Spell the name right and do that. Again, with Trump's assault on the media, which is horrific, people start to wonder. Well, don't wonder. We care. We're a very serious group of people and we spend lots of time. I've listened back and forth, back and forth on tape to try to get the exact word if it's hard to understand. Ten fifteen times I've gone back and forth on a tape just for one word.

Charlie: [00:12:12] Sure.

Christine: [00:12:13] We care about this. So anyway, so Gibbs is saying "I didn't say it, I didn't say it." And either myself or the Baltimore Sun, one of our reporters yelled out, "We have it on tape, coach." And we showed him our tape recorders back then before iPhones. And he goes, "I don't care what that tape says. I didn't say it." That was Joe Gibbs, very serious, but using humor. What do I remember about him all these years later? A story like that.

Charlie: [00:12:41] Sure. The next one is from a great German novelist, and the author of All Quiet on the Western Front - Erich Maria Remarque. This was really an interesting comment. He said, "It's always the wrong people who have the guilty conscience. Those who are really responsible for suffering in the world couldn't care less."

Christine: [00:13:07] Yes. I've found, not to get into politics too much, but I'm talking to you from my home office in Washington DC and there's a man about four miles away that I'm thinking of right now. But we don't-- No one needs to hear a sports journalist talk about politics, but the idea that I think we're probably at the height of that in our culture right now. I can think of one man in particular who's leading the way. But it is, it's-- The really good people, people who don't get attention, the social workers and the people in churches and synagogues and mosques, and we're talking this week on Thanksgiving. It's troublesome sometimes--

Charlie: [00:13:54] It can be, indeed.

Christine: [00:13:55] How the thoughtful people and the wonderful people are the ones that think and dwell on something, and then the big jerks out there just plod along. My dad, my late father, I can hear him saying it. "Honey it was that way 50 years ago, and it's going to be that way 50 years from now." The rewards come in other ways. So those that are thoughtful and think and worry about things, and double check and triple check, whether it be your work or caring for others. Those things are timeless. The rewards will come in many other ways, but it does gall you when somebody just-- Especially people like, "I can't believe they got away with that." In the end they probably won't, but I do think we have an issue in our country right now with this. Hopefully it will go away relatively soon. We'll see.

Charlie: [00:14:45] That is a good segue into my final anecdote that I'd like your thoughts on. Someone, and this is on page 102 of the book, someone remarked that if Thomas Edison had gone to the Harvard Business School we'd all be reading by larger candles. The point is obvious, sometimes we make life far more complicated than it needs to be. The observation about Edison suggests that flexibility and adaptability are great qualities. I'd love your thoughts on that.

Christine: [00:15:20] Absolutely. Also, it may be that the best educated among us may not be the best educated at all. He was able to-- Too much education might have been bad.

Charlie: [00:15:33] Right.

Christine: [00:15:35] He wanted to get out there and do it, and I mentioned my dad several times, my mom too. Both of them came from the Depression era, south side of Chicago, Hyde Park in south shore. At a time, they had nothing. My dad would joke that my mom's family was rich, they did not know each other as children of course, but because they had a car. Then they got in a car accident on Christmas Eve and there went the car, and that was the end of the car. So my dad had nothing. I mean, he would sell magazines to put food on the table for his family in the 1930s. An eight year old boy, 8-10 years old. When they come home from school sometimes he and his brother and sister would find all their belongings in the front yard. They were being evicted from another home. That's how my dad grew up. So he didn't have a chance. He went to Drake University for one year on a football scholarship, coming out of Hyde Park High School, and then he went right into the end of WWII in 1945. He couldn't wait to get over there and continue to fight, and going through the German towns and liberating them from the Nazis. So, that was my dad. My mom just ended a little business school, so basically my mom and dad had one year of college between them officially. Then my mom, as I said, was just [inaudible], but it was a business school and then she worked for Illinois Bell before getting married. The point I'm making here, Charlie, is that my dad was the smartest person I ever met by far. Brilliant. Had dates and figures and times, and 10 years ago today this happened, and--

Charlie: [00:17:14] Right.

Christine: [00:17:15] I've got a lot of that myself. Happy birthday next Tuesday to some poor guy I'd walk by on the street. Hi, Mr. Brennan." Yes, my dad knew his birthday. My point is that I'm not going to put my dad and my mom in the same sentence with Thomas Edison usually, except I will with this anecdote because it wasn't going to be getting your MBA. It wasn't getting an undergraduate degree.

Charlie: [00:17:39] Right.

Christine: [00:17:40] It was just about being smart, and what you were born with, and reading and knowing things, and living, and having common sense. As my dad said, "There's nothing common about common sense."

Charlie: [00:17:52] That's such a great line. I've always said to people, when you're looking for people to do something or looking for a member of your board of directors or something like that, I've always said "Forget the resume. Find somebody with good judgment and common sense, and that's all you're gonna need. They'll fill the bill."

Christine: [00:18:13] Exactly. This notion that you have to-- Again, we're not saying you and I, of course we encourage everyone to go to college if they want to. Also there's vocational school, there's so many ways to go. Point being that so many of our great leaders in this country and great people, especially from generations ago, were obviously at their best because of common sense and intelligence, and listening as we said earlier, and their own natural given abilities, and fostering that curiosity.

Charlie: [00:18:45] And the experiences that they went through, particularly those who lived through the Depression.

Christine: [00:18:52] And trying again, and then of course heart and passion. So my dad became a great success., rags to riches literally. No one handed him anything, but this great country of ours, the United States of course made it possible for him and my mom to succeed beyond their wildest dreams.

Charlie: [00:19:06] That's true, sure. Absolutely. Well, I can't think of a better way to end this just fascinating conversation with you, Christine. To say that we work hard, we try our best, and we'd like to think that now and then we succeed. But we also know

when we fail that there's a lesson there as well. So, thanks to you for doing this. Thanks to you for being you, and I look forward to our next conversation on what will always be an interesting subject, I'm sure.

Christine: [00:19:42] Absolutely, Charlie. Always love our conversations, and again for those listening, you are an absolute role model and an idol to me. Just a voice of reason. Thank you, keep doing that.

Outro: [00:19:58] Thank you for joining me for today's conversation. If you'd like to listen to more episodes, please visit CharlieMechem.com, or search for 15 Minutes with Charlie in your podcasting app. If you're enjoying the show you should check out my book, Total Anecdotal. A fun guide to help you become a better communicator. Learn more at CharlieMechem.com/book.