

## Calming Our Hearts

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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Richard and I found our first son by answering an ad in our local newspaper. That sounds odd, doesn't it? Actually, Richard saw an ad placed by the Department of Social Services of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The ad offered the opportunity to go through a process where we could adopt a child that was living in foster care. This was an opportunity for us. I mean we'd tried everything to get pregnant with no success. We did answer the ad, participated in several months of training, lived under the microscope of the Commonwealth, and were finally matched with our son, Antonio. We had such big hopes for our child, but quickly learned that our hopes would be dashed.

You see, Antonio had a miserable early childhood. He was removed from his birthparents because he was found in an urban center eating the trash out of a trashcan on the street. He was four years old, alone, and hungry. We learned that Antonio was being physically, sexually, and emotionally abused. When we met Tony he had been in foster care for four years. During that time Antonio was placed in six foster homes. At the hands of some of these foster parents he was beaten, raped, and neglected. Richard and I weren't turned away after discovering Antonio's history and struggles. We were educated, had resources, and decent clinical skills. We knew we could save him.

We were wrong. Antonio didn't need to be saved. He needed the calming of his heart. When Antonio joined our family we were presented with some of the most awful times in our lives. Antonio was physically aggressive most of the time, he set our house on fire, he ran away from his school, he had issues understanding his sexuality, issues that no 8 year old should be worried about, he harmed the family pets, lacked conscience, and any internal control. Richard and I were left asking ourselves, "What did we do?" We had the option of calling Antonio's adoption failed and return him to the system. We didn't entertain this, well maybe momentarily. We thought that if we had given birth to Antonio we wouldn't abandon him, so why would we do that now? He was our son and we would get through this.

Today, Antonio is either 33 or 34. I can never remember. Today is the birthday of our son, Robert. On Friday he said, "Remember, it's my 29<sup>th</sup> birthday on Sunday." Not just it's my birthday. My children have been taught to exclaim which birthday it is as I've never been able to pinpoint their age. So, Antonio. He lives in Massachusetts, has a job, attends the UU congregation he was raised in, is in the choir, on committees, he has a girlfriend, he has many friends, is rooted in his community. While in school, Antonio played basketball, was on the football team, was on the Dolphins swim team, always participated in talent shows with various results. He played the trumpet in the school band and had the only lightbulb powered by a lemon in the science fair.

People told Richard and I that we were saints offering us accolades for Antonio's successes. Don't get me wrong. We went through hell and back with this child. I mean I had hair and was

thin before we met Antonio. Richard and I will take some credit. The day we decided that we could not be the parents we wanted to be, but needed to be the parents Antonio needed us to be was one of the most important realizations in our lives. We actually talked about the fact that if we didn't change Antonio would be in prison in adulthood. Antonio had exhausted and great parents. But, without Antonio changing, without his willingness to calm his heart, we would all have failed.

During this time our family experienced Trauma. Antonio was carrying the trauma of his early childhood and we were carrying the trauma of all that had happened. We had to alarm Antonio's bedroom door so we would know when he left his room overnight. To this day, when Richard and I walk into a shop or store and they have an alarm alerting the worker that someone has entered and it sounds like Antonio's bedroom alarm, we feel panicked and sick. I tell you this story and name the trauma because I think it has a lot to do with how we are all feeling in this moment. We have been abused for four years and cannot trust that things will get better. Our hope has been beaten many, many times. We've been taught not to trust, to hope, to expect positive change, honesty, compassion, charity, integrity, civility, or decency.

And so, we've been traumatized. We've been burdened by despair. We've learned not to trust the idea that change is going to come. We've learned that we must protect ourselves and lash out, live in fear, put our most anxious and aggressive selves to work. This is how we have been taught to survive. Just like Antonio. Just like we told Antonio that this was his forever home, that he was safe, that he could expect more and lay down his sword and armor, I'm telling you that it is time to calm your hearts. It is time to return to hope and trust. It is okay to be a little vulnerable again. It's safe. Author, activist, and spiritual leader Marianne Williamson tells us, "We do not heal the past by dwelling there; we heal the past by living fully in the present."

I ask you what state is your heart in today. Pause for a moment. What state is your heart in today? Surely it needs to be healed. Surely, you need to bring it back from the edge. You will never find peace of mind if you do not listen to your heart. We are all starving for certain things in life. Security, love, happiness, purpose, success, and independence are among our top goals, however, we define these ourselves. We live our lives trying to find happiness. But, as John Lennon sang, "Life is what happens while we are busy making other plans." Sometimes our disappointments can be extremely jarring, like my experiences as a parent. Other times life is on a roll, and we become elated. But then things turn, and we are headed for a crash landing, life's ups and downs can be so distressing. When we feel like we are being torn apart, we learn to protect ourselves by not getting our hopes up about anything. but then we are living a life of resignation, which isn't fulfilling, either. Tying our emotions to all the ups and downs is like stepping onto a perpetual roller coaster, riding through multiple dips every day. Why live with that kind of stress when a better alternative exists?

Wayne Dyer said, "Peace is the result of retraining your mind to process life as it is, rather than as you think it should be." If that sounds like giving up or giving in, that's not what Dyer meant. He was referring to the flow of life. We can train ourselves to take advantage of this flow and stay in balance regardless of any temporary elation or dismay. When life is great, we hope it continues forever. When we're in a dip, we can't wait until it ends. But nothing is permanent. That's hard to remember when we're stuck in a bad situation and hard to accept when life is good. Reminding yourself that all things must end (and new situations will replace them) is a great way to begin detaching, and maintaining balance no matter what.

Human beings experience physical pain differently than animals do. We exaggerate pain by thinking about how bad it is and how much we don't want it. But we can get control of our pain by focusing on the actual size of the area it covers and how it truly feels. Observing instead of judging can help us see reality. The same applies to events we label as bad. Try to take your focus off of feeling bad long enough to assess the reality. Then shift your mind to finding a positive aspect of the experience or thinking about something good that is also happening. Life just is. It's easier to relax and meet it with a smile when you can. If you practice living and being in the moment, rather than evaluating how everything is affecting you, events will lose their grip.

Life is like a flowing river. We can do three things when we jump in: We can go with the natural flow, letting the current carry us forward; we can try to go upstream, or we can hang onto a rock to try to stay put. If we go with the flow, we'll be carried along peacefully. If we try to go upstream, we'll have a real battle on our hands. If we hang onto a rock, we'll risk being battered against that rock. Try stepping back, relaxing, and taking a bigger view. Focus on believing that everything will get done in its own time if you take one step at a time. When you do this, you'll find that things will fall into place with less effort on your part. You'll experience the flow of life.

Our loving Antonio is a great reminder that even horrible situations are only temporary, and since I can learn so much from them, it's better to look for the lessons than to focus on how bad things seem. Life can't always be just the way we want it. But if we go with the flow and work with each situation as it is, and calm our hearts, we will often be surprised that things turn out better than we wanted. A balanced life that is far less stressful makes everything more enjoyable. A wise prophet once said, "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*" May you find peace in your heart and healing in your soul.

May it be so.