



Together, We Can Pause, Connect and Rise Together

Joanna Curry-Sartori, LMFT

Many of us have remarked that while we are respecting physical distancing, we are all so profoundly connected! In this connection, we have the power to spread so much - useful information, our fear and uncertainty, or our love and appreciation. So this raises the question, during this time, how do we want to *be* together? How can we bring out the best in our human spirit to uplift and care for each other? Is it possible this time can draw us closer to our shared humanity rather than divide us through pain and fear?

As we've been home as a family (my ten year old son, husband and I) it has been intense - so many sides of us show up. We need to be practical and focused; setting up work spaces, organizing our new schedules, checking our "stores", learning to zoom. We also recognize the need to be especially caring; listening, acknowledging, and helping each other. And then there were other sides of us surfacing too - annoyance, criticism, overwhelm, worry, sadness and disappointment. Does any of this sound familiar? As some of the waves of emotion are faster or bigger than usual, we sometimes need to spend more time than usual just regrouping, repairing and making sense of what is sweeping through our family and our world.

I am a Marriage and Family Therapist and a consultant implementing social and emotional learning programs in schools. So at some level I understand why we are having stronger reactions right now and what I need from my emotional "tool box". All the same, I sometimes feel like a captain navigating uncharted, rough waters, all the

while unsure what will come next in this storm. How do we stay the course, continue navigating and stay calm and connected through this storm?

How do we understand what is happening inside of us?

For just about everyone, the impact of this time is hugely significant, challenging, trying. As we speak of "uncertainty, fear, unpredictability", our underlying vulnerabilities can quickly become activated and this in turn increases our survival instincts. When we feel out of control, scared, helpless, or grieving, we instinctively increase our protective system in an effort to relieve or bury the sense of vulnerability. Said another way, if our animal brain perceives threat and danger, we instinctively shift into fight, flight, freeze and take action to guard against anticipated pain. At this time, many people are understandably operating more often in a more heightened, guarded state of mind. How does this show up in our everyday experience? Sometimes this manifests as an increase in the parts of us that want to "get things under control" - they anticipate, plan, worry, try to help, overcontrol, etc. Sometimes there is an increase in the parts of us wanting to escape - they lead us to shut down, distract, indulge addictions, erupt etc. Under current stressors these and many other responses are understandable. Ironically, however, when we react this way, we often get the opposite of what we want. Rather than feel more safe and connected, we may end up hurting each other, feeling misunderstood or more isolated.

So...What is another way to Be together?

Just as we have the fight/flight/ freeze response, science has demonstrated that we also have another physiology, another option - what Dr. Herbert Benson called "the Relaxation Response". We have the power to perceive external stressors, step back, bring our nervous systems "on-line" and choose our response. We have the power to choose love over fear. This is our unique human gift and it is our birthright to access and operate this way. And now, more than ever, it's time to build it and use it. We refer to this "whole brain" state of being often in our language saying, "I was my best self, I was on my game, I was in my center, in the zone, etc." It is inherent in our physical wiring - it's good to know it's there and it's even better if we activate it. What if right now, we could access our innate capacity to be calm, courageous and

compassionate and lead from this best Self? So, maybe this sounds nice, but how can we actually do this right at this time, while we are in the storm?

Find your simple, small practices that help you settle into your core, into your calm center. As I've reflected, here are some ways I've found we can access and lead from our Self:

- Pause before reacting. Notice the signs and signals when you are about to flip and step back to cool off. You won't be productive in this frame of mind.
- Breathe and calm our bodies before action.
- Reflect on our different responses coming up - notice your different emotions, appreciate our perspective and intention, and consider what we truly need.
- Communicate with care - Describe your experience and feelings to another without blaming them for "making me feel x, y, x..." Give them information about what is happening inside you - your story of the situation, your interpretation, hopes, etc.. "In this moment, a part of me feels, while another part of me thinks...."
- Listen to really understand another. Listen to "get" rather than listen to fix, advise, argue or win. Especially right now, we just need to feel another human is with us on the journey.
- Remember your center of love, compassion and courage. We all have moments when we have connected to our best Self - call on that memory and have the conviction that this state of being is alive within you.
- Focus on the greater social good, what will benefit all, and invite others to join in courageous action.

What does this look like in real life?

After a few weeks of quarantine, I approached my husband. "Honey can we check in? I don't even know exactly what we need to talk about but this is intense. I want to come out of this time feeling we love each other more, feeling our family is stronger, not that we've gotten sucked into blaming and arguing. Can we try just speaking for what's going on inside?" And so we did. We patiently represented our different emotions, assumptions and needs, we spoke for the different parts of our selves, not blaming the other for how we felt. Some moments were sticky but we didn't run away, we owned our "stuff", we let the other person know we understood and appreciated their

perspective and that we still loved them. Gradually the space lightened. Eventually, we returned to the practicalities of setting up agreements about how we wanted to share our days and make space to grow as a family. Then we were ready to bring our son into the dialogue to care for him as well.

This helped immensely. And... it wasn't a "one and done". Our time together over the last many has required many such check ins and extra discipline and vigilance. I need to continually check what is bubbling inside, I need to be mindful before acting on a knee jerk reaction with my family, and I need to make more space to slow down and understand where my son or husband is coming from.

What if we join together to find our calm core and lead from there?

While much may not seem to be in our power, what IS in our power is cultivating our connection to ourselves and each other. And doing this is not just so we can survive the unexpected curve balls day by day. Doing this is, in the big picture sense, for the well-being of humanity. As we work together to build our capacity to work through difference and find loving connection, we are "on line" to find solutions to some of the greatest challenges we've ever faced. As we persist to find a meaningful understanding and role to play, we are actually nurturing deep healing. Rather than integrate this as a trauma, we can encode this experience as something that grows and uplifts us as a species. As we do this, our children are watching us, following and learning... and from us they can learn to manifest the greatest qualities and potential of the human spirit.

We are on a tremendous, unknown journey - and as we take it together, we may see more of the extraordinary power and beauty of the human spirit than we have ever known. Let's join in a commitment to bring forth this greatness in each other and experience our generous, strong, wise capacity, for our world and for our future.