

An excerpt from the book, "Be The Hero You've Been Waiting For" by Yvonne and Rich St. John-Dutra. © 2009. All rights reserved.

## Chapter 11

### What Else?

**Suffering cheerfully endured, ceases to be suffering  
and is transmuted into an ineffable joy.**

~ Gandhi

#### Yvonne

It was one of those weeks. My fifteen-year-old daughter, stressed beyond capacity, kept snapping at everyone. I reminded myself that anger is always a cover for other feelings and, in an attempt to help, as well as to move the rest of the family out of the crossfire, I asked her if she wanted a "session."

A session combines the tools of "emptying the balloon" and giving "the gift of listening." Rich and I use this technique with our families, with each other, and in the Challenge Day organization. In fact, giving and receiving sessions is a very important part of the training that each person goes through in order to become a Challenge Day leader.

At first my daughter just mumbled, "No," which I took to mean, *I want to, but I'm really scared*. Finally she released breaths of fire and reluctantly followed me into the most private room in our house.

**My goal was to stay open and be ready for anything in order to support my child in her journey through the pain of her unfelt feelings and into the discovery of a new part of herself.**

I stood approximately four feet away from her and looked into her eyes. This gave her plenty of space to breathe, feel, stomp her feet, and move her body like any child who naturally remembers how to collapse into a tantrum. I did my best not to look anxious or “weird.” My highest chance for success was to be open with no agenda, and instead just listen and trust the natural process.

As she breathed deeply her face reddened and it seemed as if she was contemplating blowing me off. I imagined it took courage for her to trust me enough to go into her feelings instead of shutting down or numbing out. I guided her by suggesting, “Why don’t you finish the sentence, ‘I am angry that...’”

That did it. Tears began flooding her eyes and rage exploded through every vein as she yelled, “I am angry at you!”

I silently reassured myself. *Okay, here we go, she is going to start with me. Don’t get hooked, just listen.*

She continued yelling, her voice growing louder with every statement, but she still seemed a bit tentative, as though checking in to see if I was truly ready to hold her anger. Then, blasting through her doubts, she shouted, “I hate that you are always gone! Every child in the world is more important to you than your own!”

She’d triggered my defensiveness, and my mind searched for rebuttals. *When I am home, you are always busy with your friends and you rarely have time with me anyway.* But I kept silent, remembering that the only way this session could end with me feeling proud would be for me just to listen – no matter what. I stayed with her and asked softly, “What else?”

She upped the ante and took her best shot, screaming, “I hate you!”

My ego grew horns, but I managed to keep quiet. I told myself to keep my body in a relaxed and open posture while I let her hostile energy just flow through me.

She continued with a full head of steam, “You like Lauren more than me! You baby her all the time!”

My mind raced, my heart pounded, and I suppressed the urge to protect myself. Instead, I held onto my goal of being as non-reactive as possible.

Then we got past her testing point and off she went. “I hate my life! I hate my sisters! Dad doesn’t listen and he never trusts me! You are always nagging me, and it seems that my room being clean is more important to you than all the stress I am under!”

I breathed, softly but deeply, internally complimenting myself for being able to listen without reacting.

She kept going, showing no signs of slowing down. “I hate school! I don’t know why they teach us half this stuff anyway! I feel so stupid! I am retarded and it is so embarrassing being in Special Ed!”

Now I wanted to take care of her and reassure her that she was brilliant. I wanted to list all the geniuses in the world who had forms of dyslexia. Yet I knew she just needed to feel, not be saved. I asked, very softly, “What else?”

She immediately responded. “I feel so ugly, I am so fat, I hate my body!”

I wanted to tell her about how our media portrays women and intentionally launches us on an endless cycle of hating our bodies in order to buy things in the hopes of looking prettier or thinner. But I resisted, remembering how fat I felt at her age. In my mind, I relived my desperate, secret life with bulimia. Strong waves of understanding rippled through me and I allowed some tears to spill – not so many that she would have to turn off her feelings and shift over to taking care of me but just enough to let her see that I got it.

**My daughter was not just talking about her pain, she was fully *feeling* it.**

As she continued emptying her balloon, she literally resembled a woman in full labor. “I have no clothes that fit me! All the other kids have nice clothes with brand names. Why do I have to be the poor kid with hand-me-downs?”

My parent’s version of “You think you have it bad” rolled through my head, though once again I chose to ignore it. I actually felt excited that she was doing what I call, “following the thread in.” I knew that her only true way out of this “feelings storm” was to go all the way into and through her emotions.

I kept encouraging her by repeating, “What else?”

With an intensity that shook the entire house, she wailed, “I can’t do this anymore! I can’t do this anymore!”

I felt proud for being able just to listen, which overrode any temptation to give advice, defend myself or fix her.

Then it came, every parent’s biggest fear.

She screamed in agony, “I hate my life! I want to die! I want to kill myself!”

This was my final test. If I could be here with her through this, I could do anything!

I flashed back to what seemed like a lifetime ago, when I was in the mental hospital. Beads of sweat surfaced on my forehead. My inner cheerleader – what I think of as my higher self – chimed in by asking, *What would you want your mom to do?*

The answer came fast and clear. *Just listen and love.*

I vividly recalled the terror I had felt at her age when I was certain that I was going crazy. My compassionate tears flowed freely as I said, “What else?”

Her sobs intermingled with screams as her body contracted in spasms. Her movements reminded me of a three-year-old fully expressed in her body.

She cried for what seemed like an eternity, though in reality it lasted maybe twenty or thirty minutes.

**I simply stayed in her eyes as I softly invited more. “What else?”**

Gradually, her anger moved into what appeared to be sadness and grief.

At some point I said, “You are doing great.”

She responded with a withering glare that I translated to mean, *Don't patronize me!*

I hoped that my off-track encouragement would not stop her release, and I remained totally present, allowing time for her emotional balloon to completely empty.

Then her breathing softened and she relaxed.

Instincts are particularly important in this part of the process and the mother in me knew that this was the moment to gently reach out. I took her hand in mine, and without interrupting the flow, I gracefully made my way over to a nearby chair and guided her into my lap.

She wrinkled her nose, which I was sure meant, *Oh mom, I'm too old for that.*

“Humor me,” I whispered.

I had proven my safety. She allowed herself to fall into me, tucking her head into my shoulder as I began to gently rock her. For a few minutes, her crying increased, though it came from a more peaceful place. I was in no rush. Where else was there to go? What could be more important than this moment? I held her as we rocked.

Then, as if nothing had happened, she looked up with a giggle and said, “What’s for dinner?”

In that moment, I knew she was complete. We had done it!

What an honor it was to midwife my daughter as she gave birth to herself through this session. Waves of pride spread through my body as I continued to say *I love you* in the most intimate way I could – by simply listening and holding space for her as she felt all of her feelings.

**What the caterpillar calls the end of the world,  
the Master calls the butterfly.**

~ Richard Bach

Being a teenager can be extremely challenging. Adults tell you what to do and where to go. You have to make major decisions that can affect your entire life, at the same time that your body is changing, your hormones are raging, and your feelings are often running the show.

As the mother of four, I have repeatedly learned that the best gift I can give to my children is to remember that their feelings are simply feelings. The greatest way for me to say *I love you* is to be able to hold the space and listen to them as they move through their emotions – *without* taking it personally. Most every parent would agree that it is considerably easier to listen to other people’s kids than their own, especially when the kids are ready to explode. So, throughout this process the only thing a parent needs to remember is to listen, love and ask, “What else?”

Giving a session is an art, requiring that one person intentionally listen while the other empties his or her emotional balloon. To do that, it's best to set a "container" solely for the session. The container serves two main purposes: the first is to establish a mutually agreed-upon time boundary for when it will end; the second is to be clear that in this container, and *in this container only*, the person "sessioning" has explicit permission to share *anything* and to express *all* his or her feelings in healthy and safe ways. The *only* thing the one offering the session needs to remember is to listen, and *if needed*, genuinely ask, "What else?"

When I give a session, I kind of split myself in half. One part of me is the outer or human part that just listens, while the other part is my higher self, the wisest part of me who silently coaches me through the process. It can be difficult to not chime in with my stuff or to jump in and fix things. I need my inner voice to remind myself that my job is to listen.

I remember this particular session with my daughter because of the many times I wanted to stop her pain and make her feel better. I longed to say, "You are not fat! You are not dumb!" At the same time, I struggled to keep myself from getting too defensive. I had to allow her to attack me and hold firm in knowing that I would be more proud of myself by taking it, than by becoming defensive, *no matter what*. In the end, my daughter was able to break through because I had proven that I was a safe refuge in which she could completely release.

I liken this process to the difference between pulling the weed out with the roots versus just cutting off the top. I went for the roots. My daughter was able to vent all of her feelings and completely empty her "emotional balloon." And I was able to let her know she'd done it perfectly by holding her when she was finished. That was one of the things I craved during difficult times as a teenager. I wanted to be held and rocked but I never asked because I thought I was too old or too big. Still, I longed for that kind of nurturing. The

phrase, “Just humor me,” has become a great tool. Saying it then allowed my daughter to surrender as I tenderly rocked and mothered her.

I feel so blessed every time I have the privilege to vulnerably support or midwife someone into, and completely through, their feelings. It’s the same kind of emotional breakthrough that happened to me in the psych ward and ultimately saved my life. If you really knew me, you’d know that each time I do it with someone else, I picture a butterfly.

Butterflies are a miracle of nature. In order for a caterpillar to complete its journey through life, it must spin its own cocoon. Once inside the cocoon, miraculously, it allows itself to completely melt down into “imaginal” cells. The caterpillar melts in order to transform. Out of this natural, spectacular process of metamorphosis, a magnificent butterfly soon appears, ready to soar off into its new life.

### **What if, like the butterfly, we are also born with the ability to transform our lives?**

If you have ever deeply and courageously “followed the thread” of your emotions to their origin and then emerged out the other side, you understand exactly what I mean. It can seem as though you are literally melting down and transforming.

Many people have certainly had the experience of being overfilled with feelings as their emotional balloons explode. But without someone listening and holding a “sacred space,” it’s all too easy to hurt ourselves or others, emotionally or physically, along the way. The melting down part takes place but the transformation is missing.

We used to inherently understand how to do all of it. But ever since we threw our first tantrum, many of us have been forcefully taught not to go there, that to express strong

emotions is wrong. Children are punished for their tantrums and adults are shunned. As a result, so many of us never empty our balloons.

We need to be responsible for our feelings. Just as we care for ourselves by eating healthy, exercising and having a spiritual practice, it's vital to fully express our feelings in order to grow as human beings. The key is to intentionally set a safe container. In my ideal world, people would understand this process.

Ideally, our families would lovingly demonstrate unconditional listening as we rollercoaster through the full gamut of our emotions. Unfortunately, without access to the tools of setting a safe container and sessioning, most of us have been stifled, shamed, punished or perhaps even physically hurt as a way to shut us up. Regardless, no one is a victim here. If we are avoiding our feelings, we are continuing a cycle that has been passed down from generation to generation. Now, however, we can become more conscious and notice what we're doing so we can make a different choice, and then act on that choice.

## **Accountability Buddies**

Rich and I feel enormously proud that everyone in the Challenge Day organization practices the tools we teach in this book. And to make sure we all have the support we deserve, everyone in our organization creates a personal growth plan, including the selection of an "accountability buddy" who cheerleads and supports them in creating the life, job and relationships of their dreams. On a regular basis, these buddies check in to hold each other

accountable in achieving their stated goals. Accountability buddies offer encouragement and, most importantly, “sessions” to help each other empty their emotional balloons.

One of our basic beliefs is that, with enough love, we can all naturally heal. All we need is someone who is not afraid of us respectfully expressing strong emotions. Our buddies give us the gift of listening as we find our way back to ourselves.

Because our work as Challenge Day leaders requires that we hold the emotions of countless youth and adults, every leader commits to a minimum of at least one emotional release session per week. By giving each other the gift of listening and emptying our balloons on a regular basis, we prepare ourselves to hold the onslaught of emotions that can come our way.

People often ask, “What happens if the timer goes off and you are right in the middle of an emotional storm?” When that occurs, and it often does, we recommend the tool of “attention-out.” This is a simple and common technique used in many forms of counseling. It means asking a question that causes the person to move from *feeling* to *thinking*. Some examples are to recite the names of vegetables that start with the letter “C,” or to list the names of the Seven Dwarves, and state which one you like the most and why. Lists can be a great tool to attention-out. One of my favorites is to ask the person to start listing the things they are grateful for; this not only helps to attention-out from the big emotions but also ends the session on a positive note of gratitude.

Questions should make the person *think or be funny*, or they should be *open-ended* and require more than a one word or a yes or no answer. The funnier or more outrageous the attention-out questions are, the better the results. The goal is not to complete the answer as much as it is to bring the person out of their feelings and back into their rational minds.

## Steps for a Session

1. Find a partner who has read this chapter or understands how vital it is for people to fully feel all of their feelings.
2. Create a container by choosing a safe and private place, and setting a timer. Make sure you've got plenty of Kleenex on hand.
3. For the person in need of the session, commit yourself to allowing all feelings to be expressed. The listener commits to accepting those feelings without defensiveness, fixing or responding.
4. As the listener, you can begin the session by asking simple questions such as, "What are you feeling?" Remember, the best gift you can give someone who is having a session is to encourage them to fully empty their emotional balloon.
5. A powerful tool to get an anger session rolling is to evoke emotion by having the sessioner match your volume and energy by completing the sentence, "I'm angry that ... !?" This tool can be used as needed throughout the session.
6. Ask "What else?" if the sessioner seems complete, gets stuck or needs reassurance that you are still there and willing to continue listening.
7. After the timer goes off, pause, breathe, and allow the emotions to settle. Then validate your partner for his or her courage. Remember, do not respond to *anything* that has been said.
8. If necessary, "attention-out" with questions that move the sessioner from the heart to the head. You want to prepare the other person to either leave the session or switch to your turn, knowing their feelings are simply feelings, and

- that they can go back to school, work or life without their emotions running the show.
9. If your partner has sessioned about someone else and that relationship is not complete, make sure the sessioner goes directly to the person to clear up anything that is between them. Then have your partner come back to you and let you know when that has been completed. Refer to our Rumor Elimination Model in Chapter 13, if necessary.
  10. What's said in the session stays in the session. It is crucial to keep all shares confidential. The only exception is if someone is in danger of physically hurting himself, hurting others or being hurt by another. In any of these situations, seek professional help and get your partner the support he or she deserves.

## **Be the Hero!**

**There's no easy way out. If there were, I would have bought it.  
And believe me, it would be one of my favorite things.**

~ Oprah Winfrey

### **Notice**

- Is there anyone in your life whom you trust to hold you during your strongest emotions? What about these people makes it safe for you to express yourself? What is it about the way they listen, their body language or attitudes that tells you to keep

going? When was the last time you allowed them to come through for you? Did you allow yourself to cry and scream until your balloon felt empty? If you did, how did that feel?

- When was the last time, if ever, you had a good cry or anger session? How did it feel in your body? What effect did it have on your attitude and behavior? Were you able to think more clearly? Did it help you make better choices?
- When, if ever, have you held or supported someone while they expressed deep grief, anger or rage? Were you able to keep your attention on them? How was it to be present with intense emotions? Did you feel compassion? Did your support allow them to get to the bottom of their emotions? How did the “session” affect them? Did you notice any changes in the person’s attitude and behavior afterward?
- As a child do you ever remember having a tantrum? What happened? How did people respond? Do you remember being yelled at, shushed or told to go to your room? What effect, if any, did people’s reactions have on you and the way you would later express your feelings?
- How often does your “emotional balloon” leak out on the people around you? Have you ever hurt anyone with your anger? How often do you say things you regret?
- Have you ever been physically or emotionally hurt by someone else’s anger?
- Have you ever made dangerous or unhealthy choices as a result of your unexpressed emotions? If so, what did you do and what were the consequences?
- Is there anyone in your life that you would trust to be an accountability buddy for you? Someone who you believe might help you create the life of your dreams, listen when you need it and hold you accountable for living your 100% life?

## **Choose**

- Think about a time when you held back strong emotions about something. Perhaps you can think about something you are currently holding inside you that has gone unexpressed. Now choose the person with whom you would like to release these emotions and imagine completely emptying your balloon. What does it look like? What do you say and do?
- Can you imagine allowing someone to have this same sort of session with you? Envision yourself “holding the space” for someone else to completely release his or her emotions. How do you encourage that person to empty everything that’s inside?
- If you have noticed times when your emotional balloon has leaked onto others, plan a course of action to fully express your emotions and then plan the steps you would need to take to make amends for any words or actions you regret.
- If you have been hurt by someone else’s actions or words, how can you imagine feeling better? Would you need to have a session to get out your feelings? Or would you need to address the situation with that person in some way? List all the things you might do in order to feel better.
- If you have made unhealthy choices as a result of unexpressed emotions, are there any ways in which you need to address those choices? What course of action can you imagine taking in order to fully heal?
- Envision the perfect person as your accountability buddy, and then list all the ways in which you might support each other.

## **Act**

- Share this chapter and these tools with your family members, friends, co-workers and other people in your life so that you can support one another in having sessions when needed.
- The next time you notice someone in your life has a full emotional balloon, offer him or her a “session.” Find a safe place, set a container, let them know they have permission to share whatever they are feeling. Practice the steps listed for having a session. If, at any point, they seem stuck, try asking the question “what else?”
- Find someone you trust to become your regular “session buddy.” Create time each week to empty your emotional balloons. Using the tools in this chapter, exchange time crying, screaming, yelling, laughing and expressing yourself fully so that your emotional balloons don’t leak onto those you love. Notice how alive and free you feel afterward.
- Apologize to someone you feel you have hurt with your words and actions.
- Get help in healing any unhealthy habits you may have as a result of a full emotional balloon.

## **Celebrate!**

Give yourself permission to laugh out loud and celebrate the freedom you feel.