

Calm Waters

The day started out like any other day. But any other day for this person wasn't like any day that most people live. No, this person had moved from another country, and to a county in a state where he had lived for a quarter of a century. He had married, raised two children, started several successful companies, and he had been happy for many years. Formerly, his life was typically happy and optimistic, as if those two traits were somehow instinctive for him. He always seemed to gravitate to knowing that no matter how bad a thing might be, it could always be worse, and knowing that it wasn't the worst it could be was like a life jacket to him. It allowed him to pop up and not drown in the experience.

Yet somehow people seemed to have changed over the past several years. People wanted to share their opinions and yet their opinions were shallow and devoid of facts to back up their words. He then began hearing the same opinions from many others, and their opinions were said as if they were facts, and the whole scenario began to drive him away from people. Society then seemed to fracture over the course of several years, and everywhere he turned he was met with opinions about literally everything, including opinions about opinions.

Then one day, and then for a succession of days, he noticed he wasn't happy anymore. And by not happy he felt unhappy. Nothing much seemed to make him happy any longer. His hiking in the hills around his home in the outskirts of the city where he lived still brought him happy hours, but more and more his hikes were simply an escape for him. So many aspects of his life that had once brought him large amounts of happiness now seemed to have withered away like flowers left unwatered. His daily meditations began to take on the aspect of a wrestling match,

where his mind would run amok as it tried to figure out an escape from his now daily unhappiness. It is true that his girlfriend brought him respites, and it is true she infused him with happiness and smiles that would last him for hours. And yet that was not enough either.

But life has a strange way of providing for each of us if we let it. If we fight off the advances of friendship or love from well-meaning friends or potential lovers, that friendship or love can become overwhelmingly negative to us. However, if we accept friendship or love from another it can become the wind that fills our sails and transports us to places we never thought or imagined we would experience. And while he had experienced both accepting friendship and love and fighting off friendship and love, now he was in a wasteland where nothing could grow any longer. His life seemed barren to him, and after a while he seemed to be going through the motions of being happy. He feigned happiness for the benefit of others. He feigned optimism for the same reason. When asked how he was he would reply, "I've been worse and I've been better, so I guess I'm okay". He questioned why he stayed where he was, he questioned literally everything, and yet he came away confused, unable to find any answers. The best he could come up with was that finding happiness for now was like finding a thin, nebulous needle in a mile-high haystack. But being a basically happy and optimistic person, he instinctively kept on being as happy as he could. Of course, his responsibilities also kept him from simply leaving too.

One morning while meditating he came across a memory of him sitting next to a small pond of water. The crystal-clear reflection was so perfect that it was almost impossible for him to tell that the trees weren't growing upside down in the pond. He knew there was deep meaning in this memory and so he sat with the picture, and as he sat, he felt his mind getting calm. First, he noticed calm, and then he noticed his mind and his body began to match the surface of the pond. As he got up from his meditation, he was smiling for the first time in a long time. It was as if the

smile he smiled was an inward smile, a smile that was directed at himself rather than towards the world around him. A two-word combination began to echo in his mind and the two words were calm waters. At first, he understood the meaning and he had felt some calmness, but it wasn't until he began to implement the concept that he truly began to understand the concept. He found he could begin to create calm waters in his daily meditations, he could create calm waters in his conversations, and he found, after some successes and some failures, that he, he himself, could create calm waters for himself. The concept and implementation weren't without errors of course, but as he became more adept at implementing calm waters inside himself for his mind and his heart, so did his life outside become calmer. He began to learn that it was simply most people he was tired of, and their endless opinions about literally everything. He turned his television off.

Now that he had moved and was done with his past life, he had succumbed to life in the country and to a life that beckoned him each morning. He loved that life seemed to summon him each morning, and he loved that his life had, what felt to him, a deeper meaning once again. Whether it was the squirrels, chipmunks, or myriad birds that he so loved to feed and watch and who were there waiting for him every morning, or whether it was lighting the logs in his wood stove that he carried in from the wood pile he had so meticulously stacked, to heat his small cabin, or whether it was simply getting up from a restful night's sleep didn't seem to matter. He loved his life again, he loved the mountains where he lived, and he loved the tall pine and fir trees of the forest within which he lived.

Sometimes his life required hard physical work. Gathering logs that he would then split, first by hand and then later with a gas-powered log splitter that he purchased, was no easy chore for him. Trees were felled by local wood cutters and then delivered to him for a reasonable price, or lately

he had needed to have several trees around his cabin cut down. All these trees were fairly massive in height and in girth, so they were then cut into shorter lengths that would fit into his wood stove, and finally the shorter lengths would be split and stacked so they could dry. The men who felled the trees and cut them into rounds, as the smaller lengths were known, were very strong men; far stronger than he was. Many times, he would simply laugh and shake his head as he would try to move a round that had been literally picked up and thrown off a truck by these mountain men. He would try to simply move the round and it wouldn't move. Eventually he learned how to move them, and eventually he learned that it was easier to split them first. The biggest rounds he would split by hand using a maul, and later by using his new gas-powered wood splitter, but no matter the methodology he used, splitting and stacking wood was hard work.

Because he lived in a forest, it was imperative that he kept his property from becoming a fire trap. He did that by raking the pine needles, that fell like snow flakes every autumn, and then carefully burning them. He would also cut off any dead limbs that he could reach, and finally, he would have an experienced wood cutter fell any dead trees. This work didn't take all his time by any means, but it did take time, and this work needed to be finished before the rains and later the snow that would pile up six and more feet during the long winter months. By then he would have split and stacked his many cords of wood, and then covered those logs with strong tarps to keep them dry.

Raking the pine needles and burning them had gotten easier over the years as he had gradually gotten the upper hand over the dead trees and the fact that no maintenance had been done prior to him purchasing the property. But now he was on top of the maintenance, so what used to take several weeks was now taking half that time, and he found the work satisfying.

Living in the mountains wasn't by any standard of measurement all hard work. He had a small boat he had purchased two decades previously and he would often fish in the nearby lake. And fishing in the lake was good. He caught many fine trout and he learned how to smoke them. He loved smoked trout, and he froze several pounds for eating during the long winter. He also froze trout fillets which he would consume during the long winter months. And while he had previously hunted for meat, he had stopped. He stopped after he met a young doe who was an orphan. Her mother had died so she had never learned to migrate, and when she was found emaciated and starving during a snow storm, several neighbors had fed her during the long winter months. One day when the man was outside doing some chores, the doe, now two plus years old, saw him and cautiously walked over to him. He sat down on the ground and still the doe approached him. He extended his hand towards her, and ever so gently the doe touched her wet nose to his fingers. The man smiled and said "Hi", and then he said "Thank you" to her. Occasionally he would feed her some bird feed which she loved, and she would eat from the tin he held out for her. The interaction with the doe, and later interacting with her fawns, proved so meaningful that he could no longer shoot deer. Of course, he also had plenty of food which made his decision much easier.

Living in the mountains was also, at times, harsh. Harsh for him, and harsh for everyone and everything that lived there. The birds were mostly migratory, but there were several species that hung around year round. Many animals lived in the mountains year-round, and he got to know them by the tracks they left in the mud or in the snow. He once had a silver fox who lived for several weeks under a table on his deck. His outdoor camera captured her coming and going until eventually the fox left. He saw her footprints still, and in the spring, he saw her sunning herself on the stump of an old tree. He would see her many times until the summer, when she

would retreat into the wilds of the mountains around him to escape the many visitors who would visit this beautiful area each summer. But he would keep alert and he hoped to see her again in the autumn. Bear would visit from time to time, mountain lion were regular visitors, a little-seen visitor, a badger, was caught on his outdoor camera. The bear hibernated, most of the deer migrated to lower ground, but many of the other animals were like him and stayed.

There were many nice people living in the area, people who were courteous and polite, and while he rarely visited with anyone for more than several minutes, seeing them was always nice. There were also many people who were impolite and sometimes seemed full of hate. When he was around these people he practiced his calm waters but eventually their hate won the day, and he learned that a simple hi and not stopping to talk was the only acceptable form of interaction. His instinctive nature was to be happy and friendly. He couldn't help himself, and along with that came his desire to help people who weren't happy to be happy. Yet here were people who he thought could and should be happy, and he often wondered what had happened in their lives that had so filled them with hate. But even being close to hate was too much for him. Hate-filled people he learned were the exact opposite of calm waters. He himself had not lived a life untouched by negativity, or hard times, or homelessness, or even the deaths of those he had dearly loved. What was the difference he asked himself repeatedly? Eventually, he asked some of the people he knew who were rarely happy or optimistic. That's when he began to find out that many people suffered from medical conditions and were taking medications for depression, anxiety, and other disorders. He himself had of course been depressed and he had been anxious at times, but through self-examination and introspection, he had found a way to cure himself. Maybe it was a childhood trauma, or perhaps it was emotional abuse at the hands of a step-parent, but whatever it was that had happened, he realized it was not happening now, and by

letting the person he was now deal with the issue, he could, as he referred to it, be in present-time. He learned he needed to stop talking about politics, religion, taxes, and many other topics as these seemed to be the buttons he was pushing that caused people to react passionately, and in many cases, aggressively. But since there were literally a billion topics that he could and did talk about, this was a simple change for him.

Present-time simply meant not living in the past. Living in the past was when the abuse happened so by not living there, he was freed. It was hard at first to not be a victim, it was a hard struggle at first to get out of being a victim. But as he got out of victimhood he found more calm waters, though he hadn't identified the calm he experienced as such yet. That would come later. What he had learned was that yes, he had been a victim, but that being a victim was not a lifelong sentence. Being a victim could be finite.

He still found it difficult to let others be who they were. He wanted to help those he felt needed help, and because he had helped himself, he felt he could help others. But, as he soon learned, trying to help people who weren't looking for help was futile, so he stopped. He even learned that trying to help people who didn't want his or anybody's help actually annoyed most people, so he found another reason to stop trying to help others. Soon the motto of "live and let live" made the most sense it had ever made to him.

He remembered asking his stepmother why she had been so mean to him when he was a small child, and later when he was a teenager, and right up until he had been kicked out of the family home. Her answer surprised him, and her answer was surprising to this day. Her answer went like this. "I was raised during the depression," she said, "my father had died, there were seven children and I was the youngest. My mother worked and left me in charge of the others. If

something went wrong, if something got broken, I was the one that got in trouble. I noticed,” she went on, “that when I was nice my sisters and brothers didn’t behave, but when I was mean they all behaved. So, I got mean. I got mean all the time.” He had never understood that information, he never applied it to others as their reason for being mean, instead he naturally and instinctively veered away from mean people.

And so, his life and the lives of others where he lived continued on and on. He would meet people who seemed to have experienced nothing of what he considered meaning to their lives, and yet who was he to judge others? They were happy or they weren’t happy just as he had been during his life. What he did know was that he was learning to be at peace in his life.

He had lived a life that only conformed when it needed to conform or he could be in legal trouble. But even then, there were many instances when he didn’t conform and simply wasn’t caught not conforming. As he sat back, he realized that the ocean wasn’t always calm, nor was the ocean always rough. Life ebbed and flowed, but his life had never turned mean. He still couldn’t and probably never would understand a life of not being happy nor a life of not being optimistic. His quest for calm waters was for himself and himself alone. The fact that he found calm waters inside himself was truly another gift from the God he knew and loved. The fact that he was able to extend his inner calm waters to his surroundings was a testament to how well he understood the concept and its implementation. And though it was still difficult for him to walk away from others, he had finally learned to do it. For those people he grieved slightly, but then as his waters grew calm again, he knew he had done the right thing.

He still was not a bitter nor a mean man, he still wanted to be neighborly, and yet he had not solved the problem of how to listen to people who spoke shallowly of deep problems as if they

truly had the answer. He tried reason, he tried dispensing facts, but usually all it got him was raised voices, consternation, or people acting like they knew a secret he was not privy to. And then one day the knowledge of how to treat these opinionated people came to him. The man was highly intelligent, his life was based in facts, unless one excluded his belief in God since there are no facts to prove or disprove God exists. The knowledge coming to him in how to treat opinionated people was quite simple, and it entailed him simply being as smart and as educated as he was. He remembered a time he had built a magnificent stone arch for a garage in England. When it was done it was indeed a work of art, and a person walking by asked him how he had built it. The man answered, "I built the arch by first placing the two stones on either side of the arch", and as he said the words, he pointed to the two stones at the bottom of each side of the arch. Of course, he didn't talk about the wooden frame he built for the arch, nor the wedges he supported the frame with so that when he was done, he would knock out the wedges, and the frame would drop enough so could remove it without damaging the arch. But there was no reason to explain all of that, simply saying what he had said sufficed. So, he began using that tactic, that technique, on opinionated people, and it worked. He merely behaved as the intelligent, educated person he was, smiling as he listened to their non-factual nonsense, remaining calm and understanding, and then he would walk away.

His calm waters weren't affected as much, nor was his peace, his love for life, nor his creativity.

The man had finally learned, even better, that while he could not control or change what was outside of him, he could control and change how the outside affected him.

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © September 30th, 2022

