

Calm Waters.

The day started 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 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 was happy for many years. 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 any experience.

Yet somehow, people seemed to have changed over the past several years. People, television, newspapers, and social media wanted to force their opinions on him, yet their views were shallow and devoid of facts to back up their words. He then began hearing the same thoughts from many others, and their opinions were now said as if they were facts, and the drama being played out began to drive him away from people. Society then seemed to fracture over the next several years, and everywhere he turned, he was met with opinions about everything, including opinions about opinions.

Then, one day, and for a succession of days, he noticed he wasn't happy anymore. Happiness for him had been waking up and doing anything he had to do or got to do. Happiness was working or hiking or watching his dog play. Nothing much seemed to make him happy any longer. His hiking in the hills around his home on the outskirts of the city where he lived still brought him happy hours, but more and more, his hikes were simply an escape from the hounding he felt from the angry, confused world around him. So many aspects of his life that had once brought him

happiness now seemed to have withered away like flowers left unwatered. His daily meditations seemed more like a mental wrestling match, where he wanted quiet, but his mind ran amok as it tried to escape from his now everyday unhappiness. His girlfriend brought him respites; she infused him with happiness and smiles that would last him hours and even days. And yet that was not enough either.

But life has a strange way of providing for 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 accepting friendship and love and fighting off friendship and love, now he was in a wasteland where nothing positive was possible. 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 everything he was doing and why he was doing it, 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 nebulous needle in a mile-high haystack.

Instinctively, he was a happy and optimistic person, so each day, he kept on being who he was as much as he could. Of course, his responsibilities also kept him from simply leaving.

One morning, while meditating, he came across a memory of him sitting next to a small pond. 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 quiet, and then he saw his mind and body begin to match the pond's surface. Later, 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 inward, a smile that was directed at himself rather than toward the world around him. A two-word combination began to echo in his mind, and the two words were calm waters. At first, he felt calm, but it wasn't until he began implementing the concept that he truly understood it. He found he could create calm waters in his daily meditations, he could have calm waters in his conversations, and he saw, after some successes and many failures, that he could create calm waters in himself and around him. 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 heart, his life outside became calmer. He began to learn that it was simply most people he was tired of and their endless opinions about everything.

Now that he had sold his business and house and had moved and was done with his unhappy life, he had succumbed to life in the mountains and to a life that beckoned him each morning. He loved that life seemed to summon him each morning and that his life felt a more profound 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 woodpile, he had 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 woodcutters who then delivered them to him for a reasonable price, but lately, he needed to cut down several dead trees around his cabin. All these trees were massive in height and girth, so they were cut into shorter lengths that would fit into his wood stove, and finally, the shorter lengths he would split and stack so they could dry.

The men who felled the trees would then cut them into smaller sizes, called rounds, and these were strong men, far stronger than he was. He often laughed and shook his head as he tried to move a round that had been picked up and thrown off a truck by these mountain men. He would try to move a round, and it wouldn't budge. Eventually, he learned how to move them but realized that it was easier to split them first. He would split the biggest rounds by hand using a maul and later with 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, he needed to keep his property from becoming a fire source. He raked the pine needles that fell like snowflakes every autumn and carefully burned them. He also cut off any dead limbs he could reach, and finally, he would have an experienced woodcutter cut down 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 feet or more 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 many dead trees and the fact that no maintenance had been done before he purchased 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 all hard work by any measurement standard. He had a small boat he purchased two decades earlier, 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 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 snowstorm, several neighbors cared for her during the long winter months. She was still wild, but she warily trusted humans. 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, speaking softly to her, and gently, the doe touched her wet nose to his outstretched fingers. The man smiled and said "Hi" and "Thank you" to her.

Occasionally, he would feed her some bird feed she loved, and she would eat from a tin he held out for her. The interaction with the doe, and later with her fawns, proved so meaningful that he could no longer shoot deer. Of course, he also had plenty of food, making his decision more straightforward.

Living in the mountains was also, at times, harsh. The bitter cold was difficult for him and challenging for everyone and everything that lived there. The birds were primarily migratory,

but several species 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 the snow. He once had a silver fox who lived under a table on his deck for several weeks. 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 visiting this beautiful area each summer. But he would keep alert and hoped to see her again in the autumn. Bear would visit occasionally; mountain lions were regular visitors, and a little-seen visitor, a badger, was photographed by his outdoor camera. Bears hibernate, and most deer migrate to lower ground, but many other animals are like him and stay.

Many friendly and courteous people lived in the area, and while he rarely visited with anyone for more than several minutes, seeing his neighbors was always nice. A few people were impolite, and a few people were full of hate. When he was around these people, he practiced his calm waters, but eventually, their hatred won the day, and he learned that a simple hi and not stopping to talk was the only acceptable form of interaction. His core nature was to be happy, optimistic, and friendly. He couldn't help himself, and along with that came his desire to help people who weren't excited or curious about life. Here were people whom he thought could and should be satisfied, and he often wondered what had happened in their lives that had so filled them with unhappiness. But even being close to those people was too much for him. Unhappy or hate-filled people, he learned, were the exact opposite of calm waters.

His life was not untouched by negativity, hard times, homelessness, or even the deaths of some he had dearly loved. What was the difference, he asked himself repeatedly? Eventually, he asked people he knew who were rarely happy or optimistic why they were as they were. That's

when he discovered that many people had mental conditions and were taking medications for depression, anxiety, and other disorders. He had been depressed and anxious at times, but through self-examination and introspection, he had found a way to cure himself. Maybe it was childhood trauma or emotional abuse by a step-parent, but whatever it was that had happened, he understood it was not happening now, and by letting the person he was currently deal with the issue, he could, as he referred to it, be in the present time.

He also learned he needed to stop talking about politics and religion, as these seemed to be the buttons he was pushing that caused people to react passionately and, in some cases, aggressively. But since there were a billion topics that he could and did talk about, this was a simple change for him.

Present-time 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 not to be a victim; it was a difficult struggle to get past 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. He had learned that, yes, he had been a victim, but being a victim didn't need to be 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 thought 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 discovered that trying to help people who didn't want his or anybody's help 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, then later when he was a teenager, and until he had been kicked out of the family home. Her answer surprised him, and her response 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 took advantage of my kindness, but when I was mean, they all behaved. So, I got mean. I got mean all the time." He had never understood that explanation and 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 not, just as he had been during his life. He knew 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 trouble. But even then, there were many instances when he didn't conform and wasn't caught not conforming. As he sat back, he realized that the ocean wasn't always calm, nor was the ocean always rough. Things ebbed and flowed, yet he had never become a mean person. He still couldn't and probably never would understand a life of unhappiness or pessimism. 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 could 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 multifaceted issues as if they genuinely had the answer. He tried to reason, he tried dispensing facts, but usually, all it got him was raised voices, dismay, 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 intelligent, and his life was based on facts, excluding his belief in God since no facts exist to prove or disprove God's existence. But the methodology for treating opinionated people was simple and entailed simply being as intelligent and educated as he was. He remembered when 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 how he had built it. The man answered, "I built the arch by first placing those two stones on either side of the arch." As he said the words, he pointed to the stones at the bottom of each side of the arch. Of course, he didn't talk about the wooden frame he built to support the arch, nor the wooden wedges he used to support the structure, so when he was done, he would knock out the wedges, and the frame would drop down enough so that he could remove the frame without damaging the arch. But there was no reason to explain all that; simply saying what he 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, nor were his peace, love for life, or creativity. The man had 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