



Story for all Ages – Imogene’s Antlers by David Small

Reading “Don’t Take Anything Personally” Don Miguel Ruiz

Nothing other people do is because of you. It is because of themselves. ... When we take something personally, we make the assumption that they know what is in our world, and we try to impose our world on their world.

... Even if others insult you directly, it has nothing to do with you .... The person is dealing with his or her own feelings, beliefs and opinions. That person tried to send poison to you and if you take it personally, then you take that poison and it becomes yours. ... You eat all that emotional garbage, and now it becomes your garbage. But if you do not take it personally, you are immune in the middle of hell.....

When we really see other people as they are without taking it personally, we can never be hurt by what they say or do.... When you make it a strong habit not to take anything personally, you avoid many upsets in your life. Your anger, jealousy, and envy will disappear.

If you keep this agreement, you can travel around the world with your heart completely open and no one can hurt you. You can say, “I love you,” without fear of being rejected. You can ask for what you need. You can say yes, or you can say no – whatever you choose, without guilt or self-judgment. You can choose to follow your heart always. Then you can be in the middle of hell and still experience inner peace and happiness ... Hell will not affect you at all.

### Sermon

When Lance Bass came out publicly about his sexual orientation, he was so relieved. He’d been hiding for a decade, since he joined the band, N’Sync, in 1995. N’Sync was one of those boy bands that became an overnight sensation, capturing the hearts and souls of teen and preteen girls around the world. In fact, I’m pretty sure that if you had kids at home in the late 90s, you were probably forced to listen to N’Sync much more than you wanted to! Each of the five members had a large fan base and Lance learned pretty quickly that he was expected to keep quiet about what tugged at his own heart and body. A teenager himself, and child of a small town Southern Baptist family, he internalized the message that his homosexuality could bring the whole band down. It was his responsibility to protect the band, and most importantly, to protect the profit margin of everyone involved, with his silence.

While he kept silent in his public life, he tried to have a private life. He found the gay community, found boyfriends, but given his public persona, the paparazzi were never far behind and rumors of his homosexuality filled the tabloids. For years he did everything he could to squash those rumors. But in 2006, he’d had enough. He wanted his life back, so he booked an interview with People Magazine. Afterwards, he was so relieved, thinking that he had his life back, that he was beholden to no one.

But, he then faced criticism from a place he never expected it. He expected it from his hometown of Ellisville Mississippi. He expected it from the Southern Baptist church he grew up in. He did not expect it from the gay community, the community he expected to be there to hold him. Apparently, this is what happened. During the interview, he had talked about being a Straight Acting Guy, and when this came out in the People interview, gay leaders declared that he was betraying his community by putting down feminine gay men. He came to represent what many in the gay community call – mainstreaming. “Mainstreaming” is a label that can be attached to anyone who is seen to be too much in line with heterosexual norms. To give you another example, “mainstreaming” has also been used to describe lesbians who are deemed too feminine. If you’re too girly, too “straight looking” there will be some who won’t trust that you’re really in their camp.

Well, Lance found himself caught in this whirlwind of criticism, of people saying he was too straight, and it really really hurt. He’d gotten used to the tabloids. He didn’t take them personally. But, when his own community turned on him, that was hard. Here he’d done what he’d been afraid to do for years! And he expected to be kinda patted on the back! “Welcome home! Good for you!” Instead, he was condemned.

So what Lance had to do was to start that self-differentiation process all over again. First of all, he took the time to learn more about the community that was criticizing him, to understand why they were so upset. At the same time, he had to learn all over



again that their criticism had nothing to do with him, and everything to do with the internal politics of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community and its own fears and insecurities. This doesn’t just happen in the gay community. Think about all the anxiety around whether Obama was black enough. Lance was a target of a similar kind of anxiety that had nothing to do with him and everything to do with the gay community’s sense of vulnerability to whatever might be thrown at it next.

When Lance got to that point of understanding, it was much easier not to take it personally, and much more possible for him to be able to have at least some compassion for his critics. When you can see that criticism as coming from their own pain rather than some failing of your own, how can you help but feel some compassion for those who criticize you?

At least that’s what Don Miguel Ruiz believes. That everything other people do has nothing to do with you and everything to do with them. When you are being praised, it’s about them. They see something in you that they want to see in themselves. When you are being criticized, it’s about them. They are seeing something in you that they are uncomfortable about having in themselves. The negativity coming at you has everything to do with their pain and sorrow, their fear and anger. You are not responsible for causing their pain or making it go away. They are. And if you can make a serious spiritual discipline of not taking things personally, you will find that instead of reacting and buying into the negativity of others around you, instead of escalating that negativity, you can stay open, focused in yourself, and even cultivate inside yourself compassion for those who hurt you. In other words, when faced with the temptation of hell, you can stay anchored in heaven.

What this whole process is called in psychological terms is self-differentiation. Self-differentiation means that our sense of worth and value is not determined by the opinions, values, beliefs and actions of other people. We are able to cultivate an inner sense of worth and value rather than getting it from outside of us. At the same time, we are able to stay open and in relationship with the people in our lives. Self-differentiation does not mean withdrawal from others or not loving or caring for others. It means staying grounded in yourself while remaining open to the world and the people around you.

For Rabbi Edwin Friedman, this process of self-differentiation is a supremely holy journey. It is the journey intended for us by God, it is God’s model for creation, it is the journey into and through and with God. To use more humanist language, it is the process of connecting with and allowing for the full potential of life to move through us so that we are truly co-creators of our world. We become the bearers of unconditional healing love, that love that transforms hearts, heals souls, soothes wounded spirits, and affirms what is good and holy in ourselves, in others and in the world.

Think about Imogene and her antlers. How easy would it have been for Imogene to walk into her mother’s negativity? Imogene could have taken her mother’s reaction personally. She could have decided that she was responsible for her mother’s pain and suffering. And then she would have likely gone down one of the two paths that people take when they get caught in someone else’s negativity.

First, she could have tried to change herself. She could have spent all of her energy trying to find ways to get rid of those antlers so that she could please her mother. Second, she could have tried to change her mother. She could have spent all kinds of energy trying to prove to her mother that her antlers were a great thing.

Either path takes tremendous energy. Think about it. To get rid of those antlers, she would have had to do violence to her own body. How much violence do we do to ourselves, trying to make ourselves into the people we think others want us to be, just so we can get their approval? This requires suppressing what makes us who we are, turning those pieces of ourselves into shameful secrets that get heavier and heavier, and actually keep us from being able to love ourselves, others, or God. It’s not a very healthy way to live, it’s not the plan for creation itself, and it won’t get us very far. The result is jealousy, envy, anger, bitterness, depression, and a whole lot of other heavy stuff.

And then there’s the energy we spend trying to change other people. Getting them to be what we need them to be. We talked about that a little bit last week. How much energy that takes, and how rarely it actually works.

When I first came out to my Dad, he just couldn’t accept it. Oh it hurt so bad. I don’t know what hurt worse. That I wasn’t getting his acceptance, which made me really mad. Or that he was suffering because of who I was, which made me feel really guilty. And so I tried to get him to change! I reasoned with him. I argued with him. I bought him self-help books. I sent him PFLAG literature. I even tried connecting him with a gay and lesbian Mennonite support group. And he kept saying, “I don’t think I can do this,” and I would go home resentful and heartbroken. After a while, I realized this wasn’t going to work. He



## “Who’s Responsible?”

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didn’t need me projecting my guilt and anger onto him, trying to make him into who I needed him to be. I needed to accept where he was at, and to find a better way to deal with my anger and guilt. I didn’t need to be measuring my self-worth by my father’s lack of acceptance. It had to come from me.

So I tried letting go. It didn’t come easy. It didn’t happen over night. And it didn’t mean walking away. Just because his stuff wasn’t my responsibility, didn’t mean I withdrew. The key is to stay self-differentiated and still connected.

Once I let go of my need to control my dad – and that’s what we’re trying to do when we try to change people, we’re trying to control them – once I let go of that, things got easier. There was room for us to love each other again. We could start trusting each other again. And in time, I actually got exactly what I needed: a father who completely accepts me. I just needed to give him the space to do it in his way and in his time.

How much of our lives are engaged in power plays to change other people? And do we really understand the kind of damage we do to ourselves and others by playing this game. We’re playing Russian roulette with creation itself.

How different would our world be if we had stopped playing the game after 9/11. How different would our nation be if we stopped playing with our poor and downtrodden. How different would our churches and our families be if we stopped taking things personally every time our feelings got hurt? How different would our marriages be if we stopped measuring our worth by how well our partners filled every need we have?

By not taking things personally, by letting go, we realign ourselves with the unfolding of creation itself. By respecting ourselves, and deeply respecting others, we are responding to God herself, to that spark of the divine, that inherent worth and dignity in every person. This is the kingdom of heaven. This is the foundation of bliss. This is salvation, not an other worldly salvation, but a very this worldly salvation. We don’t have to wait for heaven. It can be right here, right now and you have the power to make that choice.

We have the power to free ourselves into spiritual liberation, free ourselves from the prisons of others and the prisons of our own making into radical acceptance, radical hope, radical love, and radical beauty. This is what I hope for myself, it is what I hope for you, and what I hope for our beautiful and hurting world. May it be so.