


# **CHAPTER 8**

Gentle This Broken Heart





***If I shall succeed in leading a person to a specific dream, I will first have to start where the person is at, and just start there. He who cannot do that is cheating himself... To be able to help others I must understand more than the person does, but primarily understand what the person knows... True helpfulness starts with humbleness toward the one you want to help, and that is why I must understand that to help others is not to rule but to serve. If I cannot do this, I cannot help anyone.***

*-Soren Kierkegaard*

We have reflected on many ways to mend broken hearts. The task is not easy and it surely starts with and depends on us. Our first step is to become acutely conscious of our own values and then to find ways to reflect on the reality of those whom we serve. There are no easy answers. I recall one of my earliest experiences seeing reality. Back then, I did not know what to do, but the story still remains etched vividly in my memory.

***As the bus zoomed along the ocean front , the city of Salvador loomed before me. Colonial churches, mansions, boulevards with fancy hotels, strutting women, and suited men masked the Brazil I was soon to see.***

***It was a sight that struck my heart like a sledgehammer. Children were eating garbage. Mothers, nothing more than skin and bones, were trying to breast feed their babies with milk-less breasts. The lame, the blind, the insane were wandering down the streets begging for a penny, a crumb, a drop of water. The underbellies of the bridges were home for thousands. Sewer pipes protected frail, starving bodies squeezed into the city's intestines. The stench of the open sewers was overwhelming, a sweet and sour putrid smell that served as the breath of life for large numbers of children.***

***I did not know what to say. I did not know what to do. The next day I went for a walk near where I was staying. This brought me close to the reality of suffering. I could see the people's skin filled with pus from unknown infections. I could hear the moans of the babies and the cries of the mothers. The streets echoed with their laments, "For the love of God, give us food!" I knew Portuguese well enough to understand everything, but their empty eyes and bowed heads spoke of empty hearts. Their outstretched hands were like death's hands reaching out for life.***

***I noticed most passers-by did not even look at these abandoned people. Faces were not seen but were in the background like humid air-- cold,***

*damp, and clinging.*

*Then one day I had a chance to know the abandoned ones. I was staying with Tomazinha, my “comadre”, in a small city called Juazeiro-- a desert town, scorched by the sun, filled with abandoned children who made their home the city dump. I tramped through the putrid garbage, whisking away the black cloud of buzzing flies.*

*Garbage gave life. Stench was the perfume of misery. And abandoned children lived on the leftovers of those who had everything. A gathering of those children was on the far side of the dump. They felt safe there since few would bother to walk through the waste to get to them.*

*I came close to the group. They looked toward me, but said nothing. They were busy scavenging their daily food. Then I saw a child, perhaps two years old. He was being watched over by pigs. I went over to where the "pig-boy" was. I picked the baby up from a wet piece of cardboard. He was naked. His belly was bloated from worms and hunger. His eyes were caverns-- dark, endless, bottomless. I said nothing, put the baby down, and ran back to Tomazinha's house.*

*Tomazinha was inside cooking supper. I told her about the baby. She listened and said, "Don't you know that your friend Pedrinho had been abandoned by his mother? So that's why he is now my child." I was shocked. I remember thinking, "Little Pedrinho could be in the garbage dump, lost, abandoned." She continued, "And my sister, Dandana, is taking care of two other abandoned children." She went on in her tired way, "John, that's the way life is here-- the strong care for the weak, and the living care for the dying. That is what we all have to learn."*

*I went outside and sat beneath the palm trees and the deep green tropical plants. The desert moon was shining through the finger-like palm leaves. An evening breeze was blowing. But I wondered where the pig-boy was sleeping, whether a gentle breeze was blowing on his baby face.*

*Then little Pedrinho sat next to me and silently stared at the full moon. Although he said nothing, I knew that he, too, was wondering about the pig-boys of Juazeiro. His face spoke of abandonment as the soft rays of the tropical moon touched him. And a solitary tear glistened on his black cheek.*

## WHAT WE HAVE TO DO



Our role is to open our arms and hearts to the Pig-Boys. It is time for us to reach out to the most abandoned, the most forgotten, and those whose hearts are the most broken. Now it is the time to make a difference. We are

asking ourselves to do what is different. A spirit of gentleness calls on us to live in the moment and yet have a vision of a world without violence and injustice. It assumes that all people are brothers and sisters and that all long to feel safe and loved. It is a life-project that has to permeate our whole life, not just sometimes, but all the time. It is time for us to bend down and reach out to the Pig-Boy of Juazeiro, to the imprisoned, to those in nursing homes, institutions, and schools.

Gentle caregivers make an option to serve the most marginalized. The guard on death row makes an option to be kind in the midst of despair. The nurse helping the confused woman in the nursing home brings a sense of peace to the moment. The teacher with a macho gang member finds a way to teach him to feel safe and loved in the classroom. The social worker in the shelter for street children makes her moment a time of love for those who do not know its meaning. The caregiver in the asylum cuts through the screams and moans to give a man an embrace. The gentle caregiver starts with the moment.

You have examined yourself and those whom you serve. You have looked at ways to make your care giving more loving and ways to teach a feeling of companionship and community to those whom you serve. You have seen how you can put "companionship" into a plan and how you can begin to change the culture of what you do. You have reflected on the underlying assumptions in care giving, its purposes, its strategies, and how to implement it. You have had opportunities to think about it and, hopefully, to discuss it with others based on your own experiences and hopes.

You should realize that there is no answer to the question, "What do you do when . . . ?" Nor, is there any nice and clean recipe book that will tell you what to do. You know by now that almost everything depends on you--the establishment of a feeling of companionship and the development of community.

Our first question was about our own child, Joseph:

***Your teen-age son comes home in the middle of the night—drunk again, yelling, screaming, and cursing. You smell the booze on his breath. Its odor smacks at you like a clenched fist. He staggers and stumbles. You come up to him. You are filled with disappointment. This is the umpteenth time. You think, "Damn, he's done it again! God, what am I going to do! Do I curse him like he's cursing me? Do I yell at him like he's yelling at me? What in God's name do I do?"***

You figure it out, but use what we have reflected on in these pages! We know we have to deal with the moment and that our direction is to make him feel safe with us and loved by us. We know that all we have to teach him safe and loved are our hands, words, and eyes. We feel like lashing

out, but our hands reach out to embrace him. We feel like cursing, but our words are soft, quiet, and hushed, “Shh! I am glad you are home!” We feel like looking at him with shame and loathing, but we look into his heart with warmth. Does this sound insane? Try it and the next day try it again, and the next, and the next...

Take your time. Look around you. Use the kitchen table tools we have shared. Try things out yourself, then focus on bringing in your friends. As time goes on, start to focus more on the creation of community by sitting at the kitchen table and discussing issues with your co-caregivers and those whom you serve. Avoid talking about getting rid of things. Whatever is a barrier to a feeling of companionship and community will begin to fade away if you center yourself, your discussions, and your deeds on what you want to create. Whatever you are doing now is the best you can do. If you now question any aspect of your work, those things will change in direct proportion to what create. If you do not want to use restraint, it will decrease over time as you focus on teaching feelings of safety, engagement, and valuing. Start with your own beliefs and values. Become more loving--kinder, warmer, more authentic.

This book is nothing if it does not touch your own relationships and your own life-project. It should make sense in your work and your own home life. Among your friends begin to develop deeper questioning about what you do and its purpose. The kitchen table tools can serve as a format for growing together. Be honest among yourselves and acknowledge different roles-- some leading, some questioning, some cynical, some more self-centered, and some more other-centered. These roles can vary as time passes. For yourself, keep the focus on what you are becoming, and help others through listening to them and giving unconditional support.

No matter what your official job, you can become a leader. Feelings of friendship and community start with you and those around you. Do not wait for someone to tell you what to do. Go ahead and begin forming deeper relationships and community!

Let us return to where we began—Joseph and his mother.

***Your thoughts race like bolts of lightning that pile on each other, huddled, waiting for the thunder, “He knows better! He’ll be dropping out of school. His grades are down. He sleeps all day. He curses and yells at me. He calls me a ‘no good’ and ‘worthless.’” Hope begins to slip out of your heart. Emptiness, sorrow, and anger swell like thunder. In that moment between lightening and thunder, there is moment of quiet stillness. Everything stops. You ask yourself, “My God, what do I do?”***

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Words we have read,  
Words of hope, words of pain,  
Words of Victor and the Pig-Boy  
Words of Mary and Joseph  
Words of Henry, words about ourselves.

Take your gifts and  
The mandate of love.  
Gentle your way  
Into a broken heart.  
And, then,  
Mend it  
With your laces  
Of affection.

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