

Chapter 6

Fostering Peace Within

Shelby was a friend of mine from college. We got to know each other during our senior year and became quite close. It was through her example that I realized that I had other options for work besides being a waitress. Although I was on the verge of graduating with a degree in chemistry, it never occurred to me to look for work in the field of chemistry until I witnessed her perusing the newspapers and attending career fairs. I had always planned on being a career waitress. School for me was just something to fill my time and satisfy my brain. Shelby demonstrated that other people consider school to be a means by which they pursue career aspirations.

Shelby successfully went after and got an entry level chemist's job at Lawrence Livermore Laboratories. It seemed like a strange place to work, but given her passion for academia and their prestigious position as a research institution it seemed like a good match. She began work soon after she graduated.

Immediately she fell into depression. She felt excluded by the male-dominated workplace and the treatment she received negatively impacted her self-esteem. In addition, she was greatly worried about how chemicals were handled in the areas where she worked. We were both taught in school that people who are organic chemists had a life expectancy 20 years shorter than the average person in the population. Twenty years is a big difference. A year or two difference could be brushed off, but no one can lightly ignore the hazard of being a organic chemist when it shortens life by 20 years.

Organic chemicals can be quite nasty. The “organics” we are talking about here aren't the pesticide free produce you get at the health food store, but solvents like gasoline and turpentine. Up until recently, the affects of such chemicals on human health was not clearly known. This

may have contributed to the early demise of people working with such agents on a regular basis. Now it is known that proper safety precautions can minimize the risk of working with organic solvents.

Although Shelby wasn't working with organic chemicals herself, she worked around people that used organic solvents in their research and the solvent odor permeated her work space. Soon she was coming home every day with a headache. She complained about the problem to her colleagues, but no one moved to remedy the situation. She was convinced that she was being poisoned but not sure what she could do. Eventually, she took her problem to the institutional health and safety department. They provided her with a respirator. Later she found out the respirator was not fitted properly. Despite wearing it at work, she was still exposed to noxious fumes through the leaky respirator.

Eventually, she left that job and filed a successful disability claim that included retraining in a different field. The continued exposure to organic solvents created a chemical sensitivity that prevented her from working around solvents at all. It was also several years before her lungs returned to normal.

But the story doesn't end there. Interestingly, another friend of mine took Shelby's former position at Lawrence Livermore Laboratories. Sharon graduated with honors in the class after ours. Like Shelby she saw the position as an excellent opportunity to advance her career as a chemist. Several months later I ran into her and asked her how she was handling the solvents. She answered, "The problem was they were storing the used waste solvent out in the air. I took the majority of the solvents and put them in the hood. The rest of the stuff that was left out I capped."

I was shocked by the ease by which Sharon had solved the problem that had left Shelby disabled. She simply went in and cleaned up. Capped a few bottles and moved the remainder into a ventilated hood space

where the fumes would be sucked up and through a carbon filter. The solvents were removed by the filter before being vented outside the building. If her colleagues thought to complain, I'm sure that after the Shelby situation they would have thought better of it. The truth is they probably didn't even care where the solvent waste bottles were kept.

Why did Sharon succeed where Shelby failed? Shelby needed the support of her colleagues to improve the environment that she worked in. She was trying to get them to acknowledge that there was a problem and then work together to find a solution. They choose to ignore her. Sharon, on the other hand, didn't even solicit their opinions. She just changed things.

As baffling as it is to consider Shelby's inability to protect herself, I can totally relate. I have had similar personal experiences. In my situation, I spent years in courts struggling with my daughter's father over matters of child visitation, child custody and financial equity. I was scared of him and my fear prevented me from acting in my daughter's best interest. I, like my friend Shelby, was looking for my partner to acknowledge what the problem was and come to a fair solution together. I didn't know what to do with a hostile co-parent. My fear and tendency to give in without him ever knowing what I really wanted, trained him to continue to disregard my unspoken wishes. In addition, I was ineffective in the legal arena. I simply didn't know what matters the court would support me in and what matters they wouldn't. I really wanted someone to step in and take care of me and especially my daughter.

I spent a great deal of time fretting and not acting. If I thought he was supposed to bring my daughter on Wednesday and he didn't until Thursday I would complain to all my friends. When I wanted to take her out of state to visit relatives over the school break and he wouldn't acknowledge my request so I could make reservations, I whined some more. I felt like a complete victim at his mercy. It seemed I had no

power or say over the situation. My friends grew angrier and angrier at what appeared to be continued injustice.

Things got worse when I moved out of town to go to graduate school. It was about a two hour drive from on-campus housing to where my daughter went to school and where her father's house was. At the time, we had a shared custody schedule whereby she was with me Thursday to Sunday morning. I tried for three years to get him to agree to let me take her Friday to Monday morning. Thursday night was a drag for both me and my daughter. This schedule worked when I lived close, but now meant a four hour round trip for me on Thursday night, Friday morning, Friday night, and Sunday morning. My daughter's father also refused to share any of the driving because "I was the one that moved away".

The situation was a mess, but finally, it looked like I was going to get court backing to have it changed. The court appointed psychologist had denied my request for full custody, but was going to recommend I get the weekend schedule I wanted. I was pleased, until my daughter's father flatly said no to the proposal! He liked the schedule the way it was and planned on fighting the proposal in court. Even though he had little chance of winning he was going to fight it!

The very fact he was going to litigate the recommendations of the court appointed psychologist devastated me. I snapped. I said to myself, "I will not do this crazy driving schedule anymore. I don't care if my worst fear happens and I lose custody. I'm not doing all the driving anymore."

I completely let go. The weekend came and I didn't pick her up. I don't even remember what I said. Probably something real simple like, "I can't come and get her this weekend". I don't remember him even asking why. I intended to never pick her up again unless I wanted to. Then the next weekend came and he called me and told me that my

daughter really wanted to see me. We worked out something that was agreeable to me. I remember thinking, “And I've been fighting him for years? All I had to do was give up.”

During the many years that I struggled with my daughter's father I learned one important thing: not to suffer over my suffering. It was horrible when he didn't bring her home on time, but I made it worse by fighting with that reality. I've had other situations in my life where things didn't go my way and I've made them worse by doing two things. I'd either blame others for my problems or blame myself. Other times I would act confused and complain that I didn't know what to do.

I spent many years using these techniques. For instance, in graduate school I attended my first week of the “core” class for my program and found that the subject matter was completely irrelevant to me and my interests. I went to my advisor and complained.

I “knew” I was in the wrong program and wanted to switch to a different major. She assured me that the first quarter was a bit dry, but it would get better. I felt trapped and angry. The program never got better and the further along I went in it the more trapped I felt.

Then I began searching for a faculty advisor to help with my research. Despite a prestigious fellowship from the National Institutes of Health, I continued to come up empty handed. I've heard it said that “when one door closes another opens”. Since I found myself pounding on closed door after closed door I could only conclude I was making mistakes.

I think over the course of my graduate career I proved every positive optimistic saying wrong. In the process, I turned on myself and questioned the goodness of the universe itself. I believed that if I was willing and able and asking for guidance and listening for that guidance that a way would be made for me. Since I appeared to be completely blocked, my faith was shaken. If I had made a mistake it was because

the universe wasn't supporting me. I had been deserted and I was bitter and angry about it.

Needless to say, getting mad at people, institutions, God, and myself didn't make my situation any better. If such a reaction worked I would still be doing it. Not only have I found, after years of research, that placing blame does not improve the outside world, it also makes the inside world very unpleasant. Now when I approach unpleasant circumstances I do so with a different attitude. My goal is to not suffer over my suffering. Here are some of the things I keep in mind.

1. I don't blame other people.

Even when I think people or institutions are clearly in the wrong I don't place blame. I simply refrain from judging others. There is not a whole lot for me to say about this. I haven't found judgement to be particularly productive. I prefer to stay proactive and solution oriented. If people or institutions behave in ways that I don't like and I want them to change, I consider it my job to share this with them and let them know what I like. I don't expect them to change, but I feel it is important that I express my wishes. I call this, “doing my part”. Once I've done my part of maintaining the relationship I may chose to stay in association with the other party or look for a situation that I like better.

2. I avoid the “I'm a victim” trap.

Whining about a situation is almost second nature for me. I'm a melancholy by disposition and have to consciously work to keep a positive attitude. To this end, I have adopted the belief, “I am taken care of”. This means when bad things happen to me I chose to believe it is for some unknown higher good. Maybe I get a flat tire, but only because it prevents me from a head-on collision with a intoxicated person two miles up the road. Perhaps I get fired from a job I enjoy, but only so that I am freed up to find work that is even more satisfying. A friend dies, but this deepens my commitment to service.

It brings me comfort to believe that my life is following some sort of plan. I choose to think, when people treat me poorly, they are only helping me develop further. I tend to stay away from thoughts that support a belief that I am being punished for past mistakes or that somehow I created this bad karma by being bad in the past. Although, I do sometimes claim that people who reject me are victims of my karma, I don't think I am being rejected because I rejected others in the past. This kind of thinking, whether it is true or not, simply doesn't serve me. I like to think that some reject me so I can experience the kindness of others that care. Or perhaps the rejection propels me in a direction that I would have previously not considered, but is critical for fulfilling my full potential.

One of my favorite life models is the “we pick our life before we are born” model. I find comfort in considering myself looking down on earth and selecting my parents and the other players in my life including the professor that dropped me and kept the research I did in his lab, my best friend in grade school and the pleasant and unpleasant employers I've had. I can envision myself a confident spirit up in the heavens saying. Alcoholic father? Absent parents? Abusive husband? Yeah! Bring it on! It helps me to feel in charge of my life when I consider for a moment that I had some say in creating the life I had today - especially the part that seems completely out of my control.

3. I acknowledge to myself how the situation makes me feel and what I don't like about it.

When something unpleasant happens I'm bound to feel bad. It is important for me to listen to myself. I spend sometime exploring how the situation fell short of meeting my personal needs. Every time I encounter a situation that is less than my ideal I grieve. Sometimes I feel hurt and I always experience a sense of loss, no matter how small. Even though I know everything is for the best and I'll eventually feel better, it is important for me to acknowledge just how each situation impacts me.

It is not uncommon for me to be tempted to tell myself to get over it. Perhaps I'm really upset because the teller at the bank snapped at me for not having my forms all filled out before I got to the window. Now it is two hours later and I still feel guilty, ashamed or maybe angry at her treatment. I may be tempted to minimize the impact of the situation and say to myself, "Gads! You didn't do anything wrong. Stop feeling bad!". Or maybe the thought running over and over through my head is, "I am so bad. I made her so mad at me. I can never do anything right. When will I ever learn?" Neither thought brings me peace. Instead I chose a line of thinking that goes like this, "Wow, that situation really upset you. Your needs for consideration were not met at all. In addition, you didn't feel valued. Yes, you feel a little guilty because the sign said to have your forms filled before reaching the window, but you didn't. What would you do differently next time? Oh, you hate that rule because it slows you down." This line of thinking serves to uncover the sore parts of my psyche and allow them to heal. I may also find in the process that other things are bothering me not directly related to the current incident.

4. I ask myself, "Given the situation as it is, is there anything I can do for you?"

Life is hard and when it is hard I want to be the best friend to myself that I can be. Sometimes my trials and tribulations knock me out and I find myself sitting on the couch crying or chain watching videos. Other times I find that I can get out of myself and write, clean the house, walk the dog, or sew. I don't expect not to suffer, but if I can find a way to treat myself better it helps me let go of unpleasant situations. I'm an introvert, so I need solitude to heal. Some people find comfort among friends and others find service to be a sure way to alleviate suffering. Indeed, when I was devastated by losing my job, I relied on volunteering at the local soup kitchen to help heal the wound of rejection. They were always happy to see me and that was the best medicine.

Here again I focus on treating myself well. I've accepted the situation, acknowledged my pain and am searching for a way to ease the pain and move forward. This question gets my focus off the past and puts it on my present. Sometimes there is nothing I can do to feel better. At such times I simply affirm that “this too shall pass” and allow myself to be exactly where I am.

5. If I am feeling confused, I confront myself.

I have found that confusion simply means that I have been given the answer and I don't like it or don't want to accept it. I have learned that if I hear myself saying, “I'm confused” that I need to step back and observe myself. Often times I get confused when I am trying to make a decision that it isn't time to make. Usually this is because I want to know the future and simply can't. Letting go and waiting are very hard, so sometimes I continue to toy with the situation in my mind keeping myself in a state of confusion. When I am confused, I say, “I don't know what to do!” and I continue to try to figure out what to do. When I am at peace, I say, “I don't know what to do.” and I accept that as the truth and end my struggle.

Putting the steps into action

I recently interviewed for a full time teaching position at a school where I was working part-time. I wasn't really sure I wanted to teach full time there and had been considering withdrawing my application when I finally decided I'd go ahead with the interview anyway. I also knew the college was looking for a biology instructor and since my specialty was physiology and anatomy my chance for getting the job was slim. I figured in the off chance there was no candidate strong in biology, I'd submit my application and interview.

From the moment the interview started, I knew I was off. And it only got worse. I didn't enjoy myself at all and went home feeling terrible. I didn't even want the job, but that didn't matter. I felt bad for days.

First I wanted to blame them:

- They threw me off.
- I'd interviewed at the college twice before and this time they did things differently than the other interviews.
- I was distracted when the next candidate walked in on the middle of my interview. They shouldn't have let him in.
- They were my friends but they treated me like a complete stranger.

Then I wanted to blame me:

- I wasn't prepared.
- I should have known they would ask that question again.
- I didn't know how to handle a panel interview.

Perhaps all this was all true. Certainly it was important for me to acknowledge how I felt about the situation. In addition, evaluating the experience could only help me in future interviews. However, repeating over and over what went wrong wasn't serving me. I let the thoughts come up and then just put them aside.

On some level, I also thought they should not even have had to interview me. They know what an excellent teacher I am. Why should I have to go through with this? That was so unkind of them. Here, I was feeling like the world is unfair and I am a victim. It seemed that the failed interview hit my fresh wound of rejection. I had to acknowledge that although I loved to teach, I have never felt welcomed by the department. It is one of those situations that is “perfect” except my needs for community, professional comradery and inclusion weren't being met.

It was through the process of admitting how much they let me down that I was able to feel my pain and grieve. I have found there is nothing worse for my self esteem than wanting a partner or employer that doesn't want me. Here I kept trying to connect with this group and for

some reason it wasn't happening. In the process, I'd forgotten how valuable I am. After simply being in my emotions for a couple of days (yes, I was waking up in the middle of the night and “remembering” something else I'd said at the interview) I was able to begin to focus on personal projects that bring me joy.

My reactions and process surrounding this failed interview demonstrate how I actively strive to not suffer over my own suffering. I stay aware of thoughts that don't serve me and simply let them pass. I acknowledge how I feel and proactively look for ways to bring myself more comfort.

When I work with others in times of suffering, I sometimes think I understand how a behavior or thought pattern doesn't serve them. Since having this level of insight is new and exciting to me it is tempting to tell people what and how to change. However, I prefer to treat others as I treat myself using the same steps: no blame, empathize with the feelings, and move into present time action.

I marvel at how we are all different. What was easy for Sharon was difficult for Shelby. There are many things that I can naturally do. I have an innate ability to organize things. I'm excellent at filling out forms and following directions. I can fix a leaking faucet, change the oil in my car, sew clothing and train dogs. These things come natural to me. In contrast, how to deal with interpersonal conflict has been difficult. In the past I was easily thrown off by hostile people and would quickly lose my sense of confidence. My solution for dealing with differences between myself and others was to either leave the situation or accommodate the other party. While I know that some people easily interact with others, I have had to rely on book study, observing people that are effective in relationships and constant practice to develop even the most rudimentary of skills. However, I continue to improve.

I have found that new behavior or thought patterns do not feel natural at first. This is not surprising. While I still feel unsure and awkward when I interact with people, it is beginning to be second nature to not suffer over my suffering. It is almost natural for me to choose thoughts and attitudes that bring me peace. This is the reason that I continue to make steps towards goals that seem impossible to reach. Small amounts of persistent movement towards a goal (even when I have to go around huge obstacles) does result in positive achievement.