

The Power of a Calm Heart

My parents are not writers, they did not grow up as devout readers of literature or poetry, and they value words more than anyone else I know. My father and mother believe that life and death are in the power of the tongue and so they have always been careful about the words they say to us. I was reading an interview with Maya Angelou recently and she said, "Those negative words climb into the woodwork and into the furniture, and the next thing you know they'll be on my skin." I recognized her words from my parents' actions.

Words have gravity and weight. Not in a "name it and claim it" sort of thing with admonishments about "watching your confession." Nope—I had enough of that in the Word of Faith days in the 80s. But I see my life—and the lives of my tinies, my husband, even my work as a writer—as fertile ground. And the words I scatter so carelessly around me can take root in the hearts and minds of us all, giving a narrative deep in the core about ourselves, the God we love, each other and our world. I am conscious of sowing words of life and freedom.

We have dozens of "one good phrases" in our family history. My eldest daughter already knows exactly what I mean when I tell her to "be the head and not the tail" as she's climbing out of the minivan during school drop-off because my parents always said that to me. (Dad also used to say "Be not unequally yoked!" in regards to all the boys, but somehow I didn't listen quite as well to that one good phrase.)

"Make a quality decision" is another one. We use the phrase "Guard your gates" because their eyes and ears are gates for the hearts, so if we guard what we see or hear, then we are guarding our heart. (Quite sweet, really: If a scary commercial comes on TV, the tinies clap their hands over their ears, screw their eyes shut and holler at each other, "*Guard your gates!*")

I also have a little homemade sign in our house that proclaims, "We use our words to love each other," because I cannot tell you how many times I say it—it's for the tinies and it's also for my life on the Internet. I have pet phrases I use often in my writing life; they are my darlings, and I won't kill them off just yet. (Sorry, William Faulkner. Maybe someday.)

But for this week, for our world, I'll tell you a bit about this one: *Calm your heart.*

It started when I had only one small toddler in my care. If there is one thing toddlers do very well, it's lack of proportion in their response to the world. (Can I get an amen?)

Woe betide you if the food touches the other kind of food, and heaven help us all if someone else wants a turn with the spatula. When toddlers are delighted, their whole body proclaims it. When toddlers are frustrated or angry, watch out. So when my first little toddler would become angry or despondent, I would press my hand to her chest and quietly say, "Calm your heart."

I don't know why I did it. I've never heard or seen anyone else do it. But for years now, when the tinies—who-are-not-so-tiny-anymore seem overwhelmed, whiny, upset or just plain ornery, I place my palm right over their heart, we take a deep breath and I say, "Calm your heart, love. Calm your heart."

They cannot listen to me while their hearts are pounding with rage or fear, so the first thing I want to do is try to slow the panic. I never knew if it made a difference, but I knew that hollering at toddlers to "Be quiet!" is usually counter-productive for us both. So I would tell them to calm their heart, and I would take deep breaths with them, and sometimes, in those early days, it would be me and a toddler, in a heap on the kitchen floor, taking deep breaths in gulps together,

our hands pressed to each other's chests, and I was always whispering calm for us both.

Eventually, I realized that it did make a difference.

One night, we had a full house with lots of noise. It was getting late, and predictably the tinies were falling into an abyss of overstimulation and whining. My eldest started to lose her composure, melting into a puddle of unmet preschooler expectations. I took her to her room for a bit of quiet and relief (for us both, I imagine).

She looked up at me and said, with a sob-hiccup, "Mummy, would you tell me to calm my heart?" I placed my hand on her chest and did just that. She took a shaky breath and said, "I need my heart to be calm." "Me, too, kiddo," I said.

Another night, she kept getting out of bed. The reasons became more and more fantastical: *I need water and this doll baby is keeping me up and my Band-Aid wants a friend.* I marched her back to bed with my Mum-Means-Business voice and manner. She burrowed into her sheets. Asked for kisses. And then she said, "Mum, I know what's wrong. My heart is just not calm. Will you pray with me?" So I did.

We prayed together, I put my hand on her chest, and we said it together, slowly: "Calm your heart." She took a big breath and said, "That calmed my heart right down, Mum. I think I can sleep now." And she did.

The funny thing about the simple and basic things is that they are true. If it's true for a toddler, it's probably true for most of us. It's true that I need to go to bed at a reasonable hour, and I need to pray, and I need to eat real food, and I need to share, and I need to make time to rest.

It's true that I need to make quality decisions, and I need to use my words to love people. It's true that I need to guard my

gates from lies and evil and fear. And when storms and frustrations come, when I am suffering—imagined or real—when I am whiny or overstimulated or just plain ornery, when I am angry and feeling unsafe, when I am panicking and my heart is pounding and I can't seem to get through the cloud of anger and fear and scarcity, I need to take a deep breath and I need someone to physically be present with me and I need someone to kneel on the kitchen floor, deep breathing, and I need to calm my heart to begin again, all over again.

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