

Week 21: Finding the Fear Underneath All the Fury

I once had a chance to travel to an exotic location with a friend. He and his wife had booked seats together but, when we arrived at the airport and they printed the boarding passes, they were seated at opposite ends of the plane. It was a nine-hour flight. I expressed my sympathy. He looked at me with a sideways grin, and he said, “No worries, Kelly, we’ll sit together.” I looked down at his boarding passes and wondered what he knew that I didn’t. His grin grew as he headed toward the gate, “People want to help, Kelly. All you have to do is ask.”

People want to help.

My friend talked to the attendant at the gate, and he and his wife sat together on the plane. In fact, they ended up in *business class*. My friend was aware of the first thing we *all* need to know about people: people are basically good and wired for love and beauty.

Most of us have been trained to believe people are basically broken and bad at their core. At best, we believe people are selfish. At worst, dangerous. Admittedly, I began my career as a psychologist with this assumption about people. I figured I was in charge of fixing the brokenness, correcting the rottenness. But almost fifteen years later, I realize I was never really in charge of the fixing, because all along, my clients were fixing *me*. All along, they were teaching me about what is really at the center of people. And the truth is, beneath all the layers of protection and pretending, people are basically good and beautiful. As a psychologist, I’m not just a repairman responsible for *fixing* brokenness. I’m also an explorer *discovering* beauty. And over the years, I’ve discovered it’s *always* there.

People are basically good, beautiful, and wired for love.

People want to be generous and they want to smile and they want to connect and they want to leave the world a better place in their wake. People get out of bed and they hope for something better and they want to be a part of making that better thing *happen*. People want to redeem the broken parts of this world and they want to be part of a beautiful story.

Except, sometimes we don’t act like it, do we?

When people dominate others and abuse power and act like animals, people don’t seem terribly good or beautiful. When people get strung out on drugs or abandon their families or walk into a convenience store with a gun or commit any number of heinous acts both legal and illegal, people don’t seem terribly good or beautiful. When we get lost in our thoughts and sit at a green light for a little too long and the guy behind us ends up with a red face and a big pulsing forehead vein

and spittle hitting the windshield and one of his fingers sticking up in the air, people don't seem terribly good or beautiful.

Which brings us to the only other thing we really need to know about people: if they don't appear good and beautiful—if they scare us or threaten us—it is because they are wounded and *afraid*.

In October 2012, Taliban assassins attacked a fifteen-year-old girl on her way home from school. Four years earlier, at the age of eleven, Malala Yousafzai had begun an organized resistance against the Taliban by insisting upon full access to education for all Pakistani girls. She made a name for herself, and the Taliban had a bullet with that name on it. The gunman leaned into the car of schoolgirls and shot three times. The first bullet entered Malala's left eye and exited through her shoulder. The second two bullets missed and entered the arm of one of her companions. At point blank range, the assassin *missed*.

Because, according to reports, his gun hand was *shaking* as he fired.

Fear can fester and mutate into incredibly evil acts, and frankly, evil lives. But always, *always*, beneath the corrosion is a wound and the fear it creates. Fear of never being enough. Fear of never *having* enough. Fear of the *other*. Fear of *ourselves*.

The question is, when someone's wounded fear has usurped their goodness and their love and their beauty, can we have a vision of him that is bigger than his bullet? Do we see only the evil of his gun, or can we also see the fearful shaking of his hand? Because if we see only the bullet he sends at us, we will send only a bullet back at him. And then he will send another bullet at us, and then we another back at him, and so on and so on.

And to *hell* with that. Literally. A living hell for everyone involved.

Most of us are not dodging bullets of steel. But I think most of us are being pierced by bullets of a different kind—the words of our lovers, the rebellion of our children, the betrayal of our friends, the indifference of a stranger. What if, instead of controlling or retaliating or hating, we looked past the bullets, and we looked for the shaking hand of the ones we love? What if we looked them in the eye and said, “So, you're scared, too?” And what if we looked past the shaking hand and into their good and beautiful hearts?

What if we gave the same gift to ourselves?