

Week 4: Self-Acceptance Is the Foundation of All Self-Improvement

On a Saturday afternoon, my daughter is *wailing*. She's screaming like her life is at stake. Her life is *not* at stake—she's just tired. But she won't. stop. crying. And it's sucking the life right out of me—like a dementor's kiss, I'm being drained of every last ounce of happiness. (Yes, I just compared my daughter to a dementor. Have I mentioned it's not easy to be related to a writer?)

Only days earlier, I had published a blog post about parenthood and our calling to be inspired parents who are inspiring our children. So, on a Saturday afternoon, as I think about running away from home and never coming back, I say to myself, “Kelly, you need to go reread your own words. You need a little inspiration.” But that thought is stopped dead in its tracks by another thought: “I have no interest in, or ability to be, inspired right now. I couldn't read that article right now if *my* life was at stake.”

As my daughter falls to pieces, I wonder if I'm falling to pieces. After all, I usually love to be inspired, and we *need* to be inspired. We need to be given a vision of higher ground, and we need to believe it's possible to stand there. We need Martin Luther King, Jr., giving his “I Have a Dream” speech. We need Ronald Reagan telling Mr. Gorbachev to “tear down that wall.” We need a YouTube montage of windshield video recordings capturing small, lovely acts of kindness. We need the moments that remind us life can be redemptive and it's all headed somewhere and beauty is always just around the corner.

But I also wonder if we've started to use inspiration like a tall cup of coffee. I wonder if, in a culture addicted to self-improvement and epic stories—in a culture of viral YouTube inspiration and pithy memes—we drink down inspiration like caffeine, using it to propel us into some kind of glorious new place, into a more perfected version of ourselves. And I wonder if, in doing so, we unknowingly participate in a culture of self-rejection.

What if our obsession with self-*improvement* is really a cleverly disguised form of self-*rejection*?

Perhaps when we feel uninspired and stuck, what we are really feeling is, “I'm stuck with who I am right now, and who I am right now is *not good enough*.” Not good enough. The slogan of shame. Working its way quietly into even our well-intended efforts to “better” ourselves. Perhaps when our sense of worth becomes contingent upon moments of inspiration and constant self-improvement, we need not worry about other people rejecting us—because we're already doing it to ourselves.

Feeling uninspired and unimproved is a normal part of our good, ordinary lives and an essential part of our humanity. Yet we take the uninspired moments that make up the bulk of our days, and we experience them like a final, condemning judgment of who we are. So, I hold my wailing daughter and I recall a recent conversation:

“Kelly, I love your writing, but I haven’t read a post in a while.”

“Why?”

“Because your writing is inspirational, and I just can’t find it in me to be inspired right now.”

I hold my wailing daughter, and those words *deliver* me. Not because they *improve* me, but because they return me to *myself*, they return me to the *moment*. Those words are grace. They give me permission to feel uninspired. They give me permission to be who I am—a tired dad at the end of his rope. And, ironically, when I embrace who I am, the despair is diminished. I don’t need to fix myself. I don’t need to transform my daughter’s tears into laughter. I don’t need to find a deeper meaning in the agonizing moment.

In fact, I don’t need to *do* anything at all. Which leaves me free to simply *be*. It leaves me free to be an uninspired dad with a hopelessly crabby daughter. It leaves me free to hold her and to hug her and to be with her, exactly the way we are. In this moment. And then the next one. And then the next one.

And so I hold my little girl as she cries. I just sit in the mess with her and I feel completely uninspired. I sit there, wiped out by life, and I quit wondering what to *do next*, and I simply dedicate myself to *being this*.

The modern dictionary definition of *inspire* is: “To produce or arouse a feeling.” However, in its archaic usage, it meant, “To breathe life into.” Maybe, sometimes, the calling of our lives is not to *feel* inspired. Maybe sometimes it’s okay to feel purposeless, to not be headed anywhere epic or grand, to not be constantly fixing and improving ourselves. Maybe sometimes it’s okay to simply breathe alive into the moment.

This week, let’s just be who we are. Let’s be uninspired. Let’s quit trying to run from ourselves through self-improvement. Let’s simply settle into the current version of ourselves, and let’s pause our search for an upgrade. Let’s just breathe. And let’s find a moment in which that is enough. Let’s find a moment in which we know *we* are blessedly good enough, precisely the way we are.