

Week 9: What to Do When Your Heart Feels Like a Jungle

“Are your new shoes in your closet?”

My wife is trying to make my youngest son, Quinn, look presentable for a Christmas concert. He usually refuses to wear anything except athletic pants but she has somehow, miraculously, talked him into a pair of corduroys. The finishing touch will be a pair of shoes that don't look like they have been through a semester of playground wars. He looks up from the book he's reading. His face is deadly serious as he responds, “Yeah, but I'm not going to look for them. It's a jungle in there.” It's a jungle inside Quinn's closet.

And it's a jungle inside our *hearts*.

It can be scary to venture into our inner world, because we know the mess we are likely to encounter once we get in there. Facing our feelings is the most courageous thing we'll ever do. It requires so much courage, even the bravest warriors are often afraid to do so.

This was heartbreakingly illustrated in the first season of the HBO drama, *In Treatment*, when an uber-confident Air Force pilot—played by Blair Underwood—finally allows himself to feel the guilt and sorrow of the children he killed in a bombing run. As the pain surfaces—as his body is wracked by sobs and his strong façade crumbles in an instant—the viewer is left with no doubt about the utter bravery of such a moment. Our feelings are the last place we want to go.

But they are the only place we *must* go...

Quinn says, “It's a jungle in there.” And my wife stands still. I can see the wheels turning. Is this an exaggeration that needs to be corrected? An insurrection that needs to be put down? Or is it the truth? She settles on: “I'll sort it out with you. If we work together, I'm sure we'll find what we're looking for.”

They disappear into his room and, for the next hour, I can hear thumping and bumping and the chatter of conversation and the moaning and groaning of intermittent conflict. Eventually, my son walks out of his room and he's a little bit taller, in part because he's wearing a new pair of shoes. But I think he's *standing* a little taller, too.

Because he entered his jungle and sorted it out.

Quinn waded into his mess with a companion, they sorted it out together, and he found what he was looking for. When we enter the jungle of our *hearts*, we too may need a guide who joins us. Someone who understands closets and the daunting things they harbor. Someone who can stand strong with us, as we patiently sort through the chaos. You might know who that person is. You may not. If not, there is a therapist, somewhere, waiting to join you.

When we do finally enter the jungle of our hearts, we will find something far more valuable than a pair of shoes. We will find out who we really are. We will find our *true* self. In the middle of our digging, we will discover our true self is not some inner object we're digging for. Our true self is even better than that.

Our true self is the part of us doing the digging.

Our true self is the courage to face our fears. Our true self is the growing confidence we can handle them. Our true self is the awareness that observes our anger rather than acting on it. Our true self is the freedom to move toward our fear, rather than away from it. Our true self is the patience to wait out our sadness and sorrow. Our true self is the love that's left when our jungle finally withers away. Our true self is the part of us that walks away from the digging and sorting, standing a little taller, because it knows it's not alone. It knows it can handle the darkness within. It knows there is light within. It knows there is light in the world. Indeed, it knows it is *part of* the light in the world.

And all that's left to do is shine.