

Emotional Regulation and Relationship - The Key to Healing

“Silence is golden”. The Tremelos wrote a song about this. Wyclif's Bible, 1382 also includes the thought - "Silence is maad in heuen"(made in Heaven). The first example of it in English is from the poet Thomas Carlyle, who translated the phrase from German in Sartor Resartus, 1831, in which a character expounds at length on the virtues of silence. Most therapists have good communication skills and techniques to help clients explore what they are feeling. At least we think we do. One of the simplest and most effective is silence and co-regulating with a client. Children have told me some amazing things when I least expect it and it wasn't due to my great ability to explore their issues and ask profound questions.

John, who has been waiting to be adopted for over a year, was denying any stress about being adopted. He always does this when we get together. My next step with him is always to co-regulate. As we co-regulated, John requested a hug from me and reported that he was frustrated with waiting so long to be adopted. He asked what if these were the wrong parents? I reassured him that the reason this is all taking so long was that we were really checking people out. We wanted to make sure that he would be safe in the secure. He then asked if there were guns in the house. He then went on to talk about how kids get hurt accidentally with guns that are'nt put up properly. I talked with his foster mother about this after the session. Apparently this discussion stemmed from one of his cousins who had just been through gun safety course. John had visited that cousin recently. Now on the surface that sounds very reasonable for John to bring this up. Let's look a little deeper into that through the lens of the stress model. John has a deep-seated fear of not being safe and that fear equates to death. He was the least able to express that to me in a metaphor. I responded to John's question by having him crawl up on my lap. I held him like you would in infant. I spoke to his unconscious fears, reassuring him of his safety.

In another session he told me about getting used to other people's music. John made this comment out of the blue. We were co-regulating by building a project with blocks. Because John was getting close to being adopted this was on his mind a lot. He said when you get adopted, "you have to get used to other people's music". I took that as meaning more than just music. I responded that must be hard to do. John agreed and with a little encouragement he disclosed how hard it was being adopted. This incident led to him talking about his fears and grief. I validated his feelings. This is the power of regulation in turning the key to healing.

Some of my favorite examples come from a youngster who whose mother died at a very early age. Erin lives with her adoptive parents and calls them her mom and dad. During one session, she said, "I wish you were my dad". I said, "Well, I can't really be your dad, but I can sure be your friend". Erin replied, "Yeah, we will be BFF, best friends forever". I said, "That sounds like a good deal". As we were sitting there she spontaneously said, "Well, I have a best friends club". I responded "oh, is that for kids in your school and church?" She said, "No, it's for people I haven't met yet." At that point and time, I was taken back. Sometimes it's good to be speechless. That way you don't mess things up. She said, "No, a lot of the kids there are black." Then she said, "But they can't come visit me". I said, "Yeah, that's pretty sad that they can't do that. We had a brief pause in conversation. Golden silence. I then said, "Well you know maybe their parents don't want them to be away from them." Erin said, "No, it's because of me". This came from her belief that being different from other children is negative. I filed that one away to

discuss at a later time. There have been several times in my office that she would play with the doll house and miniature characters. I would observe and then have her tell me their story. Inevitably their story reflected her own story of not being with her biological parents. The circumstances of the characters were different but all had abandonment in their life. Erin's simple story telling in a time of emotional safety always lead to her experiencing the trauma of her grief and allowing me to help her process this.

What can you say that would help these young children? I have learned that I need very few words for that. What I do know and realize is that what is very powerful is relationship. I have a strong horizontal relationship with both of these children. This is made possible for me by my vertical relationship with my Father in Heaven. Both of these little saints are believers. They are both children that you are really drawn to. There is an emotional attraction through the Holy Spirit. You really want to engage them, nurture them, and be around them. From the very beginning they felt comfortable with me, and that comfortability has grown in leaps and bounds.

The simplicity of a child's world is incredible. Jesus talks about that in the scriptures, unless you have the mind of a child, think like a child, and act like children, it will be hard to receive the kingdom of God. The stress model is also simple. Apply the principles of co-regulation and relationship development and look what happens. The lessons to be learned are simple. Talk less, listen more, and put love into action. The key to healing is turned by using emotional regulation and relationship.