

# The Gift of Reassurance

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The Journey of a Father's Love

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8:23 AM 29 Dec 1993. A third generation only-son arrives healthy, loved and ready to carry on the family name. “We got our boy,” his mother states behind tears and a tired smile – and we name him Anthony.

Mothers do most of the raising in a lot of families, and ours was no different. I worked long hours to provide and build a home, but it never seemed like enough of a contribution and I envied the closeness she had with the kids. Our two girls and new baby boy were her heart and her life, and sometimes I felt like “all” I did was provide. I wished I had that closeness with our new son that sometimes escaped me in my overriding focus on building a career. I thought maybe I wasn’t a good dad at all; maybe I wasn’t capable of the type of love she felt and gave them. Maybe I didn’t have the right heart for my dear son who was now already past his second birthday. But then life changed.

It was a normal Saturday afternoon, summertime in the Midwest. The duplex we shared with our young landlord was on the last block of a dead end which transitioned into a nice city park which we were planning on going to a bit later. Maybe the city would be giving free ice cream to the kids again. Our little kitchen was at the back of the house, with a small window overlooking the backyard that needed mowed. I was preparing lunch today since Mom was at work – spaghetti again. The kids and I were all in the kitchen, discussing who knows what and enjoying the rare togetherness.

The conversation fades and we all begin doing other things and focusing on our own immediate needs. My own thoughts drift off to work for just a minute, and I step to the table to review bills that need paid. In an instant my focus is ripped back to the room – “TURN AROUND!”



Some believe in a parent's inherent instinct and connection when it comes to their children. Others of faith believe in a guardian Angel. My wife was alerted the year prior in a parking lot, that same thundering yet silent voice told her our daughter was in immediate danger (which she was). Our middle daughter had wandered just a few feet away – but directly behind a car just getting ready to back out. We've always believed the voice saved her that day. Whatever the voice, perhaps the same one, it pulled at me intensely at that moment there in the kitchen.

I swept around to see our little Anthony reaching up as high as he could with a big stirring ladle and pulling the pre-spaghetti pot of boiling water off the ledge of the stove towards his little head.



Anthony is also a third generation guitarist – better, without dispute, than both myself and his grandpa. I used to listen to my father play, more often than not it would be an old Johnny Cash tune like “Big River” or “Goodbye Little Darlin”. He taught me chords and how to strum with an alternating bass on an old enormous piece that would make your fingers nearly bleed.

On that guitar I learned to finger pick on my own with some books I bought at the mall, and by watching John Denver on television. I passed on to Anthony everything I could, and then he taught himself advanced scaling and fretting and quickly became better than I ever could even be. His playing and music are part of his life now, just like they have always been part of mine. We have recently been practicing “The Boxer” by Simon and Garfunkel as a duet.



Without a moment's hesitation, I stepped toward the stove and Anthony was right in front of me. On pure instinct, I pushed him aggressively between and under my legs where he landed in the middle of the kitchen. The pot continued on and crashed to the floor – I remember some splattering on the oven window, and trails of steam rising from the carpet. At this

momentous second in life, I was not yet aware of where the potentially deadly water had actually landed.

Heart on fire with panic, I spun behind to check my only son. I went to my knees down beside him on the floor, and as I try to comfort my little Buddy and wipe his tears my eyes dart at superhuman speed to take in the damage. I look to his face, head, hands, his legs, ears, fingers! And over again . . . and again . . . and again.

But there was nothing – not one evidence that anything had even happened, except the look of fear in his eyes, no doubt from wondering why daddy had just pushed him to the floor. The instinct, the voice, the Angel that had warned me to turn had saved my son. The water would have drenched over his head, changing his entire life – and ours. But instead there was nothing wrong with Anthony at all.

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“Oh well, we’ll find out when we get there,” was the faithful wisdom of young Anthony at five-years-old after inquiring what kind of shirt Jesus was wearing in heaven and not getting a solid answer. He has always been known for his insightful wisdom and sincerity, which often brought a needed break in the routine of lower middle class daily life.

He once told me, “Daddy, if you were blind and Jesus was still on earth and He would give me one wish -- my wish would be that you could see.” Those are words that bring tears to a Daddy’s eyes, both then and even now.

On another occasion, he asked me from the backseat of the car if there was such a thing as booger cancer. I don’t recall my answer, but it’s been impossible to forget the question.

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The melted flesh on my left forearm had slid away from its normal place and was dripping over to the inside of my arm. You could see the exposed layer of under-skin that was

supposed to be covered. The pain began now to seer into my own arms, belly and right thigh as the excitement of the moment wore off, and my heart was relieved that my son was perfectly safe. It was me – I took the hit of this threat. This was a pain that literally begins to take your breath away and makes your lip start to quiver. My jaw begins to move without intention, my arms begin to shake, and I wonder for a moment if I will pass out or slip into shock. Instead, I get my breathing back under control and try to decide what to do. I must be strong. The kids are watching . . . we are home alone . . . they need me to be strong -- so I am.



For Christmas one year, Anthony told everyone that all he wanted was “keys.” Not toys or clothes – just keys. In general, the notion was overlooked and despite his pleas we bought him the normal toys that little boys were getting that year. But on Christmas morning, a special package labelled “From: Grandma” was making a quite unusual clinking when shaken. To Anthony’s thrilled surprise, inside were dozens and dozens of old keys. They were all different shapes and colors and sizes! This was the best Christmas ever in his eyes – and the joy on his face certainly made it then one of ours too. To this day, we still don’t know where my wife’s mom got all those keys – all that ever mattered is that she did.



Now getting used to the pain, and in the process of beginning treatment on my wounds an overwhelming realization overtakes me. A realization so vivid and strong that I believe to this day it was given to me, spoken to me, as a gift – from the voice . . . the Angel . . . a revelation.

What I knew at that moment, within minutes of taking the pain on my own body to save my son, was that infinite unconditional love was real. In those moments, as the pain still ripped through my nerves, I knew with all my heart that I would take this pain, even THIS pain, one thousand times over if it meant it would keep my son safe, my Anthony.

Those thoughts that maybe I wasn't able to love at its truest and deepest level and that maybe I didn't have the heart of a real Daddy – they went away that day. That day was a gift to my spirit, and one for which I am forever grateful.



He is a soldier now, like his grandfather on his mom's side and great-grandfather on mine, and sometimes he calls me "sir." His friends all call him "Tony" now although that's been too hard for his mom and I to adapt to. He has seen his share of love come and go, and he has dared to travel and experience life in ways that sometimes scares us, but definitely makes us proud. He is master of a military assault rifle, but has published poetry and written his own songs. He is a tough, handsome guy with a soft, sincere heart. I carry no physical scars from that day, keeping only the lesson of reassured love that has stayed in my heart ever since. My truest wish for my son is that someday he too will know this unconditional love, and know that it's true and real and know it with all his heart. That is the gift I received that day, and the legacy I hope I have passed on to my son, my Anthony.