

Fables for Parents: Ashley's True Self

Dr Koa Whittingham writes 'fables' for parents – stories written to inspire vital living and loving, responsive parenting as based on the latest research, her clinical experiences as a psychologist and her own experiences as a mum. Koa's fables can be distributed freely as long as you credit Koa Whittingham as author and provide a link to her site: www.koawhittingham.com If you enjoy this fable then you may also enjoy Koa's blog: Parenting from the Heart www.koawhittingham.com/blog/ and her book providing psychological support for the transition to motherhood: Becoming Mum www.becomingmum.com.au

Ashley's True Self is grounded in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. In particular, this fable illustrates self-as-context in a manner relevant to parents.

Ashley's True Self

Ashley was exhausted from the battle and covered in grime and blood. She marched through her army's camp with grim determination. She wouldn't let her soldiers see how hopeless their General felt. As she worked her way to the central tent, her eyes roamed over her soldiers, taking in the losses that her side had suffered. She paused as she looked at each soldier's face, finding every one of them to be a mirror image of herself — an army of Ashley's, and she was their General. Of course, Ashley reflected to herself bitterly, the enemy camp would look exactly the same. They were an army of Ashley's, too.

At last Ashley reached the central tent and she pushed her way inside. She calmly removed her heavy armour, stretching her muscles and sighing in relief as each piece was removed. Next, she carefully wiped the worst of the blood and grime from her face and hands with a wash cloth and a basin of water. When she'd finished, she turned to face the small group waiting patiently inside her tent — her most trusted advisors, ready and waiting to debrief the battle. Each and every one was wearing her own face.

"Well, what's the verdict?" she asked, beginning the debriefing.

"We suffered heavy losses," one of the advisors answered.

"Heavy losses? We were decimated," Ashley replied.

Her advisors nodded sadly in unison. "I'm afraid so," one of the advisors replied.

Ashley sighed and rubbed her tired eyes, "This cannot continue. We are all that is good, and true and right in Ashley. We are the confident thoughts, the loving impulses and the joyful feelings. Need I remind you all of what is at stake? Need I remind you what today's battle was for? We fought today in defence of Ashley's

position as a good mother. We fought hard and we lost. Tomorrow we must win. Ashley must be a good mother. Why can't we destroy the enemy?"

One of her advisors stepped forward and cleared her throat, "Maam, I think, the problem is they regenerate. No matter how many times we kill an enemy soldier they will always regenerate."

Ashley frowned, "Yes, that is the problem and we've spent years and a small fortune in researching bigger and better weapons but always it is the same thing. We kill a negative thought but it returns hours later. We slaughter a cluster of misery but it is back regaining ground the next day. We bury a terrible impulse but it finds its way to the surface again. Always, they regenerate. Why? How do they do it?"

The same advisor cleared her throat again, "Ah, with all due respect Maam, we regenerate, too."

"And so the battle goes on," Ashley sighed in frustration, "this isn't working, is it? I need an entirely new strategy. Leave me be so I can think."

The advisors nodded and one by one left Ashley alone in her tent.

As the last advisor left Ashley felt the last of her reserves crumble and she began to weep. She cried great heaving sobs until she could cry no more. Then she made a courageous decision. She would take an entirely different approach. Maybe even fire her advisors. She liked her advisors, they were supportive and made her feel good but she'd been following their advice for years and still the battle raged on. Ashley carefully rolled her battle schematics onto her table and studied them. She needed to look at this entire war in a completely different way. She needed an original idea.

"You won't find one there," a voice whispered.

"What?" Ashley started, "Who's there?"

The disembodied voice laughed, "Who else?"

"Which side are you on?" Ashley asked, immediately suspicious, "Good or bad?"

The voice laughed again, "Oh there's more in Ashley than just two sides in a never-ending war. I could help, you know."

Ashley frowned. She didn't trust the neutrals but perhaps this neutral did have some useful information, "How? Help with what?"

"Your original idea, of course. I have one."

"Oh, yeah, and what's that?" Ashley asked.

"You aren't the General," the disembodied voice announced dramatically.

“What?” Ashley started in shock. It was certainly an original idea but one that didn’t make much sense either, “What do you mean?”

“You are not the General of the good army,” the voice reiterated.

“Don’t be ridiculous, of course I am!” Ashley shouted.

“You aren’t. I can prove it.”

“Fine. Prove it.”

Instantly her tent melted away and she found herself standing on a hill overlooking a wide field. Down below two armies clashed — her army and the enemy.

“Know where you are?”

“Watching today’s battle...” Ashley whispered dejectedly.

“You cannot change the outcome so don’t get distracted by that. This is a memory. We can only watch. Look at the scene before you. Ashley, where are you?”

Ashley pointed towards a figure battling hard at the front of the good army, “There I am, leading the troops.”

The voice laughed, “Oh, no. Look harder, Ashley, where are you?”

“Do you think I don’t realise that every single soldier good and bad is a part of me? Of course, I know that! If that’s your big revelation then I hate to break it to you but I thought of that long ago.” Ashley cried out angrily.

“That’s not my revelation. There’s so much more to you than the sum total of each and every soldier. Ashley, look again.”

Ashley stopped and looked at the scene again as the voice continued, “This time, look beyond the soldiers. Look beyond the thoughts, emotions and sensations that come and go. After all, Ashley, unlike the soldiers that come and go, haven’t you been here all along? Isn’t there a place that’s always been here? The eye inside the hurricane...a place from which you watch the battles day after day...a place from which you’ve watched your whole life unfold? Isn’t that, Ashley, where you truly reside? Go to that place, Ashley, and notice that you’ve been there all along. You aren’t the General of the good army. You aren’t a soldier at all. If anything, you are the battlefield. You are the wide, open space in which all that is Ashley comes and goes. Notice the soldiers, notice the battle, and then, Ashley, notice who’s noticing it all. You, Ashley, are the wide, open space in which all of this happens. You, Ashley are the one who notices...”

The voice paused, allowing Ashley time to process this revelation, “Oh, and Ashley...there’s something else to notice...listen...”

“Mum...mum...mum!”

Snap!

Ashley’s attention snapped away from her internal battles, away from her new revelation, and back to the external world, back into the here and now of her life. She turned and saw her son gazing up at her expectantly, crying out to her, “Mum!”

She smiled at him, “Matthew, darling, sorry, what did you want?”

“I can’t make the tower high enough...” Matthew complained, his bottom lip quivering slightly to show that this was really serious.

“Well, mummy can help with that,” Ashley replied, smoothing out her skirt as she stood up and followed Matthew into his bedroom. Ashley knelt down onto the floor, “Ah, I think we need a good foundation. What if we put the bigger blocks into a pile and we can use them first?”

Matthew nodded and started gathering the bigger blocks. Ashley gathered the blocks with her son and they built tower after tower together, laughing as Matthew knocked each one to the ground. As they played, Ashley stayed true to her new revelation. She noticed her thoughts coming and going, emotions rushing in and out like waves...her internal battle raged on as it always did. But this time Ashley didn’t join in the fray. Instead, she stayed in that place that had always been there; the eye within the hurricane. She noticed the battle, she noticed each soldier come and go and she noticed herself, noticing it all. “I’m such a good mum, I’ve been playing with Matthew for ages,” a thought would appear and then, “But you really should play with him more often” and after a time, “I’ll make his favourite dinner tonight, I’m such a nice mum” and then, “oh but is that healthy enough? You feed him too much junk”... And on and on and on... Her internal battle raged and she was the General of the good army no longer. Ashley was the wide, open space. She was the one who notices and she chose to notice her son.

As Matthew began gathering up the blocks yet again to build another tower, Ashley spoke, “Sorry I got a bit lost in my thoughts before, kiddo.”

Matthew shrugged, “It’s okay but it is better when you’re here with me.”

Ashley smiled, “Yeah, it is. Sometimes I get caught up in worrying about whether I’m a good mum or not. It is a bit silly...”

Matthew snorted, “That’s really silly. You’re MY mum.”

Ashley laughed, “Yes. That I definitely am.”