

Fables for Parents: Brianna's Life Mission

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

Brianna's Life Mission is grounded in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. In particular, this fable illustrates experiential acceptance and committed action, in the context of motherhood.

Brianna's Life Mission

Brianna had always defended her heart valiantly. It was her life's mission. If she could just devote enough of her time, her energy and her resources to protecting her heart then she could be without pain, she rationalised. Finally victorious, free at last, she could start to truly live. But the monsters always returned...

Brianna's heart was deep in the centre of her woodland of consciousness. Brianna's consciousness forest stretched far and wide in all directions. The woodland was home to beauty. Great, mighty trees spread their wide boughs heavy with greenery, dainty wildflowers flourished, creatures darted from tree to tree and insects buzzed through the warm air. But Brianna knew the woodland of consciousness surrounding her heart was also thick with monsters. There were dark thought creatures striding through the forest and casting shadows over the beautiful landscape around them, terrifying beasts of fear gnashing their sharp teeth and demanding to be fed, raging creatures of anger howling throughout the night and calling for blood, horrible memories growing on the forest floor like fungus and great nightmare stories flying from tree to tree on their bat-like wings. Brianna would listen to the howling and the teeth-gnashing late into the night and, foregoing sleep, she would plot and plan. She did everything she could think of to purge her consciousness forest of the monsters. But the monsters always returned...

So Brianna became a guard, sitting permanently at the doorway to her heart. Vigilantly, she watched the monsters in the woodland all around her. She watched them night and day. The monsters would regularly attempt to seize ground and overrun her precious heart. A dark thought creature might dart out from behind a tree and stride towards Brianna and, reaching out with its shadow hands, it would

cover her eyes and plunge her world into shadows and darkness. A nightmare story flying overhead may drop suddenly from the sky screaming into Brianna's ear a terrifying tale. Brianna would unsheathe her sword or grab her long bow and defend her heart bravely. Again and again Brianna would battle with the monsters. But the monsters always returned... And always, always there was the constant sound of gnashing teeth from the hungry fear beasts. The monsters would mock her with their dark magic, their taunts forming a constant chant, "Nobody loves you..." "You're worthless..." "Nothing you do is good enough..."

From time to time Brianna would glimpse another roaming in her woodland of her consciousness. Gazing out, from the doorway of her heart, she might see glimpses of a handsome young man striding through the trees or of a young woman picking wildflowers. At these times she would long for connection, long to reach out. "I could have a friend..." she'd say to herself, "I could love and be loved..." At times she would call out to the strangers. They'd talk, calling out to each other across the forest. At times, the other would approach and sit with her on her heart's doorstep. Those were precious moments, but they were only moments for, as if sensing her happiness, the monsters would swarm. Brianna would find herself surrounded by shadowy thought creatures, hungry fear beasts and howling creatures of anger. The sky would become thick with nightmare stories flapping their great bat-like wings and shrieking horrible tales. Using their dark magic the monsters would chant, "You don't deserve a friend..." "He could never love you..." "Who would want to spend time with you..." Brianna tried to battle the monsters and talk to the young man or woman at the same time, but this always proved impossible. She simply couldn't wield her sword and listen to the other at the same time. Each time Brianna would eventually retreat into her heart. She would barricade herself in and wait. She would wait for the monsters to leave. Eventually, the swarm would settle and the monsters would quieten. Then, she would peak outside to a sad and empty doorstep, for the other would always leave, too. Brianna would sit on her heart's doorstep, lonely and with regret, she would weep. The horrible memory fungus spreading across the forest floor would grow, engorged with the new, painful memories that the precious moments had become.

Until, one day, it all changed. One day, Brianna did something different. Brianna was in her usual post as guard on her heart's doorstep. She was scanning the forest around her, listening to the soft gnashing of the fear beasts in the undergrowth and wondering when the next attack would come. Brianna startled as she heard a noise she had never heard before, a wailing, bleating cry. Brianna gazed out towards the source of the noise and she saw something she'd never seen before lying under a great, old tree at the edge of the consciousness forest. Brianna's breath caught in her throat. It was a babe, a tiny, newborn babe with pink, wrinkled skin. "The babe is mine," Brianna whispered to herself, "That's my child..." She didn't know how she knew it but she knew it through and through. She recognised her child deep within her very bones. An instinct to protect the babe rose from deep within her and she

whispered, stepping towards her child, “I must protect my child...I must keep her safe...I must give her love...I must hold her close within my heart...she is everything...”

Brianna unsheathed her sword and she began to walk steadily towards her babe. The babe continued to call her with her wailing, bleating cry and Brianna felt her very bones, her blood, her flesh, her heart and soul thrum in response. As Brianna approached her babe the monsters swarmed. Brianna was surrounded by dark shadowy thought-creatures, hungry fear beasts, howling anger creatures and swooping nightmare stories. They chanted their dark magic, “You’re worthless...” “You’ll be a terrible mother...” “The babe would be better off without you...” “The babe will never love you...” “What if the babe should die?” Brianna cried aloud at their chant, she swung her sword and tried to vanquish them, but then her babe cried out again, her wailing, bleating cry, and Brianna pushed on, wading through the swarm of monsters until she reached her babe. Brianna dropped her sword into the grass and she gathered the babe up in her arms. Her babe was pink and new, her skin still a little bloody from her journey into the world and her eyes were a deep, midnight blue. Brianna held her babe and felt an overwhelming sense of rightness, as if she had been waiting her whole life, without knowing it, for her babe to arrive. “Shh my little one,” Brianna whispered. “Mother is here now”. The babe quietened and nuzzled into her breast.

Brianna clutched her babe tight to her chest and strode back to her heart, pushing her way through the swarm of monsters. The monsters danced and sang around her, still weaving their dark magic, “You’re worthless...” “You’ll be a terrible mother...” “The babe would be better off without you...” “The babe will never love you...” “What if the babe should die?”

In time, Brianna reached her heart’s door. She intended to take her babe deep inside her heart where she could love and care for her always and barricade the monsters firmly out, but standing on her doorstep she saw a terrible thing. A thin, silver thread ran between her babe and the worst of the beasts. “Oh why, why my dear little one?” she cried, tears streaming down her face. Her babe was attached to the monsters. She couldn’t take her babe deep into her heart without letting the monsters in, too. She couldn’t barricade the monsters out without leaving her babe out in the cold. In desperation she pulled out her dagger and tried to cut the thin, silver thread but it was impenetrable. She thought about slaying the beasts but hadn’t she been trying to slay them all her life? It had never worked before and, anyway, the babe needed her love now. She laughed angrily as she realised that she’d even left her sword back at the tree, discarded so that she had both arms free to hold her babe. She gazed down at her dear child nuzzling into her breast. She needed to take her darling child deep into her heart where she could love and care for her for the rest of her life. There was only one solution. Her resolve deepened and she felt her mothering instincts rise. The child must be protected. She wrapped her instinct and her love for her child around herself and whispered her promise like

a mantra, "I must protect my child...I must keep her safe...I must give her love...I must hold her close within my heart...she is everything..."

Bravely, she turned to face the monsters. She looked steadily at the dark thought creatures shadowy faces, at the hungry mouths of the fear beasts, at the raging anger creatures and at the nightmare stories perched in front of her. She took a deep breath and spoke, "I will fight you no longer. You who are attached to my babe are now as precious to me as she is. I shall treat you always as honoured guests. You, all of you, are welcome." The monsters chortled with delight and Brianna kissed the forehead of her tiny babe to remind herself why she was welcoming such horrible creatures into her very depths, "For you, my little one, I'm doing this for you."

Brianna opened her heart's door wide open and, clutching her babe close to herself, she strode inside. Gleefully, hungrily, the monsters followed. Brianna took her babe deep within to the very deepest, innermost chamber of her heart. Still the monsters followed, gnashing their teeth and laughing in delight. Brianna kissed her babe again, "Here you shall live with me, always." As if the babe understood, the babe nuzzled deeper into Brianna's breast and fell asleep. The monsters weaved their dark magic, chanting their terrible songs, "You're worthless..." "You'll be a terrible mother..." "The babe would be better off without you..." "The babe will never love you..." "What if the babe should die?"

Brianna listened to the monster's song as she held her babe. She looked not at the monsters but at her sleeping child and wondered how a being so beautiful had ever come to her. Softly, she began to sing a lullaby. Time passed. When her babe was hungry Brianna fed her from her very self, when her babe fussed she held her close, when she wanted comforting she rocked her gently and sang lullabies. Still the monsters chanted. Slowly, Brianna came to a realisation. The monsters held no real power. All they had was their terrible appearance and frightening chants. The monsters could not reach out and physically harm her or her babe. They could not damage her heart. She never had to fight them at all.

So now, Brianna lives deep within her heart with her babe and she lives in peace with the monsters of her consciousness woodland. Brianna leaves the door to her heart wide open. Dark shadowy thought-creatures come and go freely, nightmare stories fly through the open windows, fear beasts leap inside and gnash their teeth and anger creatures howl at the moon. Painful memory fungus grows on her very heart and Brianna nurtures it, for the painful memories are precious, too.

If you were to visit you would see that on the doorstep where Brianna used to stand guard she has fixed a sign for all her guests, beautiful or monstrous, "All are welcome". From within the deepest chamber of her heart you would hear Brianna's gentle voice as she sings a lullaby to her babe. At last, Brianna is free. Brianna has a new life's mission and she defends her child valiantly. As days turn to nights, as

monsters come and go, one thing remains and Brianna returns to it in her acts little and large, over and over again. Brianna loves her babe.