



Learning Lifeline

A LETTER ABOUT LEARNING FROM ESTHER WILKISON

I used to teach first aid to the teachers at the school where I taught. One day, some of those teachers came to get me from my classroom because a little boy had fallen off the top of a large slide. I wondered why they couldn't just do the first aid I had taught them until I saw that his arm was at an entirely wrong angle.

I was able to stabilize him and get him to a place where the paramedics could easily move him into their ambulance. The break was severe and required surgery for damaged nerves. Once this little boy came back to school with a cast, people were gentle with him. They adjusted their expectations to what he would be able to do given his need to heal.

Physical injury often comes with a cast or crutches as well as get-well cards and kind wishes. But when something threatens or wounds us internally and causes us deep mental or emotional stress, we are often told to "Buck up, Buttercup;" or "If you don't stop crying, I'll give you something to cry about," as if the pain that is causing our tears means nothing.

When someone treats our feelings as invalid, they invalidate us as the human-with-feelings masterpiece that God designed us to be. When we are shamed for showing feelings, the neurons for emotion and shame get wired together in our brains. Many adults don't know how to process emotions because, instead of teaching us how to process our pain by tuning in and processing it with us, our parents and teachers often ignored our pain or belittled us for being too sensitive.

You may be thinking, "Esther, you have no idea how over-the-top sensitive my child is." Actually, I have a fantastic idea based on first-hand knowledge since I qualify as over-the-top sensitive as well. While my being overly sensitive was often treated as a fault, it is actually part of my ability to tune in with others and connect deeply both with individuals and audiences.

God, in His wisdom, gave each of us emotions as a good gift. Wise decisions in life are influenced by both reason and emotions. Jesus demonstrated emotions freely while never letting His emotions dictate His decisions. The fact that Jesus was sensitive to His feelings and the feelings of others is what makes Him so amazing at loving us and praying for us.

The ongoing results of the pandemic, racial actions, and national unrest have left many mired in anxiety, anger, helplessness, shame, guilt, confusion, and fear. We had challenges prior to the pandemic, but many today are beyond their ability to cope with all the grief, disappointment, and isolation. What we are facing is different than the kind of trauma faced by the boy with the broken arm. It may help to understand the two types of trauma.

Type 1 (Acute Trauma) is a one-time event that can overwhelm us to the point that it leaves us stuck or feeling threatened. The boy who fell from the top of the slide may never want to go on a slide again, but since his life doesn't depend on slides, the results of his trauma are somewhat limited.

Type 2 (Compound or Complex Trauma) is pain that continues based on things like long-term illness for a person or in the family, unresolved loss, unstable and/or violent relationships, abuse, bullying, and other extreme situations. Type 2 trauma affects our nervous system and often



Learning Lifeline

A LETTER ABOUT LEARNING FROM ESTHER WILKISON

produces anxiety, flashbacks, and a distorted sense of self. Those with complex trauma avoid situations that remind them of past traumatic events—even if this disrupts relationships. They often have difficulty controlling their emotions and often experience relationship challenges.

Those who have gone through trauma could benefit from a wise, trauma-informed therapist, but they also need parents and teachers who understand how trauma affects us and our learning. When we are in a place of fear, our body is more concerned with getting us to safety than with holding on to math facts or grammar rules. Often the tone of voice an adult uses when exasperated may be the very thing that triggers a trauma response, causing a child to further disengage. The more intense the tone of voice, the more a trauma-disrupted nervous system may go into fight, flight, freeze, or fawn mode.

In future Lifelines, we will address how trauma is different than life hardship. Why this brief explanation today? I want you to pray. You may have thought immediately of kids you know who are in hard places. I love that you want to pray for them. However, I'm asking you today to pray for yourself.

I don't believe any of us wants to further traumatize those God has put into our care, but often we react towards kids the way others reacted towards us. If we are going to break this pattern, we will have to become like Jesus, who was able to be patient and kind with His immature followers. He never scoffed at His student. He never belittled them. Neither does He scoff at or belittle you.

Here's my prayer: May God give you a gentle tone for calm, soft answers. May He guide you into the healing you need so that you talk to yourself and others in ways that reflect contentment, health, wholeness, rest, well-being, and harmony—all of which are bound up in the Hebrew word *Shalom*. And may the *Shalom* of God keep your heart and mind so you reflect Christ to those He has given you to love.