

THE CORNER

THE PROBLEM OF RAIN

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Jenny rang me mentioning that a close friend and colleague had given her my name. She sought my willingness to come to her home, which fortunately was not that far away, to meet with her 10-year-old daughter, Sarah (for confidentiality, all names have been changed). This was an unusual request. “Why do you consider that to be necessary?” I kindly enquired. Jenny told me that Sarah had adamantly refused to come to my workplace and any discussion about it led to her sobbing inconsolably and demanding a reprieve, promising that she would get over “it” herself. Sarah lamented that, if anything, “‘it’ just gets worse every time we talk about ‘it.’” I finally got up the nerve to ask what the “it” she constantly referred to was. Her reply was one word: “Rain!” I was immediately embarrassed by my reply, which I uttered somewhat querulously before I had time to think about it. “Rain?” Implicit in my voice, I suspect, was “how in the world could rain be a problem worthy of consulting a narrative family therapist?”

For those readers unfamiliar with Auckland, the climate is subtropical with warm, humid summers and mild, damp winters. To quote the Wikipedia entry on Auckland: “High levels of rainfall occur almost year-round with an average of 1240 mm per year spread over 137 ‘rain days.’” If “rain” was a problem, living in Auckland would have to be considered very problematic as compared with San Antonio in Texas or Adelaide in Australia.

There was another somewhat unusual condition that Jenny insisted upon no matter how much I proposed the family therapy wisdom of “all of us sitting down together and talking about the rain” to counter the rain Problem. She raised her voice to indicate to me that she would brook no more opposition to her proposal that I also meet privately with her at my office ahead of the proposed home visit. “Why do you wish to keep your concerns a secret from Sarah?” I meekly inquired, realizing there had to be more to her request than mere convenience. “I cannot

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talk about her grandmother in front of her. She adores her grandmother and her grandmother adores her. They are almost inseparable. But she gets her fear of the rain from her grandmother, who has had it since she was very young. I have always felt sorry for Mum but I don't want my daughter going through life like she has. It would break my heart! But there is no way I am going to say a word against my mother in Sarah's hearing!"

I must admit to some intrigue up until I met with Jenny. I had never encountered a grandmother/granddaughter who shared a "rain problem," although of course I had met many, if not most, who strongly preferred sunny days to rainy ones. It became immediately obvious to me as soon as Jenny told me the story of her mother's "rain Problem" and how it had been "passed down" to her treasured granddaughter, seemingly skipping Jenny and her siblings' generation:

When my mum was 6 and they were living on the family farm down country, lightning struck a large tree very close to the house. It split and crushed the tractor shed and the tractor. It was a very close call. There wasn't much left of the tractor and money was very tight in those days. And that was followed by torrential rains that lasted that night and much of the next day and the day after. From that day on, Mum was wary of any rainfall whatsoever but most of all was terrified by thunder and lightning. She would scream and run in to her parents' bed if at night and just scream her lungs out if it ever happened during the day. Grandma and Grandpa were really embarrassed by her and always told everyone about the incident when she was 6 to explain her terror, as for most people her screaming seemed as if it just came out of the blue. And others, like her teachers, wouldn't know what to do or, in those days, would think that she was "mental." It would take them hours to calm her down and reassure her all was well. Of course, my grandparents hoped she would grow out of it. But she didn't. To this day, she spends a good part of every day reading the weather forecast in the newspapers, listening to weather reports, checking her barometer, and watching the sky for signs of rain.

My father died 6 years ago and we knew we had to look after my mum when the farm had to be sold out of the family. We found two houses next to one another and Mum agreed to help with the mortgages so she could live alongside us. Sarah is her first grandchild and is the apple of her eye. She doesn't see her other grandchildren much as they live down country, and Mum has started to fear being away from her home as well. She has been a great help to me with Sarah and because she was next door, I was able to go back to work after 6 months. In some ways, Mum is more Sarah's mum than I am if you compare how much time they spend together. In some ways, they are the best of friends and Mum rarely even goes outside without Sarah. And then again, there are my mother's gardens, which are so beautiful they could make it into *New Zealand Better Homes and Gardens*. There is never even a weed that lasts more than a day or two. They are always busy down at the gardening center, reading seed manuals, and trying to garden organically. Real different from my dad's farming! That is certainly one good thing my mum is passing down to Sarah—her passion for gardening. Of course, that is, sunny day gardening. Neither my mum nor Sarah will garden in the rain, nor when the weather forecasts rain or heavy showers for that day. They will go out in light showers but it mustn't be much fun for Sarah as Mum continually is looking at the sky or always asking her, "What's the weather doing, darling?"

It's no surprise Sarah is as scared of the rain as my mum is. But what can I do? My husband, Jim, is furious with my mum but he doesn't let on to her either. But he certainly lets me know about it. If I withdrew Sarah from my mum's company, they both would be devastated! How could I do that to my mother who has been more "mother" to Sarah than I have? But Jim says he can't stand by and watch Sarah getting more and more afraid of the rain any longer. I cannot see a way out of this.

She looked at me expectantly: "Can you, David?" And before I could answer, she reiterated: "Jim is pushing for us to separate them." I can't recall exactly what I said in reply but I suspect I was encouraging that a way could be found out of this dilemma, although I certainly wanted some time to contemplate how that might happen.

There were two strands here of the relationship between grandmother and granddaughter, each of them leading potentially in very different and perhaps contrary directions: Sarah had "inherited" both a fear of the rain and a love of gardening from her grandmother. I wondered if one could counter the other? But how? This was on my mind when considering how my proposed home visit might proceed, given that Jenny had led me to believe that something had to "give" between her extreme reluctance to separate her mother and daughter and Jim's insistence that they had to relieve Sarah of what he referred to as her "phobia."

Sarah was very apprehensive when we sat down together, as was Jenny. I commenced our meeting with a very obvious observation:

DAVID: I couldn't help but notice your wonderful gardens. I am a gardener myself but your gardens leave our gardens for dead. I also observed that you have only native trees and many of them by your grandmother's house look like they are juvenile kauris. Did you help plant them or were they there before your time?

SARAH: My gran and I planted them about 3 years ago. We bought "large trees" because they take so long to grow.

DAVID: By the way, how long does a kauri take to grow before it is, say, 10 meters high?

SARAH: I don't know exactly, but as they get older they grow faster and bigger.

DAVID: You don't say! How do you know that?

SARAH: My gran and I read books on trees and stuff.

DAVID: What do you consider is the most remarkable thing about a kauri?

SARAH: The fact that a kauri is one of the oldest living trees in the world and can live up to 1000 years.

DAVID: Is that a fact?

SARAH: Yeah, my gran and I read that in a book we read together about New Zealand trees.

DAVID: Really!

SARAH: Yeah. And we read *The Organic Gardener* together too.

DAVID: You don't say!

As you can see, I had more than met my match on gardening in general and organic gardening in particular. Through our conversation, we went on to establish their preference for native New Zealand over exotic, imported trees and how they had removed all exotic trees from their adjoining properties and were gradually replacing them with native trees. And I had to ask how much thought they gave to deciding on their placement of trees as I had noticed how carefully they had been spaced when I came onto their properties. I had also saw a large and meticulously maintained vegetable garden with a series of composting bins alongside it and what I thought were flower beds mulched over for winter. Our conversation passed from specimen trees to organic gardening and then forked between vegetables for the table and flowers for vases and bouquets for family and friends. Jenny, who had remained in the background of this conversation, stood up and absented herself after a while, asking if I would prefer coffee or tea and warned us that a cake was on its way. I wondered if because she had availed herself of a private meeting with me, she thought she should provide the same opportunity for Sarah.

DAVID: Sarah, what do you consider are the essentials for either a good vegetable or a beautiful flower?

SARAH: Gran says you need good organic soil with lots of nutrients and earthworms, lots of compost, some trace minerals, water, and sunshine, and if the plants are really healthy, they will be pretty disease-resistant and not required to be sprayed. Oh, and companion planting too to draw the insects away from what you are really wanting to grow.

DAVID: Do you find, as I do, that you have to water your vegs over the summer months?

SARAH: Sure! My gran and I water everything early in the morning before the sun comes up and after sunset. You don't water stuff in the heat of the day.

To be honest, there wasn't much Sarah didn't know about watering vegs and in particular the special requirements of watering tomatoes to reduce the risk of blight.

DAVID: Sarah, have you ever considered what would happen if you were either too busy or forgot about watering your vegs and flowers?

SARAH: (taking far more time to reply to this question) They would get diseased or sick and then die!

DAVID: What would you think about yourself as a gardener if that happened?

SARAH: (taking my query very seriously indeed) That would be really bad. You grow stuff to see them fruit or flower. That's why you have veg or flower gardens!

DAVID: I suppose you're right! . . . By the way, what are your favorite flowers?

SARAH: (compared to her easy responses to earlier questions, she was now frowning and was taking her time) . . . Uuummmh.

DAVID: Take your time. I doubt if you have ever been asked such a question before, have you? (She nods in agreement) Then take any amount of time you need!

SARAH: (now she shook her head from side to side as if she was weighing up several candidates and voting against them; she finally regained her composure and then reached what seemed to be a definitive answer) Daffodils! Definitely daffodils! I love “daffs” more than any other flower, even though there are many flowers I love. They are the cutest of all.

DAVID: Can daffodils make you smile when you see them in spring?

She smiled in response and didn't need to say any more.

I suspected Jenny was relieved that at least we were having an amicable conversation, but was she wondering, “Well, wait until he starts talking about ‘it’ and we’ll see what happens.” I certainly shared this as a very likely prospect when I asked her permission to leave us in private for a few minutes. She was only too happy to vacate their sitting room.

“Sarah, I want to tell you a story that I hope will serve you well if you become a horticulturist when you grow up and at any other time in your life. Even today and tomorrow.” She welcomed hearing such a story when I sought her permission to relate it to her. “To really see the pictures my words will be making in your mind’s eye, can you close your eyes and open your ears as far as they can go?” She closed her eyes.

Once upon a time in a far away land there was a 10-year-old girl who looks a lot like you. She wears blue jeans like you have on and a T-shirt that says “A gardener lives here!” on it almost identical to the one you are wearing right now. She has blue eyes like yours and her hair is in a ponytail almost the same as yours. But this girl who looks so much like you has a worry that really worries her. You may not believe me when I tell you that she is afraid of the rain, but she really is. So much so, in fact, that she spends almost all her spare time listening to the weather on the radio and TV, checking the barometer in the hall, and when she is outdoors, she looks skywards to see if the sky is starting to signal rain or thunder is on its way to her house. In fact, she is so afraid of the rain that she wishes and wishes and prays and prays that it stop raining and in fact never, ever rain again.

She was surprised but so happy after a month or more when she realized this had worked. It just stopped raining, and now she had nothing more to be afraid about. There would be one sunny day after another from now on. She would never have to be afraid again. She no longer had to “rain watch” and this saved so much time for gardening, which along with her granny, her mum, and her dad were the loves of her life.

She slept right through the night, no longer awakening listening for or to rain on the roof. She was saving countless hours of sleeplessness. It seemed as if all her dreams had come true!

Not too long after, there was a knock at the door. To her bafflement, a kauri tree and a daffodil stood on her doorstep. She had never seen either looking so forlorn and down at the mouth. The kauri tree’s leaves were turning brown and some had fallen off, leaving lonely bare twigs. The daffodil looked even more woebegone and cheerless. Most of its petals were missing, like a 10-year-old most of whose front teeth had fallen out. But this daffodil didn’t look as if there were any replacement petals in sight.

She asked them: "What do you want?" The kauri tree, who was 10 feet tall and lorded it over the foot-high daffodil, pleaded their case: "Little girl, look at me! I need some rain; otherwise I will lose all my leaves and die away!" "Me too!" the daffodil piped up. "All my petals are turning brown and falling off! I cannot make children smile any longer and that is what made my life worth living. I need some rain!"

This 10-year-old girl who looks so much like you couldn't help feel sorry for them, given her love of trees, vegetables, and flowers; but then again, her life without fearing the rain was just so much better than it had been before. She didn't know which way to turn and told them so.

Strangely, they both cheered up. They said in unison: "We thought as much, so we have a rhyme for you to take away your fear of the rain." She was very interested in hearing this, as she had no idea there were rhymes to make rain fears go away but wanted some reassurance. "Oh, yes," they once again replied in unison, "but you have to make it rhyme. And to make it rhyme you have to practice it before you go to bed at night for at least 10 minutes. Will you promise to do it?" She willingly agreed to practice rhyming the rhyme before bed every night until the fear went away. But the daffodil tempered their promise: "But, little girl, no one I know likes rainy days better than sunny days, so the rhyme won't take that away. Is it enough to no longer fear the rain but not like it either? After all, do you have any friends who love rainy days?" Thinking about the fact that she didn't know anyone who loved rainy days, she accepted their proposed deal.

She was really getting curious as to how the rhyme might go. But the kauri tree and the daffodil seemed to be unsure. "Hey, you guys, tell me the rhyme!" she demanded. The kauri tree looked down at the daffodil and the daffodil looked up at the kauri tree. "Do you want me to rhyme it to her or do you want to do it?" The daffodil told the kauri tree to do it because "you are taller and can whisper in her ear." "Okay! Little girl, can you come over by me so I can whisper the rhyme in to your ear?" She gladly did so.

"Little girl, listen carefully to what I am about to rhyme to you and never forget it as long as it rains." She urged the kauri tree to get on with it. She was becoming mildly impatient. "I'll do it, but just tell me the rhyme."

"There was a little girl who wished it would never rain again so she said over and over to herself: 'Rain, rain, go away!' And it did. But my brother trees and sister flowers need rain if they are to grow and flourish, have flowers and leaves, so thankfully this little girl said she would rhyme this instead. Listen very, very carefully, little girl. 'Rain, rain, come again!' Can you say that but make sure it rhymes, little girl?" Although she found it odd to have such words coming out of her, her love of trees and flowers and her gardening with her granny were so much stronger than her fear of the rain that it went away almost overnight. But no one in their right mind would have expected this little girl to love rainy days. Who does, after all? And now when she wanders around the gardens, she wonders if one of the kauri trees is waving at her with the tips of its newborn green branches and if one of the daffodils is smiling gratefully at her.

We recalled her mother and told her we had just about finished our meeting and that if she thought we should have another one, she might recontact me by phone. I never heard back from her, but I was reassured by my colleague, whom you will remember was a close friend of Jenny's, that Sarah was no longer rain-fearful but had been unable to convince herself to like rainy days much.

Some 10 or so years later, I was cycling around a traffic roundabout when I came face to face with a young woman bending over to plant seedling trees in the middle of it. Our eyes met as I was riding very slowly and carefully around it, and this young woman called out to me: “Hey, are you Mr. Epston? I’m the girl who rhymes. I suppose you don’t remember me?” I pulled up and dismounted from my bicycle. Of course, I immediately recognized her. “I remember you very well and if you want me to prove it, I will tell you your rhyme.” She laughed and said that was proof enough. She was now doing a university degree in landscape design and was on an internship with Auckland City Council designing and planting traffic islands and roundabouts with trees and flowers. We shook hands and she promised to pass on my kind regards to her parents.