The Power of Connection: Ongoing Adventures in the Car

Gloria Lybecker

Have you ever noticed how driving in a car can create the neuroception of safety for people to connect in conversation? I'm guessing that almost every parent has experienced unexpected "crisis" or meaningful dialogues with their kids while sitting behind the steering wheel of their car, with the motion and hum of the motor in the small space inviting a deepened connection.

Yesterday, my son, Rylan, and I went out to run several errands together. As we drove through town, he remembered friends he used to go to school with. "What grade is Linda in this year?" he asked. "She'll be in sixth grade," I replied.

His body folded in, his lips turned down at the corners, and his eyes began to brim with tears as he verified, "She's in sixth grade already and I'm not?" Pausing to take in his expression and noting he was near the edge of his window of tolerance, I quickly offered an explanation to reassure him, "Linda was a year ahead of you in school, and you took time off from second grade to get comfortable in your body, remember? We started up again the next year in second grade because we're not in a hurry. So now you will be in fourth grade this year, kind of like your friend John. Remember him? He was in your class in kindergarten, only he was a year older than you because his mom said they weren't in a hurry either!" Rylan smiled through his tears. "Yeah, and next I'll be in junior high and then high school." Looking into his shining eyes, I smiled back. "Yeah, and you'll be ready for it then too. You are growing into a young man, aren't you?" He nodded his head in agreement. "Yep, I started out a baby, then a little boy, then a big boy, and now I'm growing to be a young man. I already have hair on my lip too!" I reached out my hand with joy, to shake his, saying, "I'm pleased to meet you, young man! It's good to know you!" Grinning big, he returned my greeting.

I began to realize just how important this moment really was for him. He was integrating temporal understanding, making meaning of his personal history while projecting himself into his future. Wow! Very cool! I saw that as he pondered this new information, his countenance changed, his jaw flexed forward, his eyes narrowed. When he reflected and imagined, he sat up straighter and became very quiet. As if for the first time, I noticed how much he had grown, my baby boy becoming a man, with more awareness of his own experience in the world. "Wow–when did this take place?" I asked myself with wonder. I took note that the contours of his face are different from his little boy days. I really *saw* how much he had grown and developed, and acknowledged the milestones of time passing. I took a deep, cleansing breath.

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As I made the cognitive distinction that even though Rylan is ten years old, his emotional development age is much younger at times, especially in social contexts, I noticed that my stomach was warm and relaxed; I felt a sense of peace and contentment. Reflecting over past experiences with Rylan, I noticed just how much acknowledging his emotional or mental age, in the moment, supports my ability to remain present to him as he experiences times of dysregulation.

I checked in with Rylan, "This is really pretty big stuff for you isn't it, realizing that your friends are going into junior high and you will soon be joining them. You've never really thought about this before have you?" "No," he replied, with lips pursed and eyebrows furrowed as he pondered this

new information and looked out the window.

We drove, stopping by my oldest daughter's apartment to drop off her mail. I sent her a quick text, "I'm dropping off ur mail." Rylan quickly said, "And tell her I want a hug," so I sent another text, "Rylan wants a hug, too!" As we sat in the driveway, no one came out to meet us, so I drove forward and placed my daughter's letters in her mailbox. Rylan's countenance quickly changed. He frowned angrily and jumped out of the car, slamming the door and saying, "I'm not leaving! I need to see my sister now!" "Rylan," I entreated, (moving directly into *strategy*, in my own emotional rise, even though I know how supportive it is to connect with my child with *empathy* in these difficult moments), "We have an agreement that we're running errands and we need to leave for Walla Walla to pick up your prescriptions. Would you be willing to get in the car so we can be on our way?" "No!" he expressed loudly, as his aroused nervous system heightened, "I'm staying here to see my sister!"

With tears welling in his eyes, his body showed great reluctance as he climbed into the car.

Instantly I was transported back in time, remembering a previous experience when Rylan refused to get in the car for over an hour when it was time to leave a friend's house. I felt the creeping sensations of panic begin to rise as my chest tightened, and shame spread heat across my cheeks. I told myself, "Oh no, not again! I'm not going through this again!" Feeling desperate to interrupt this pattern, I said, "It's time to leave and the car is going. I'd really like you to come with me. Would you be willing to get in the car now?" He shouted a loud "No!" As if struck, my body recoiled and a chilling sensation radiated out from my solar plexus. Wanting something different than that old pattern of stuckness and immobility, I decided to try something new and slowly began to drive away. Worrying whether my choice to drive away was truly supportive of Rylan, shame flooded through my body at having left, and quickly I drove around the block to get back to him. With relief, I caught sight of him standing by his sister's gate excitedly waving to me, shouting, "She's coming out!" I pulled into the driveway as she came out to greet us and visit for a few minutes. I noticed that I wasn't really present during this conversation. My body was there, but inside I was hiding and watching, hoping his sister would work a miracle somehow and restore us all to a calm and easy transition. I was watching closely so I wouldn't miss seeing it.

As she said goodbye, Rylan tried really hard to find words to convince her to let him stay, clearly having trouble with leaving. When this failed, he adamantly refused to get into the car, insisting that he be able to spend time with her in her apartment, maybe even spend the night. Once again, she explained to him that her roommates would be moving out soon and then she would have plenty of room for him to visit and spend the night at her place. With tears welling in his eyes, his body showed great reluctance as he climbed into the car. As we were picking up speed, his emotional alarm system flooded and he hollered, "B--, just kill me!" and suddenly released his seat belt and pushed open his car door! In the face of this unexpected reaction, my reflections on parenting him held me calmly in this moment, and I decelerated and asked, "Rylan, would you please shut your door for safety?" (Ah, yes, I see how I was able to connect my request with an important reason, different from wanting to run errands, deeply connected with life. This allowed Rylan to shift momentarily from his rage into mourning, and it also let me find my own inner source of empathy.)

Crying loudly now, he hung his head. "My arms and legs are broken so I can't shut my door." Hearing this familiar expression about being broken, an emotional metaphor that began when he was three years old, I empathized, "You really love it when others greet you with joy and include you in their plans, especially when the person you want to be with is your sister who you haven't seen in awhile?" He slammed the car door closed and I quickly reached across him to fasten his seat belt. I

saw his face flush, his brow furrow and lips grimace, which gave me just a moment to prepare myself as his nervous system tipped into fight mode. He grabbed my arm and squeezed it with force, his mouth descending to bite my arm. "Ouch! Rylan! My arm hurts!" I grasped at a sudden inspiration, to guess which developmental part of him was present in this moment and to name it. "Rylan, I'm checking in to see what part of you is at choice right now. Is it the really little Rylan or is it the young man Rylan?" His eyelids widened as our eyes connected briefly, his gaze moved slightly off to his right, and his grip relaxed as he paused. I empathized, "Is really little Rylan scared and overwhelmed, wanting to know just how much he matters?" His neurobiological system calmed with the release of oxytocin as his face softened and his eyes came back to meet mine again. "Is Rylan the young man there with you? Can he come out now to support you with some tools?" Letting go of my arm and turning his body towards me, with great inner strength and inspiration, he said with a few tears, "Okay, truth or dare?" Recognizing his favorite new game, I smiled, reaching out to shake his hand, and said softly, "Welcome back, and thanks for your support." With a louder voice I said, "Truth!" And the game was on. "Do you have five kids?" he asked. "Yes," I replied. He hugged my sore arm and slipped under it for me to return his warm embrace, releasing more oxytocin and further calming our nervous systems. "Your turn to ask me now!" And we continued on with our errands.

This driving experience illustrates the power of connection. When I gain attunement with my son, I sense with more ease how to empathize, to name experience, and to be with him in such a way that he feels known. I feel inspired witnessing how naming Rylan's inner community empowered him to stretch his window of tolerance and hold his younger self with compassion. As I hold him, metaphorically, he learns to hold, nurture, and soothe himself. This is the root of a healing empathic connection. I am committed to helping those roots grow strong and deep.

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For nothing is fixed, forever and forever and forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock. Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have. The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.

-James Baldwin