
Dealing tough love

Word count: 4069

Mixed messages

Leisa was in a quandary.

For three days as each morning rolled around she woke feeling angrier and angrier. Each night she tossed and turned before dropping off to an exhausted and unreplenishing sleep.

She knew what was troubling her. She just didn't know what to do about it.

Was it her place to say anything? She didn't like confrontation and she knew that was part of the quandary. It seemed the more she avoided action the more it ate away at her life. Something had to give.

Grumpy and bleary eyed Leisa sat on the edge of her bed looking out at the back yard, searching for an answer. The palm fronds waved in the breeze acknowledging her gaze but they offered little support.

She needed a sounding board. Yes. Today she would search one out and make a decision on what to do.

The universe seemed to be in sync with her. She didn't have to wait long for a sounding board to appear. As she was washing up the breakfast dishes, revelling in the quiet of the house since the children had gone to school; there was a knock at the door.

"Jon, wow what a surprise. I haven't seen you in ages." Leisa reached forward to embrace him. They had been friends since high school but rarely saw each other these days.

“Yes, I know. I’ve got an appointment up the road at 10 and they just rang to push it back half an hour so with nearly an hour to kill I thought I’d pop in.” Jon said returning the embrace warmly as he stepped over the threshold.

“Great to see you. You are looking well. I was just going to put the kettle on.”

Jon and Leisa caught up on each other’s news as the kettle boiled and the coffee brewed. Their friendship never seemed to age. You could pick up where you left off like it was yesterday.

Jon was having relationship troubles as his second marriage seemed set to fail.

Leisa remembered when they had dated in their early 20s. Jon was a creative type, a potter by trade, sensitive and full of nervous energy. He liked to pace the floor as he spoke and thought. He found it hard to sit still for any length of time.

Leisa imagined that came from the hours of being tied to the seat of his potter’s wheel when he was on a creative binge. They had never worked out as a couple but had been blessed enough to remain friends.

He had a similar relationship with his parents that she had with hers. Both of them were the eldest child. They were both adopted as was their only sibling. Both had wayward brothers. Both had parents who turned a blind eye to their younger brother’s bad behaviour too often.

For Leisa she had always seemed to wear the brunt of her parent’s discipline because she was the eldest. She recalled it feeling unjust all through her childhood. Her brother Walt was the apple of her mum’s eye and could do no wrong. If he did, as he was prone to do, it was often reframed around Leisa’s influence. As a result,

Leisa grew further and further apart from her brother as the years rolled on. In short, her dad supported her mum in whatever she said.

Over the years Leisa had just accepted that the bias existed. She had no power to change it. Lord knows she had tried. She had tried a tonne of childhood tactics. Best, brightest, most obedient, highest achiever. At the end of the day none of it made her star shine brighter in comparison to her brother. Not that Leisa was a competitive person, she just wanted to be acknowledged fairly. Walt revelled in being flawed and challenging the system, any system.

Once when her brother kicked a new ball in a tree, Leisa was the one that got in trouble. Mum has specifically banned Walt from playing near the old sprawling mango trees for fear the ball would get lodged in its branches. There was open ground to play on, without obstruction. Of course, Walt ignored that and got his ball stuck high up in the tree. He came crying to Leisa asking for her help, afraid he would be in trouble for disobeying. So Leisa, having compassion, had climbed the tree to retrieve the ball for him.

The thanks she got was Walt pulling the ladder out from underneath her that resulted in bruises and a gash on her thigh that required stitches.

She was the one who got in trouble for climbing the tree, her mother was so angry with her. The gash never got the stitches it needed. She was sent to her room with bandaids without dinner. She still wears the jagged scar to this day. A reminder of how unjust life can be. She wasn't the one that was banned from playing there, not

that she was playing there, but she was the one responsible for setting a bad example for Walt. She still couldn't follow the logic.

There were many instances like that littered throughout her childhood. Now as an adult with her own children she was challenged with serving discipline and she was keenly aware of being fair and not dishing out punishments for the unknown or the unjust.

"Jon, I have a parent problem I don't know what to do about. Can I run it past you?"

"Sure, I'm all ears." Jon grinned knowing that he would more than likely identify with the problem. He got up from the chair and started to pace back and forward pausing at each turn.

"Mum came up a few days ago. We were having afternoon tea so we were all sitting around the table, me, the kids and her." Leisa glanced over the table she sat at remembering.

"She said Walt had dropped in the week before on his way back from Brisbane. He lives up north now." Leisa looked up at Jon who was nodding his head.

"Anyway, when I asked if he was by himself she said he was with a mate. The mate had bought a car at the auctions. Apparently, that was why they were in Brisbane. Walt came along for the ride and had to drive the new car back."

Jon raised his eyebrows and paused mid pace.

"Has Walt got his licence back?"

“No,” Leisa responded with a small smile. Even though she hadn’t seen Jon for a long time, he remembered Walt’s panache for never holding a driving licence for any extended period before he would lose it again for driving offences. Walt had over a decade of driving offences on land and on the water, everything from speeding, unlicensed driving and reckless endangerment to car stealing and running boats aground in protected marine areas.

The silence hung thick in Jon’s pause.

“You know what he is like. He hasn’t held a licence for longer than six months in the past ten years.”

“So what did your mum say?”

“Well, when I asked mum why he was driving when he doesn’t have a licence, she said ‘Oh, he had to drive. His mate had to get the car home,’” Leisa sighed.

“What? That’s bullshit. What did you say?” Jon’s indignation oozed into his tone.

“I was just dumbfounded. I didn’t know what to say. It’s a 600 kilometre trip and he *had to drive unlicensed*. You know my parents, they have always been law abiding. I wondered if Mum was showing early signs of dementia. And, I’ve been really disappointed in myself not challenging her at the time because the problem is that she said it in front of the kids, my kids. I don’t want them to think its ok to break the rules if you have some lame excuse. According to Mum’s story he pre-planned breaking the law before he even left.”

“Have you talked to the kids?”

“Yes, yes I’ve done that. I’ve talked to them about it not being right. Of course, they wanted to know why grandma thought it was alright then. I don’t really feel like shattering the image of their grandmother by telling them she’s always biased when it comes to Walt. It’s been eating away at me ever since. I don’t feel like Mum is a good role model for the kids. She is making excuses for her adult son’s bad behaviour and justifies it. I was frozen when she said it. She had made a conscious choice to herald his bad behaviour at the expense of her grandkids. It would have been different if she said it just to me but because she chose to say it in front of the kids I can’t just ignore it. What will she tell them next? ”

“Did she just slip up?” Jon paced a bit more shaking his head.

“No, she was genuinely endorsing his excuse. She repeated it and there was no hint from her that she didn’t believe it.”

“I’ve been going over and over it ever since. Wondering if there was a clue I missed. I’ve been looking for reasons.”

“Well there’s no justifying it regardless. Don’t turn into your mum and blow it off with some lame excuse you might dredge up. Leisa, this is serious. The kids are young and impressionable. They learn right from wrong from their family. I’m not saying they are going to drive unlicensed tomorrow but you have to confront it. The issue is that they are getting mixed messages from the adults in their life and that is something you have to clear up for them as their parent.”

Leisa nodded, her eyes downcast.

In her heart of hearts she knew the truth. She just needed someone else to say it out loud.

Mum would always wear rose coloured glasses when it came to her Walt. She had protected him with warped logic all her life. Leisa's head churned and her stomach felt leaden. This meant she had to take action.

Jon was right. She had to say something. She had to confront her mother and call her on her behaviour. She had to take a stand so the poison of this bias didn't leech into another generation.

The angst

Leisa rang her mum after Jon left.

“I need to come and talk to you. Are you and dad going to be home tonight?”

“Yes, we will be here. Why? What is the matter?”

“Nothing is the matter, I just need to talk to you so I’ll wait till the kids are settled and I’ll pop down. About 8.30 or 9. Is that ok?”

“Yes, that is fine. We will see you then.”

All afternoon Leisa felt nervous. She folded the washing as she took it off the line. She felt like a child again, like a child about to get in trouble. The anticipation of pending doom —she hadn’t felt that in years. She was also a little scared. She chastised herself for being a scaredy cat.

It was ironic in a way. This is the feeling that Walt would have had when he threw the ball in the tree. Anxiety. He found a solution to deflect the feeling of trouble – her, the big sister would save his ass. But her only solution here and now is to face the music.

Storm clouds were beginning to build. The day had been humid. Leisa would welcome the change.

It would be so much easier to ignore it. Pretend it didn't happen. But Leisa knew that would only be endorsing it. And she needed to be able to function normally again without this continually playing on her mind.

What Walt did was wrong. Leisa had suffered the repercussions of his bad judgement as a child. She won't let him get away with it now if it means it's at the expense of her kids.

Poor Walt, he doesn't even know what he has done. He only ever thinks of himself. She wondered if his mate knew he didn't have a licence. Probably not. None of this was important now or her problem. What was important was to stop the issuing of double standards.

Her eldest, James, was watching TV.

"If the others stir give me a call on my mobile. I won't be too long."

"Uhhuh." James was fixated.

Leisa walked into his line of vision, between the couch and the TV.

"Where am I going?"

"Grandmas," James responded looking up at her.

"And what do you do if the kids stir."

"Tell them to go back to sleep," he read his mother's face, "And call you."

Leisa smiled. "If I'm not back by 9.30 you get yourself into bed also, mister. Is that understood?"

“Yes, mum.” James groaned.

Leisa kissed him goodnight before heading off to the car. The promise of an afternoon storm had only been a promise and the night was still hot and humid.

The drive there was uneventful except for her palms that began to sweat profusely as she turned into her parent’s street. As she got out of the car she had an overwhelming urge to run. A nervous chuckle escaped as the image of her running down the street, at her age, as her parents looked out the window wondering what was going on, amused her momentarily. Her heart was pounding. This is ridiculous she thought.

Leisa climbed the stairs with a heavy heart and knocked on the door. There was a far off rumble in the heavens.

Being brave

They sat in the lounge room - her parents in their separate arm chairs and her on the couch to one side. The television was on quietly.

“Well, what is it that brings you here on a weeknight?” her father asked.

“I have to talk to you about when Mum visited the other day and what she said about Walt.”

“What about Walt? What are you talking about?” Leisa’s mum seemed taken back, defensive even, her voice rising.

“I’m talking about when you told us that Walt had to drive his mate’s car.”

“Oh.” Leisa’s mum seemed relieved. “What about it?”

Leisa could feel her blood rise. Her mother had no idea what she had done.

“Mum, you can’t say that Walt *had* to drive the car when we all know he doesn’t have a licence. You can’t say it is ok. The kids were all sitting there and you were telling them it is ok to drive unlicensed. It’s not, you know it’s not.”

Leisa’s dad went to her mum’s defence. “That’s not what your mother was saying Leisa.”

“Dad you weren’t even there. That’s exactly what she did say. That’s exactly the message that mum gave the kids. *It’s ok to break the law if you have a lame excuse.* Walt planned to break the law before he even went to Brisbane by offering to drive. He planned on it.”

Leisa could feel the pent up anxiety leaving her as she spoke. She had broken the seal by stepping over the threshold of confrontation.

“It wasn’t a case of being stuck in a bad situation as mum seemed to imply. He’s fully aware he doesn’t have a licence. He’s the one that has to front court every time he has lost it.”

Frustration began to mount again as she looked at her parent’s blank faces. Leisa didn’t understand why she was having to explain this.

“Your brother didn’t have a choice. He had to drive. Don’t have a go at him when he isn’t even here to defend himself. He was being a great friend. How dare you try to bring down your brother.” Leisa’s mum defended his honour and her father sat there nodding.

Leisa’s mind raced with the change in tact. How delusion is this? How far will they go? All of a sudden, she felt like it was skidding sideways, out of control. It was like being on ice skates and she was no skater. She needed to keep this on track.

“I’m not having a go at him. The law will catch up with him. He will bring himself undone without my help. My job is to make sure that my kids know right from wrong. And what Walt did was wrong. You sitting there telling them it was alright only confuses them. I can’t have you telling them it is ok to break the law. I can’t have you telling them if they make up a petty excuse it will make it all fine.”

“Don’t have a go at me, now. Now you start on me.” Leisa’s mum started to well up. Tears came to her eyes, her voice rose.

Leisa's father accused, "Now, look what you have done. You've upset your mother. She has done nothing wrong."

"After all we have done for you." Leisa's mother's voice was still rising and cracking with emotion. "You come here and threaten me that I can't see my own grandchildren."

"She can see her grandchildren whenever she wants." her father pitched in.

Leisa's head was spinning. What just happened? All of a sudden she was being attacked. She was the evil one. Oh this was so reminiscent of her childhood. That foreboding feeling of pending doom earlier wasn't unwarranted. She reminded herself, this was why she had moved away in the first place. And now she had foolishly moved back into this world because she thought her kids needed more exposure and family time with their grandparents after she and her husband had separated.

And who said anything about not seeing the grandkids? Where did that leap come from?

Another old feeling came back to Leisa. Two parents at her. The feeling of being alone. The feeling of isolation, being under attack, hunted like prey. These were childhood feelings she thought she had left behind.

Dad had always been the reasonable one of the two. He could see logic and was happy to talk through things. But when Mum turned on the waterworks all reason went out the door and he supported her blindly. His allegiance to her was as stoic as hers was for Walt.

Leisa wondered who had her back?

Ignoring her mother's attempt to play the victim, Leisa tried one last time.

"So you are saying that you believe it is ok to break the law? You are saying that you want my kids to know that it is ok to break the law?"

"Don't be absurd. Of course, we aren't saying that." said her father.

"Well what are you saying? Because finding excuses for Walt when he breaks the law is saying just that," Leisa's father went quiet.

Leisa's mum wouldn't back down. "I've been there for you and looked after you since you were a baby. We chose you. I brought you into my home and raised you and this is the way you repay me? You'll learn. When your kids are older. You need to be there for them. " She was becoming hysterical.

Something inside Leisa snapped and her frustration was replaced with red hot anger. Her mother was pulling out her trump card, *we adopted you so you should be grateful*. All respect Leisa had for her mother dissolved in that instant.

Leisa felt a firm resolve, like a mighty rock, plant itself inside her chest. She steeled her voice and talked over their protests in a clean, clear, solid voice.

"Don't try your emotional blackmail bullshit on me. This has nothing to do with me owing you because you raised me. It has everything to do with me raising my children the right way. It's not about you or me or Walt. And for your information I never said you couldn't see the kids. You said that. I hadn't even thought about that but now that you have raised it that might be a solution."

Her voice was firm and even, her emotions calmed.

Leisa had been heated and searching for a way through the jungle of crap to get her message across. Hitting brick walls where they were dodging and weaving, refusing to take responsibility or even acknowledging the issue was pushing her. Weren't these the people who were supposed to support her, wasn't this one of the excuses they were using against her? Now, a solid foundation of confidence anchored her dialogue.

"It's simple. Don't give my children mixed messages. When I'm trying to teach them right from wrong you either support me or don't be there. Don't make excuses for Walt's bad behaviour in front of them. If he has done something wrong, then either call it for what it is or don't mention it in the first place. He is a bad example and you condoning what he does sets a bad example for them. If you can't set a good example for the kids then don't be around them. It's your choice." Leisa rose.

Leisa's mother burst into a wail and held her chest. She shrunk back in her chair like she has been mortally wounded.

"How could you?" she wailed. Leisa's father had gone quiet. He reached out to pat his wife's hand.

"Your mother. Look what you are doing to your mother." he accused.

Liesa stood up.

"Very easily," Leisa responded to her mother, looking her straight in the eye. "I have a responsibility as a parent. I am not going to cover up for my kids. I've seen what that does. It enables them to keep behaving badly. I want my kids to be responsible for their actions. I want them to know there are consequences for bad choices. I

don't want them to live a life of lies and deceit and blame and pretend. I don't want to end up spending my life making excuses for them as a cover up for where I failed as a parent. If defending Walt's bad behaviour is more important to you then you should stay away. It's your choice."

A crack of thunder pierced the atmosphere outside. The tension in the sky had eased. The boil had been lanced.

Her mother sobbed. Her father soothed. Leisa felt drained and suddenly sad.

Leisa walked to the door. She turned back and sombrely said, "I hope you make the right choice so we can see you soon. Good night."

Breathing again

Leisa let herself out quietly into the crisp night air. She felt battle weary and so very sad inside. Her rock hard resolve had turned to molten lava and now cooled to a gooey mush. Knowing that her mother had used her adoption as a playing card was just too low for her to feel any victory had been achieved.

Standing on the driveway, Leisa watched the gathering clouds cover the night's moon as the hurt covered her heart. Somewhere inside of her she acknowledged that she knew this day would come. She instinctively knew since her childhood that her mother harboured a grudge against her but she didn't know why. Now the always unspoken had been finally been said and the rancid pus was seeping into her life.

Maybe when her mother looked at Leisa all she saw was her own inability to have children naturally. Maybe they only adopted Leisa to push past the barrier of childlessness and maybe her mother finally felt like a mother when she adopted Walt. Whatever the psychological meanderings that had lead to this point, Leisa knew that a pinnacle had been reached. Their relationship would have no further forward motion; it would be all downhill from now.

Dealing tough love to her parents revealed deep seated feelings of debt that were harboured. Leisa's reaction to that wasn't to take responsibility for it. She was just born when others made those decisions about her life. But it felt like the final piece of the puzzle was turned over and been put into place.

She breathed in deeply as the air assaulted her nostrils with the pungent odour of oncoming rain. She felt alive. Emotionally bruised but alive. Shocked and appalled even, but alive.

Those few cutting and hurtful words had strangely set her free.

The first fat raindrop fell on her nose as she climbed into the car. With a smile she closed the door knowing that she was in for a good night's sleep.