

Untamed

By Glennon Doyle

5 Several years ago, my daughter Tish’s teacher called and said that there was a “situation” at school. During a discussion about wildlife, she’d mentioned to the class that polar bears were losing their homes and food sources because of the melting ice caps. She showed the students a photo of a dying polar bear as an example of the many effects of global warming.

10 The rest of the kindergarteners thought that this was sad information but not sad enough to keep them from, you know, soldiering on to recess. Not Tish. The teacher reported to me that when the lesson ended and the other kids popped off the carpet to run outside, Tish remained seated, alone, mouth wide open, stunned into paralysis, her little shocked face asking:

“WHAT? Did you just say the polar bears are dying? Because the Earth is melting? The same Earth that we live on? Did you just drop that little tidbit of terror ON US AT CIRCLE TIME?”

15 Tish eventually made it outside, but was unable to participate in recess that day. The other kids tried to get her off the bench to play four square with them, but she remained close to her teacher, wide-eyed, asking, “Do the grown-ups know about this? What are they going to do? Are other animals in trouble, too? Where is that hungry polar bear’s mom?”

20 For the next month, our family’s life revolved around polar bears. We bought polar bear posters and papered Tish’s wall with them. “To remember, Mom—I’ve got to remember.” We sponsored four polar bears online. We talked about polar bears at dinner, at breakfast, during car pool, and at parties. We discussed polar bears so incessantly, in fact, that after a few weeks I began to hate polar bears with every fiber of my being. I began to rue the day that polar bears were ever born. I tried everything I could think of to yank Tish out of her polar bear abyss. I coddled her, I snapped at her, and finally I just lied to her.

30 I asked a friend to send me an “official” email pretending to be the “President of Antarctica,” announcing that, once and for all, the ice caps were fixed and all the polar bears were suddenly A-OK. I opened that fraudulent email and called to Tish in her room, “Oh my gosh, baby! Come here! Look what I just got! Good news!” Tish read the email silently, then turned slowly toward me with a scathing look of scorn. She knew the email was fake because she is sensitive, not stupid. The polar bear saga continued, full force.

35 One night I tucked Tish into bed and was tiptoeing out of her room with the joy of a mother who is almost to the promised land. (Everybody’s asleep and I’ve got my couch and carbs and Netflix and no one is allowed to touch me or talk to me until the sun rises, hallelujah.) I was closing the door behind me when Tish whispered, “Wait. Mom?”

40 Damnit to hell.

“What, honey?”

45 “It’s the polar bears.”

OH, HELLLL NO.

I walked back to her bed and stared down at her, a little maniacally. Tish looked up at me and said, “Mommy. I just can’t stop thinking: It’s the polar bears now. But nobody cares. So next, it’s gonna be us.”

Then she rolled over, fell asleep, and left me all alone in the dark room, stunned into paralysis myself. I stood over her, eyes wide, arms wrapped around my body. “Oh. My. God. The polllaaarr bears!! We have to save the mother freaking polar bears! Next it’s gonna be us. What is wrong with us??”

Then I looked down at my baby and thought: Ah. You are not crazy to be heartbroken over the polar bears; the rest of us are crazy not to be.

Tish couldn’t go to recess because she was paying attention to what her teacher said. As soon as she heard the polar bear news, she let herself feel the horror and know the wrongness and imagine the inevitable outcome. Tish is sensitive, and that is her superpower. The opposite of sensitive is not brave. It’s not brave to refuse to pay attention, to refuse to notice, to refuse to feel and know and imagine. The opposite of sensitive is insensitive, and that’s no badge of honor.

Tish senses. Even as the world tries to speed by her, she is slowly taking it in. Wait, stop. That thing you said about the polar bears . . . it made me feel something and wonder something. Can we stay there for a moment? I have feelings. I have questions. I’m not ready to run outside to recess yet.

In most cultures, folks like Tish are identified early, set apart as shamans, medicine people, poets, and clergy. They are considered eccentric but critical to the survival of the group because they are able to hear things others don’t hear and see things others don’t see and feel things others don’t feel. The culture depends on the sensitivity of a few, because nothing can be healed if it’s not sensed first.

But our society is so hell-bent on expansion, power, and efficiency at all costs that the folks like Tish—like me—are inconvenient. We slow the world down. We’re on the bow of the Titanic, pointing, crying out, “Iceberg! Iceberg!” while everyone else is below deck, yelling back, “We just want to keep dancing!” It is easier to call us broken and dismiss us than to consider that we are responding appropriately to a broken world.

My little girl is not broken. She is a prophet. I want to be wise enough to stop with her, ask her what she feels, and listen to what she knows.