

## SEVEN MINUTES

I work with a personal trainer twice a week. A guy named Anthony. Big guy. Hard muscles. Wears a ponytail and a doo rag and sunglasses all the time. A diamond stud in each ear. Baggy pants and bright-colored hooded sweatshirts. Walks tough, with a swagger that could be mistaken for bravado. He might even scare you if he looked at you in a certain way. I'm telling you, he's big picture. But don't be fooled; he's soft. Not mushy soft, but soft as in his heart is completely open. When I think of buddha-nature, I think of Anthony Espailot. Kind and generous, compassionate and loving.

On Friday afternoons, I come to the gym at 3:30 to walk on the treadmill before we train, and while I walk, Anthony conducts a children's class. For an hour he keeps six human spark plugs engaged in a variety of physical challenges that build their muscles and their character. I have never seen a group of kids adore anyone like these kids adore Anthony. Mr. Anthony, they call him. Tiny little bodies, wiggling and flailing about with uncontrollable energy for life, each one willing to be reined in by Mr. Anthony because at some deep level, they know he has their best interests at heart. And he does. He wants them to develop strong, agile and capable bodies. And somehow, without saying a word about it, he shows them how care for their bodies goes hand in hand with care for their character, with understanding who they are and what is possible for them. He is a personal trainer. But he is also a bodhisattva, a Buddhist term for enlightened beings who have come into human form to teach others the path to peace and happiness.

I witnessed Anthony's unique brand of training last week with Daniel, a slight, freckle-faced, curly-headed eight-year-old whose father sent him to Anthony hoping the boy would develop more interest in baseball, a sport the father loves and Daniel not so much. When I came into the back room of the gym to stretch out after my cardio work, Anthony was finishing up with the kids; they were guessing numbers to win the last prize he had to offer them for their good effort during the session. Anthony is a genius at motivating these kids to do difficult tasks (like jumping from a flat-footed position onto a bench); in addition to his praise and high expectations, it's not beneath him to offer them prizes. It's fun to see how hard and seriously they perform for the silliest trifle.

So anyway, it's 4:25. They've been working hard for fifty-five minutes. Their little faces are flushed, their hair is damp; a musk unique to young, sweaty bodies permeates the room. But they're beginning to slow down a bit, even though the decibel level in the small space is excruciatingly high. Anthony has a red gift sack in one hand, and small pieces of numbered papers in the other hand. Each child comes forward to draw a number and a chance to win the red sack. You have never seen such focus. This is the announcement of the winner of *The Florida Lottery*, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, and *Deal or No Deal* all rolled into one. Bodies are tense. Eyes are riveted. Expectancy hovers like a hawk.

Anthony commands the athletes to stand against the wall. They wiggle, tease each other, scream for his attention. With a look, he focuses them on the business at hand. "Emma, what's your number?"

"Thirty-two!" she booms.

"Tony, what's your number?"

“Twenty-seven,” he screams louder than Emma. And on down the line until all have nearly split a vocal cord. No one has pulled the winning number, the prize remains unclaimed, so Anthony must offer a final challenge.

“Everyone down on your mat, plank position on your elbows. Hold it high, hold it tight. The last person holding is the winner of the prize.” They fly into plank position, laughing, talking, craning their necks like young turtles to see where Mr. Anthony is in the room or to check the position of their compatriots. They are in this for blood now. The prize awaits.

I have stopped stretching to watch the contest. I cannot keep from smiling at the happiness and full-out commitment these live wires bring to the last five minutes of their session with Mr. A. No one needs to train them how to be present. No one needs to remind them of their birthright to joy.

Anthony paces the room like a commandant, moving in and around the mats and barking orders. “Up on your toes, Alli. Get your butt down, Tony. You must be in plank, not downward dog.” And with the orders, he offers encouragement. “You can do this, guys. Looking good!”

“Owwww, this is hard!” Yonni screeches at the three-minute mark and drops to the mat. Thirty seconds later, so does Alli. Emma laughs and says she feels good. “I’m strong, Mr. Anthony, aren’t I?”

“Yes, indeed, you are.”

Daniel, clearly uncomfortable, shifts to the side of his feet. “No shifting, Daniel. Come on, buddy, you can do this.”

“No, I can’t,” he whines. “It hurts.” Poor Daniel, I thought, he’s giving up on himself. His brow is furrowed, his lip on the verge of a quiver. His face is so sweet, so soft from

defeat he has accepted all his whole young life. He won't make it, I think.

Anthony ignores him. "Good work, Tony. Looking strong." And he does. At this point, I'm betting on Tony. His plank is solid. His head is level with his body, his arms strong, his face determined.

Anthony keeps pacing among the three remaining bodies. He bends down to see how far off the mat Tony is. "Push it up, man. Hold strong." Minute five and, to my surprise, Tony collapses without warning. He's out of the running, leaving strong Emma and sweet Daniel, the failed baseball player. Daniel's jeans are crumpled and sweaty. His arms are shaking, shoulders dipping dangerously low. His head is hanging, and sharp shoulder blades poke his t-shirt, but he's still in position. The commentary and laughter in the room remain thunderous as the kids hoot and harangue and egg on the two contenders, so it takes a while to realize that underneath the hilarity there was a whimpering, a low moaning from deep in a throat. A moan that had no care or conscience, a moan oblivious to the presence of others.

Tony lowers to his knees and crawls up to Daniel, gets right in his face. "Daniel's crying," he yells, with part joy and part concern. He looks up to Mr. Anthony as if he possesses some valuable new information, but Anthony makes no response as he continues pacing the room. "Get back to the wall, Tony." He looks at the clock. "Six minutes, Emma, six minutes, Daniel. Keep it going."

"I can't do this," Daniel pleads, lifting his head up to show a flushed face and eyes bulging with tears. "I'm in pain."

"Yes, sometimes it hurts to be good at something," Anthony says and keeps walking.

“Mr. Anthony, I’m getting tired,” Emma still has a huge smile on her face, but her body reveals fatigue.

“Take care of yourself, Emma, but don’t stop just because it’s hard.”

Daniel breaks into full-out crying, tears streaming down his fiery cheeks. He chokes, oblivious to the friends who line the wall and watch. “I hurt, please stop, please stop.” His chest heaves, distorting his plank; his body searches for relief, rolling from side to side. Anthony offers no correction.

“You can stop any time you want, Daniel. But the clock is still running as long as two people are holding. Six minutes thirty seconds.”

I want so badly to step over to Daniel and comfort him. I want to put my arms around him and tell him to lie down, put that sweet belly on the mat and rest. Please stop, I think, just stop.

Anthony was watching Daniel, too. He had worked with him for three months, watched him week after week as he slowly dropped his reluctance to move, his unwillingness to challenge himself, his fear of failure. He knows where Daniel can go, and he circles the two contenders like a mother wolf preparing her young for the wild, creating a warm and sustaining breath that envelops her pups.

*Move toward what is difficult*, my yoga teacher says. The pose you most deeply avoid is your best teacher, your path to opening. Habituated as I am to ease and comfort, this practice is challenging. I have avoided with great effort the hard path, the heavy load, the gift of pain. I once believed the good life was one free of suffering, failing to understand it’s my belief about suffering that configures my state of being, not the actual suffering. If I can sit with it, hold the space for

it, let it be without resisting it, I can find myself on the other side of the pain, and amazingly, relief follows.

And now, I witness a fragile eight-year-old receiving this very lesson. Despite the words of his mind—*I hurt*—he holds the pose. Indifferent to the shame of his tears, he tolerates the pain. Calling upon a new body and a new attitude toward that body, he moves head-on toward his own personal difficulty. He turns his back on the boy last to be chosen in every recess game. He hunkers down with pain and lets it ride between his sharp shoulder blades. Daniel cries, and still he holds.

The kids standing against the wall shout their encouragement. And then, Daniel lifts his head high, his face contorted. I can't imagine he can go on, but somehow he summons the energy to yell, "How many more seconds? I can't go on!"

Three kids standing against the wall. Two kids holding plank on their mats. Anthony still pacing. In the corner sitting on the Pro-Stretch, I am riveted. Daniel, whose father feared he was a weakling and sent him to Anthony to toughen him up, is holding plank right along with Emma, strongest kid in the class. His body is breaking, his mind wants him to stop, but he has found a reserve; in this moment he has overcome his long-assumed weakness. Daniel holds.

At seven minutes, Anthony calls time, and Emma and Daniel drop to their mats. Emma rolls over and giggles in relief. Daniel, his face buried in his arms, sobs little-boy sobs with abandon. We onlookers cheer and applaud.

"Well done, young athletes; we have two winners in today's contest." Anthony has pulled some bills out of his pocket and offers the cash or the gift bag to the champions. "We'll draw numbers to see who gets to choose first."

Daniel rises from his mat and wipes his face on his shirt as he heads out of the room. “I don’t even want it.” And he leaves.

The next few minutes are kind of a blur. Mothers enter the room to retrieve their children. Emma has taken the coveted gift bag as her victory wreath. Children gather their water bottles and towels and exit. At some point, Anthony directs me to a mat and starts my ab work. A few crunches into the first set I sit up, head reeling from the event.

“Oh my God, Anthony, that was amazing.” I am too stunned to be more articulate.

“I know,” Anthony says, smiling and nodding his head.

“What just happened? Daniel—he held. It was amazing.”

“I know,” Anthony repeats with pride. We are in awe. We can’t say exactly what happened, but we know it was a transformation.

At that moment, Daniel re-enters the room, his arms splotchy red, his face still wet with tears, and approaches Anthony. Looking Anthony square in the eyes, he extends his hand and says, “Thanks, Mr. Anthony.”

Anthony drops to his knees and takes Daniel’s hand, man to man, then envelops him in his strong arms. Daniel’s sweet face rests on Anthony’s shoulder, a moment of complete surrender. “Thank yourself, Daniel. You did it all on your own. You did it.”