

January 29, 2020 by Tim Ferriss

(1) The Story of a Curious Phone Call by Auburn Sandstrom

From: <https://tim.blog/2020/01/29/the-story-of-a-curious-phone-call/>

Book: <https://www.amazon.com/Moth-Presents-All-These-Wonders/dp/1101904402/>

The below is a true story from Auburn Sandstrom that blew my mind and opened my heart. It is excerpted with permission from *All These Wonders: True Stories about Facing the Unknown*. Read the whole thing. Trust me. Take the five minutes and be rewarded. Enter Auburn...

(2) The year is 1992, Ann Arbor, Michigan. I'm curled up in a fetal position on a filthy carpet in a very cluttered apartment. I'm in horrible withdrawal from a drug that I've been addicted to for several years now.

In my hand I have a little piece of paper. (3) It's dilapidated because I've been folding it and unfolding it, to the point that it's almost falling apart. But you can still make out the phone number on it.

I am in a state of bald terror. If you've ever had an anxiety attack, that's what this felt like.

(4) I'd been having a nonstop anxiety attack for the last five years. And I'd never been in a darker or more desperate place than I was that night. My husband was out running the streets, trying to get ahold of some of the stuff that we needed, but I knew if he succeeded, he was not going to share.

(5) And if I could, I would jump out of my own skin and run screaming into the streets to get what I need. But right behind me, sleeping in the bedroom, is my baby boy.

Now, I wasn't going to get a Mother of the Year award in 1992. (6) In fact, at the age of twenty-nine, I was failing at a lot of things.

I had started out fairly auspiciously. I was raised in comfort and privilege. I was that girl who had the opera lessons, spoke fluent French, and had her expensive undergraduate college paid for. (7) I was that person who, when my checking account ran out, would say something to my parents and two hundred dollars would magically appear.

I know, when the revolution comes, kill me first, right?

So I had the year abroad. I had the master's degree. I was, you know, pedigreed.

(8) But in my twenties, I ended up in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and I started noticing things like poverty and racism and unconscionable injustice. And that people like me were mostly causing it. It was a huge revelation for me.

(9) I came to the conclusion that the thing I needed to do with my privilege and all the comfort that I'd had all my life was to destroy it.

Rip it in half. Spit on it. Piss on it. Set it on fire.

(10) And you know, every time I've come to a major faulty conclusion in life, the man comes right after who will help me live it out. And this time was no different.

Man, he was beautiful—a radical, revolutionary, fine-ass poet from Detroit.

(11) I was twenty-four, he was forty, and I was smitten, in love. It was so exciting—who he was, how he talked, the way he looked at the world. And it was beautiful for a while, until he introduced me to one of his old activist friends, who introduced us to the drug I was now addicted to.

(12) I had tried to change my affiliations and transform myself. I had wanted to shed my class. I would have shed my race if I could have.

But instead of transformation, you have me going ninety miles an hour down I-94 with my poet, in a car full of alcohol and illegal drugs. (13) The baby's in a car seat (it's probably not a regulation car seat). He's covered in candy and chocolate, because you have to keep the baby entertained while you're taking care of your business, getting yourself some relief.

(14) This particular night it was bad because, if we were to have been pulled over, we were both on parole. So we would've both been locked up, and our child would have been taken from us.

(15) Underneath my withdrawal and terrible anxiety was a sure knowledge that I was leading the life that was going to lead to me to losing the most precious thing I'd ever had in my life, which was that baby boy.

(16) I was so desperate at that moment, that I became willing to punch the numbers into the phone.

The phone number was something my mother had sent me. Now, mind you, I hadn't been speaking to my parents or anybody else for three, four, five years.

(17) But she'd managed to get this number to me by mail, and she said, "Look, this is a Christian counselor, and since you can't talk to anybody else, maybe sometime you could call this person."

Now, I think it goes without saying that I wasn't hanging real tight with that sort of thing in those days. (18) But I was so anxious and in such a desperate state. I was emaciated, covered in bruises.

I punched in the numbers. I heard the phone pick up.

I heard a man say, "Hello."

And I said, "Hi, I got this number from my mother. Uh, do you think you could maybe talk to me?"

(19) I heard him shuffling around in the bed, you know? You could tell he was pulling some sheets around himself and sitting up. I heard a little radio in the background, and he snapped it off, and he became very present.

(20) He said, "Yes, yes, yes. What's going on?"

I hadn't told anybody, including myself, the truth, for a long, long time. And I told him I wasn't feeling so good and that I was scared and that things had gotten pretty bad in my marriage.

(21) Before long I started telling him other truths, like I might have a drug problem, and I really, really love my husband, and I wouldn't want you to say anything bad about him, but he has hit me a few times. And there was a time when he pushed my child and me out into the cold and slammed the door behind us.

(22) And then there was a time when we were going sixty miles an hour down the highway, and he tried to push us out of the moving vehicle.

I started telling those truths. And this man didn't judge me. He just sat with me and was present and listened and had such a kindness and such a gentleness.

(23) "Tell me more. . . . Oh, that must hurt. . . . Oh."

And do you know, I'd made that call at two in the morning. And he stayed up with me the whole night, just talking, just listening, just being there until the sun rose.

(24) By then I was feeling calm. The raw panic had passed. I was feeling okay.

I was feeling like, I can splash my face with water today, and I can probably do this day.

I wouldn't have cared if the guy was like a Hare Krishna or a Buddhist—it didn't matter to me what his faith was.

(25) I was very grateful to him, and so I said, “Hey, you know, I really appreciate you and what you've done for me tonight. Aren't you supposed to be telling me to read some Bible verses or something? Because that'd be cool, I'll do it, you know. It's all right.”

(26) He laughed and said, “Well, I'm glad this was helpful to you.”

And we talked some more, and I brought it up again.

I said, “No, really. You're very, very good at this. I mean, you've seriously done a big thing for me. How long have you been a Christian counselor?”

(27) There's a long pause. I hear him shifting. “Auburn, please don't hang up,” he says. “I've been trying not to bring this up.”

“What?” I ask.

“You won't hang up?”

“No.”

“I'm so afraid to tell you this. But the number you called . . .” He pauses again. “You got the wrong number.”

(28) Well, I didn't hang up on him, and we did talk a little longer. I never would get his name or call him back.

But the next day I felt this kind of joy, like I was shining. I think I've heard them call it “the peace that passes understanding.” (29) I had gotten to see that there was this completely random love in the universe. That it could be unconditional. And that some of it was for me.

And I can't tell you that I got my life totally together that day. But it became possible to get some help and get the hell out. (30) And it also became possible as a teetotaling, semi-sane, single parent to raise up that precious, chocolate-covered baby boy into a magnificent young scholar and athlete, who graduated from Princeton University in 2013 with honors.

This is what I know. In the deepest, blackest night of despair, if you can get just one pinhole of light . . . all of grace rushes in.

(31) AUBURN SANDSTROM is a senior lecturer (part-time) in college writing at the University of Akron. She won the Ohio Arts Council Award for fiction, a Citation for Teaching Excellence in Creative Writing from the University of Michigan, and a Cowden Award for fiction. She is a career college writing instructor with a master's in fine arts (fiction), and she has an Ohio Language Arts Grades 7–12 Teaching Certification and an Ohio principal's license grades 5–12. A longtime advocate for urban students, she is currently pursuing a PhD in urban education policy at Cleveland State University.

This story was told on November 21, 2015, at the Academy of Music Theatre in Northampton, Massachusetts. The theme of the evening was “Lost and Found.” Director: Jenifer Hixson.