

ULTIMATE ACCEPTANCE
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Sheridan, WY May 8, 2022
by Susan Clinch

When Holly Hogarty asked me if I'd be willing to present a talk on Acceptance I said "Sure!" I accepted the offer...in a passive sort of acceptance. I accepted it as a gift, a sign that I was a true and actual member of this fellowship, which still feels new to me, and I hope it always will.

My First thought was, "hmm.. acceptance...that's a good thing, right? Especially as compared to Tolerance, which we always have been taught to believe is a Good Thing. Teach Tolerance, the poster said. But do you all remember when you first realized that tolerating something was merely putting up with it. You can tolerate (insert here something you feel is inferior or other: gay folk, black people, immigrants), - but do you Accept it? Do you consent to receive it as equal to your experience...as a reality as valid as your own?

This is binary thinking at its core. To understand something, find something else to compare it to, then see how it stacks up.

Holly told me that she was once asked to give a talk on a topic, and when she told the Asker that she didn't know anything about it, she was told "That's why I asked you to do it." I feel like she gave me the same gift...the opportunity to delve into a topic and learn something new. So, thank you, Holly.

My Second thought about Acceptance was its important place in the Serenity Prayer. We all know it and generally consider it good advice:

God, grant me the Serenity
To accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And the Wisdom to know the difference.

That “accept” part always seemed like the hardest part. So I went to Mr. Google and discovered that this prayer has evolved over time. I won’t take you down the rabbit hole of all the back and forth over who said it first or who said it better. I will just tell you that it is commonly assumed to have come from Reinhold Niebuhr, a well-known American theologian. One of my favorite Niebuhr facts is that Dietrich Boenhoeffer was a student of his at Union Theological Seminary, the school where Jane Wohl is now studying. And if you don’t know Boenhoeffer, that’s a rabbit hole worth falling down.

The earliest version I could find of his “Serenity Prayer” switched the order...in it courage came first.

“Give us courage to change what must be altered,
serenity to accept what cannot be helped,
and the insight to know the one from the other.”

Not as poetic, is it? I think he was wise to change the order. Until you have accepted the reality of a thing, the courage may or may not be misplaced. Hard to put anything in the Change column until you’ve accepted it as real.

So, that’s what I knew about the subject: It’s better than tolerance, and it makes the Serenity Prayer work. Well, the Serenity Prayer was my door into discovering the concept of Radical Acceptance.

Its origin is in Dialectical Behavior Therapy proposed by psychologist Marsha Linehan and popularized by Tara Brach in her 2004 book Radical Acceptance: Embracing Life With the Heart of a Buddha. By that I mean its origin as a catch-

phrase. .. Its origin as an actual “thing to think about” goes back at least to Plato’s time.

Radical Acceptance does not mean you are agreeing to a situation or an action. It means you are acknowledging that the event happened and is real. Which sounds simple but is not.

Remember Plato’s Cave? Where the people sat staring at the shadows on the cave wall, thinking that was reality? I think we all want to consider ourselves the guy who recognizes that those are just shadows...or maybe even the guy who climbed out of the cave entirely and sees the sun.

There are levels of reality to explore and levels of acceptance. But if we start by radically, actively accepting that we are imperfect beings living in an imperfect world making the best decisions we can, we will spare ourselves a lot of pain. The metaphor that I use to see the difference between passive and active... simple and Radical Acceptance .. is the wind. I can hug my knees and duck my head and accept that I am buffeted by the wind. Or I can stand with my arms open facing the wind and accepting the full power of it.

It’s fitting the we look at this notion of Radical Acceptance after we have, as a group, considered mindfulness, because it comes from that perspective. It is not a hopeless acceptance of whatever happens or about giving up the ability to make choices. It means we stop trying to make things work the way we want them to work and, in the moment, see as clearly as we can, what is real.

Lily Tomlin said, in *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, that “Reality is just a collective hunch.” And we are living in a very weird time when the “Collective” part of that phrase is falling apart. So I think it’s wise to occasionally revisit those realities that we have accepted.

For instance..this statement: Black Lives Matter. There was a time when I would have said to that: “All Lives Matter.” In that reaction I was refusing to accept an important aspect of Reality. Well, of course, all lives matter. But if you cannot accept the reality of the Part: that Black Lives Matter. Period. Then you cannot possibly believe the Whole: That all lives matter.

And then there are the realities that persist no matter how often you revisit them: the death of a loved one, serious illness, the end of a marriage. You have to accept these truths in order to get through the pain.

A wise young friend who has known more loss in her life than I have helped me figure this one out. She said, “Don’t avoid the pain. Dive in, head first .” She was speaking my language, the language of metaphor. She was saying - Accept this reality. She knew that lack of acceptance prolongs the pain. And then she said one of the kindest things. She said “If you need company, I’ll swim with you.”

The most potent illustration of the power of Acceptance in my life was going through the Alzheimers journey with my Mother. Like so many other families, mine started out in denial. Oh, she’s having “senior moments.” “Mom, you just need to focus”... or worse, “Surely you remember.....what happened this morning...that you already ate...who I am.”

It wasn’t until we had a bona fide official medical diagnosis that we were all able to finally accept that she was slipping away from us....that she was, as my Dad said, “between this world and the next.” That’s a metaphor that spoke to me and that I adopted.

The most powerful transformation, though, was in my Mom. Once she accepted that she was not going to “get better” she was able to let go of unrealistic expectations and enjoy whatever was happening in the moment. A cardinal outside her window would delight her....snowfall was magical. A beatific peace came over her. I am so grateful that my whole family managed to achieve Acceptance because it allowed us to relax and enjoy our favorite pastime - laughing together.

Our Story for All Ages was about the first acceptance we need to experience: acceptance of the self. It's great practice for all the things beyond the self that must be dealt with...up to and including what I think of as:

The Ultimate Acceptance, the thing that we, or at least I, am always trying to avoid and deflect as I sort through the many situations and relationships that I am busily trying to deal with. The Ultimate Reality that refuses to change no matter how often we revisit it is Death. Death in general, of course, but more to the point our own, no, my own personal Death.

There was a period in my childhood when the thought terrorized me. I would lay awake at night contemplating what “not being” meant. I would look at people walking around, doing normal things like shopping or working and think, “Don't they know? How can they behave so calmly if they know THEY ARE GOING TO DIE!

This came on the heels of my beloved Grandpa Hap's death. I was 6 years old. At the wake my father hoisted me up so I could see Grandpa in his coffin and kiss him goodbye. No thank you. Young as I was I could plainly see that Nobody Was Home. The finality, the reality, of death was brought home to me that day.

Fortunately my First Communion was not far off so I soon was given a blueprint for understanding death. It wasn't final! Death was followed by eternal bliss. Well, that would be the outcome unless I screwed up: Like if I ate meat on Friday, or forgot my chapel veil on Sunday, or coveted my neighbors goods. I wasn't as sophisticated as my Dad, who could argue with the priest in the confessional about whether a sin was "mortal" or not.

I totally bought into the whole Heaven/ Hell dichotomy, but was still troubled by the thought of the "end of me." I was just discovering "me" and liked being "me."

Still, I am so grateful that I had that religious blueprint. It comforted me and tidied me over until I could read Herman Hesse who said "The call of death is a call of love. Death can be sweet if we accept it as one of the great eternal forms of transformation." Until I could read Kahlil Gibran who said "Life and Death are one even as the river and the sea are one." To read Ernest Becker's belief that "To live fully is to live with an awareness of the rumble of terror that underlies everything." To discover that the ever-quotable Mark Twain said "I do not fear death. I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born, and had not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it."

As I read these things I went from being a frightened child who memorized Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night. (Rage, rage against the dying of the light) to a person who collects metaphors. Because that's all these things are: Theories, metaphors, a Collective Hunch. We cannot know the thing until we know it. We cannot know death until we die.

This is not about understanding the nature of life after death. It is simply accepting the fact that it is inevitable.

And we must Accept it....or at least I must. I have always thought that this is what Socrates meant if he actually did say "The unexamined life is not worth living." Because to examine Life ultimately leads you to the realization that it is finite. All we have in this life is Time..... and as Robin Williams wisely said, "Time is God's way of keeping everything from happening at once." Until it stops. for us, at least

I'll let Mary Oliver have the Last Word:

The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean -
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and
down -
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated
eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her
face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?