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LEARNING HOW TO ACCEPT YOURSELF

A parent cannot communicate acceptance to their child if they don't accept themselves. Invariably, the child will activate parts of the parent which the parent dislikes, rejects, runs away from, or even hates. And the parent may experience so much distress and internal static that acceptance of the child at that moment will become difficult, if not impossible.

However, accepting oneself is a lot easier to want to do than it is to actually do. We all want to accept ourselves and be kind to ourselves. But how does one go about achieving this aspirational goal? Most of us like parts of ourselves but really dislike other parts. We may like that we are warm and funny, but hate the angry or envious, or anxious aspects of our personality.

We may have had a mother who was shrill and we remember hating how we felt and how she got. And then we are mortified when our kids accuse us of being “a screamer.” We might dislike that part of ourselves intensely. What can we do about these negative parts of ourselves which are unwelcome guests?

How can we even justify “accepting” a negative part of ourselves that violates what we admire?

In his lovely poem, “*The Guest House*,” Rumi encourages us to **see all of our feelings and states, whether positive or negative, as guests in our house.** He urges us to welcome each guest and let it find welcome as it imparts its lessons.

What does this possibly mean for a parent?

Here is my understanding. I think the first objective for a parent who wants to learn to accept themselves, if only so they can be more tolerant of and accepting of their child's "negative sides," is to notice all of their feelings unflinchingly. Monitor yourself. Be mindful of what you are feeling and thinking at each moment. Every day I start the day with a mantra: "*May I notice and be mindful of every feeling and every thought and every bodily sensation I have this day.*" I usually end my brief meditation with "*And may I learn to accept my life and myself as I notice I am, rather than as I wish I would be.*" It is only a short step further to: "*And may I accept my intimates, my wife, my children, my grandchildren, my patients, and my friends as they are, rather than as I would wish them to be.*"

But we are still left with the question: "How can I dare to accept the "bad" or "negative" parts of myself. This is a difficult and thorny question. Here is my thinking on this important question.

First, even our "negative" side once had a value. For example, our critical internal voice, copied from our critical parent, was once used by us to make sure we didn't do something that would get us yelled at or rejected. No child ever wants that. Now, that critical voice has overstayed its welcome and goes too far. We want it to go away. But perhaps we need to be more appreciative and more compassionate with that side of ourselves. That part of ourselves protected us once upon a time. That side of us isn't evil or bad. It is just out of date. It is something left over from another time that needs to be modernized. And we may need to appreciate how it saved us from worse as a child. We may, through understanding, come to forgive that part of ourselves for being troublesome at times in the present. We may even have compassion for that child in us who tried heroically to protect us from difficult parents or siblings. Once we have understanding and human compassion, we may suddenly realize "*There is*

nothing to forgive. I did what I had to do to survive. I adapted to manage the complexity and pain of my family relationships. How can I hate myself for being a child who was only trying to be loved and trying to avoid hatred, anger, and rejection from parents, siblings, and peers?"

This self-understanding which leads to self-forgiveness and self-compassion, when practiced over and over, may lead to a steady state of self-acceptance. As my first analyst said to me about himself *"What can I hate about myself? I have met all sides of me, and come to understand them with compassion. All that is left is acceptance, with sadness as well, but in the end, acceptance."*

We are left now with the problem of the difference between self-acceptance and self-indulgence. Self-indulgence takes over when we give ourselves a "pass" to be dishonorable or hurtful to others. Self-indulgence may be at play when we have standards, values and ideals that we ignore because it is too painful or too hard to live up to them. If I value respect for my children, and I ask them to always respect me, it is self-indulgent to allow myself to yell at them in rejecting and critical ways and then give myself a pass because *"They deserved it and I accept myself."* This is not self-acceptance. Self-acceptance integrates accepting oneself as one is and accepting what one values and aspires to be.

A healthy way to be self-accepting would sound like this: *"I accept that I have a part of me that tends to yell or shame or ridicule, as my mother or father did, but I also notice the negative effects of this part and I want to change this part of myself because I do not like the hurtful effects. Nor do I admire this part of myself. I seek to change, not justify. I change, but not out of self-hatred. I change because I want to be more of what I admire. Changing this hurtful part is important to me and this desire to change is important to me. If I fail to always make good on my goal of changing, I understand why. I understand the heavy load my "inner child" carries as his or her legacy from a critical parental figure. I do not reject or hate myself. I compassionately ask myself to pick myself up off*

the floor of failure and discouragement and move forward. I then seek to change again. Hopefully, the first step is to own up to my lapse by apologizing to my child for my yelling or shaming or ridiculing. And then I make good on my hopeful promise to myself to change.”

Once we have made progress in self-acceptance, it is but a small step towards progress in accepting our children as they are. We extend acceptance even when they act in ways we don't like, causing us to worry or become angry. We extend acceptance even when they generally drive us crazy. How we do this and how we do this without enabling their negative behaviors and bad habits is what we will discuss in the next chapter, *“How To Accept Your Child.”*

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