

Accepting Our Shadow Side

Last month, I wrote about how we are addicted to trying to gain others' love or approval. This month, I want to look at the other side of the coin: our fear of being criticized by others. Funnily enough, it was when I was re-reading Byron Katie's *I Need Your Love – Is That True?* in order to remind myself about the downside of seeking others' love or approval that I had a real 'Ah-Ha!' moment in relation to our deep-seated fear of others' disapproval of us.

In her books, Byron Katie writes about how she now welcomes any kind of criticism and always finds some truth in what others say about her. For example, she writes that if someone were to call her 'mean, unkind and unfair' she would reply, 'Thank you sweetheart, I can find all these in my life, I have been everything you say and more.' She then states, 'What could anyone call me that I couldn't find at some time in my life?'

The key point to get here is that whenever we feel the slightest urge to defend ourselves against someone's criticism of us, we are actually defending ourselves against something that we do not want to accept about ourselves. When we feel hurt by others' criticisms of us, if we stop and bravely look within, we will find something about ourselves that we really want to hide, or something about ourselves that we reject. But once we finally come to accept an aspect of ourselves that we have previously rejected, we will find more inner peace and wholeness. Then, others' attacks on us will really begin to lose their sting.

Just think about this for a minute. Suppose you are *totally* comfortable with your size/weight/shape and someone says to you, 'I really think you should go on a diet and lose some weight!' You might respond very calmly with something like, 'Thank you so much for your concern for me, I will give it some thought.' But if you actually hate your weight, your size or your shape, someone kindly suggesting that you might go on a diet or join a gym will probably push all of your buttons and you will feel a big whoosh of anger, hurt or resentment. The other person has triggered your aversion to your 'shadow side' which in this instance, is represented by your hatred of your own beautiful body.

We all long to feel loveable and whole, but deeper down, we all harbour a load of unworthiness issues, and every time they are triggered by someone or something in the world around us, we tend to feel awful. We also tend to defend ourselves from any perceived attack by attacking back, and so when someone's criticism of us pushes our buttons, we instinctively attack them back in some way or another.

OK, let me try to explain how I now see this pattern in my own life and in my own reactions to other peoples' criticisms of me. Recently, I have been practising mindfully noticing how I react to all kinds of criticism. Sometimes for example, Gloria will say to me, 'You are so untidy!' and I usually just laugh and say 'Yes I know!' Her gentle criticism of me is like water off a duck's back because I have totally accepted that aspect of my personality-self. In fact, I

quite admire 'Peggy' for being so untidy, because it represents a really rebellious streak that enabled her to enjoy at least some freedom when she lived with a highly controlling mother for the first sixteen years of her life.

I have also noticed more generally that if I totally accept something about myself that others may judge as some kind of fault or failing - such as my impatience or my tendency to eat really fast - their criticism does not usually hurt me, because I already own these rather unskillful aspects of my personality-self. Although of course, if Gloria or anyone else tells me that something I do is really annoying them, I will do my best to stop because it seems like the most kind and loving thing to do.

On the other hand, if anyone even hints that they think I have been selfish, I notice that I feel extremely upset and highly defensive, because this is an aspect of my personality-self that I still have not come to terms with. Why? Because when I was little, my mother used to criticise me a lot for being a selfish little girl and would sometimes follow up a verbal attack on me by not speaking to me for several days as a punishment for my 'selfishness.' The pain of her rejection of me during those times went deep and so to protect myself, I tried to deny that I was *ever* selfish.

Of course, once I had completely rejected this aspect of my personality-self, if anyone even hinted that I might have behaved in a selfish manner I reacted by being mortified. As a fairly diligent spiritual practitioner, I once tried really hard to process my hurt and resentment when an acquaintance publicly accused me of doing something selfish. I really wanted to forgive this person whom I perceived to have attacked me. But if I am totally honest, this forgiveness process did not go so well, and from that day forwards, I harboured a pretty strong dislike for my 'attacker'.

I know that Jesus tells us to love our enemies, but I have found that it is extremely hard to extend genuine love to someone whilst I am still hanging onto any feeling of hurt in response to their behavior towards me. On the other hand, I am now pretty certain that if I can totally let go of the hurt, I can truly love my apparent 'attacker' without any negative feelings or thoughts about them getting in the way of this miraculous flow of love energy.

So ironically, it now seems to me that a key way to loving our enemies is first and foremost to love ourselves unconditionally, and that means loving every aspect of ourselves, including our shadow side. Now I know that you might be tempted to interject at this point - 'But Peggy, surely if we unconditionally loved our shadow side, would we not be condoning our bad habits and our hurtful behaviour towards others? For example, if I accept that sometimes I am an angry person, wouldn't that mean that I would be more likely to shout angrily at those who annoy me from time to time?'

Well, in my experience, accepting, or even loving, our shadow side does not lead us down the road to bad behavior, but rather leads us along a beautiful path towards wholeness and

unconditional love for all sentient beings. Please bear with me on this. For example, which is more likely to lead to an alcoholic to seek help to stop drinking: a total rejection and disapproval of the part of themselves that is addicted to booze, or a loving acceptance that a part of them has strong alcoholic tendencies and needs help? Or, to take another example, which is more likely to lead us to care for our bodies with a good diet and exercise programme: hating our current body or loving it unconditionally?

I hope you can see where we are going with this. It may seem counter-intuitive at first, but I am really beginning to see how this process works. First, we allow and then accept that we are not perfect. Then, we then send love to our shadow side and the shadow begins to dissolve in the light of loving awareness.

Of course, we all feel anger or even rage towards others from time to time. But if we try to deny these 'negative' aspects of ourselves, we usually get horribly stuck in endless pain and suffering. On the other hand, if we start to accept and even love our shadow side, we can begin to come back to wholeness and inner peace.

So this month, I am going to commit to noticing where I am still trying to deny any aspect of myself that I deem to be unworthy or even unacceptable and then I am going to do my very best to love that shadow side of myself. If you would like to join me in this healing practice, I am convinced that together we can make real progress towards returning home to wholeness, peace and joy. Good Luck and Namaste!!

Peggy Foster
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