

Always Look on the Bright Side of Your Past

When I first saw the Monty Python film *Life of Brian*, I was so shocked at the song at the end of the film that Brian sings whilst being crucified. But now I love it! I sometimes listen to it if I am feeling a bit low. Listening to the catchy tune and the silly words about always looking on the bright side of life reminds me to be grateful for all the blessings in my life, even if my life seems quite challenging from time to time. What about you? Do you regularly give thanks for everything you have received this lifetime, or do you still have a tendency to look back into your past and blame certain people for causing you pain?

When we are in any kind of emotional pain, we instinctively want to blame someone else for it. We subconsciously believe that if we can make someone else responsible for our fear, anger, depression, jealousy, or whatever, we will somehow feel better. But does this egoic trick ever really work? I don't think so!!

When I was a neurotic, depressed, anorexic young woman, I became convinced that my adoptive parents were to blame for my unhappiness. I blamed my father for being needily clingy towards me and my mother for being cold towards me. I then spent over 10 years in psychotherapy expressing my anger towards my adoptive parents to psychotherapists who actively encouraged me to be the innocent victim of their 'bad' parenting.

But now when I look back into my childhood, I see nothing but two rather unhappy adults doing their absolute best to raise their adopted child to become a happy and successful adult. For example, they paid for me to go to a private school because they believed that this was the best way to ensure that I received a really good education. They also paid for loads of extras such as elocution and piano lessons. Not only did they shell out loads of money for me, they also spent a lot of time and energy when I was little feeding me, making sure I cleaned my teeth twice a day and bringing me drinks of water when I could not get to sleep on hot summer evenings.

So much to be incredibly grateful for! Yet for years, I focused only on the unskilled aspects of their selfless parenting. Now that I am a pretty happy, mature, together woman, I look back at my younger self and really regret that it took her so long to become truly grateful to

both her natural parents and her adoptive parents for giving her the precious gift of a life in which she had so many miraculous opportunities to grow, to awake and to heal.

What about you? Have you forgiven your own dear parents yet for all the mistakes they made whilst raising you? Even if your parents were exceptionally bad at parenting, they must have done at least something right for you still to be alive!

Now that I look back on my own childhood with real gratitude in my heart for all the gifts my parents gave me, I am really saddened when the adult children of dear friends of mine still insist on blaming them for all their current emotional angst. I am sad that these young adults are in so much pain, but I am even sadder that they seem to believe that their loving mothers - who spent so many years of their lives devoting virtually every minute of every day to raising them – are to blame for all their current woes. I know that we all make mistakes in life – none of us is anywhere near perfect or perfectly enlightened – but please! Can we not just pause for a moment or two and give our dear parents a break.

Even if our parents did nothing much more than to keep us alive throughout the dangers of babyhood and childhood, we should still be incredibly grateful to them. I suspect that your parents did *far* more for you than that, but I would also hazard a guess that you still remember the occasions when your parents really lost it far more vividly than you recall all those normal days of childhood when your parents were pretty loving and kind towards you.

Please don't misunderstand my message this month. I totally acknowledge the lasting emotional pain inflicted on children who live in abusive families. I know just how hard it can be for a loving, kind person to forgive a parent or primary caregiver who inflicted any kind of physical or sexual abuse on them when they were just a vulnerable little child. But even in extreme cases, our painful past is now well and truly over, unless we somehow choose to keep our past pain going year in and year out by going over our grievances and our past suffering again and again and again.

Some of my greatest spiritual heroes are those who have transcended incredibly painful childhoods to go onto lead exceptionally compassionate and helpful lives. For example, Frank Ostaseski is the founder of the Zen Hospice Project in San Francisco who has worked

miracles caring for the terminally ill over several decades. In his brilliant book *The Five Invitations*, Ostaseski talks about the pain of being raised by two alcoholic parents and then recalls the trauma of being sexually abused as a young teenager by a priest. Yet he is now one of the most compassionate, wise, together individuals one could possibly hope to encounter in life. He has worked through his own inner demons and come to a place of real acceptance, forgiveness and inner peace in relation to his exceptionally painful childhood.

So, as far as I can see, the key to our happiness in the present turns out to be not whether we had a happy childhood, but how we now deal with any unhealed issues from our childhood. If we are determined to let go of any stored emotional pain from our past, we will eventually come to see that our childhood was just right for us –even the really hard parts.

For example, without having had a rather unhappy childhood, I would never have gone into therapy, and if I had not gone into therapy, I would never have met my first meditation teacher, and so I would never have begun a miraculous and unbelievably fulfilling awakening journey that has now lasted over 30 years.

I have now not only forgiven my parents for not being perfect, I am truly grateful to them for playing a key role in my awakening this lifetime. Of course, I did not suddenly go from being angry with my parents to loving and thanking them unconditionally. There were a lot of painful times in between as I released a load of stored fear, anger and heartbreak from my mind and heart. But these painful times turned out to be so worth it.

So please, this month consider taking some time to look gently at any stored grievances you may still have against your parents or any other key figures from your past and ask yourself if maybe it is time to let them go. As Frank Ostaseski wisely suggests in the first of his 'Five Invitations', *Don't Wait! Forgive everyone in your life - including yourself - now because Forgiveness shakes loose the calcification that accumulates around our hearts so that love can flow more freely.* (Ostaseski 2017)

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