

Acceptance

by Patti D. Thomas, LCSW

“To place nothing - nothing - above the verdict of my own mind.”
- Dagny Taggart in Atlas Shrugged by Ayn Rand.

A woman diagnosed with Alzheimer’s told me that more than anything else, she just wanted “acceptance.” “My family either gets mad at me or treats me like a baby. I just want them to accept that this is me. This is who I am now.”

It struck me that this simple statement summed up what most of us want - to be loved and respected for who we are right this minute, not who we used to be or who someone else thinks we should become.

But we can experience intense inner conflict if we have habitually turned over the reins of our lives to others. We might wonder, “How did I lose myself and how can I reclaim who I really am?”

Children have little control over their lives. They are essentially at the mercy of the adults around them: parents, grandparents, teachers, etc. Emotionally stable parents do not feel threatened by their child’s expression of independence. So when their daughter, Lucy, says, “I know you want me to continue piano lessons, but I really want to join the track team,” they are open and interested in her needs. Although they might be surprised or even disappointed in her decision, they are able to separate their needs from hers.

Less stable parents are more likely to personalize such an encounter. They perceive Lucy to be an extension of themselves. Therefore, rejection of their plans for her feels like a rejection of them as parents. It is no wonder, then, that they react with hurt and anger. They pressure her so relentlessly that she gives in and continues the piano lessons.

Despite her initial lack of enthusiasm, Lucy finds she has some talent for music and enjoys the recognition it brings. She makes friends with other kids who also play instruments, and she receives compliments from teachers and other adults. Her parents are proud of her and seldom miss an opportunity to remind her that “we knew what was best for you.”

The lesson Lucy takes from this experience is: “It is easier to please other people than to fight for what you believe. Choosing the ‘path of least resistance’ results in approval from people I care about.” This sets the stage for her to continue subjugating her needs for those of employers, friends, and lovers. Over time, she begins confusing whose needs belong to whom.

As an adult, Lucy accepts a position teaching piano at the local college and does well supplementing her income by performing at parties and weddings. She is viewed as a woman who is accomplished - a success. But Lucy has lost herself. She merely goes through the motions of living while feeling detached and empty. Her only real joy comes during her morning run. When she does her stretches, she begins to come alive. She starts walking, then gradually picks up the pace, and moves into a full run. She realizes she is smiling, even laughing. An hour later, as she cools down on the walk home, she wonders if she can get in another run before her evening class.

Lucy has resigned herself to jumping from one fulfilling experience to another as though they were stepping stones in Life's Pond of Misery. Although her passion clearly lies in running, it has been relegated to a minor place in her life. She is afraid of even considering re-designing her life to into one that honors her needs. Relinquishing her current identity might cost her the approval - the acceptance - of others.

Sadly, Lucy's story is not uncommon. Reclaiming one's identity is not without risk, and many people are unwilling to risk the loss of others' approval. Ask yourself tough questions such as, "If this person doesn't accept me for who I am, why do I want him/her in my life?" and "Am I willing to trade my identity for the approval of others?"

Compromising your integrity to gain acceptance may allow you to temporarily maintain a relationship, but it will never lead to fulfillment. Only through discovering who you really are and embracing that person can you then offer it to others as a gift.