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A Path to Living in What Is

Some imaginative young children (usually boys) take a fancy to thinking that they can fly. They finagle a ladder to the house, claw themselves up, believe that super heroes really do exist and that they are one of them. More than a few have immortalized such childishness in stories told as adults of broken bones or frantic parents intervening just in the nick of time. Of course they cannot fly. Silly children! Such childish wishes slowly get challenged by the realities of life and the wonder will hopefully be replaced by a mature respect for the laws of nature.

Usually this process of aligning our world view with the world is slow and painfully learned. Through, as the Bible says, “sowing and reaping,” we collide over and over again with the mismatch of our behaviors or beliefs to the realities of life. Speed too long and we get a ticket; drink too much and we get a hangover; eat too much and we get a body that’s not healthy. The journey from childish fantasy to a mature and accurate way of seeing life is deeply embedded in the process of growing up. As Paul said, “We are to put away childish things.” (1 Corinthians 13:11)

But illusions die a slow death and often outlive us. We can minimize, deny, distract and outright wail against reality all the days of our lives. “One more piece of cake won’t hurt.” “Why can’t he change?” “It should be okay if I wait to save until later.” We cling to our personal idea of how life is, our expectations, because they are so tightly wrapped around our experiences, needs, sense of rightness, or hope. We live in that silent wish, all the while living a dual-citizenship between the world as I want it to be and the world that is. The gap between what we want and what is can be much more formidable than a simple jump from the roof.

The Laws of Life

Now these laws or principles of nature are not just about our physical world. Gravity is a powerful and unforgiving law. The laws of electricity can be directly experienced by any child putting a paperclip in an electrical outlet. But there are other laws or principles at work in our world as well. For example, we all know that there are consequences to how we treat our bodies: eat too many Big Macs, get heart disease. Social laws: speed, get a ticket. Even relationship principles: treat someone badly and you may lose the relationship. There are laws or principles all around us that govern how life works. In a way these laws are just a description of what is, of how things work. They are the boundaries of how life is. We can be ignorant of them, we can deny them, but we cannot escape them.

Jesus was quite a pragmatist in some ways. He said some startling things. For example, he said, “You will always have the poor among you,” (Matthew 26:11) and “You will hear of wars and rumors of war.” (Matthew 24:6) He was acknowledging the world as it is. In a sense, He was saying that it was a law of reality that these things exist and that there will never be a time (at least here on Earth) when they don’t.

This may seem strange when measured against His coming to make the world a better place. You may say, “Well, good enough. I know that the world is like this, but it shouldn’t be. The world should be better than it is.” And, of course, you are also saying, “My world shouldn’t be this way. I want it different than it is.” That aspiration is at once both a good motivation and a trap. On one hand, aspirations drive commitment and effort to be better. We strive to eat less, drive slower, curb our tongue. These aspirations and hopefully efforts are part of what helps us work on being more mature, more loving, more healthy. So in the best of times they provide a powerful vision and motivation to grow to what I hope can be.

The Traps of Aspirations

But therein lies the trap. Within the striving to be better, to grow, can be powerful traps that we only experience after we have moved from expectation into frustration, control or despair. We wrestle with what we expect and want things or people to be with the way things or people actually are. And if we move from “should” to “must” we can actually rob ourselves of the ability to live with peace and grace in our broken world.

The first trap is in putting these expectations on others. The underlying assumption of a should is that it is a “can.” For example: “I **should** get my taxes done because I **can** get my taxes done.” A “should” makes sense when it is based in a real possibility. We usually don’t blame people for things that they can’t help. You don’t say, “You should have blue eyes” to your spouse if they have brown eyes. You don’t feel hurt because they don’t change their eye color for you. Of course it isn’t a should because they can’t help but have brown eyes. But you do get hurt if your partner or child doesn’t do what you think they should do. That’s because you believe that they can do it. Therefore not doing it is a failure of their willingness to do it.

But there is a fuzziness to where should and can intersect. Should my partner put the dishes in the dishwasher? Every time? Should I not get angry with my kids and yell at them? Never? As you drill deeper into “can” you see that we and others are beset with all sorts of biological, emotional and spiritual challenges—at times, impossibilities—of being anything other than exactly who we are, including our character defects. We are all subject to forces beyond our will. We can’t just will ourselves to be different. Even the Apostle Paul acknowledged that “I do that which I should not do and do not what I should do.” (Rom. 7:15) He was acknowledging that as humans we have deep challenges beyond our ability to control—that we of-

ten can't just choose to be better. That is the whole point of the book of Romans. The Old Testament Law—the “shoulds”—were an exercise in showing us that we couldn't keep the law, to show us that we can't do what we should do.

But when we get angry or hurt by others for being who they imperfectly are, we are actually saying that they should and can be different than who they imperfectly are. We are saying, “You shouldn't do that which you shouldn't do and you should do what you should do.” Exactly the opposite of what Paul says! And when we place that expectation on others we invariably personalize their behavior. It seems almost impossible for us to not think that if they cared more for us or respected us more they would behave differently. We feel personally offended with those close to us because their behavior seems a choice to not respect or love us: “If you really loved me you would . . .”

This is because we unconsciously attach our needs for love, security and respect to those closest around us. When those expectations are not aligned to who that person really is we inevitably get hurt. If I expect my wife to greet me with a hug when I come home I get hurt if she doesn't. If I expect my child to respond to my call with a call instead of a text I get frustrated when they text. When I need my parent to not be critical then I get irritated when they are critical. And deep inside that hurt or irritation is a judgment that they should and can do those things. Those unconscious expectations are the first trap.

The Paradox of Change: Acceptance as the Path to Change

The second trap is contained in the paradox of change. Change, true change, takes intentionality and effort. It takes us not lying to ourselves, taking ownership and making effort to grow. But effort that is grounded in self-will and effort—however heartfelt—will ultimately produce a cycle of shame and frustration. **And that cycle of failure will most often maintain the very problems that we are trying to change.** There is a counter-intuitive truth that real and **deep change only happens when it is grounded in true acceptance.** This is a hard truth to grasp. Jesus said, you have to die to live: “Unless a seed falls into the ground and dies it remains alone.” (John 12:24) Or as the twelve-step program says, “Let go and let God.” What is it that is dying or letting go? I think that it is our self-will, our efforts to fix ourselves or others. It is the acceptance of ourselves as we really are. This acceptance or surrender opens the very core of how we relate to ourselves and those around us. When we start with acceptance we actually change how we relate to our's and other's character defects. We slowly work at surrendering the “shoulds” of ourself and others.

This is because there is difference between what is called first-order change and second-order change. **First-order** change is **symptom change**, it is “tinkering” with the existing system that we live in, including within the beliefs system that we have. It is changing the symptom of the system but doesn't change the system itself. Sometimes that is absolutely fine. I may have been packing the dishwasher in one way only to find out that my wife wants it a different way. She tells me. I do it

differently. Problem fixed. It works because it is within my ability to change and because the underlying system really doesn't need to be changed. If every problem were so easy then life would be so much simpler. Every "should" by my wife would be met with my "can," my ability to meet that need and be what she wants me to be.

It is tempting to think exclusively in **first-order ways** because we assume that problems are generally straightforward with the underlying belief that I and others can make the changes to be healthier, more respectful or more loving. We're tempted to look for single causes to our problems—and generally simpler answers also. As the Nike commercial says, "Just do it." We don't have to think as hard. And thinking is hard! But that lack of thinking lives within an unconscious framework that says, "You are who you are ultimately because you choose it and the only way for you to be better is to choose (to will) yourself to be better." You are responsible because you are able. This leads us directly into expectations of ourselves and others that all change is ultimately a product of our willingness and effort to make the change.

This way of thinking runs headlong into some troubling research. One marital researcher, John Gottman, has found that essentially 69% of the ongoing difficulties in marriages are irresolvable issues—over two thirds! They have found that no matter how much a couple tries to fix the issue by one or both of them changing it doesn't work. The issues keep coming up because they are grounded in their biology, personality, personal history and character struggles. They're never going to solve those problems by solving those problems. Now I'm assuming that if this is true in marriages then it is also true in all of our relationships, including the relationship with ourselves. 69% of the things that bother me about others are essentially irresolvable. And 69% of the issues that irritate me about myself are also irresolvable. How then do we not fall into despair or judgment over these issues? That leads us to a deeper level of change, second-order change.

Second-order change is quite different. It is often called "transformational" because it involves seeing the world in a different way--of challenging assumptions and working from a new and different worldview. This is **heart change**. We usually don't get to this level except when all our efforts to change have not worked. In fact, many times those efforts have just been a continual cycle of frustration, shame and guilt. I **try** to stop smoking (a symptom change) but seem to keep falling back into my old habits. I **keep telling my partner that I need** more affection and they fail to change permanently. Between dieting merry-go-rounds, New Year resolutions, repetitious arguments, and chronic hurt we collide again and again with the on-going problems in our lives. This results in judgment, shame and despair. And that robs us of enjoying the life that we have.

If I can step back from the judgment about my smoking or my partner then I can start to analyze my assumptions and values. Maybe I don't have as much willpower as I thought I did about my smoking. Maybe there are other reasons my partner does what he or she does. And if that is so then what else do I or they not

have power over? The minute you ask these questions you are beginning to enter into heart change. You're challenging old assumptions.

Jesus was all about heart change. He upended the assumptions and belief systems of his time. He came to serve, not to be served. He said the first shall be last and the last shall be first. He said that you had to die to live. He skewered the Pharisees precisely because all they focused on was appearances, on symptom change (Matt. 23:25). They looked outward with increasing exactitude on every nuanced flaw and symptom. Instead Jesus said to look inside: "the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 12:21).

This is what Jesus was talking about in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, "Look at the log in your own eye." (Matthew 7:5) He was saying that if you focus on the external—someone else's behavior or even your own behavior—you are only seeing the surface. And he was teaching that anything short of a heart change will not work. You have to look deeper, be less concerned about the external and try to live, as some have said, "from the inside out." This heart change comes way before the symptom change.

This movement of stepping back to reevaluate our assumptions is very hard. We are attached emotionally to those old expectations. You feel the hurt on a visceral level, on a gut level. And, as has been said, you can be so in your gut that you are out of your head! It is so disorienting to think of letting go as the way to deeper change, of acceptance as the path to peace and love. Aren't we taught all our lives to take responsibility for ourselves? We instinctively cringe at people who say, "The devil made me do it," or "My parents are responsible for my defects." It seems either so immature or irresponsible. But perhaps there is a way of holding both absolute acceptance and absolute responsibility together.

Acceptance and Ownership without Shame

So what is this heart change anyway? What does it look like to live life with acceptance but not resignation and ownership without self-defeating shame? If it is so counter-intuitive then we should expect to contend with a lot of emotional headwind as we try to operate from a different viewpoint. It should not feel comfortable or easy—it may be one of the hardest things we've ever done. A big reason for this is that we are so programmed to believe we have control and that responsibility and control are synonymous. We use all sorts of unconscious strategies from criticism, avoidance, denial, blame or shame to maintain the illusion that it is up to us to change.

Expecting What Is

While there is not a simple or linear path to this deeper change, let's outline a picture of it. The first element is in seeing life not as we wish it was but as it really is. This is the step of *expecting* the world to be the world. As the familiar colloquialism

says, “It is what it is.” Now this may seem really trivial and superficial but actually it is a deep truth. When Jesus said, “In this world you will have troubles” (John 16:33), He was saying that **it is what it is**. So we shouldn’t be surprised when we have disappointments and struggles with ourselves or with others. We should **expect** to struggle with our character defects and emotional battles. We should **expect** to be let down by our spouse at times. We should **expect** that we will have trials (1 Peter 4:12). Peter may have been addressing persecution of Christians in that passage but it is an easy extension to make that today our trials are of the more mundane type: my painful character defects and my frustrating people. Basically the Bible is very realistic about the fact that life is a rich tapestry of beauty and pain. Both are equally part of this gift of life.

This means that you shouldn’t be surprised when you struggle with your diet,-your temper or your driving too fast. And you shouldn’t be surprised when your spouse struggles with their diet or temper or fast driving. Usually we judge ourselves or others when these struggles happen. But going from judgment and shame to compassion toward yourself and for others is a profound shift in how we face the realities of life. **We should struggle because we do struggle**—that is what it means to be human! So this shift in expectations is the beginning of living gracefully in the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. Most of the “shoulds” that we impose on ourself or others are ideals or needs that we demand or hope for in our life. We often think of them as universal truths or moral absolutes but really they are expectations that life be something that it is not. We expect what isn’t and so are already on the wrong path. That road—of imposing an impossible expectation on life—cannot get us to where we want to go in having the fruit of the spirit in our life. **The spiritual life with the fruit of love, joy, and peace is necessarily grounded first in living in life as it is.**

Accepting What Is

But just expecting what is is not enough. The next challenge is to **accept life as it is**. I can expect what is but end up in resignation or resentment. I can wail against the fact of how life—my life—is. If we stop at this point then we have a cynical and often helpless way of viewing life. There is no true engagement in our life. It is either a painful trial to endure, a meaningless exercise to try to distract myself from (so, eat, drink and be merry), or just an interlude until I can get to the real show, heaven. The second verse of the Serenity Prayer says it well,

Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace.
Taking, as He did, **this sinful world as it is**,
Not as I would have it.

In accepting life as it is I make a further shift toward a positive embracing of life. **Acceptance—radical acceptance—is a deeply spiritual movement because at its heart is the letting go of the illusion of control.** It's living in the real world, not the world of my imagination or childish hopes. That's part of the dying to live that Jesus is talking about. There is something greater than us, greater than our ability to control. Accepting is not resignation or helplessness in the face of what is. **It is an acknowledgement of the reality that the world is the world and that we have much less control over it than we think.** Even our own emotional and spiritual life at its core is more about acceptance than about self-will and control. I accept that I and my partner and my kids and every other human on this planet think, feel and do—in short, live life—in a complex web of factors beyond our immediate control or will. And it should be that way!

The paradox is that both symptom change and heart change are more deeply impacted by acceptance—by letting go—than by another resolution to do better. At its core acceptance is almost always the more profound need. Much more important than my drinking too much is the realization that I have no control over my drinking. It can not be stated any better than the Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book:

“And acceptance is the answer to *all* my problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing, or situation—some fact of my life —unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, thing, or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment. Nothing, absolutely nothing, happens in God's world by mistake. Until I could accept my alcoholism, I could not stay sober; unless I accept life completely on life's terms, I cannot be happy. I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on what needs to be changed in me and in my attitudes.” (The Big Book, page 428)

Accepting the way things really are moves me to a healthier emotional position. Instead of just trying really hard (or just giving up when that fails again and again) I take a deeper look at the fact that I have unique gifts and struggles with deep influences. I start the journey of growth from the position of acceptance instead of judgment. And hopefully I give that grace to those around me. Or as Carl Jung said, **“We cannot change anything unless we accept it.”** This truth seems so self-evident when we first “hit bottom.” Paul says, “While we were yet sinners . . .” in Romans 5:8 to share a deep truth that it is exactly in the recognition of our helplessness that we encounter a new way to navigate life. When we hit bottom we surrender our illusion of self-will and we accept that we have less control than we thought. And that recognition can help us see that others also have less control and that their behaviors are often not a result of just simple choices. We can judge ourselves less and personalize other's struggles less. That acceptance is a state of grace.

This acceptance can free us from cycles of resolutions that end in frustration and judgment. We give others and ourselves the gift of being who we all are without judgment or shame. The shame has been released on the cross of grace and ac-

ceptance. We can breathe, expect, and accept that some things will never change and that is okay—that is life. As paradoxical as it may seem, this acceptance moves me toward a deeper peace in the midst of my struggles. I can have peace with my spouse (or kids or parents) even if they don't change in the ways I would wish. I expect them to be who they are and I work at accepting them for who they are.

Embracing What Is

Now, if we stopped here we would have a great gift, but not the full gift. There is still more. In Romans 8:37 Paul writes, "We are more than conquerors." What is this conquering? It can't be that we conquer every character defect, every struggle, or every emotional vulnerability. We don't become overcomers in that our bodies are healthy, our spouses always loving, our kids wonderfully obedient. No, we are able to overcome because we can thrive even when the challenges are still there. Somehow we can still have an abundant life in a life that comes mixed with ongoing and often irresolvable challenges. I can be an overcomer while still dealing with my character defects or with others around who are hurtful or frustrating.

This takes us to our third spiritual movement. Beyond expecting what is and accepting what is comes the ultimate transformational change, ***embracing what is***. Now we take all that is—easy and hard, satisfying and painful—and find a way to live it with gratitude and joy. "Count it all joy when you encounter . . ." John tells the early Christians (1 John 1:2). "Rejoice in your suffering . . ." Paul echoes in Romans 5:4. To find joy in it all is to embrace it all. I don't always like it. It can even be very distressing at times as I wrestle with all the messiness of my struggles. **But by embracing what is I begin to see all of my life as my path towards maturity and growth.**

What Is is What I Need

This means that I slowly come to see ***what is as what I need***. Paul said that, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every circumstance, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." (Phil. 4:12) This joy and this contentment is the product of embracing what is. **When I only need what I have then I am content.** When I need something in my world to be different than it is then I am discontent and that need controls me. Now, this can be an extremely difficult concept to get our heart around. To see my life as *exactly what I need it to be* can run so contrary to what my feelings tell me.

Let's take a simple example. You get a ticket for speeding. You can choose to 1. beat yourself up for speeding and getting a ticket, 2. get angry at the cop who gave you the ticket, or 3. blame your spouse (because they were not ready on time) for making you drive too fast. In short, you can resent what is. Or you can embrace what is. You can honestly say to yourself, "I needed to get a ticket! If I didn't need to get a ticket I wouldn't have driven too fast. Evidently I needed to get a ticket to

learn to not drive too fast.” So if I already had the lesson I wouldn’t have the ticket. You wouldn’t have driven too fast! That ownership is profoundly mature—and profoundly difficult.

Let’s take a harder scenario. You have an alcoholic spouse. You’ve wished he would change. You’ve prayed for him, harassed him, tried to punish him, and tried to control him. Even so, he still drinks. Of course, this is extremely distressing. It can consume you with anxiety, frustration and bitterness. Despite your best efforts he continues to drink and you continue to get hurt about his drinking. It’s an endless cycle and your heart is trapped in the dysfunctional dance with him.

But to be honest with yourself you shouldn’t be surprised that he drinks. He’s an alcoholic; alcoholics drink. And they lie and break promises and are self-destructive. If you could step back from it you could see that your expectations of what is don’t line up to what truly is. And you can see how hard it is for you to accept that this is the reality of who he is. All your efforts to fix him have collided with the reality of alcoholism. Worse yet, because of your distress you have become part of the problem. Your heart is consumed with his behavior and your not-so-silent judgments and hurt hijack you. This dance—his hurtful behavior and your hurt—can go on endlessly.

But what if we try to apply this heart change first? First I would need **to expect** what is: he is going to drink, and lie and break promises. That’s hard because I may not like that reality. But I work at being honest with myself that this is reality. Next I work at the daily process of not being in denial. I try **to accept** that this is my reality. That’s very hard also because part of me doesn’t want this to be my life. I want another life. But as long as I live in that wish I’m handcuffed to my hurt. So I try to look honestly at what is and accept it as a fact of my life.

Then I make the most difficult movement of all—to embrace this situation. “Within this difficulty is something for me to learn—I need this for me to be able to learn and grow. I need to learn this because of the fact that this controls my heart and mind.” **So I embrace this as the path for me to learn.** You may see that if you were healthier you would have made better choices for a spouse. The dysfunction actually reveals things about you also. **And that openness to learn changes the meaning of the suffering.** Every pain will have its own tasks and its own opportunity. Perhaps you’re learning relinquishment, self-control, unconditional love, boundaries, self-care, etc. These could be some of the tasks of the situation. And because every situation is a microcosm of your life these are the tasks of your life. Embracing what is changes the focus of my heart and helps me now transform myself first.

This is heart change and it will invariably lead you to change in the here and now, external change. You will change inside and that will effect a change on the outside. I’ve seen that sometimes those external changes happen organically because of your inner change. Often a person chooses to go to Al-Anon because they are despairing about their partner only to find that first they need to work on them-

selves. That shift in focus changes the dynamic with their partner. When I'm able to "Let Go and Let God" (accept the first step that I have no control) sometimes it loosens the bonds of our mutual dysfunction and allows the partner to face himself for the first time.

Living Within The Boundaries of My Life

Embracing what is allows me to live within the limitations of my life. I doubt that you say, "I resent gravity because it doesn't let me jump off the roof and not get hurt." You don't say, "I feel so ashamed of myself because I can't fly like Superman." You don't even think about making a personal or moral judgment to the fact of gravity in your life. Gravity is a limitation in your life and you just live within that boundary. It is something that exists regardless of what you think about it. Hopefully you can come to say, "Now that I think about it, gravity is something that I need in my life."

But you will say to yourself, "I resent that I'm too . . . or that my spouse isn't . . . or that my kids do . . ." You will judge, harass, be anxious over, get plastic surgery for, shame yourself over, be depressed about, and downright make yourself miserable for all sorts of other things that you don't have control over. These are the results of not realizing that just like gravity you have a lot of other things beyond your control. You can think of those things as being a type of boundary of your life. For example, your kids' choices are going to exist regardless of how you try to control them—that's a boundary. Your character defects will often be challenges regardless of how much you try to change them (how many diets have you been on?)—that's a boundary. Most of the ongoing challenges in your relationships will be irresolvable—you won't be able to change them—these are boundaries. And on and on it goes! Reality will not change to conform to our expectations. Me against reality? Reality will always win!

Well you may say, "That is fine being content with some things, but how can I be content with my alcoholic daughter or my anxiety or depression?" Aren't we supposed to have a divine discontent with sin and evil? "Should I really find joy in my depression when the Lord wants me to have joy?" Yes . . . and No. Herein we find ourselves back at the paradox. It isn't that I don't want to grow, that I want my daughter to destroy her life, that I want to be depressed. But the truth is that despite my good attempts my daughter will struggle with drinking. The more that I try to control her I am back in a position of judgment towards her and am part of the problem. And actually her problem now becomes my problem. **When I am so in my problem of trying to control her problem I can't help her!** And this is true even of myself. Whenever I begin my attempt to change myself from a position of judgment it ultimately won't work. When I believe that my life can only be good if I am not depressed or anxious I actually become more depressed or anxious, with a dose of shame on top of it. I may get conformity out of fear (as are many sober alcoholics or suffering dieters) but it isn't really heart change.

Acceptance is Ownership: The Tasks Within What Is

Now let's get a heart-read on this. Don't you hear your heart and mind push back on this with confusion and questions? Can't you hear, "Doesn't this just become an excuse? Isn't this just a convenient excuse to not change, to accept sin, to excuse hurtful behavior and reduce motivation to change?" Deep inside we rebel at the idea that anything would change if we accept and embrace it, especially because we're distressed by what is. It all seems so lawless and irresponsible. We are wired to believe that without some form of judgment nothing will change. We really do not trust that unconditional acceptance is the path toward not only heart change but also symptom change. We don't trust that accepting my alcoholism (or anger issues, or insecurities, or frustrating spouse . . .) will actually be the only true way of dealing with those problems. **We instinctively believe that if I accept then nothing will change—and that is unacceptable!**

So again we face the paradox of change. As I align myself with the realities of my life and embrace them I can then re-engage my life from a different platform. The old starting point was judgment, expectation and often shame. I shamed myself and others for being who we really are. I beat myself and others up because I continually find myself and others tripping up. Now, instead of judgment, disappointment or resentment, I can slowly be open to what my tasks are within my life. Acceptance leads me to healthy ownership of my "thorns in the flesh." **I accept the reality of my brokenness, and the brokenness of everyone around me. It is not passive resignation or victimization; it is active engagement with full respect of my forever journey.** This means that I respect my character defects, my struggles (that I also do that which I should not do) and my vulnerabilities so that I slowly figure out how to take care of myself. This curious compassion and loving-kindness is the true starting place of change.

How does this really work? Let's say you have struggled with your anxiety your entire life. You do not have "the peace which surpasses all understanding." (Philippians 4:7) This, of course, is very distressing and painful. You have prayed about it, listened to sermons, read books, and talked to counselors. Despite all your best efforts you continue to have anxiety and this causes you to not only feel guilty but also more anxious. Your anxiety causes you anxiety. **You're trapped in both anxiety and discouragement because you are not what you think you should be.** This endless cycle of effort, failure and guilt preoccupies you and robs you of any joy. It can drive you into isolation as you try to hide what feels like an unacceptable character defect.

What if we changed the framework? Instead of **trying** to not be anxious what if you were able to say, "I am an anxious person, this is my nature and my struggle. Because of who I am I should be anxious. I will try to accept that I am anxious." No more judgment. No more expectation that you are going to get rid of this challenge. Because I am not in denial about who I am **I can now find compassionate ways**

to take care of myself. I can share my struggle because it really is okay to be me. And that sharing helps me be connected with other struggling people. I'm not so alone. And perhaps I can even find some humor in being me, of being able to be anxious but maybe also becoming more than just my anxiety. I will figure out ways to respect my anxiety so that I do what I can to take care of myself. Maybe I'm careful about taking on too much, how much news I watch, make sure I get sleep, etc.—all because I know that if I don't take care of myself I will predictably fall into more anxiety. This acceptance will actually help you be less anxious or shameful about your anxiety.

Perhaps you also try to change your expectation of others. Perhaps your spouse is not as affectionate, or prompt, or frugal as you'd like. Your old self would judge them against the expectation that they "shouldn't be that way." By embracing what is you may say, "They **should** be this way **because they are this way.**" They are this way for very deep and complicated reasons (that maybe I don't fully understand), but they are who they are. As you embrace them for who they are you move from judgment to compassionate curiosity and to an exploration of what your task is in this situation. Perhaps you need to learn to be more flexible or less critical. Perhaps you to learn to take care of yourself rather than focus on them. Perhaps it is to love them even when they don't quite fit you! You turn the focus away from changing them to seeing those very struggles as revealing what you have to work on.

Lastly, let's take a harder situation. Your spouse is physically or emotionally abusing your children. There is a real danger to them as well as to yourself. How can I accept and love this? Well, your old self may have tried to get him or her to stop being angry or abusive. You tried all sorts of ways to get them to not be hurtful. But what if you started from a position of acceptance? Then you'd be saying, "He (or she) is angry and hurtful. He does not know how to control himself." You now know that it isn't your job (or even possible) for you to change him. Instead, you focus on your task in this situation. It may be that you need to face your fears and work on setting boundaries. You may need to separate yourself and your kids from the situation or find other ways to enforce self-respect and safety. So you don't try to change him; instead you work at figuring out what **you** need to do for yourself.

It can be very difficult to see what those tasks may be. They will be very personal to each person as we are all different and live in different circumstances. So embracing what is is not passive; it is each of us taking an active position of dealing with ourselves. Probably because of our personal biology and history we will have our own unique tasks that we will revisit over and over again until we die. Personally, I have found that I seem to continually come back to many familiar tasks. For me it is learning to let go, to trust, to relinquish self-will and false ego, to love freely, to give generously, to fear less. If you look honestly at yourself you will see that you will have your own collection of familiar tasks. When Paul talks about "working out your salvation" (Philippians 2:12) he assumes humility and acceptance that this is a

lifelong process. As we embrace it all we may find joy in the journey of being human.

There is an additional paradox within embracing what is. Embracing what is is not a secret strategy to change what is. That isn't real acceptance. True transformation is only accomplished through true acceptance. This acceptance is not a covert manipulation of others or ourselves. It is a true embracing of life as it is so that I can find a spiritual position from which to "be in the world but not of the world." (John 15:19). That is the profoundly spiritual place where we can be fully engaged in our world (fully human) while not being defined by what is. This is an interior place from within that is stable despite our exterior world.

But make no mistake about it. You have to pay a great price for this new position. Parts of you have to die. You have to offer up your expectations, your need for control, your assumptions that you know what is right, and your illusions. You even have to give up your self-judgments! You have to daily take up your cross of relinquishment and acceptance. And that can be a heavy cross to bear. It strikes us at the core of our fears of not getting what we need. And that very fear is often at the heart of our struggles. But in exchange you get the gifts of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. Against such gifts there is no law (Galatians 5:23)—only grace.

Acknowledgement: I want to acknowledge that the core paradigm of expecting, accepting and embracing what is comes from Byron Katie and her excellent book, ***Loving What Is***.

Some afterthoughts: What about my past?

This concept can be helpful in dealing with your past. So many of us hear the "would've, could've, should've" voice of regret and remorse. Bad choices, guilt and often shame can overwhelm us as we replay the movie of our life through the lens of our judgment and disappointment. Judging our life against what we think we should have done, what the "right" thing to do, we are trapped in memory that cannot be changed. We cannot go back and live over those choices.

What if we applied this process to our past. First we would say, "I should have done exactly what I did because I did it. I made unhealthy decisions because I was unhealthy. I did immature things because I was immature." It's really quite logical that unhealthy and immature people do unhealthy and immature things. And I (along with everyone else) was one of those people. There is nothing that any of us have ever done that is not our version of being human.

This new lens of expectation and acceptance is not a cheap grace, an excusing myself. It is not saying what I did was mortally right. In fact, one of the steps of healing is for me to make inventory and take ownership of my choices. Grieving that past with honesty and, if needed, amends to others can be a powerful way of moving toward forgiveness of ourselves. That ownership can be painful but it is quite different than shaming ourselves for our past. True reconciliation with our-

selves, and freedom from the shame of the past, won't come primarily through judgment.

So we can own the brokenness, the dysfunction and the immaturity of our past. But it is doing that through acceptance—compassionate acceptance. And if we can embrace it we see our past as a powerful teacher for us to see what we get to work on, the tasks of our life. We embrace our journey as one of our teachers. Looking back now is not an exercise of self-shame but of learning to benefit our future. That is highly self-responsible as we respect our unhealthy self and live again in the forever process of growing up.

Another thought. In moral philosophy there is a common warning against what is called the Is-Ought mistake. The mistake arises when a person makes a conclusion of what should be (oughts, prescriptions) based solely on what is (descriptive). So we can't say that a description of what is gives us a description of what is right or wrong or worthy for us to guide our choices. We can't say that because people rob and steal then it is right for people to rob and steal. If we were to teach a class on ethics we wouldn't prescribe all the crazy things people do as the morally right way to act. Nor can we conclude from our past that it is right to repeat the dysfunction in our future. The past is not a prescription for our future. We don't say that it is right for me to keep drinking because I have drank in the past.

This article is not making a prescriptive argument for moral judgments. It is not in the aims of this article to use the lens of moral norms to judge our past. Instead I am making the argument that such a lens actually can be counter-productive. It most often does not help a person who is in shame about their past to tell them, "You should not have done that. That was wrong." And it actually most often does not help a person to say, "This is how you should be now and in the future," especially if that expectation is grounded in some ideal moral system. I think this is in some degree why Jesus was so upset at the Pharisees when he said that "They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders." (Matthew 23:4) The religious leaders were crushing people with their religious (moral and abstract) expectations. They actually were going from prescriptions (laws) to description (expectations). And as we have said this is an exercise in futility because it was the whole purpose of the law to show us that we couldn't do the law.

It is beyond the scope of this paper or my ability to present a comprehensive moral philosophy position. Nor do I think that it would be terribly helpful for most people. I'll leave that up to others more inclined and able. But hopefully it is enough to acknowledge that such a tension can exist. And I believe the any moral prescriptions that uses "should" abstracted from the graceful acknowledgement of human frailty is ultimately destructive. Rather than a helpful compass such moralizing becomes a labyrinth that we'll never escape.

So I have hijacked the word "should" from the moral lexicon and transported it as a descriptor of "what is" and a path to a better "what can be." Hopefully it is full of grace, ownership, caution, and direction. It can cast a light on a fairer and healthier world that we are seeking for ourselves and those we love. Even while we live in

the full fulness of our humanness we also lovingly (and hopefully with some joy) embrace all as the true path to living at peace and love with ourself and others.