

REJECTION

Sermon by Peggy Sperber Flanders

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When You Wish

by Terry J. England

Child, don't you ever
wish darkness on anyone.
It knocks them down,
crawls into their mouth, sits
on the back of their tongue
then eats them alive.
They can brush and brush,
only to feel tasteless and gray.
They become married to darkness.
"Till death do us part,
bend down to the pain".
Days weep together,
it beds them with fear.
Their fingers will claw,
scratch scabs for protection.
It rips the meat from their bones;
beats them bites them from the inside out,
blinds them with voices
and they don't even know why.
They carry this around, sinking
into themselves.
Child, don't you ever
wish darkness on anyone.
It will be savage
and eat them like air.

When I picked the topic of rejection to talk to you about, it came from my experience of having to send hundreds of rejection letters to writers aspiring to publish their poems in our magazine, The Comstock Review. That definitely put the subject at a distance. After all, it wasn't me or my family who were getting rejected. It may have been the very heart and soul of someone else, but that's always easier to handle – at a distance!

Rejection slips, television news stories of hatred and war, families who have their lives ripped apart in the paper. They are always..... at a distance.

But REJECTION is not an abstract image, even if one of the poets we accepted told us she was dealing with her feelings by using rejection slips to paper her writing alcove!

Rejection is the gut wrenching fire of immediacy, ... it is the ache that never completely heals, ... it is the tears at the back of your suddenly-strained smile..... it is the pain that turns your head and sits on your shoulder when an old sad song is played. It is immediate

no matter how long ago it occurred.

Not that I mean to make you feel uncomfortable, but think for a minute.

- Who rejects you? Now -- in your present life? When you were younger?
- When did you feel the most rejected?
- Think about watching someone you love being rejected.
- How do you respond to the instances of rejection you see around you?
- Maybe just as important – how do you define: personal rejection? professional rejection? rejection as a member of a minority group? rejection for just being different than the group in which you find yourself?
- Does it change the picture for you when the person who rejects you or your ideas is: a colleague at work,.....a boss,a friend,a partner,.....a father,.....or.....a mother???
- What about the situation where you are indifferent, or even opposed, to the other person's point of view on most other things?

Is the experience of rejection different for you when this “other” is rejecting your surface manifestationsor the substance of who you think you are?”

I had grown used to my mother's rejections of me by the time I was in my twenties. I no longer responded to her saying “ people don't think like that”, when I had just expressed an idea of my own. I was even getting practiced at translating what I expect were supposed to be compliments, like her saying, “that's a nice dress BUT why can't you do something with your hair?”

The sad part is that I had also taken on the identities implied in her rejections: I was a rebel who felt like an alien. When I used to complain, I CAN'T do that!” she would either respond “I can't never did do anything.” or “Any idiot can do it, so can you.

As you can imagine, the person who says “I can’t” and whose self-message is continuously reinforced, never will be able to do anything easily, especially the thing complained about. And the remark “any idiot can do it...” Well, how would you

translate that as a child? Definition: I am an idiot? or Definition: If any idiot can do it -- and I can’t ----- what does that make me?

Sometimes rejection is more subtle. The person is rejecting himself, or the world, and putting it off onto you. One of the saddest things I can think of is the way we reject the ones we love when disease interferes with our perceptions. I’ve seen that in recent years with my own family. To visit and watch someone you love suffering -- and at the same time be rejected by them because they are suffering -- is one of the ultimate forms of rejection.

When this happens with a mother or father, I believe it is one of the most difficult to cope with.. No one ever told us that commandment of “honor thy father and thy mother” was going to be easy! Even if we don’t believe the literal interpretation, I know we all carry versions of it around in our heads --- or is it in our guts??!!! It is something I bet everyone in this congregation knows on a visceral level – far beneath all those intellectualizations and rationalizations that keep UU’s going in this world.

On the other hand, is it worse to be rejected when there is no apparent reason, other than our own, so-called, “unworthiness?”

There are so many kinds of rejection in the world, that I can’t begin to deal with them all. I’ve chosen to keep to the personal. I will leave it to those with more skill than I have to deal with global rejections – the ones that cause wars and the ones that recently lead to this congregations’ meetings on “isms” : – racism, classism, sexism, able-ism, and age-ism.

The perception of rejection can be almost as powerful as rejection itself. As an example, Dr. Susan Forward, in her book Toxic Parents, says: “Godlike parents make rules, make judgments,and make pain. When you deify your parents, living or dead, you are agreeing to live by their version of reality. You are accepting painful feelings as a part of your life, perhaps even rationalizing them as being good for you.”

To quote one of the members of our congregation: “Yes! Rejection is powerful! The power of ‘presumed’ rejection from those that matter most is what leads us to very personal self-rejection. Hence, the reason ‘the closet’ exists for gay people. Self - rejection becomes easier than facing the rejection of those we love.” This person continues: “Certainly, closets exist for other facets of our personalities besides sexuality, for similar reasons.”

Witness all the cases of anxiety, depression and panic disorder treated by therapists. Many people inhabiting our jails, streets, and drug treatment centers have taken on negative identities. While some of these also have biochemical illnesses, others are

limited by their own self-definitions. The biggest rejection of all is to reject your own self. This can happen in many ways.

A “rebel” is a definition. Dr. Forward says: “If we rebel in reaction to our parents,” (or, I would add, to other authority figures), “we are being controlled just as surely as if we submit... One of her patients “rejected whatever his suffocating, controlling mother wanted for him, including things he might otherwise desire.

By doing this, he created for himself an illusion that he was ‘his own man,’ but in reality his need to rebel overpowered his free will.”

She calls this “self-defeating rebellion” and believes it to be “the flip side of capitulation. Healthy rebellion is an active exercise of free choice. It enhances personal growth and individuality. Self-defeating rebellion is a reaction against a controlling person,” eliminating, rather than enhancing, free will.

Go back to your answers to my earlier questions. Can you identify self-defeating definitions you couldn’t label before? Think about the mythical teachings: to learn the secret name of something is to learn how to control it.

Solutions are as individual as the rejections that necessitate them. Eleanor Roosevelt said: “You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in

which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, “I have lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along. You must do the thing you cannot do.”

Plenty of people know how to “consider the source” Changing approaches gives you a wider world. It takes a conscious effort of choice to ignore a bad tone of voice in an otherwise good person, and then let it go and not twist it into your mind. It takes an even bigger effort to actively choose to clarify a sharp retort, or a seemingly rude remark, whoever it comes from – even, perhaps, from a member of the congregation!

Sometimes we need to affirm our choices in life and find a way to carry on even while being rejected – or just while in the process of being frozen with anxiety or fear. In his book, Peter McWilliams stated: “An affirmation is a statement of truth you make firm by repetition.”

Two of our UU affirmations are “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” (even ourselves) and “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth.” Acceptance of another, to me, also includes acceptance of self.

Not being a UU at the time, I chose to memorize a quote from Frank Herbert, the science fiction author who wrote Dune. I used to say it over and over again, like a mantra, when stymied by the fear of potential rejection: Perhaps some version of it would be helpful to you:

“Fear is the mind killer. Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration.

I will face my fear.

I will permit it to pass over me and through me.

And when it has gone past me, I will turn to see fear’s path.

Where the fear has gone, there will be nothing.

Only I will remain.”

It took years to implement the next personal solution . I used to feel INFERIOR on a superior/inferior continuum. (Ý [up] ß [down]) I viewed almost everyone else as “above” me. Most of my world was built on a vertical axis and I chose to consign myself to the bottom third - at least! Talk about letting the world weigh me down!!

Of course, I had no conception my negative view was a choice.

My ex-husband gave me the best present ever when he suggested that I could I look at the world in a different view. I could picture myself as DIFFERENT THAN, (Û) the picture in my head could be horizontal, the playing field could be level -- for the first time in my life.

Still not realizing that anxiety must be approached and lived with, if only for a minute at a time, it took years longer to change the picture and accept myself. When I was about half-way there , I told my husband I hadn’t been able to turn the picture on its side –YET! (“Yet.” Now there’s a deceptively simple word a friend taught me – if you add the word “yet” to what you think you can’t do, it changes the picture. The time frame changes from, “I can’t do it in this lifetime” to “ I can’ do it --- yet!”)

I still viewed myself as yards to the left of center. But it was easier on my psyche to imagine being graded on a vast universal curve, than it was to envision myself always at the bottom of every heap of any thing I ever attempted.

(The use of “ever” and “always” here is intentional. If you find yourself using these limiting words about your attributes, potentials, or personality, your universe isn’t as wide as I believe your Creators --or Great Spirit – or God of Many Names -- intended for it to be.) I would say now to always stretch your psychic muscles – don’t assume anything as limiting your life.

If you make a considered, thoughtful decision that you can’t do it, because you are not prepared to invest the time it would take, -- or the blood, sweat and tears! – say with confidence “My resources are otherwise engaged.” .- and then engage them in the growth of your choice!

I now wonder if the opposite of rejection isn't POWER? Rejection makes us feel powerless. We empower ourselves. We come to decide who rejects what in our lives. When we have power, we can allow ourselves to look at the action, dress, personality trait, etc. that was rejected.

Look it full in the face! (Did any of you cringe at that view? I used to –all the time.)

We decide what is YES and what is NO – whether joining the rejection is for own growth (as it sometimes is) or for our diminishment. Our minister, David Blanchard, stated in his book A Temporary State of Grace, “If the truth hurts, we must acknowledge that it can also heal. It makes us more authentic when we find the courage to trust that there is at our core a sense of worth that other people don't get to take away from us because they don't like us, or approve of us, or just don't care about us.”

- Should we change and be a little uncomfortable so the person we live with, or love, will be a lot more comfortable?

- How far do we deny our true selves to keep our jobs, our images? - or even our parents' love?

- Should we hide those rejected pieces of ourselves? Is a closet for whatever reason, a permanent living situation, or is it for safety -- to build up our power and confidence for the next, bolder step into the challenging.... and sometimes terrible world of rejection?

Remember the example in Toxic Parents: reaction to control is not the same thing as gaining your own control. Healthy growth is active and based on choice. Remember the quote in our prayer book that what we worship we are becoming? Well,who or what we reject, we are also becoming.

Choose wisely. But do not leave the choice in the hands of others, if you would seek peace of mind.