

Theme for October - Impermanence:
The Practice of Acceptance

Nothing endures but change. - Heraclitus

As Heraclitus asserts, we can always count on change - whether we like it or not! It is in our nature and that of our world for all things to change, to pass on, die off, making way for new life, new opportunities.

We know all too well that life is indeed impermanent. Relationships end; our pets pass on; jobs terminate; the seasons pass by; our loved ones die. Knowing this does not always ease the pain. Also, it does not always remind us that there may be new opportunities abounding. Why are we continually so resistant to changes? Why is it so hard to accept?

There is a Buddhist approach to finding more space in which to hold and accept change. Imagine that there is a vessel that holds all of life and it can expand through practicing meditation. To get a mental picture of this, think of squeezing a lemon into a glass of water - the result is a very sour, lemony glass of water. Then think of squeezing that same lemon into a large bowl of water - tasting it will remind you of the lemon and it will be a much less sour experience. Now squeeze the lemon into a body of water, say Farm Pond. What happens? There is no sour taste, no lemon fragrance. Through meditation, over time, the experience of life expands and change is easier to accept given the larger vessel in which it occurs.

The month of October gives us plenty of opportunity to experience and accept impermanence and change. It's the time of year where the temperature at dawn can easily double by mid-afternoon; the days naturally shorten. We invite you to reflect on this month's theme through the following questions, reflections, and readings.

Questions for discussion and discernment on your own, around the table, or with each other:

1. Why do we have so much difficulty with impermanence?
2. How can attachment to what we want, or how we think things should be, foster non-acceptance?
3. How do we practice acceptance when other people trigger us?
4. What does it mean to truly accept the present moment as it is?
5. What are some of the things that are impermanent or fleeting in your life? How can you honor these things while you have them?
6. How does genuine acceptance enable us to move on to what's next?
7. Do we ever develop a true acceptance of the inevitability of death? How?

8. Is death impermanent? How or how not?
9. What does nature teach us about impermanence? How can we use this awareness?
10. What factors or life situations may enhance the development of acceptance? What factors get in the way?
11. How does self-acceptance help with the acceptance other people as they are?
12. Describe how acceptance might open doors.
13. Can practicing acceptance lead to greater levels of peace and happiness? How?
14. What does true acceptance look like in a person? In a society?
15. What are some of the things we cannot, or simply should not accept?
16. What attitudes and behaviors help you to experience a greater level of acceptance in your day-to-day life?

Quotes:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference. - Reinhold Niebuhr

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay. - Robert Frost

No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man. - Heraclitus

It is said an Eastern monarch once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence to be ever in view, and which should be true and appropriate in all times and situations. They presented him the words, And this too, shall pass away. How much it expresses! How chastening in the hour of pride! How consoling in the depths of affliction! - Abraham Lincoln

Fall Song - Mary Oliver

Another year gone, leaving everywhere
its rich spiced residues: vines, leaves,

the uneaten fruits crumbling damply
in the shadows, unmattering back

from the particular island
of this summer, this NOW, that now is
nowhere

except underfoot, moldering
in that black subterranean castle

of unobservable mysteries - roots and
sealed seeds
and the wanderings of water. This

I try to remember when time's measure
painfully chafes, for instance when au-
tumn

flares out at the last, boisterous and like
us longing
to stay - how everything lives, shifting

from one bright vision to another, forever
in these momentary pastures.

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...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. - From Alcoholics Anonymous

When you open yourself to the continually changing, impermanent, dynamic nature of your own being and of reality, you increase your capacity to love and care about other people and your capacity to not be afraid. You're able to keep your eyes open, your heart open, and your mind open. And you notice when you get caught up in prejudice, bias, and aggression. You develop an enthusiasm for no longer watering those negative seeds, from now until the day you die. And, you begin to think of your life as offering endless opportunities to start to do things differently. - Pema Chödrön

'Dukkha,' they say. The Buddhists say, 'All is dukkha.' It is hard to translate, they tell us. It means literally 'suffering' but the feeling of dukkha is closer to impermanence. The fact of impermanence is central to the Buddhist path to nirvana, enlightenment.

Dukkha. All is impermanence. Nothing lasts. I thought of that yesterday, watching leaves come down in a shower, and the smell of the rotting ones going back into the earth. Leaf to humus and back to earth to nourish the roots of the mother tree. The crows crying as the leaves fall and their nests are exposed: dukkha . . . all is impermanence... - Elizabeth Tarbox

Some part of us knows that no person or place in the galaxy of impermanence can ever fully give us refuge. Everything comes and goes, even that which feels most familiar. All eventuality melts back into the ocean of existence like iridescent multicolored sands of mandalas. From the One all things emanate; to the One all things return. - Tosha Silver

The moment that judgement stops through acceptance of what is, you are free of the mind. You have made room for love, for joy, for peace. - Eckhart Tolle

To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest. To live fully is to be always in no-man's-land, to experience each moment as completely new and fresh. To live is to be willing to die over and over again. - Pema Chödrön

We think that the point is to pass the test or overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don't really get solved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It's just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy. -Pema Chödrön

Many have died; you also will die. The drum of death is being beaten. The world has fallen in love with a dream. Only sayings of the wise will remain. - Kabir

Nothing in the world is permanent, and we're foolish when we ask anything to last, but surely we're still more foolish not to take delight in it while we have it. - W. Somerset Maugham

It takes a huge amount of fortitude and motivation to accept what is - especially when you don't like it - and then work wisely and effectively as best you possibly can with the circumstances you find yourself in and with the resources at your disposal, both inner and outer, to mitigate, heal, redirect, and change what can be changed. Such acceptance is called radical acceptance because it goes to the root of things. - Jon Kabat-Zinn

I've know supreme, and I'm not greedy enough to want what I have to go on forever. Every dream ends. Wouldn't it be foolish, knowing that nothing lasts forever, to insist that one has a right to do something that does?...but if eternity existed, it would be this moment. - Yukio Mishima

It is also our practice to share brief testimonials from Worship Associates related to the monthly theme:

I think we all struggle to feel calm in the midst of uncertainty. The fall season brings this struggle to light for me. I realize that life is always unstable, changing, and uncertain. On a daily basis, to help me accept this, I vow to embrace the dynamic nature of life as a journey that will help me transform, feel inspired and illuminated. At the heart of my daily life is a practice of prayer and gentleness with self that opens my heart and mind: I give thanks; I look with wonder at that which is before me; I say affirmations, such as I am wise, I am disciplined. I am a radiant being of light and love. This practice of prayer and affirmation enables me to feel connected to something larger than myself, and to love and care for others. I embrace challenges head on by identifying small steps I can take

towards a positive solution. I try to smile often at people, strangers, and neighbors, and recognize that small acts of kindness make a huge difference to others and to me. I feel that in order to embrace all the change in our lives, and not fight against it, we must be gentle and loving towards ourselves and others. If we embrace our groundlessness rather than constantly seek certainty, by way of connecting to the wonder around us at every moment, we will be able to let go of the inner struggle and enjoy living much more. The practice of being open and receptive (and kind!) is definitely not easy, and it takes hard work and discipline, but it is one that brings me fulfillment and joy. From this place, I am able to feel accepting and loving towards the ever changing world around me. ~ Alex Businger

I tried to practice meditation, hearing it is good for relaxing and quieting the mind. But when I heard the invitation to “come into the present moment”...“there is just now”, I failed miserably. I couldn't seem to let go of the “what was” and “what will be.” And I became aggravated...until I read about the mandorla, an ancient symbol that I have integrated into my everyday life.

A mandorla (almond in Italian) is formed by two circles coming together. I have come to understand it as a joining of opposites, a place in between, in transition, or on the threshold of what is next. When I think about my existence in space and time, in the context of the mandorla, I feel held with a promise of passage through. In this way I begin to accept the uncertainty of life, the impermanence of everything, and the connectedness of all that was, is and will be...and I realize that I can, in fact, practice a form of meditation. - Jane Detwiler