

WHEN POLITICS AND CULTURE DISRUPT FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS:

Can Radical Acceptance Help?

by Aaron Cohn, Ph.D., LMFT

(A scene from the 1980s, at the height of the AIDS crisis. HANNAH is a Mormon pensioner from Utah, at the hospital bedside of a new acquaintance, a gay man named PRIOR, who is suffering from AIDS. PRIOR has told HANNAH that he has seen an angel.)

HANNAH: People have visions.

PRIOR: No they — Not sane people.

HANNAH: (A beat before deciding to say this): One hundred and seventy years ago, which is recent, an angel of God appeared to Joseph Smith. In Upstate New York, not far from here.

PRIOR: But that's ridiculous, that's —

HANNAH: It's not polite to call other people's ideas ridiculous.

PRIOR: I didn't mean to —

HANNAH: I believe this. He had great need of understanding. Our Prophet. His desire made prayer. His prayer made an angel. The angel was real. I believe that.

PRIOR: I don't. And I'm sorry but it's repellent to me. So much of what you believe.

HANNAH: What do I believe?

PRIOR: I'm a homosexual. With AIDS. I can just imagine what you —

HANNAH: No you can't. Imagine. The things in my head. You don't make assumptions about me, mister; I won't make them about you.

PRIOR: (A beat; he looks at her, then): Fair enough.

From Act 4, Scene 8 of *Angels in America* (Kushner, 2013, pp. 239-240)..

Moments before she learned how her life would end, my mother-in-law looked no more disgruntled than usual. Admitted to the hospital at age 70 for shortness of breath, she spoke quietly with her grandson Michael, her son Bryan, and me, her son's husband, while we awaited test results of the fluid surrounding her heart.



Trained as a nurse herself, Honey catalogued the oversights of the night nurse, critiqued the positioning of the IV in her hand. In hospital gown and bed, she somehow still conveyed a sense of confident control, her sovereign authority in the family undiminished. This was known and accepted: we were all of us always entitled to her opinion. Differences of opinion would be entertained, but not one moment before her own position was detailed in full.

Honey was probably detailing a to-do list for Michael when the doctor entered the room and prepared us for the news: Honey's heart trouble was secondary to terminal lung cancer. In her face I saw a flash of puzzlement, and then a wash of cold fear. This is the talk, I thought, and looked to my husband. In his face was an expression I do not remember. I know how grief shows in his eyes, though. It is a shade I can easily paint over this gap in my memory.

With the doctor gone and the news hanging in the air, Honey began to weep but without bitterness. An evangelical Christian, this was news she was ready for. On Earth with her sons and grandchildren or in Heaven with her parents and daughters, Honey was "good either way." She had said so before in hypothetical talks about death. Now, though, behind the tears was the fact that we did not share her faith. I am a Jew and her son a lapsed Catholic. Together we live in a same-sex relationship whose validity her church would never recognize. While our relationship lasted, Honey's salvation could never be ours. When we received *the talk* ourselves, the terror would strike us with full force.

Do you love someone whose beliefs are so different from your own that it is difficult, if not impossible, to bridge the gap? In the months following the most divisive Presidential election in living memory, many American families are feeling torn apart by the extreme emotions surrounding victory and defeat. Compounding the difficulty is a pandemic that to date has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Americans and millions around the world. Response to the pandemic has split down political lines as well, with many Democrats favoring strict adherence to masks and other precautions, while many Republicans view such measures as excessive and far too damaging to the economy. By the close of 2020, when many families were relying on the unifying rituals of the fall and winter holidays to renew their relational bonds, COVID-19 precautions shattered many of our traditions. Angry texts, social media posts, and bitter phone calls crisscrossed the continent as people canceled plans and gave admonishments. Some families were able to work around these issues and strike a balance between safety and togetherness, using internet teleconferencing to shrink the physical distance. Even if Thanksgiving dinner itself was still delicious, a bitter aftertaste lingered. Or rather, some essential flavor was missing. Try as we might, the 2020 holidays just weren't the same.

Though united by law, profound differences have always divided our country. These differences are vast in number: politics, race, religion, gender, sexuality, economics — the list goes on and on. The media use a few polarized categories to create a coherent story out of this tangle. In their eyes, we are in a war of Democrats versus Republicans, hypereducated city

folk versus rural salt of the earth, Millennials versus Boomers. With headlines written for maximum splash painting the present as a scene of unprecedented drama, it is easy to forget that similar stories have played out for over a century. Writing in 1907, the American philosopher William James summed up the situation then in his description of “tough-minded” and “tender-minded” Americans:

Each of you probably knows some well-marked example of each type, and you know what each example thinks of the example on the other side of the line. They have a low opinion of each other. Their antagonism, whenever as individuals their temperaments have been intense, has formed in all ages a part of the philosophic atmosphere of the time. It forms a part of the philosophic atmosphere to-day. The tough think of the tender as sentimentalists and soft-heads. The tender feel the tough to be unrefined, callous, or brutal. Their mutual reaction is very much like that that takes place when Bostonian tourists mingle with a population like that of Cripple Creek. Each type believes the other to be inferior to itself; but disdain in the one case is mingled with amusement, in the other it has a dash of fear. (2000, p. 11)

No one would have ever accused Honey of being “tender-minded.” She could be tough, indeed. She carried a pistol in her purse. By way of contrast, I have never wielded a weapon deadlier than a BB gun. This contrast reflected profound differences in our backgrounds and worldviews. Over time, however, I learned that if I gave her enough space, she would find her own way to make sense of me and my existence.

One Christmas, her gift to me was a beautiful gray steel Star of David on a chain. In the box was a leaflet explaining the origin of the pendant. It was created by an artist in Israel who shapes them from fragments of rockets that Palestinian militants fire into the country. It is likely that everything Honey knew of Israel and Palestine came from her church, which was a strong supporter of right-wing Israeli politics. She did not ask, nor did I offer, my opinion on the conflict in the Middle East. I accepted the gift as Honey’s way of honoring our religious and cultural differences while remaining true to her own vision of reality.

Researchers in couple therapy have found that a relationship between any two human beings will involve enough “baked-in” differences of background, temperament, and worldview to create an upper limit on how much harmony and bliss the relationship can ever hope to generate. (Gottman, 1999; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996). Such research suggests that more often, fostering acceptance, not effecting change, relieves excessive conflict. These insights have been applied to parent-adolescent conflict as well (Flujas-Contreras & Gómez, 2018; Greco & Eifert, 2004). Fortunately, many couples find that bringing more acceptance to their relationships paradoxically leads to some of the change they have been longing for. Why? Because acceptance changes how we experience our loved ones and how our loved ones experience us. As the creators of Integrative Behavioral Couples Therapy (IBCT) put it, “when we feel accepted, when we don’t feel defensive, we are better able to hear our partners’ concerns and appreciate their struggles.

We may change to accommodate our partners, not out of force or pressure or coercion, but because we see and experience them differently” (Christensen et al., 2014, p. 131).

When considering which of your loved ones’ behaviors you might try to accept rather than criticize, complain about, or silently rage against, you may very quickly run up against some of the more difficult aspects of the concept of acceptance. Two questions arise immediately. First, aren’t there behaviors that are impossible to accept? Second, isn’t acceptance much easier to say than to do?

As a couple and family therapist, my answer to both questions is an emphatic yes. First, I would never ask anyone to accept behavior that constitutes physical or psychological violence. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-5) defines spouse or partner physical violence as: “nonaccidental acts of physical force that result, or have reasonable potential to result, in physical harm to an intimate partner or that evoke significant fear in the partner[.]” Partner psychological abuse is defined as “nonaccidental verbal or symbolic acts by one partner that result, or have reasonable potential to result, in significant harm to the other partner” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). A full treatment of this complex issue is beyond the scope of this article, but if you suspect psychological or physical abuse has become part of your life, professional resources, such as the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-SAFE), are available to help.

Second, acceptance is a thing easier said than done, but not because acceptance itself somehow adds pain

or injustice to the supply of suffering you already have. Acceptance is difficult because it is a skill that requires practice. In my clinical work and in my own life, I have found Marsha Linehan’s notion of radical acceptance extraordinarily useful in situations where change is impractical or impossible. Linehan’s work with suicidal and self-destructive clients led her to develop Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT; 1993), a research-supported treatment that balances these patients’ need to change their behavior with their need to feel accepted for who they are and what they experience. Originally a treatment intended to address the severe emotional dysregulation of people with suicidal behaviors, DBT has also been applied to the treatment of problems involving an excessive need for control, such as anorexia nervosa (Isaksson et al., 2021).

Radically accepting something, in Linehan’s understanding (2015), involves accepting deeply four aspects of the world: 1) facts about the past and the present; 2) realistic limitations on everyone’s future; 3) everything has a cause; and 4) life, even when it is painful, is worth living.

Let’s examine each of these four elements.

1) Facts about the past and the present. Facts are simply things we either cannot change or that do not change on their own. They’re the familiar ingredients of experiences that come up repeatedly, easily relied upon and hard to ignore. For example, it’s a fact that if you leave a drop of egg yolk in a bowl of egg whites, you’ll never be able to whip up those egg whites into a fluffy merengue, no matter how hard you try. If you accept this fact, you’ll be more likely to check your egg whites for little specks of yellow before you start beating

them. If you don't accept it, you're likely to wear yourself out trying to coax air bubbles into wet slush. Similarly, it's a fact that other people come equipped with their own minds, their own histories, their own proclivities and habits. Some of these characteristics we enjoy, others not so much. But like the drop of egg yolk in our merengue, once an aspect of personality is in the mix, there's usually no getting it out. If your spouse loves to eat strong-smelling cheese, they will likely always love it, whether you can tolerate it in your fridge or not. If your loved one watches a cable news channel that presents information in a way you find abhorrent, you may be able to convince them to watch another one, or you may not. If a thoughtfully worded suggestion is ineffective, a harshly worded one is not likely to do any better. But it is more likely to damage your relationship.

2) Realistic limitations on everyone's future. In the culture of the United States, most of us don't like to believe in limitations. We love to be told: you can do anything you set your mind to. Sometimes, that kind of cheerleading is just what we need. At other times, it's not helpful at all. For example, as a 45-year-old individual who has never taken dancing lessons, I can never, ever become a professional ballet dancer. That doesn't mean I shouldn't take dancing lessons if I would like to, but performing with the Joffrey Ballet is just not in the cards for me.

Now, I'm going to shift abruptly from a silly analogy to what may be the most heartbreaking truth I can tell you. But I promise it is bearable. Sometimes, people we love are about as good at empathy, understanding, and connection as I am at ballet dancing; that is to say,

not good at all. And there may be no hope at all for them to ever get better at these things. That doesn't mean you can't be in relationship with them or that they are not worthy of love — because they are. It just means that another person's emotional growth and capacity for empathic connection is not generally something you can have much influence over. In most instances, the best you can do is model the kind of empathy, openness, and generosity of spirit you'd like to see in others.

3) Everything has a cause. Read this carefully, because it's a powerful truth that can transform a lot of suffering into something much more bearable. Imagine an individual who has done something completely unjustifiable. Say, a corrupt pension fund manager steals dozens of retirees' life savings. There may be no excuse for such an action. You'll probably never be able to say truthfully that "it was a good thing that those retirees' money was stolen." But you will always be able to truthfully say: there was a reason why those retirees' money was stolen. A subtle shift occurs within you when you move from a mental space of "that shouldn't have happened" to "there's a reason why that happened." Both statements are "true" in their own way. However, the former statement can be full of tension and suffering, while the latter is encountered on the way to radical acceptance and a more peaceful existence.

4) Life, even when painful, is worth living. Much of our life is spent liking and disliking things. We spend vast amounts of energy trying to get more of what we want and get rid of what we don't want. But we will never get everything we want, and we will never be

able to avoid everything we don't want. Yet, we never really stop trying to make life better and avoid pain. We try so hard at this that we overlook something really weird about life: it's not all about liking and disliking things. Sorting experiences into big bins marked Stuff I Like and Stuff I Hate is only one of the many kinds of things we do. We also breathe, sleep, walk, talk, and observe. Sometimes you do things just because they're the right thing to do, not because they feel good or improve your fortunes. The more actions you take because they are meaningful to you, not just because they will get you what you want or avoid what you don't want, the more independence you win from the game of liking and disliking and the more aware you become of your core values — those principles that give you the willingness to experience the pain of life and resist distractions.

As we approach the one-year anniversary of his mother's death, my husband Bryan has met each holiday with a fresh dose of grief. He even misses Honey's persimmon pudding, a pithy custard he describes as "horrid stuff" that he nevertheless ingested yearly, only to make Honey happy. And even though, as a therapist, I know there is no way to hurry Bryan's passage through the valley of his grief, I find myself wishing I could do so. And in those moments, I feel a kinship, a subtle connection to his mother: I had a source of comfort unavailable to my own loved one.

What I didn't say to Honey at her hospital bed is that I do have a source of spiritual comfort, though it might have been difficult for her to imagine. In addition to my Jewish culture and traditions, I incorporate elements

of Buddhism into my life that foster my spiritual development. This tradition has taught me that I can cultivate acceptance to a very deep level, to encompass realities even as initially terrifying as death. And yet, as wonderful a comfort as Buddhism has been to me, it is not something I've succeeded in getting my husband on board with. Once, I had Bryan read the words of the great Zen master and civil rights activist Thich Nhat Hanh:

The day my mother died, I wrote in my journal, "A serious misfortune of my life has arrived." I suffered for more than one year after the passing away of my mother. But one night, in the highlands of Vietnam, I was sleeping in the hut in my hermitage. I dreamed of my mother. I saw myself sitting with her, and we were having a wonderful talk. She looked young and beautiful, her hair flowing down. It was so pleasant to sit there and talk to her as if she had never died. When I woke up it was about two in the morning, and I felt very strongly that I had never lost my mother. The impression that my mother was still with me was very clear. I understood then that the idea of having lost my mother was just an idea. It was obvious in that moment that my mother is always alive in me. (2002, pp. 5–6)

Bryan dutifully read the passage before listing his usual objections to Buddhism. Primarily, he doesn't see the value of letting go of all attachment. I'm on a journey that's a little different than his, it would seem, and that's OK. It is entirely possible (I am tempted to say, likely) that you love someone who will never understand you as you most long to be understood. If this news

feels too bitter a pill a swallow, I have sweeter news, and you don't have to be Buddhist, Christian, or have any religious beliefs at all to receive it. We know from clinical science that radical acceptance, if you practice it, can make even the worst parts of life much more bearable. More than that, it can open your heart to a new experience of the ones you love most.

For the ways in which she prompted me to grow, for the ways she tried to make room for my existence, and for giving birth to and raising my husband Bryan into my beloved husband, I dedicate this essay to Beverly Walker, our Honey, our steely soul named for the sweetness of life.

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