Acceptance Is Not Approval

I remember discussing this topic with my sponsor at a coffee shop sometime during my first six months of sobriety. I was not sure exactly what I was supposed to accept, and what to do about certain situations once ‘in acceptance’ about them. In the years since, I have heard many exasperated newcomers state ‘I can’t just accept everything I see as being Ok. Some things are not acceptable.’

At first glance that statement appears to contain a contradiction, when in fact the confusion is due to an unfortunate collision of two similar words. Separating the two proved useful for me.

Acceptance means *not denying reality*.

That is all. Three words. This is the acceptance that is necessary for my serenity. Crucially, there is no value judgment in that definition, no statement of right or wrong. Realizing this distinction was important, but not yet enough for me to put the concept into practice. I still need to make evaluations about places I choose to go, or people that I see. How do I accomplish that while preserving acceptance?

Acceptable can mean many things, thus I choose to avoid it. Instead, I replace it with questions that help me frame the situation: Is it good for me? Is that a behavior I want to emulate? Do I need to avoid that person? None of these questions passes judgment on the other person, nor makes any statement about whether their behavior is good for them. The questions focus my attention onto matters within my control, namely my reaction.

With this perspective I can accept the reality of a friend’s relapse, and at the same time set a boundary if their behavior is not healthy for me to be around. I do not need to approve of anything.

This may seem like a trivial distinction, but prior to the program I spent untold amounts of energy denying things that I did not like. Worse still, I cannot let go of something that I am busy denying. My denial firmly attaches each problem around my neck, ensuring that I carry it everywhere. Each one adds to the overall load. In the last few days before I joined the program the accumulated weight had become unbearable.

Relief came in two huge leaps for me. The first occurred when I accepted that I could not solve my drinking problem by myself, which led to my accidental surrender and first meeting. The second occurred during the steps. After doing step five with my sponsor, I finally came to a place of acceptance with myself. I could recognize not just my defects but also my strengths, and see myself as a whole person for the first time. I felt like I had finally joined the human race at forty-three years old. Acceptance cut all the chains of denial around my neck. Only then was I able to begin accepting others as they are. I state the latter in the present tense, since I still work on that daily. This is the other variable in the equation that helps me simultaneously be in acceptance about something while realizing it is not good for me.

I can also realize I do not care to be around certain people without generating resentments about them. I find this to be one of the most difficult to accomplish on a consistent basis. Whenever I catch myself falling into a place of judgment or anger about someone, I ground myself with a reset of the big picture. On the graph of spiritual progress, we are all points on the curve. Many are ahead of me; many are behind me. If I am ever tempted to view another as deficient for being behind me on the curve, I consider the perspective of those ahead of me. What do they think when they look at me? While I do not know their thoughts, I can see their actions. They treat me with kindness and compassion, not judgment. Nobody says ‘you really should be farther along by now.’

I have heard that we are each where we need to be, based on what we need to learn next. I can accept that.