

Don't get stuck in the yuck: How to let go without denial

by Mark Lersch, MA LPC

Recently someone who had really been practicing accepting and embracing their negativity asked me what they were doing wrong because they now felt stuck in the yuck. My response to this question speaks to the art of how to work with negativity when it arises within oneself and within the world we experience. In my opinion it is the art we all must learn in order to live fully and skillfully in the world but not get caught in its suffering.

As human beings we all want to avoid discomfort and contract around it, push it away, much like a snail reacts to an unpleasant encounter with salt. The mistakes most of us make when encountering discomfort, whether it be emotions or people in their wounded selves, is that we either try to ignore the discomfort (dissociate from it, deny it, repress it, etc.) or we poke and prod, push and pull on it to try to change it. What both of these categories of coping have in common is that we are trying to control the unpleasant experience, which is quite understandable. The problem is that it doesn't work. Let me use a couple of analogies to illustrate.

There was an equine therapist I once worked with who would task clients to approach his large rescue horses in order to brush them and clean their hoofs. Because the horses had been traumatized earlier in life they were extremely sensitive to energy. If a client experienced fear but denied it by putting up a front of confident pretense, the horse would immediately react and not allow the person to approach. On the other end of the spectrum, if a person did not deny their fear but listened to it (and believed it), the fear gripped them and they were unable to approach the horse because they got stuck in the yuck and froze.

However, when a person acknowledged their fear, either by voicing it out loud or even just naming it to themselves (i.e. turning towards and feeling the emotion, which are also the first two steps of Inner Bonding), surprisingly the horse would allow the person to approach. Even though the person still had fear arising, the horse felt safe because the client's overall energy was safe and congruent. The person was aware of the fear and embraced it but did not make it the primary focus of their awareness. The fear was held in the background much like a loving parent tenderly embracing a child--with the primary focus on the deeper desire to connect with this beautiful animal in front of them.

The fear did not go away immediately. The person approached the horse saying "I am scared of you, you are so big and strong and I am afraid you will hurt me. AND I also want to connect with you." Then the fear dissolved once the person connected with the horse. Note that the person didn't wait until their fear was gone before taking the loving action. The fear transformed because they acknowledged the yuck, held it in

background awareness while connecting to what they really desired and then acted on it despite their fear. They acted on the love instead of trying to control the fear.

Let's use another analogy. For those of you who are motorcycle enthusiasts you may know that a very basic principle of riding is:

"If you encounter an obstacle on the road, DO NOT LOOK AT IT, because where you look, there you will go. If you look at an obstacle, you will hit it! Therefore, be aware of the obstacle with your peripheral vision and FOCUS ON WHERE YOU WANT TO GO".

The same is true when we encounter "obstacles" in life. If we focus directly on the negativity or the problem too long we will get stuck in the muck. We do need to acknowledge that it is there (i.e. my partner is in their wounded self), otherwise we might run into the tree branch on our path (i.e. the anger my boss is spewing from his wounded self). But once acknowledged, focus on where you want to go. Instead of reacting to someone's wounded self, focus on their core essence and your deepest intention to allow love to flow. Now that you are focusing on where you want to "go", ask spiritual guidance to direct you in the situation.

I have found that the various spiritual paths tend to emphasize one end of the spectrum more than the other but often they do include both. For example, for those of us who really need to practice acknowledging, embracing and accepting the unpleasantness might really benefit from Buddhism and the work of someone like Byron Katie and Eckhart Tolle. On the other hand, those who have no problem feeling and acknowledging but who get stuck and lost in the suffering might really benefit from the approaches that help one learn to focus more on what you want such as the Abraham-Hicks material, The Secret, and some of the New Thought movement. But, in my opinion, we really need to cultivate both aspects to become skillful at working with negativity in our lives.

So I would encourage you to not deny your experience, but also to let it go and to stop focusing on it. It seems paradoxical, but I have found this approach invaluable to practicing the art of not getting caught in negativity while still being fully grounded as a sensitive human being. Amazingly, I also find that this practice really allows the divine within us to transform the suffering in ourselves and therefore in the world.