

# *Doors of Perception*

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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*Olinda Backyard Toad © 2023 Rod E.S.Q.*

Have you ever felt like, no matter how hard you try, other people simply aren't impressed with you, or with what you do, and how you're doing it? And been convinced that no one else could possibly think otherwise?

How about this one: have you seen someone else do something that didn't impress *you*? And been convinced that no one else could possibly think otherwise?

Hank Green, from the vlogbrothers YouTube channel, describes that moment of “unconvincing”, when he first had a serious realization that his perception was not nearly as universal as he thought.

He shares the story of “[t]he most important 10 words a stranger ever said to [him]”, when he was at a summer camp in his tweens [ten or eleven years old], watching another fellow about his age... dancing in a way that he found... odd. He describes the experience as “second-hand embarrassment”, convinced that whatever he was seeing was not what “cool” dancing should be.

As he watched in astonishment what he was convinced was a cringey display, an older “higher status” woman said to him those life-changing words: *“I know, I wish I could dance like him too”*.

This broke young Hank's perception of reality at the time, prompting him to... redefine how he related with the reality that he shared with others. He was surprised that, not only did his own account and evaluation of the scene not automatically transfer to everyone else, but

he was dumbfounded that someone else might actually think the opposite. And rather than thinking of the unorthodox dancer with embarrassment, she was impressed.

Although these life-changing words didn't exactly turn around everything in Hank's life, it did bring a shift in some of his modes of thinking. His mind began training itself to listen to *another* voice beyond his own patterns of criticism, and to accept that others may be experiencing a somewhat different reality – one that he might find worth exploring, and which might even offer transformation in how he relates with himself and others – a conversion in his perception.

Our perceptions of others – and of ourselves – can be like that. And our patterns of thinking can convince us to be self-deprecating of our own worth and offerings, or to think of others with disdain.

But if we take a moment to appreciate the value of others' perspectives, we might just find an opportunity of conversion toward a more affirming viewpoint.

Now, there is a flipside to this... just as we may sometimes have an exaggerated sense of our failings and shortcomings (or find ourselves overly-critical of others), it also happens that we can be... disproportionately confident in our abilities or in the quality of what we think we offer. And other voices, when coming from people who have credibility in those areas, can also offer a path to a more balanced sense of who we can be and how our offerings may better impact others.

Likewise, there are times when it can be warranted for us to offer perspectives that may [...] complement how others perceive themselves, *if* these are offered with love, with tact, and a genuine desire to be allies in those who trust our counsel – rather than seeking to impose our own perspective on others. This, too, can be an affirming practice. Of course, it helps if we have some level of authority on the matter, which is to say, there's good reason to believe that we know what we are

talking about. Criticism for its own sake is seldom helpful, and unlikely to be heeded.

And still, being open to wisdom from unexpected places can bring surprising shifts in our perception. A stranger's words: "Yeah, I wish I could dance like him too" can bring a conversion from deprecation to appreciation; from derision to affirmation.

My friends, although Lent does not take the same prominence in our tradition as it might for many of our neighbours, I have been raising it up over the past few weeks because... it invites certain spiritual practices, and I'm the kind of person who's into those "spiritual" things (as I imagine many of you hope I would).

So, as we've been heading into this Lenten season, I have been inviting us to consider those things in our lives that offer value, and which we seek to see more often, by opening up space and time for them.

In what is traditionally seen as a "fasting" season, one approach for that is to also consider those things that may be getting in the way, by taking too much time and space. Now that Ash Wednesday is behind us, which in some traditions marks the beginning of the season, you may have been toying with the idea of giving something up, or conversely, taking something up. Sometimes, these two paths go hand in hand.

And, here's another perspective, what if this practice can involve taking a deeper look at the doors of our perceptions? As Hank's story illustrates, making space for someone else's perspective can offer just that. And when done with an affirming mindset, it may even help us make more room for ourselves to flourish – to find more confidence in what we do and to appreciate others in what they offer. As well as to welcome balance into our lives when others offer us counsel, even if it may sometimes be hard to hear.

My friends, in this season of mind expansion, we may yet find transformation in unlikely places. Wayward words from a stranger: “Yeah, I wish I could dance like him too” can remind us that we may be in a better place than we realize and that we can connect with others far more deeply than we might expect.

Because, who knows? What if there are folks out there who wish they could dance like you, no matter how much you may doubt yourself?

What if, after thinking someone’s dial is only at Notch 8, someone else is looking at them thinking: “Yeah, I wish I could *turn it up to 11* the way they do”?

What if, my friends, when you’re standing in front of a crowd – maybe this very pulpit – and you’re convinced things were a disaster, there are folks out there thinking “Yeah, I wish I could be in front of a crowd the way she does”?

What if, when we wonder if our singing, or our musical offerings, are up to snuff, there’s someone out there listening and wondering: “Yeah, I wish I could enjoy music the way they do”.

What if, when we welcome folks into our space and we’re wondering if they’d like to spend more time of inspiration and wonder with us, there are folks who say: “Yeah, I wish I could be part of that little white church in the country”.

My friends, sometimes there’s a voice in my mind that wonders: “Yeah, I wish I could be in a community of warmth and caring, that loves to look out for each other and make each other feel welcome”. And then, another voice in my mind says: “Yeah, I am.”

So may it be,  
In the spirit of shifting perceptions,  
Amen

*Suggested Hymns:***Opening Hymn #40 The Morning Hangs a Signal**

~)-| Words: William Channing Gannet, 1840-1923, rev.

Music: William Lloyd, 1786-1852

MEIRIONYDD

**Hymn #159 This Is My Song**

Words: Lloyd Stone, 1912- © 1934, 1962 Lorenz Publishing Co.

Music: Jean Sibelius, 1865-1957, arr. © 1933, renewed 1961 Presbyterian Board of Christian Education

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**Closing #354 We Laugh, We Cry**

~)-| Words & Music: Shelley Jackson Denham, 1950- , © 1980 Shelley Jackson Denham,

~)-| harmony by Betsy Jo Angebrandt, 1931- , © 1992 UUA

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