



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

personal myths

Several years ago a friend passed a quote to me. I liked it so much I read the book it is from and thoroughly enjoyed the book as well. Many know Martha Beck as a contributor to *O Magazine*. She is a coach/counselor of sorts and I think her advice is quite sound.

Martha Beck grew up in the Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormans) and her book is the story of her personal journey. She offers a perfect description of personal growth—and the healing process of therapy:

“We believe without question almost everything we learn as children, stumble into the many potholes and pitfalls that mar any human endeavor, stagger around blindly in pain and outrage, then slowly remember to pay attention, to listen for the Silence, look for the Light, feel the tenderness that brings both vulnerability to wounds and communion with the force that heals them. Don’t worry about losing your way. . . . If you do, pain will remind you to find your path again. Joy will let you know when you are back on it.” (Leaving the Saints, page 296)

Most of us do “believe without question almost everything we learn as children.” Our parents shape our reality for better or for worse. If they are loving and tender and respectful, we learn that the world is a safe place and that we are valued. We are able to trust others and most importantly ourselves. If parents are abusive, neglectful or severely mentally ill we learn that the world is hostile and unpredictable and that we are not important. Trusting others feels dangerous. Most tragically, not having been adequately loved we feel unlovable. Even the best parents pass on inaccurate information or inadvertently misshape our perceptions of the world or ourselves based on their own wounds or biases. Sometimes we have a feeling that something is wrong with the way our families treat us but we cannot articulate it because we don’t know anything different, it is “just the way it is.”


One of the biggest challenges we face is recognizing our misperceptions, the myths that we believe without question. Some of these myths are broad and global—stereotypes we have

adopted, prejudices, automatic responses to people, places, ideas. Some myths are quite personal—we are fat and unattractive, we are dumb, lazy, or (at the other extreme) gifted, special.

Sometimes we become aware of our biases through education, sometimes by being confronted by reality. We learn facts in school which contradict what we have been taught, or we become friends with a person of a different race, faith or political persuasion and we begin to see through stereotypes. Perhaps an interested teacher sees a gift, names it and tries to draw it out. Perhaps someone from outside our family affirms our feeling that something is wrong in our families or with our parents. Only then can the healing begin. Recognizing and ridding ourselves of our personal myths may be very hard but I believe it is the most important work that we do.

As Martha Beck describes it: “we slowly remember to pay attention, to listen for Silence, look for the Light, feel the tenderness that brings both vulnerability to wounds and communion with the force that heals them.” In that “Silence” we begin to hear our own true inner voice. We “look for the Light,” the healing that comes with opening up to the Truth, to sharing our story with others and letting in the wonder of a different way of being, feeling, seeing. By allowing ourselves to be vulnerable with good and trustworthy people, our faith in others grows and the love that comes to us indeed begins to heal the wounds of the past. We learn finally to love and trust ourselves.

The last words of the quote are so important. She says “Don’t worry about losing your way If you do, pain will remind you to find your path again. Joy will let you know when you are back on it.” There is no better guide than our experience. If we fall into unhealthy patterns, the pain will remind us to get back on track and our joy will return.

Life can be an ongoing process of growth and development, if we continually examine our beliefs and challenge ourselves to be open and to see clearly. Always we can ask: what do I believe about myself and the world that just might not be true. 

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