Accepting What Is
by Rose Zonetti

When the word “acceptance” enters a room, “but” is never far behind. But what about suffering and injustice? What about the pursuit of our personal goals? What about our individual and collective potential? As soon as the idea of acceptance surfaces, we seem to, ironically, brace ourselves against it as though it will render us incapable of anything other than complacency and apathy. In a goal-focused, free-will-oriented, and stand-your-ground culture, acceptance can feel almost like a betrayal. Scared as we can be of failing ourselves, others, and the world; of lacking in mind, body, and spirit; of being used and hurt; and of losing control, we rebuff anything that might suggest we’re weak and liable to give in or give up.

But acceptance doesn’t inherently imply inaction, stagnation, passivity, or cowardice. Acceptance does not preclude us from realizing something other than what is immediately apparent. Everything is as it is, and we live in an ever-changing, ever-evolving world that we are invited to actively acknowledge and respond to in each moment. Acceptance anchors us so that we might focus on the present rather than endlessly drift in a sea of wishing, dreaming, and pining for anything other than what is. Just as sufficiency can engender a sense of abundance, acceptance can open us up to a sense of possibility in the form of generative questions and perhaps even answers.

Presence and curiosity invite us to consider, what is here now—in my life and in the world? In this space, we might find the painful reality of suffering: the hardships and injustices that feel so wrong to accept as actualities. But as much as we might like to turn away from all that is difficult, it’s hard to imagine acting in ways that serve our fullest potential without first understanding the ground on which we’re standing. We choose how we react—but to do so with care, we must first squarely face what we are reacting to. In turning toward the hard stuff, we benefit from observing with as much gentle and humble regard as possible; this isn’t to say that we sweep under the rug the very real impact of life’s difficulties, but taking time to plainly be with them and consider them with genuine curiosity can change the way we react. Thankfully, the actualities that beckon acceptance aren’t all challenging: Noticing that everything is interconnected, that love and light exist amid the darkness, and that not all is lost can nourish us on our paths.

And so we find ourselves navigating the tricky territory of paradox: conflict, darkness, and death coexisting with harmony, light, and life. Hard though it may be to hold, such paradox undergirds our capacity for aliveness, ushering in a new question that epitomizes the way in which acceptance activates us: Given the realities of this moment, how might I act? We step into opportunity, by both recognizing the actuality of what we’re responding to and taking stock of what’s available to us in order to do so. Rather than faltering with the complacency or hopelessness that can result from a sense of lack, we embolden ourselves to live into every moment.
Discerning what’s present and how we’re called to act may confront us with limitations. But acceptance continues to serve us. Rather than denying or ignoring them as hindrances, limitations can lead us to possibility just as the planks of a bridge support our ability to span a gap. They can open us up to a generous space of inquiry where we’re invited to challenge our perhaps unexamined expectations, desires, and stories about what is and how it ought to be or what we’d like it to be. How might our limitations serve us? How might they open us up to different ways of perceiving what is? Perhaps in accepting the limitations before us, we discover we have everything we need within their bounds. Through our wholehearted presence and observation, we can endeavor to shape our visions of life—and the action that supports such visions—with grounded wisdom.

Of course, our wisdom exists as another limitation. Our endeavor to accept what is will always be colored by our imperfect humanness. But we can look to humility as a buoy as we tread the rough, gray waters of imperfection, limitation, and paradox. We can see only so far, and all our observations and inquiry ultimately land us in the domain of not knowing. The greatest limitation beckoning our acceptance is that we simply cannot understand or even perceive the entirety of life. Br. David Steindl-Rast reinforces that we need not reject this edge, suggesting instead that it’s necessary for living into our full potential: “There can be no vision without acceptance of Mystery.”

Leaning into mystery, we unleash ourselves into invigorating territory where what felt like the tough or even insurmountable work of accepting ourselves, others, and the state of the world as is begins to soften. The waters settle and clear. Edges begin to lose their edge, burgeoning with the great fullness of life. As we continue to explore the expansive space of acceptance, perhaps making ourselves more at home over time, we might one day take leaps that previously felt too big. Perhaps we can begin to trust in the mystery, and even the idea that everything we need for our boldest and brightest imagining of life is before us. Perhaps we even find the courage to say, “Thank you.”