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## Unconditional Acceptance

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### ***What makes it difficult for us to accept people the way they are***

I was invited a few weeks ago to sit among a few panelists and share my understanding of 'how our perceptions of others affect the manner in which we have conversations with them'.

During the conversation, I shared that 'our inability to accept others unconditionally impacts our perception of them'. A senior psychologist, who was part of the audience, told me that my assumption was incorrect and that 'unconditional acceptance is a fallacy'. Back home, I asked myself what troubled me about her emphatic assertion.

I remembered a teacher of mine, Fr John Prabhu, who, when I was his student, helped me understand the concept of being able to accept others unconditionally. Constantly faulting myself for not doing well in some of the courses I was pursuing, I went to my teacher and shared my discomfort.

He asked me if I could recall someone younger than I, whom I was very fond of. I mentioned a cousin who was five years younger than I was.

He then asked me to relate some incident about him. I told him that every time I visited my cousin and his parents, particularly when we were young, he would run up to me and hug me, unmindful of the sweaty shirt or dirty clothes he might be wearing, and I would hug him back, without thought or hesitation.

He then asked me if I would do the same now, as adults.

I said, "Most certainly not." I would ask him to change into clean clothes before hugging him. My teacher then asked me what changed. My quick response was "As a child, he was unaware, yet now as an adult, it is not the same."

Fondly, my teacher looked at me and said "The difference is in your perception. When he was a child, you were willing to accept him as he was, yet now, you can only do so with a condition." Confused, I asked him to explain.

He replied, "You are unable to accept your cousin today as he presents himself, not because he is any different from the child you knew, but because you are unable to accept yourself unconditionally. Thus you are unable to accept him so. What you do to yourself is what you do to others."

He went on to say, "If you can first accept yourself unconditionally and not chastise yourself for performing poorly, that it is alright to struggle, it will free your mind and allow yourself to focus on how you can better your performance."

Till a few months ago, I found I was quick to judge people, particularly when the opinion I formed of them was based on an unhappy meeting or conversation. Having done so, I was unwilling to alter that perception even if that person, when I met him later, had put the unpleasant incident between us behind him.

The shift happened when a friend told me, "When you step into a flowing stream, step out of it, and step back into it, you are actually stepping into new waters. The water that touched your feet earlier is no more the same water that is now clasping your feet; the earlier stream has moved on."

I cannot thank him enough for this lesson — by not allowing myself to accept 'what is' and receive those I judged and continue to judge with frozen perception, I remain in a self-imposed prison.

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