

Tasha Halpert

Looking with Eyes of Love

By Tasha Halpert

Many years ago I wrote a poem that began: "Consider with the eyes of love, see clearly..." I realize now what I meant by the word love was actually *unconditional* love. It took me a long time and a lot of experience to learn the difference made by this qualifying word.

While my parents really loved me, they often expressed their love as criticisms about my weight, untidiness, or appearance in general. It did not occur to them to express their love unconditionally. They thought they were helping me to improve, to look proper in the eyes of others.

My mother doubtless inherited her critical outlook from her mother, who was prone to negative comments concerning the physical appearance of her children, as well as of others. In the eyes of my grandmother one's stomach was supposed to be flat as a pancake, one's waist trim, one's posture elegant. I used to wonder why my slender mother wore a girdle. Then I learned it was because she had been taught that bulges must be banished, especially if they jiggled.

My father's mother was equally strict about appearance and passed her views on to my father. I can hear him now as he aimed his camera at me, "Take off your glasses and look pretty." It also annoyed him if my hair was untidy or my clothing was not to his liking. It didn't help that the precepts of fashion and the mode of the day presented an ideal image that mirrored what my parents believed in and thought appropriate.

The attitude toward appearances that I inherited from my family and from society at large persisted for a long time. Eventually, as a result of learning to love myself I also learned to listen to the critical voice in my head that pointed

out and excoriated anything that deviated from what I had been taught was appropriate or attractive. Because I wanted to see things differently, I learned to substitute an attitude of compassion for that of criticism.

At first I applied this change to my view of others. Gradually I learned to apply it to myself as well. The eyes of unconditional love do not see critically but with the understanding that for good reasons, we are all perfect just the way we are. However in order to make this change I had to be able to observe my negative behaviors.

While this process has been painful, it has been valuable. I've learned that if I catch myself in the act often enough, I will interrupt whatever negative attitudes I observe in myself. Then I can change my viewpoint to one of unconditional love. By paying attention to what goes on in my mind I have learned a great deal not only about who I am, but also about how I see others. More importantly I learned that a change in point of view actually begins with the growth of generosity.

The generous heart loves unconditionally. Very young children do this naturally. Who hasn't been the recipient of a toddler's offering to share a cookie or a treasured toy? Older children become more self aware and consequently more self-centered; parents have to encourage generosity. Finally, teenagers begin to form their own ways of behavior and may act cruelly toward their peers and others as they test and frequently discard their parents' guidance concerning behavior. If only they could learn at this still tender age how acting selfishly can contract the heart.

Most are familiar with Dr. Seuss's character, the Grinch. His heart was shrunken--too small by far. This resulted in his acting in a mean way toward others. Because their joy annoyed him, he tried to steal it. When no matter what he did he couldn't affect their joy he changed his behavior and wonder of wonders, his heart grew. With this story Dr. Seuss illustrates an important truth: Unconditional love really begins when we recognize ourselves as acting in unlovable ways and make a change, thus helping our hearts to grow.

I have come to realize that when I look at someone - even at myself - with a negative eye, observe with distaste extra weight or ill fitting clothing, or think negatively of another's actions and don't catch myself doing it, I am missing an opportunity to grow my heart. I have learned that I can change my thinking and instead reflect that they could be on medication, indigent, ill or feeling uncomfortable. When I can see someone in a positive light instead of a negative one my heart grows and my ability to love unconditionally increases.

The eyes of unconditional love are generous and kind. When I look with eyes of love at another or even at myself, I see a human being in need of compassion and loving-kindness. If they seem to need a bit of uplift I can say a prayer for them or send a blessing, and it may be that in some way my small effort will brighten their day and perhaps even mine. At the very least it will water the seeds of unconditional love that I am working to grow within my heart.