

Chapter 9: REJECTION

In the last chapter, we looked at the spiritual opportunity of being forthright with someone else about our feelings when we want to say no. But what do we do when someone rejects *us*?

Call. Call. Call. Call.

I'm staring at my phone, willing it to ring.
I'm trying not to stare at my phone.
I sigh.
I lower my standards: Text. Text. Text. Text.
I will my phone to buzz.
Maybe it's off.
I check it.
It's on.
Maybe it's on "do not disturb."
I check it.
It's not.

Nothing.
But the silence is speaking volumes.

In the past, I was relentless in my affections. I thought that if the guys I liked just *knew me* well enough, surely they'd realize that I was completely wonderful and they would fall in love with me immediately. Convinced that these men were shy, intimidated, or simply very badly confused, I'd throw myself into their lives like a lounge singer sprawling across a fat baby grand.

The first boy that I ever loved looked like the love child of C. Thomas Howell and Robert Sean Leonard. His name was Geoff. I was fifteen. In the face of his disinterest, I was steely-eyed, irrepressible, and resolute.

"I will make him mine. I don't care if he is dating Laura the blond and sporty senior, I will become his confidante and soul mate. I will become his very best friend and he will reveal all his secrets only to me."

This is literally – mark this - *literally* - what I thought.

Through sheer honey badger tenacity, I managed to wedge myself into Geoff's life like Play-doh squished into a pasta mould. It wasn't pretty, but it worked. Once I felt appropriately lodged, I let out a big sigh of relief. *Ahhhhhh!* I thought, *we may not be*

dating per se, *but we are friends. I am in the inner sanctum!* Wipe brow. Mission accomplished.

I'd love to chuckle ruefully and pass off my neediness as youthful folly. But fast-forward twenty years, and I'm doing exactly the same thing.

When my marriage ended (more on that saga in chapter twelve), I was devastated. Until my divorce, I hadn't understood how "heartache" could be literal. There was a huge, gaping hole in my chest.

Not only was I freshly separated from my husband, I had also just moved to a new country, changed coasts, shifted careers, and taken over the mortgage on our apartment. My family was a country away. I had no friends, no support network, and I worked a lonely stay at home job as a commissioned sales agent for a software company. Discovering late night parties with a sweet and sympathetic group of ravers felt like instant connection, generous love, and healing acceptance.

The Ecstasy may have helped just a teensy, tiny, little bit.

I dated one of leaders of this partying crowd on and off for a couple months. You met Jeremy in chapter one; he's the filmmaker who was conveniently out of town for weeks at a time. Smart, confident, and understated, he had a cute habit of adjusting his glasses by holding the frames with his thumb and middle finger and sliding them up his nose. He also had a cute habit of being attracted to really fucked up women.

In short, he was perfect for me.

Jeremy was charismatic, smart, distracting, and too far away – both physically and emotionally - to see how messed up I really was. At least at first.

Then he came back into town from work. The sweet allure of my "damsel in distress" status soured in the face of how desperately I needed his attention.

He calls while I'm driving.

"Yeah..." he sighs, "Look, this isn't working for me."

I am on my way to my lawyer's office to sign the papers that will finalize my legal separation from my husband. My chest tightens. I pull my car over. My breath gets fast. My world slides.

"Not working for you."

"Yeah...sorry. You're just...it's too much. You're too..."

“What?”

“Well...you’re...” he sighs, “needy.”

I feel as if a hot stone has been set on my chest. I’m stunned, then furious.

“Needy.” It’s a vile word. “Needy.”

“Needy” stabbed me straight through my feminist heart. “Needy” transformed my painful moments of vulnerability into simpering weakness. I had opened up to Jeremy at my most helpless, and then been unceremoniously kicked to the curb. Over the phone, no less.

I was furious. But underneath my anger, I was humiliated. Because he was right.

I was needy.

Jeremy’s affection had provided a distraction from the pain of my divorce. The decline of my marriage had shattered my self-image as a confident, capable, and loving woman. In the aftermath, I felt like a failure: weak, inept and exposed. Jeremy’s attention had helped me to feel better about myself. In the light of his affection, I felt like someone who was still worthy of interest and love. And when he dumped me, the thin defense that I’d plastered over my own self-loathing blew away.

His rejection felt like death.

Abhinivesa

Literally, fear of death. Abhinivesa is our natural desire to cling to what is habitual and avoid endings and change. Abhinivesa is one of the obstacles (kleshas) to our practice and is said to be powerful, even in the wise.

It’s human nature to be afraid of change; our minds are wired for safety and consistency. When we stand in uncertainty and change, we tenderly touch on the truth that change is inevitable.

However, even the humiliation of being dumped wasn’t enough to make me step back and start taking care of myself. I couldn’t bear the idea that Jeremy thought of me as weak. I craved his validation. Rather than cutting off ties with him, I wanted him like me. I needed him to think that I was still cool.

I took on the role of the “easygoing ex” and performed a lot of tricks to make sure that he still thought that I was “okay.” I was casual and distant. Flirty, but not too flirty. And sure enough, we stayed in touch and became friends. Once more, I had Jeremy’s approval. Though the lamp of his affection may have dimmed, enough of it remained to restore my dignity. I was okay.

My confusion in both of these situations was simple: I had wanted Geoff and Jeremy - twenty years apart – to give me something that only I could give myself.

Self-love.

Let's not sugar coat a break up: the end of a relationship feels like death. It *is* death. We are lonely and vulnerable. We feel despair, remorse, regret, anger, and self-doubt. Precisely because rejection is so painful, it exposes the very core of our Missing Piece confusion. Seen in this way, rejection becomes a potent opportunity for self-growth and fierce compassion.

The Jewels of Rejection

Rejection is full of opportunities.

Like diamonds that are created from coal under deep pressure, the “jewels of rejection” have been forged in great intensity. Out of darkness and heat, something lustrous, pure and unbreakable is born.

The first and most important “jewel of rejection:” self-love.

Call, call, call.

Text, text, text.

Rather than harden, blame, or scramble to cover our bad feelings up, we can take a breath and *practice the pause*. We can soften and remember that our Big Self is watching the show. Our Little Self is having an emotional adventure, but we are safe, whole, and worthy of love.

When we feel pained by rejection in dating, our confusion is glaringly obvious. After all, you've been on – what? One date? Three dates? Even if you've been dating someone for several months, this person's understanding of you could only begin to skim the surface of who you are. Yet you gave them the keys to self-esteem kingdom. You believe the rejection is personal.

It's often easier to believe someone else than to trust ourselves. However, running after external approval is like eating candy when you need kale: while the sugar high is a temporary fix, it is unsustainable and eventually makes us sick.

Dukha

"Suffering." Dukha is a universal human experience that occurs when we feel pain based on a misguided attachment to an external source. When we find ourselves suffering and

fearful, it's a good sign that we have exported our sense of wellbeing to something outside of ourselves. Our pain is a signpost reminding us to come back home.

When I gave Jeremy the keys to my self-worth kingdom, I used him to cover up my inner angst and pain. When he liked me, my Missing Piece was filled. I felt so good! *The world is perfect, and I'm falling in love! I am okay!* But when he went away, the hole was unearthed again. *No! I'm humiliated, mortified, bereft.* My dependence on him was exposed.

When we feel rejected, our desire to fill our Missing Piece with the external world is revealed. We have exported our sense of worthiness into something that is temporary and external rather than remembering that our sense of wholeness must come from within. While it is a natural and human for us to love others and be sad when they are gone, we can begin to recognize the difference between true loss and the desperation that arises when we have been using someone else to cover up our pain. By recognizing this difference, we can begin to become more responsible for our own sense of self-worth.

The second jewel of rejection: expanding our capacity to feel.

Understanding that we are not *defined* by our feelings doesn't mean that we should feel less. On the contrary! Feeling is the spice of life, the nectar of the peach, the icing on our cake. Feeling is a birthright of our humanity.

However, we usually don't like to feel when it feels bad. Anger? Remorse? Fear? No, thank you! We're rather stuff those feelings into our emotional closet.

But when we start editing out our bad feelings, we limit our capacity to feel the good stuff, such as joy, gratitude, and love.

When rejection conjures up challenging feelings, we can practice expanding our emotional range in a safe environment. After all, it's just dating, remember? The stakes aren't actually that high. You're safe, you're okay. While the Little Self is having a wild emotional experience, the Big Self can watch with love and compassion.

By staying in our Big Self and holding space for our feelings, we can increase our capacity to feel all the colors of our emotional rainbow. No matter what happens, we stay tethered to the truth that our deepest self is good, worthy, and joyful.

“Yoga isn't about narrowing the bandwidth of our emotions, but about creating a container that's vast enough to hold them with grace.”

As you explore your feelings, you will discover that emotions – like thoughts – are temporary phenomena. They arise and dissipate. When we are tethered to our Big Self,

we can more graciously experience a full range of emotions without shutting down, becoming reactive or lashing out. This is good news, because life brings up storms of emotions, and we want to be able to treat other people with care. Cultivating your personal equanimity will help you to navigate your feelings in any situation.

The third jewel: increasing your compassion.

Experiencing your own vulnerability also helps you to empathize more with other people. Our own pain is the window that helps us to recognize the uncertainty and angst that lies within every human heart. We are not unique in our feelings: almost every adult human has experienced love and loss. By widening our own capacity to feel, we increase our ability to relate to the experience of others.

A final jewel: cultivating our own strengths.

Sometimes we are attracted to someone else because they possess qualities that we want for ourselves. For example, part of my attraction to Jeremy stemmed from my admiration for his success and creativity. On some level, I thought that if Jeremy liked me, then I would be validated by some sort of magical relationship transference. Jeremy was creative, Jeremy liked *me*, therefore, I was creative! Ta-da!

While being inspired by our partners is a good thing, substituting their success for our own means that we are missing an opportunity to follow our own hearts' longing. "Success vampirism" amplifies our Missing Piece conundrum: we can't lose the person because we are afraid that we will lose a quality that we desperately want.

"But I don't know how to change a tire." I am quiet.

Alex and I had broken up. (Remember Alex? More on Alex in chapter ten). Our relationship had lasted nearly a year. I had loved him.

A box of Kleenex has exploded in my apartment. I am curled up on the corner of my couch with one of my good friends.

"I can change a tire," Ashley speaks softly and pats my arm. "I'll show you how to do that. You can call me, and I'll help you through it."

"We were going to go camping together," I start crying. Visions of my future with Alex are dancing in my head. Exciting visions of travel, adventure – and children. "We had all these great trips planned. Exciting trips."

"You have lots of people to go camping with." Ashley cocks her head. "Marta wants to go camping. Or I'll go camping with you."

“Bu-but it’s not the same.”

“I know, honey. But do you really need him to do this stuff, or can you do it by yourself?”

I look at her through my watery eyes and snotty nose. Ashley doesn’t mince words and she’s got that look that says she’s about to smack down some wisdom.

“Maybe,” she says sternly, “it’s time to get out your own camping gear and go do it by yourself.”

Alex had introduced me to outdoor adventure. We took trips, went hiking, and skied hard. When we broke up, I felt as if I had lost that part of myself. Without him, my inner adventure girl had disappeared.

One of the wonderful gifts of having a relationship is that it can help us discover new aspects of ourselves. Perhaps you never knew that you liked LEGO, or going camping, or rock climbing. Relationships can show us new landscapes within ourselves that may otherwise have remained hidden. However, you don’t need to lose this new territory when the relationship ends. If you like what you discover, then continue exploring.

Sometimes a relationship can illuminate something within us that we *don’t* love. As my marriage floundered into dysfunction, I became a passive enabler of my ex-husband’s drinking. Through this experience, I learned that I am deeply afraid of being on the receiving end of someone else’s anger, and I have a hard time creating and sustaining healthy boundaries. By taking a compassionate pause and witnessing this habit, I can try to be alert for this pattern in the future.

Rejection isn’t personal

So now, brass tacks: rejection doesn’t really exist.

Rejection is a myth. Made up. Fictional.

We tend to feel rejection as a dismissal of our own personhood. However, a more accurate and Reality-based understanding would be to see that we have been *ill fitted*. Our jigsaw pieces just didn’t match.

Sustainable mutual attraction requires a shared recognition of values, interests, likes and dislikes. It’s a two-way street, with both parties seeing themselves in each other. With successful partnerships, there is usually a similarity in how we view the world, what we

find funny, and how we like to live. And of course, there's probably a good ol' dose of sexual attraction.

Chances are, if your feelings are one-sided and the other party isn't pursuing the connection, then your interest isn't based their personhood, but rather on a perceived need that he or she can fill in you. You may be imagining a connection that isn't there (there's the imagination vrtti, filling in the gaps again!) in order to help justify your Missing Piece need.

When I desperately needed Jeremy to like me, I wasn't able to see him fully for himself, because I first needed him to *fix my problem*. I couldn't even tell if I really liked *him* because I was too busy hiding from my own feelings to see him for who he was! It was a Classic Missing piece confusion.

Okay, but what if there seems to be an authentic mutual connection – and they still pull away?

Here's the tough part: it doesn't matter.

If they're not dancing the dance with you, then they're not the person for you. End of story. Ultimately, understanding *why* is beside the point.

When we try to rationalize and justify a rejection (“He was hung up on his ex-girlfriend,” “She’s not ready for a relationship,” “He has a weird thing with his mother,”), we are doing a tap dance to cover up the feeling that we aren't good enough. We are trying to create a story in our heads that makes us come out looking okay. Because we have forgotten that we actually *are* okay.

We don't arrive at our Starbucks date with a blank slate.

Remember the car of experience? Our windshields are full of stuff from our past that will influence how we see the world. Similarly, the person sitting across the table from you is also enmeshed in an enormous and unfathomable web of their own life experience.

Aparigraha

One of the yamas, “non-grasping” invites us to relinquish the tendency to hold onto our thoughts and cling to old ideas. Are we willing to “unstick” ourselves from our attachments to external objects (or our ideas about someone else solving our problems) in order to be free?

Your date – like you – is experiencing the world through the lens of all of their previous experiences. While we usually prefer to believe that we are the belly button of the universe, the truth is that it is not all about us. We don't have control. You cannot

control – or even really understand – how they may be perceiving you. We cannot fully comprehend the complexity of the road that they have travelled.

“Let it go.” Elsa, *Frozen*

And sometimes we just have to let go.

Learning to let go

I fought like a banshee to stop the break up with Alex.

When our communication started breaking down, I poured my heart out in three lengthy emails to try to bridge the gap. The night after we broke up, I showed up at his doorstep at 7 AM to fight for another chance.

“I know that we’re having all these problems, but I love you and I want to make this work.”

I have no doubt that we both fought for the relationship as best we could. But at the end of the day (and despite therapeutic intervention), we couldn’t find our way out of our communication quagmire.

Sometimes, you have to let go.

Isvara Pranidhana

“Surrender to a higher power.” As we practice letting go of our ability to control a situation, we begin to cultivate the discrimination to recognize what we have control over – and what we don’t. “Let go and let god.”

The natural world is cyclical, constantly beginning, sustaining, and dying. Seasons change, relationships change, jobs change, tides move, stars are born, stars die. Death is everywhere. Despite our mind’s resistance to change, we are also part of this natural cycle. We begin, we sustain, and eventually, we dissolve.

Samhara

“Dissolution.” The universal cycle of generating, sustaining, and dissolving. Our suffering comes from mistaking the impermanent as permanent (*avidya*). Samhara is actually a reabsorption and evolution of universal energy rather than an ending or a loss. This transformative process plants the seeds for new growth and experience.

Yoga philosophy reminds us that universe works in cycles. All material matter (*prakriti*) is continually being birthed, sustained, and then destroyed. There is also a fourth stage – the emptiness - out of which the birthing comes. This empty space is full of uncertainty

and groundlessness. While we hate to rest in the terrible expanse of uncertainty, it is essential for rebirth.

Om

Om (also spelled AUM) has four parts. There is the first part, “A”, which represents the beginning, creation. The second part, “OO” represents the sustaining. The third part, “M” represents dying, or the ending. And then finally, the silence after the chant is *turiya* (the void), which contains all potentialities. And out of this void, the sound arises again.

Rejection teaches us to take a breath, let go, and trust in the new cycle that will unfold.

Practices

Journal: Letting Go

Reflect upon a non-romantic situation where you have had to let go in the past (perhaps of a job, a house, an idea).

- What did you lose?
- And what did you gain?

Reflect on endings. Do you see anything in the world that does not ultimately change or end?

Reflect upon the end of a relationship from the past.

- What was truly lost?
- What new understanding did you gain through the experience of the relationship, and how do you see the effects of that learning in your life today?

Dating Practice: Letting Go

Treat each date as an opportunity to begin, experience, and let go of expectations.

- If you knew there was no second date possible, would your experience of the date change?
- After the date is over, can you completely let go of expectations and instead rest in the space of not knowing?

Breathing Practice: Letting go

Letting go creates space for what is next. The longer exhale in this practice encourages connecting to release.

- Find your meditation seat (see chapter two for more detailed instructions if needed).
- Focus on your breath.
- Inhale for a count of four, exhale for a count of six.

- Let each exhale be an opportunity to release.
- Each inhale is a new beginning.
- Notice the pause of possibility between the inhale and exhale.

Meditation Practice: Dissolution

Accepting dissolution means surrendering to the fundamentally shaky ground that is always there. When something ends, the fluctuating nature of Mother Nature (*prakriti*) is revealed once more.

- Find your meditation seat (see chapter two for more detailed instructions if needed).
- Focus on the sounds that you hear.
- Notice that they arise, and fall away.
- Settle into the space between the sounds.
- Each inhale is a new beginning.

Yoga Practice: Softening

- Sphinx
- Locust

Find the opening and softness that is possible by breathing deeply into your heart space. Rather than hardening and forcing into your backbend, use your inhalation to create space, and exhalation to soften into the space that you have created.