

Reclaiming Pollyanna

Yael Schweitzer, LCSW, BC-DMT

October 22, 2010

Often, in the context of cultivating mindfulness, I heard people emphasize - “I don’t want to become a Pollyanna”. As someone who grew up loving Pollyanna - a child heroine of U.S. novelist Eleanor Hodgman Porter¹ - I want to clear her name and claim that there is a lot to learn from her character in our efforts to be mindful.

The term Pollyanna is typically used as: unreasonably or illogically optimistic or an excessively or blindly optimistic person. If you read the book though², you will find that Pollyanna developed a character, behaviors and an approach to life that touch on many of the qualities that we want to develop as mindful people, and as therapists we want to help our clients to own.

So what can we learn from Pollyanna that supports being mindful?

Commitment and persistence - Developing mindfulness requires commitment. It is important to practice, and it is important to remember to apply the approach when needed. Pollyanna shows commitment to play “the game of gladness” even in the most desperate times when she loses her father, when the people she trusts send her away and when her aunt is harsh with her. She is not illogically optimistic, she has her moments of crying and being sad, but she is determined to find what can help her to avoid slipping into despair and depression. She constantly directs her intention to finding something good and she invests thoughts and efforts to find it.

When we work with ourselves or with others to cultivate mindfulness, it is important to be persistent and committed to the process. In the eightfold path³ the Buddha talks about right effort and right intention referring to the commitment to ethical and mental self improvement and the mental energy that we apply to prevent unwholesome states and preserve wholesome ones.

Freedom to choose - When I guide people in mindful meditation, I like to mention that the moment they observe thoughts, the moment of awareness of thinking, is a moment of choice. One can choose to shift awareness, usually to the breath, or continue to fuel the thoughts, be carried by them and believe in their message. Pollyanna chose to control her mind and reactions and we can choose that as well. We have a choice when we recognize patterns of negative thinking and decide not to spin into them. There is always more than one way to look at reality -why not choose the one that is more positive? It is not about denying inconvenient reality. We always look at reality through filters. Buddhist psychology emphasizes the importance of the observer in both sense perception and perception of external events. Cultivating mindfulness cultivates the inner observer and enables one to choose the right filter for perceiving the world. Pollyanna chose her filter of looking at the world through

the “gladness game”. By refining her filter she learned also to orient herself and see beauty around her. In a grey and dark room she sees a glass catching the sunlight - creating a rainbow, and she enjoys it fully. Like Pollyanna, clients can be encouraged to look at the rainbow in their lives - the blessings, strengths and beauty within them and around them, to get a more holistic view of their situations.

Positive Approach - When one comprehends that there is a choice one can choose to acknowledge virtues and strengths. Evolution taught us to be aware of the negative - those who predicted disasters, were cautious, protective and prepared for the worse - survived. It takes therefore the above mentioned efforts to develop a positive approach. Pollyanna became a master of seeking and seeing the good. She trusts people and can see their positive qualities and connect to them through that. In other words we could say she sees the Buddha nature in everyone. Through her eyes people learn to see the good in them as well.

In therapy and in our journey in life - practicing the ability to see the positive helps in better functioning and mental health.

Compassion and acceptance - Cultivating compassion and acceptance is a predisposition requirement for developing mindfulness. In the Buddhist tradition it is done by practicing the Loving-Kindness meditation (Metta). Pollyanna with her approach to people can teach us a lot about non-judgmental approach and compassion. She talks to everyone and treats each person equally.

Curiosity - Pollyanna talks to everyone because she is curious. She is curious about the town she lives in and explores it, meeting people on the way and they elicit her curiosity as well. She shows real interest in people, their life and their struggles. Curiosity is in the heart of mindfulness. When we bring curiosity to our experiences it shifts every experience from possessing us, to us holding the experience and exploring it. Curiosity takes the edge off of suffering and turns it to an experience worth living.

Creativity - The real charm of Pollyanna is in her creativity. With her commitment to finding the good and positive in situations and in people, with her compassionate heart and curiosity she develops a capacity to find creative solutions to situations. She uses some adaptable new approaches and a willingness to play, which are all important ingredients of creativity. Being creative requires a sense of mindfulness and mindfulness inspires creativity.

I don't think we all need to be Pollyanna, even if that were possible. What we can do however, is to have her as an inspiration for living a satisfying and mindful life.