



Yes/No - Two Sides of the Same Coin

What can be one of the most difficult words in the English language to utter? It's a word that can deaden our lips and tongue as surely as a visit to the dentist. It can have the most articulate of us fumbling and mumbling. It can bring grown-ups to tears to even imagine speaking. I'm talking about the dreaded word - "*no*".

For many of us, especially women, it can be almost impossible to say *no* to anything (well, maybe a root canal, speaking of the dentist). For a variety of reasons many of us share the perspective that saying *no* to the umpteen bazillion requests made of us on a regular basis is somehow wrong or uncaring or hard-hearted or a refusal of the abundance the universe offers us. Or that, if we do say *no*, we will be unloved and therefor die a miserable death alone. (Ok, so maybe there are few steps to get there, but it is a slippery slope that, I'm sure at least unconsciously, most of us have slid right down more than once.)

There's something, too, wiggling around in any conversation about what we say *no* to that has to do with our concept of boundaries (yet another dreaded word for many of us).

An image that has really helped me get some freedom, clarity and peace in the conundrum of choices that ends up in *yes* or *no* is that of seeing them as two sides of the same coin. They are impossible to separate. Every *yes* comes with a built in *no*, just as every *no* comes with a built in *yes*. It is when we imagine they live apart from each other that we get confused, overwhelmed, and left desperately trying to figure out the "boundary" question.

Here's what I mean by *yes* and *no* being impossible to separate. When I say *yes* to getting up early in the morning to walk, I'm saying *no* to sleeping late or checking my email or a dozen other choices I could have made instead. When I say *no* to taking that awesome class, I'm saying *yes* to living within my budget or working in my garden. My *no* to your request for me for me to meet you for coffee tomorrow could be a *yes* to

having more time to complete tasks I have already committed to. By saying *no* to a completely full daily schedule I'm saying *yes* to breathing time or to self reflection or to less stress. See how this works?

It's perfectly understandable that we could be confused here, that we could think that *yes* and *no* are from completely different planets. For one thing our consumer culture wants us to believe that we can say *yes* to everything indefinitely without any kind of downside or *no* at all. Some of the most sophisticated mind manipulation techniques known to the human species are currently employed to convince us that the only response possible is an eager "*yes!*". For the most part we live in an illusory world that worships constant, exponential growth that is outside of any cycle that includes "*no*".

One way of looking at *yes* and *no* is to think of them like any other cycle that includes apparent opposites. Summer/winter, day/night, full moon/new moon, high tide/low tide, birth/death, growth/decay are all examples of other two-sided coins. They are inseparable parts of a whole, necessary aspects of a rhythm and a flow. Each is defined by the other in some way. As we have gotten away from a daily awareness of the natural cycles of life all around us, we have begun to think only one side of these coins has merit. We have begun to imagine we can do without the dark, down, decay, death, and "*no*" side of life. We can't.

When we lived a little closer to the seasons and cycles, we were better at sensing the prevailing winds, too. By that I mean we didn't just assume that the present moment was the right time for every single thing. We remembered that there are seasons and times that are better for different things. We weren't expecting everything right now, like tomatoes in December (in the northern hemisphere). Now we can get summer foods any time of year, many businesses are open 24/7 (what a concept of constant "*yes!*"), and we are happiest when operating "on demand". Not only are the seasons and cycles ignored, our own personal cycles are often seen as impediments to progress. There is a strong social message that you better not say a personal *no* to the global *yes* or you'll get left way behind, maybe even voted off the team/island/planet.

We can also get confused about how to spend this *yes/no* coin because of our values. Many of us have values that are about being of service, or not giving up, being generous of ourselves, being loyal or any of a number of other deeply held stances for which saying *no* doesn't seem to fit. If one of my core values is to work for the good of the whole, I may find that I just can't say *no* to any request for my time by my favorite charity. That is if I think only of the *no* side of the coin. On the other side, when I say *no* to that need I am also saying *yes* to my family or my health or my job or to moving towards more balance in my life. Most of us have several core values, so the appearance of saying *no* to one is usually saying *yes* to another one. (One of the foundations of life coaching is awareness of personal values and how to live in alignment with them.)

By remembering the two sides of the coin we can stay aware of and dedicated to our priorities as well. In order to say *yes* to those things that are most important to us, we absolutely have to say *no* to many things that are not as important. If I really want to say *yes* to that creative project I will have to say *no* to many other possible ways of occupying my time. If I want to say *yes* to saving money, I may have to say *no* to all kinds of great deals and beautiful things.

It could be that our struggles with saying *no* are part of the down side of abundance. For the vast majority of us in this country at this time we have more of everything than most humans can even imagine. We have more stuff, more people we connect with, more food, more entertainment, more books, more music - we have more of every thing than we have the slightest idea of what to do with. It is imperative that we learn that all of what we say *yes* to comes with built in *nos* - and yet that can be one of the biggest challenges we face. With all of these awesome options we may have become addicted to *yes*. And who wouldn't be? There is just so much delightfully wonderful abundance all around us.

Some of us are comfortable living in the land of all possibilities. It may be easier for us to live without ever committing to *yes* or *no*. And some of us say *yes* from the place of our highest and best dreams without understanding how to actually live the *yes* within the constraints of what we call "real" life.

Our inner critic, that voice inside of each of us with the constant message of “not good enough”, also wants to keep us confused about the *yes/no* connection. Whether the critic has us believe our not-good-enough-ness means we have to say *yes* to every class/request/need that might begin to make us more worthy or to say *no* to everything because we can never be good enough for it - either way it keeps us disconnected from knowing *yes* and *no* come back to back. And when we are disconnected we stay stuck - which is just where the inner critic wants us to be.

And then there are all the ways we get *yes*, *no* and *love* tangled up. Back to that slippery slope I talked about earlier, saying *no* or hearing *no* from someone else can, from one gut-level perspective, feel very much like not giving or receiving enough love. Could that be a hold over from our little two year old selves being told *no* for the first time? Could that have felt like we weren't loved anymore and so every *no* we hear or say sends us right back there? When our parents were saying *no* to playing with sharp objects, they were saying *yes* to keeping our beautiful eyes functioning. When they were saying *no* to one more chocolate chip cookie, they were saying *yes* to You get the picture. We aren't two years old any more, but our emotional response might be - if we stay stuck in the one-sidedness of *no*.

There is no place more tricky to realize the connection of *yes* and *no* than in the face of unending need. Many of my gorgeous and awesome clients are living their values and their passions in the world with heroic dedication. Some are working in non-profit organizations that are fiercely committed to compassion, healing, and living together in more life-affirming ways. Others have children with special needs or spouses facing their own heroic challenges or have their own exquisitely demanding health issues. For many of us who are fiercely living and giving from our core values it can be extremely difficult to imagine both sides of the *yes/no* coin. Our inner super hero is determinedly doing all she can to keep saying *yes* to meeting the challenges of the ceaseless need no matter what. This is part of the magnificence of human beings - that we will give of ourselves tirelessly when needed. We have honor and gratitude for those heroes among us.

Because we are humans we live with paradox or polarities. One polarity of heroic sacrifice is that when it is no longer a conscious and willing made choice, heroic sacrifice can become imposed martyrdom. What changes the choice from one of gift to one of entrapment is not knowing both sides of the coin and not having the inner freedom to say *yes* to our wholeness. Another consideration is the sustainability of our choices. Again, when we completely ignore, even if consciously, all that we are saying *no* to when we say *yes* in heroic ways, we may not be able to do so for long. The down cycle is, sooner or later, a part of all systems, as anyone who has experienced burn out knows. Being conscious of the *yes/no* coin may make it more likely for us to figure out how to be committed to both sacrifice and sustainability.

Let's go a bit deeper here. What if we move the consideration of *yes/no* from that of scheduling, commitments, triggered responses, and heroic choices to one of inspiration? Inspiration means, according to Merriam Webster, "a divine influence or action on a person believed to qualify him or her to receive or communicate sacred revelation; the action or power of moving the intellect or emotions". What if we made our choices based on what moves us, either from our own deeper thoughts and feelings or from a sense of our connection with the sacred? What if we remembered that with every *yes* and *no* we get to chose to remember who we are, what we're about and how we're about it?

Liminal places are in between places, like doorways or thresholds, when we are not fully in one or the other yet. Dusk and dawn are liminal places, not fully day or fully night quite yet. Beaches, where land and water meet depending on the shifting tide, are other liminal spaces. If we don't just immediately drop off into the sleep of the dead, we can experience the liminal place of not really being asleep or awake, that dreamlike trance of being both at the same time. These in-between places, although barely perceptible, can be quite powerful.

In some spiritual traditions liminal places are where the veil between the worlds is thinner, where it is more possible to connect with spirit. They are spaces where divination or the envisioning the future is more likely. In these in-between places it is

more possible for us to be inspired.

My sense of *yes/no* is that there is a way of being with the two-side coin before any choice is made that is a liminal place as well. If, for even a moment, we pause in the place of all possibilities, if we rest in the in-between space for just a nano second before making a decision, we might be able to have more awareness of the impact our *yes/no* choices have on our present and future. We might come from a place of divination, a place of connecting with the divine within us, a place of more consciously creating our own future in alignment with what has the most meaning for us.

When we are open to this liminal space of all possibilities we step out of binary, 0/1, either/or thinking and into the both/and perspective of the Wise Woman tradition. Recognizing the wholeness of *yes/no*, how they always come with each other, how when we choose one we are choosing its partner as well, reminds us of our own wholeness/holiness/health.

Of course it is difficult to imagine pausing in the place of all possibilities in the busyness of our daily lives. And even with knowing all of this about the two-sided coin, it is not a simple thing to get clear on what and how to say *yes* and *no*. The good news is that we all have plenty of opportunities to practice reclaiming the powerful magical tool that the two-sided *yes/no* coin offers us!

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