

## Grief and the Patience Required for Acceptance: Willfulness vs. Willingness

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### About the Public Holistic Response

- ¶11 Will Daddario’s article, “What Acceptance Is,” brilliantly moves through aspects of grief, despair, and Acceptance; it allows griever to meaningfully hold together aspects of loss that are otherwise fragmented and dispersed in our subjective experience of it. Daddario traces contradictions that permeate our experiences not only of grief and loss, but also of how we live in light of them. This includes the paradoxical relationships between accepting and giving, cure and poison, being open and closed off, centered and decentered, and, as I will later add, of willingness and willfulness. His confrontation with acceptance resists the typical rectilinear picture (e.g., the “stages of grief”), ultimately providing us with a picture of the process out of despair that manages to retain its life and dynamic movement despite the fixity of language.
- ¶12 By including—rather than disavowing—the various vantage points through which we confront, and are confronted by, grief, Daddario reconfigures the way we understand acceptance. One of those perspectives involves the recognition of the “horizon” that lies between despair and Acceptance. We are confronted with this horizon in our search for the resolution of grief—a search he describes as a “hopeless hope.” From the vantage point of depression, Acceptance appears as something reached or achieved. Daddario notes that this is a partial view, however, because a horizon is merely the limit to our sight. It is both “there” and “not there”: an abstraction that is real. Drawing on the etymology of “horizon” as a bounding circle, Daddario explains how the horizon encircles us or constitutes a delimiting circle.
- ¶13 Describing the horizon as a circle lets Daddario begin moving beyond despair because Acceptance can be seen something other than a telos achieved through intentional action: Acceptance is a “non-doing.” Apprehending this shift involves two parts. First, he describes how we must “acquiesce to our status as patient,” which Daddario understands by looking at the role of agency with respect to enduring. Treating acceptance as a “doing” involves seeing it as something accomplished through agency—a picture Daddario rightfully contends with. The second shift consists of recognizing giving as the essence of Acceptance. Daddario represents each of these moments as part of the counterintuitive shifts required for seeing how Acceptance is not “a doing,” but is something that is done to us.
- ¶14 As a binding circle, despair has a potentially totalizing nature. It can engulf us to the point that it blocks our ability to recognize how despair is a partiality that represents itself as whole. A perspective is totalizing when there is nothing outside of it because it is wholly self-contained or closed off. Its engulfing nature is perhaps what prompts us to search for respite in a location other than where we are, like reaching for a horizon that is never present to us. It is worth noting that the perceived totalizing nature of despair is not mere delusion. Grief does not merely “appear” totalizing to the person who experiences it as such. Its potentially totalizing nature materializes in the way it consumes us—sometimes to death. It can be destructive—a destruction our depression may welcome—so that we may be reunited with, or remain in proximity to, what is lost. Just as the horizon is both “there” and “not there,” despair is both “totalizing” and “not totalizing.”

The arc to the horizon is capable of opening. For many reasons, however, some of us may never experience our circle wedged open.

- ¶15 The risks involved with despair prompt me to think about the subjective experience of, using Daddario's words, acquiescing to our status as patient. Because this acquiescence is part of what it means to recognize the true essence of Acceptance, the nature of our status as patient becomes especially crucial to dislodge despair. For me, this has meant tuning in to the aforementioned dualism whose theme features in this essay: my experience with the difference between willfulness and willingness.
- ¶16 I propose that one moment of our acquiescence towards our status as "patient" concerns the difference between willfulness and willingness. Within despair, *willfulness* is a stubborn protector that, while trying to obtain results, nevertheless encloses us. Daddario discusses this aspect in terms of agency, drawing a revealing connection between "doing" grief as agents and normalcy. He writes, "tacit belief in autonomy and individual agency, ubiquitous in US educational institutions and media representations of the "self," urges us to do grief. How to grieve is unclear, but doing it promptly is necessary because eventually we have to get back to normal."
- ¶17 Queer disability theorists point out the inextricable connection between normalcy and the compulsion to be normal, where the compulsory nature of normalcy creates the guise of choice within a system where it is lacking (McRuer [2006](#), [2012](#)). The impetus to grieve (as agents) for the restoration of normalcy might lead us to attempts at willfully rearranging and controlling the pieces of our lives in an orderly manner. Ordering our world seems to promise a return to normalcy or a reprieve from grief. While willfulness is protective, it ultimately distorts our vision of Acceptance. Willfulness chases the receding horizon; in doing so, it abdicates our capacity for pure giving because it is oriented not by patience, but teleology: it strives to reach the abstraction of Acceptance that we see from despair's partiality. Drawing on Anne Carson's discussion of Porete, Daddario insightfully highlights how action may ultimately obstruct our path.
- ¶18 In contrast, *willingness* opens the arc of despair and sees its partiality. While despair is always partial, our willfulness against loss precludes the recognition of it. Much like how Acceptance is a non-doing, "willingness" is a "non-willing." Willingness entails a pause that relinquishes willfulness, a relinquishment that is required for our status as patient. Willingness, then, is not a reassertion of the will to bring within reach the destination of Acceptance. It is the absence of the reassertion of it. Willingness provides the interval for patience—for enduring—by opening us up to what is already there, even when we fear what may be.
- ¶19 Sometimes circumstances permit, or inhibit, a confrontation with (or refusal of) our fears. Given that willingness is a non-willing, we cannot merely "will" ourselves out of fear. Fear nevertheless plays a significant role in differentiating willfulness from willingness. In Daddario's discussion of Hāfez's rose, he describes how "[the rose] doesn't choose to bloom. It stops choosing not to bloom," and choosing not to bloom is what Hāfez describes as fear. This passage can be used to draw out another aspect of willingness: the difference between "willfully choosing" on one hand, and the willingness required for the cessation of fear on the other (where fear consists in choosing to remain closed off). Considered in this light, willingness may be the antidote for fear—an antidote required for the non-doing of Acceptance—because fear underpins willfulness. Willingness is a necessary condition for being patient: it's the wedge that drives open the despair encircling

us. And the pure giving that is constitutive of Acceptance requires that we be patient: “all active attempts at Acceptance will only confuse the matter.”

110 Daddario provides us with an answer to the question of what Acceptance can be “when it is no longer bound by our individual perspective,” because opening our circle involves letting in. Sometimes in grief we say that we’re beside ourselves. Perhaps being beside ourselves is not just a facet of grief, but also of Acceptance. Maybe we’re beside ourselves when we decenter or suspend our willfulness. Maybe the process of opening the arc up to giving lets us honor the ways in which we were always beside ourselves—or, to use Judith Butler’s words, already given over—to something bigger than ourselves (Butler [2004](#), [2006](#)). As Daddario says, “We were always already participating in it.”

## References

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