

The Zen of Clams

By Nicole Perry

“Could I get a hot dog without the actual meat, just some ketchup on a bun and maybe a little relish?” my mom asked.

The vendor stared back at her and laughed under her breath. Slowly, the squat woman reached for a bun, pausing for a minute to shake her head as she shoveled on some condiments and handed the pathetic looking meal over to my mom, all the while giving her that same condescending, belittling glance from the side of her eyes.

I hate that look. In an instant, it makes me maliciously protective of my mom, and I want nothing more than to snap back at the vendor: “Excuse me, allow me to point out that you work at a hot dog stand for a living and you’re wearing a cardboard hat and an apron with a dancing soda can on it, so stop acting as if my mom is some sort of circus freak. Wipe that smug look off your face, and give the woman her damn ketchup and bread!”

I restrain myself to nothing more than a dirty look. A few moments later, as my mom and I eat our food at a nearby bench, I turn to her and sigh, “Mom, you are so weird. Honestly, just when I think you couldn’t possibly be any stranger, you go and top yourself.”

How ironic that the same attitude I give my mom every day about her “unique” beliefs and odd behavior, is also the attitude that I despise when it comes from other people.

Could it be then, that in reality we possess the very traits that we find undesirable and annoying in others? The characteristics we ascribe to our enemies could in fact be some of our own. And if that were the case, then essentially, no one is exempt from being labeled selfish or backstabbing or a liar. Perhaps we all possess these flaws, and above all, possess the inability to see these flaws within ourselves.

I remember last summer when my mom called me into the kitchen and asked me to pour the night’s clams into a pot of boiling water.

“You called me all the way in here to dump a bag of clams into a pot of water that is four inches away from you?” I asked with a rude look of disbelief.

“Well I don’t want to take on the negative karma of the clams’ souls by aiding in their death.” My mom always explained things with innocent patience, as if it were perfectly normal to fear clam karma. I gave my mom my familiar roll of the eyes and grabbed the heavy bag.

“You are so annoying mom. Why can’t you just be normal for once? You go to some hippy weirdo church in the woods of Chilmark, you meditate on a pillow in our basement closet, and now you won’t even make dinner.” I dumped in the clams, splashing hot water on the stove and stomped off.

What a hypocrite I am to judge my mom's beliefs and accuse her of being weird, all the while going to bed at night worrying about the bad clam karma on my soul and hoping that I didn't dump any sinners into that boiling pot of water.

I think that by recognizing the flaws within ourselves, we could be more understanding of those same flaws in others. Could this not be the start to eliminating hate and resentment? Isn't it what Gandhi meant in his hopes for peace by suggesting focusing on self-improvement instead of trying to improve the world?

It's hard for me still to criticize my mom when I face the facts that I was eager to eat the food she claimed was blessed by her guru, Sadu Ram, during my AP final exams. Not only that, but even when I have a house of my own, I will most likely still buy organic tampons and brown recycled napkins. Furthermore, when my mom isn't looking, I sometimes eat her dried kelp and aloe plants because deep down I do believe in their healing power.

If people could admit certain flaws and traits about themselves and embrace them as a part of who they are, then maybe when they see those same traits in others, they will be accepting and understanding. Could it be that the cause of all the world's hatred is nothing more than hypocrisy? And is the cure to end hypocrisy, or simply to accept the fact that we are all hypocrites?

It still bothers me sometimes that my mom didn't want to take on the bad karma of those clams, yet had no problem allowing me to do so, and it seems hypocritical. Perhaps this is why she is always so patient when I scoff at her beliefs and give her those icy stares, all the while becoming more and more like her each day.

Maybe it's that my mom knows that she, just like me and the rest of the world, are all hypocrites, and that by including herself in that massive group of flawed beings, she accepts and loves them all the more.