Handout: An excerpt from the book *Radical Acceptance* by Tara Brach

Chapter 3: THE SACRED PAUSE

Enough. These few words are enough.
If not these words, this breath.
If not this breath, this sitting here.

This opening to the life
we have refused
again and again
until now.

Until now.
-David Whyte

In the 1950s a few highly trained pilots in the U.S. Air Force were set a life-or-death task—to fly at altitudes higher than ever before attempted. Going beyond the earth's denser atmosphere, they found, much to their horror, that the ordinary laws of aerodynamics no longer existed. As Tom Wolfe describes it in The Right Stuff: "… a plane could skid into a flat spin, like a cereal bowl on a waxed Formica counter, and then start tumbling—not spinning and diving but tumbling end over end."

The first pilots to face this challenge responded by frantically trying to stabilize their planes, applying correction after correction. The more furiously they manipulated the controls, the wilder the ride became. Screaming helplessly to ground control, "What do I do next?" they would plunge to their deaths.

This tragic drama occurred several times until one of the pilots, Chuck Yeager, inadvertently struck upon a solution. When his plane began tumbling, Yeager was thrown violently around the cockpit and knocked out. Unconscious, he plummeted toward earth. Seven miles later, the plane reentered the planet's denser atmosphere, where standard navigation strategies could be implemented. Yeager came to, steadied the craft and landed safely. He had discovered the only lifesaving response that was possible in this desperate situation: Don't *do* anything. You take your hands off the controls. This solution, as Wolfe puts it, was "the only choice you had." It countered all training and even basic survival instincts, but it worked.

In our lives we often find ourselves in situations we can't control, circumstances in which none of our strategies work. Helpless and distraught, we frantically try to manage

what is happening. Our child takes a downward turn in academics, and we issue one threat after another to get him in line. Someone says something hurtful to us, and we strike back quickly or retreat. We make a mistake at work, and we scramble to cover it up or go out of our way to make up for it. We head into emotionally charged confrontations nervously rehearsing and strategizing. The more we fear failure the more frenetically our bodies and minds work. We fill our days with continual movement: mental planning and worrying, habitual talking, fixing, scratching, adjusting, phoning, snacking, discarding, buying, looking in the mirror.

What would it be like if, right in the midst of this busyness, we were to consciously take our hands off the controls? Chuck Yeager had to go unconscious to interrupt the compulsion to control. What if we were to intentionally stop our mental computations and our rushing around and, for a minute or two, simply pause and notice our inner experience?

Learning to pause is the first step in the practice of Radical Acceptance. A pause is a suspension of activity, a time of temporary disengagement when we are no longer moving toward any goal. Unlike the frantic pilots, we stop asking, "What do I do next?" The pause can occur in the midst of almost any activity and can last for an instant, for hours or for seasons of our life. We may take a pause from our ongoing responsibilities by sitting down to meditate. We may pause in the midst of meditation to let go of thoughts and reawaken our attention to the breath. We may pause by stepping out of daily life to go on a retreat or to spend time in nature or to take a sabbatical. We may pause in a conversation, letting go of what we're about to say, in order to genuinely listen and be with the other person. We may pause when we feel suddenly moved or delighted or saddened, allowing the feelings to play through our heart. In a pause we simply discontinue whatever we are doing—thinking, talking, walking, writing, planning, worrying, eating and become wholeheartedly present, attentive and, often, physically still. You might try it now: Stop reading and sit there, doing "no thing," and simply notice what you are experiencing.

A pause is, by nature, time limited. We resume our activities, but we do so with increased presence and more ability to make choices. In the pause before sinking our teeth into a chocolate bar, for instance, we might recognize the excited tingle of anticipation, and perhaps a background cloud of guilt and self-judgment. We may then choose to eat the chocolate, fully savoring the taste sensations, or we might decide to skip the chocolate and instead go out for a run. When we pause, we don't know what will happen next. But by disrupting our habitual behaviors, we open to the possibility of new and creative ways of responding to our wants and fears.

Of course there are times when it is not appropriate to pause. If our child is running toward a busy street, we don't pause. If someone is about to strike us, we don't just stand there, resting in the moment—rather, we quickly find a way to defend ourselves. If we are about to miss a flight, we race toward the gate. But much of our driven pace and habitual controlling in daily life does not serve surviving, and certainly not thriving. It arises from a free-floating anxiety about something being wrong or not enough. Even when our fear arises in the face of actual failure, loss or—like the military pilots—death, our instinctive tensing and striving are often ineffectual and unwise.

Taking our hands off the controls and pausing is an opportunity to clearly see the wants and fears that are driving us. During the moments of a pause, we become conscious of how the feeling that something is missing or wrong keeps us leaning into the future, on our way somewhere else. This gives us a fundamental choice in how we respond: We can continue our futile attempts at managing our experience, or we can meet our vulnerability with the wisdom of Radical Acceptance.

PRECIOUS MOMENTS OF FREEDOM

We learn Radical Acceptance by practicing pausing again and again. At the very moment when we're about to lash out in verbal outrage, we don't. When we feel anxious, instead of turning on the TV or making a phone call or mentally obsessing, we sit still and feel our discomfort or restlessness. In this pause we let go of thinking and doing, and we become intimate with what is happening in our body, heart and mind.

Pausing as a technique may feel unfamiliar, awkward or at odds with our usual way of living. But actually there are many moments—showering, walking, driving—when we release our preoccupations and are simply aware and letting life be. We may pause at seeing the new green in spring; or in the supermarket we may pause to gaze at the freshness of an infant's face. When we finally understand a problem we've been grappling with, our pause may be a sigh as our body and mind relax. At the end of a long day, we may experience a natural pause when we lie down in bed and let everything go.

We can also purposefully pause during regular activities. I often pause before getting out of my car and simply feel what is going on inside me. Sometimes after I hang up the phone, I'll just sit at my desk, breathing, listening, not doing the next thing. Or I might stop cleaning the house for a moment and simply listen to the music I'd put on to keep myself company. We can choose to pause on the top of a mountain or in a subway, while we are with others or meditating alone.

Ajahn Buddhadasa calls these interludes of natural or purposeful pausing *temporary nirvana*. We touch the freedom that is possible in any moment when we are not grasping after our experience or resisting it. He writes that without such moments of pausing, “living things would either die or become insane. Instead, we survive because there are natural periods of coolness, of wholeness and ease. In fact, they last longer than the fires of our grasping and fear. It is this that sustains us."

The pauses in our life make our experience full and meaningful. The well-known pianist Arthur Rubinstein was once asked, "How do you handle the notes as well as you do?" His response was immediate and passionate: "I handle notes no better than many others, but the pauses—ah! That is where the art resides." Like a rest note in a musical score, the pure stillness of a pause forms the background that lets the foreground take shape with clarity and freshness. The moment that arises out of the pause can, like the well-sounded note, reflect the genuineness, the wholeness, the truth of who we are.

Pausing is the gateway to Radical Acceptance. In the midst of a pause, we are giving room and attention to the life that is always streaming through us, the life that is habitually overlooked. It is in this rest under the bodhi tree that we realize the natural freedom of our heart and awareness. Like the Buddha, rather than running away, we need only commit ourselves to arriving, here and now, with wholehearted presence.

Guided Reflection: The Sacred Pause

The sacred pause helps us reconnect with the present moment. Especially when we are caught up in striving and obsessing and leaning into the future, pausing enables us to reenter the mystery and vitality only found here and now.

Choose a time when you are involved in a goal-oriented activity—reading, working on the computer, cleaning, eating—and explore pausing for a moment or two. Begin by discontinuing what you are doing, sitting comfortably and allowing your eyes to close. Take a few deep breaths and with each exhale let go of any worries or thoughts about what you are going to do next; let go of any tightness in the body.

Now notice what you are experiencing as you inhabit the pause.
What sensations are you aware of in your body? Do you feel anxious or restless as you try to step out of your mental stories? Do you feel pulled to resume your activity? Can you simply allow, for this moment, whatever is happening inside you?

You can weave the sacred pause into your daily life by pausing for a few moments each hour or as you begin and end activities. You can pause while sitting, standing or lying down. Even in motion—going for a walk or driving —you can pause internally, eyes open and senses awake. Whenever you find you are stuck or disconnected, you can begin your life fresh in that moment by pausing, relaxing and paying attention to your immediate experience.

Experiment by choosing one thing you do daily and make a weeklong commitment to pause before beginning this activity. It might be brushing your teeth, making a phone call, getting out of the car, taking a sip of tea, turning on your computer. Each time, take a few moments to pause, relax and bring awareness to what is happening within you. After you have completed the pause, notice if anything has changed when you return to doing.