

CHAPTER THREE

THE STAGES OF LOVE

FREEZE-FRAME!

In the last chapter we talked about communication on different planes. In this chapter we will talk about the different stages of relationship.

If only we could freeze time in the beginning of a relationship. Love starts out like a house on fire! Everyone's having a fabulous time and we can't believe our luck. Somewhere in the festivities there comes a moment where there is a turning point. Joan Baez talks about this moment in time when "your perfect lover looks like a perfect fool." We suddenly see him or her in a way we hadn't before, and instead of making us feel grander, it diminishes us. The music stops, the lights go up and the scales fall from our eyes. The magic is gone. In a flash, our entire program of beliefs kicks in and we start to circle the drain in an inexorable spiral of expectation/disappointment. We are still in love with our concept, but no longer in love with the person we've chosen. In fact, that person starts to become annoying and get in the way.

The breakdown is obvious for the couple in the excerpt. They've clearly migrated from that "isn't it great that we both love foreign movies" stage to the very real question "Who are you?" Small wonder; none of us can compare to the idealized version of him or herself. Because of the expectations of our couple, each is deeply disappointed in this relationship. Both feel betrayed by a partner who hasn't lived up to their fantasy. The "never agreed upon" agreement has broken down. If the lines of communication were open along the way, these changes would have been handled differently. As it stands now we see the crumbling of romantic love.

M: Wait a second, here. I'm being made to look like this indulgent little brat that lost her toys and is having a temper tantrum.

L: I just don't know where you are anymore!

T: Without characterizing it like that, aren't you both angry? What did you promise him? What was your through-line?

M: (laughs) I promised to be beautiful and adorable. To make him look good in the world.

T: You think you're kidding, right?

M: Yes, I don't know what my message was. Maybe to provide warmth and artistry. To give him something he didn't have in his life.

T: Yes, maybe all of that and more. You did provide warmth and beauty, even a touch of the exotic. And he provided stability and dependability.

M: Wow, did we screw up!

T: Given your model for love, this had to break down. Somewhere along the line you have to become aware of what you can give and what you need. With every stage of relationship your needs change. You have to recognize that and find a way to communicate it. This is a no-fault situation. You haven't failed each other. You two are stuck in different stages of this relationship. Now, it's your job to be smart enough to see where each of you is stuck and connect with each other. You both had to outgrow the old model. You need to create a new agreement. One that actually addresses your needs and can work.

M: Yes!

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WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Imagine a rocket headed for outer space. As we see the plumes of smoke and fire, we observe parts of it falling away. In order to achieve escape velocity and reach deep space, the rocket fires in stages. One after another, the boosters fall away as the projectile sweeps through space. Though each is discarded in turn, all are indispensable in reaching the charted destination.

Love is a gradual unfolding of necessary stages. Here they are in a nutshell:

1. Identification

Attraction gives us liftoff. To say that this is the only stage is like focusing on the candy wrapper instead of the candy inside. Oh sure, it's pretty and eye-catching, but it's not the goods. This is the stage where we marvel at our sameness. "We're so alike!" Everything about each other is great and we sacrifice parts of ourselves that don't seem to fit in the relationship. We collapse into identification with "us". This stage can last from 2 weeks to 6 months. No one seeks counseling in this stage.

2. Differentiation

Now we see our differences, often in stark contrast. One of the difficulties of this stage (and all of them) is that couples are rarely on the same schedule. I can still be in the romance first stage while you've moved on to seeing our differences. This can lead to feelings of betrayal and loss. This stage is about power and autonomy, defining who I am in this partnership and how to go forward. "I need my space" replaces "I need you." A time of necessary disillusionment, this stage is often read as the beginning of the end.

3. Assimilation

Assuming survival of stage two, we move on. Almost a state of truce, this third stage is marked by a deceptive quiet. Whereas stage two is usually indicated by fighting and conflict, stage three almost feels like resignation. What's really going on is that our focus is no longer on the relationship itself, but on whom I am in the world and how this partnership fits in to that. Though it can look like the "magic is gone", the real bones of a sustaining partnership are being created here. Real communication begins, and how you build it will define the quality of this partnership. It is a stage that is constantly misread, but absolutely necessary in the formation of a healthy partnership.

4. Integration

In this stage we can consider a future together. We have explored enough of who we are in the world and lived with the reality of each other for long enough to know if we can build together. A willingness to commit shows up in this stage and a returning to the relationship seems to occur. Intimacy is again sought after and even a renewed blush of romance can show up as we consider new ventures and possibilities. Big external moves might occur at this time, such as moving in together or getting engaged.

5. Creation

In this stage we have put together a durable enough partnership so that we are willing to take on an outside enterprise together. Whether this implies having kids or co-partnering in business, the relationship feels strong enough to sustain a joint participation in the world. The danger in this stage is that we can lose each other in the mix, but clearly we feel strength in the relationship that supports creation of some kind.

What stage is this couple in the example in? In fact, they are in two different stages and therein lay the problem. Marta seems stuck in stage two, finding out who she is in the world, while Lance is somewhere around stage three. He wants stability and commitment but he isn't paying attention to where she is in all of this. How do we reconcile this? Only communication and agreement can hit the reset button and put them in the same stage.

We ask so much from relationship and we know so little about it. No one has taught us how to negotiate the stages of relationship. The passion and fireworks are merely the first stage of love, but they are the part we see most in the movies and we identify as love. When this projection falls apart, as it must, we have the opportunity for the succeeding stages, the booster rockets of love.

You see the dilemma: we have an unreal "formula" for love and vague notions of how it should unfold, yet we are attached to the very stage that cannot last. *Real love can only show up after disillusionment.* We must first get through and dispel the

fantasy before we can begin to love. After the disappointment that is inevitable we can start to question, “What do we have here and how can it work?”

What most people call “love” in the beginning of a relationship is a form of self-infatuation. We’re thrilled with how we feel; we marvel that we can feel this way again. We are blissfully unaware of whom our partner might actually be. Underneath it all, our patterns, our psychology our lessons have bonded deeply. If we could see only this, if not for this fluffy fantasy, people might never couple at all. Only after the first stage is worked through can we begin to create a workable relationship.

A NEW MODEL

It isn’t easy for people to make the adjustment from the appearance of romance we’ve come to know and the very different reality of partnership. Can we survive the transitions of every stage, and make sense of the work and the play of it? The question is: will there be enough love and good will at the end of the day to sustain us?

My experience is that the reality of relationship is better than the fantasy. This point of view accounts for all the work that must be done and still allows for romance and joy. With the pleasure of fantasy comes uncertainty and insecurity. If love is too good to be true, then we are not worthy of it, but if partnership is based on truth and hard work, we can earn our happiness.

Spiritual partnership is based on a joining of equals coming together for the purpose of spiritual growth. Love can be defined as spiritual cooperation to mutually learn what we are meant to learn. Even attraction is based, not on the physical, but on our being drawn to our lessons. We are meant to come together to learn and to grow. There are no accidents in the spiritual model. We have chosen each other, in our wisdom and clarity, to work in perfect spiritual cooperation for our highest good and personal happiness.

In psychological terms we can say that our patterns attract each other. The unresolved issues of childhood are being unconsciously acted out. We seek resolution through a partner whose patterns dovetail with our own.

You and your chosen partner are in perfect spiritual agreement with every issue and every conflict. The issues that arise in relationship are designed to reveal patterns and to give us the opportunity to resolve them. We have conspired to create the events that move each of us forward on our journey. Moreover, everything that happens in this relationship is for our highest good. We serve each other best when we understand that we are the catalyst for each others’ growth.

Conflict is a necessary part of partnership. We can look at love, and even disagreement, as a part of spiritual synchronicity. There is no such thing as pointless argument. All events have a purpose for growth and learning, and when we empower this model we are never lost. This framework assigns meaning to every exchange and allows us to keep our power in the relationship. From this view there are no accidents. Nothing has “happened”; we have chosen everything. We are destined to be together. There is no unnecessary pain, just unfinished business between us. Rather than having the experience of having the “same old argument”,

recast it as ongoing work on issues that need resolving. Everything is a piece of spiritual business: from the bedroom to the public arena we are always in the presence of our learning and growth. This powerful model gives meaning to our interactions and purpose in going forward together.

As we migrate through the different stages of relationship this philosophy is a through-line that will make sense of the changes. Everything evolves and so should our model for love. This model is more serviceable than the conventional viewpoint, and it works to solve problems. Don't waste time debating whether or not it is true; rather, use it as a template to see what it reveals and explains.

Now, back to our couple in their respective stages:

T: What do you think about all of this? Lance, what do you need?

L: She knows! (Laughs)

T: that's the whole point! She doesn't know. She can't know until you tell her.

L: I need to know that she believes in us. That she wants to build this together.

T: Do you want to build this, Marta?

M: of course I do, but I need validation.

T: What does that look like?

M: Acceptance. Respect. Respect is huge! I feel like I can build anything with him if I get that. I would even want to build with him.

T: That's a start. What about you Lance? Can you give her that?

L: I can give her that. I just felt like she was leaving me behind. That hurts. As long as I know she wants a future with me, I'll give her the world.

This became the beginning of a new relationship. Through communication and connection they jump-started the process and entered the same stage together. (Stage three) They will continue the conversation that they should have had years ago. Finally, there is a chance to give each other what they need, by being in the same place and time.

YOUR WORK OF ART

If you and I were painting a mural together we would confer, discuss and agree. There would be conferences and input, even disagreements. Passions would run high. Each of us would have a point of view that reveals our inner world and our choices. Through this common goal and purpose we would get to know each other. We would create a connection, an intimacy. We would relate. We would build on the skills that each of us bring, on the mastery that we both possess.

Every great artist first mastered structure and form before creating their masterpiece. How do we create our own "work of art", our masterpiece of love? What structure must we master? There are dynamics that need to be understood, strategies to be explored, and real understandings that need to be in place to build a

partnership. To even begin to fight for a relationship we need to know what we are fighting for: what is the truth and what is not. We need to know what is possible. We also need to know where we are right now. Are we in the same stage? Is our communication solid?

There must be an investigation: an inquiry and a fact-finding mission. There is a show on the home network called "This Old House". In the show they systematically go through the house and look at the plumbing, the electricity and the basic structure of the home. They take an honest assessment of what is working and what needs improvement. Only by doing so can they determine the value of what they have. They will not even begin to market the house until they have an objective view of it. This doesn't mean that they aren't looking at its potential; within this very real scrutiny their "art" is to see what this structure can be at its absolute best. It is at once a thorough scrutiny and a projection of the best possibility of the house.

This attention to detail and focus on the relationship allows us to see in a different way. We can and must afford an honest look at the state of the union. We also need a path or structure to compare what we have. We must have to find ways to maintain the enthusiasm and vision to see what this partnership was in the past, and what it can be again.

Conscious relationship is a way and a path. Instead of placing blame and being frustrated, we choose to concentrate on where we need to improve our skills. We become a team with a purpose. Love becomes a work of art to be proud of and excited about, as well as a very real framework that demands attention and care. This model gives purpose to every moment in relationship and causes us to assess more powerfully and with a workman's eye. There is a pride and delight that shows up when we care about our work and real progress when we make substantial improvements. When we can recognize the place that each of us is in within this partnership, we have something powerful to communicate to each other.

Abandon the fantasy. It got us to the dance but it won't keep us there. In this model we choose for relationship we have to deal with the dynamics of partnership. We wouldn't expect to get behind the wheel of a car and automatically know what to do. Let's be realistic and honest with ourselves. Rather than expect love to work magically, let's have an understanding that, like any partnership or project, love takes care and attention.

What we create together will be as unique as we are. We come together spiritually, emotionally, intellectually and physically to create a synthesis that only our partnership can produce. Be fascinated by what will be forged when we combine our skills and interests. Take inspiration from whatever the highest evolution this union can attain. Your love of theater and my delight in the outdoors can live together and inform each other in ways that we haven't yet imagined. Be present with the question of "What do we create?" We can't be afraid to look under the hood and see the engine. We need communication and an accurate assessment of what stage each of us is in within the relationship. If you are still in the identification stage and I am in the differentiation stage, only communication can bridge the gap of potential disconnect and disaster. Without seeing this we are blind and will cause each other unnecessary pain.

Instead of being blindly reactive, let's find out who that stranger is across the room. Remember the initial excitement about this person; it was real. Don't abandon the potential of who we can be together. We are the raw material for our own creation.

WHAT STAGE ARE WE IN?

According to this breakdown we may ultimately find ourselves in five separate relationships. Each stage is so dramatically different that it creates a unique experience of each other. When answering the question, "What is relationship?" we have to start with what it is at any given time. It is the most stimulating fantasy ever and then it is not that fantasy. It is the opportunity to feel emotionally connected but it evolves to a place that we cannot get all of our emotional needs filled. It is the experience of being seen and understood, a most fulfilling experience. Then it migrates to a stage where we are connecting with the world instead. It does not remain a guarantee of sex and intimacy, or of eternal passion, though it starts with that promise. Neither is it a static, never-ending situation. We don't grow simultaneously and in lock-step with one another, but we are always growing together or growing apart. The fact is that relationship, like everything else in nature, has stages. If we don't acknowledge this truth, we will feel tricked and betrayed.

We are now starting to separate what we've been taught to expect from the objective reality of relationship. According to the old model, our partner should be psychic. She must know the "real" me (whatever that happens to be at the time), and deeply value that, whether I reveal that or not. He must know my special "code" for love: exactly how I need to be loved and when. Let the old model go. We'd have more luck guessing the combination of their locker in the gym than knowing their formula for love.

In our new model, there is a gradual unfolding of great potential through the use of observation and communication. There is purpose and meaning to every conflict. We see the arc of growth in our partnership and we expect change. Disappointment and sadness may show up, but these are the signals of work to be done. Every stage has an order and logic to it, and each can be exciting and naturally build to the next, as we construct a durable model that sustains us.

In the identification stage, we yearn to surrender who we are. We gladly collapse into an "us" and fall under the spell of this dream-like state. Even within the fantasy there is reality. What we see in this early stage really is the potential of that person and this partnership. Life first takes us to the top of the mountain to show us the view and then brings us down to the valley with a message. The message is "earn it." Stage one gives us a vision.

Real and workable dynamics need to be mastered, and when we do, we can navigate these waters called relationship. Only within the disillusionment of the second stage can we start to see these dynamics. There is the adventure of discovering whom we are with, and what they are all about, but we cannot abandon ourselves. Differentiation provides the opportunity to see who I am in all of this.

Forget the magical thinking. Take the opportunity to find out who you are and who your partner is. Stage one is sameness, Stage two is difference. Without hostility or blame we can discover where I end and you begin. Without this vital information we cannot proceed. We cannot lose our sense of self or give it up for an illusion. There can be great conflict in this stage, because we are angry. The magic is gone, the pain of self has returned and the promise of the situation seems to be broken. When the flower dies, only then can the plant begin to bear fruit. We must be willing to give up the semblance of happiness for the real possibility. If we were taught to expect this stage, there would be far less conflict. We can and should learn to value this necessary disillusionment. Stage two gives us independence.

A sobering stage, Assimilation brings an uneasy truce, and the possibility of building a real foundation. The first two stages could take up to two years, or six months. This period is also not determined by length but by content. We discover that this love will not take away pain, it will not manufacture happiness, or bliss. This time is the opportunity to honestly assess the assets of the union. Perhaps she is great at seeing the bigger picture, while he is a master of detail. He is wonderful at generating money where she has a great sense of balance and style in the world. We have done our time on the outside and once again look inward towards the partnership. Communication shows up in this stage because we genuinely want to know if we can go the distance with each other. Enough of an investment has been made and now we need to know what we have. We are given objectivity in this stage.

Commitment comes with the fourth stage, integration. The timeline of this stage is from one year onward. We have explored the previous stages and are ready to build a future. The wariness is gone and with it that sense of separateness and suspicion. There is a sense of real acceptance in this stage and even contentment. We sense a union that is not based on dependency but on choice. This can be an exciting time when we embrace that which we have held at arm's length. The relief and release of this time brings a lot of joy, and the good will to move forward. This can take the form of long-term commitment, moving in or even getting engaged. We are ready to formalize our union and declare it to the world. More than ever, communication and awareness are necessary tools for this stage.

When the love and good will overflows, when we have enough emotional equity in this partnership, we want to expand. A year or two into the relationship we reach the stage of creation. We feel so secure within this partnership that it literally spills over into other areas. We are ready to add more moving parts. We have successfully forged a new concept of "us" that wants to take on the world. It is a heady state that allows us to so trust what we've created that we believe that it can support creating a family.

This synthesis of concept and reality makes us stronger, like alloyed metal. We build businesses, buy houses and have babies with faith that we have the strength and agreement to do so. Creation adds a dimension to relationship that gives us participation and validity in the world. We affirm ourselves through what we create. It is an exciting stage that can be sustained for the life of the relationship.

START AN INQUIRY

Partnership is creative and challenging and requires passion and commitment. We have to abandon the idea that relationship runs itself, and roll up our sleeves. Awareness is the beginning of a process to create “conscious” relationship.

For something we want so much from, we give it very little attention. Truthfully, if the relationship were a houseplant it would not survive with the nurturing and attention that it is given. We don’t even know what agreements we’ve already made or what patterns we are behaving from. To start an exploration we need to ask questions: What do each of us want from this situation? Is this partnership we have created addressing our mutual interests? How does the world experience us as a couple? Does the world like what it sees in our interactions? Do they know more than we do about our own dynamics? How are we changing and how have we changed?

If we start with the assumption that we don’t know what this relationship is, then we are at the beginning of an exciting inquiry. Only by living in the question of “who are we” do we have a chance to examine the inner workings of our lives.

The couple in the example made a huge discovery: they learned that they don’t know where each other is, or what each wants. They did not know that relationship unfolds in stages, or what each stage means. They are now able to start addressing these issues. It is their first real opportunity to love consciously.

Exercise 1:

- 1. Write down the stage of relationship you think you are in.**
- 2. Determine what stage your partner is in and why.**
- 3. Determine what stage you think your relationship should be in and how to get there.**
- 4. Start a dialogue about the stage you are each in, without judgment. Have a “feeling” discussion about it.**