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FIVE

STAGES OF RELATIONSHIP

FREEZE-FRAME!

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 that is the 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 we are no longer in love with the person we’ve chosen. In fact, that person starts to become annoying and to get in the way.

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:

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.

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 of the 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.

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 world. 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 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.

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 that we can build together. A willingness to commit shows up in this stage and a return to the relationship starts to occur. Intimacy is again sought after and even a renewed blush of romance can show up as we consider new ventures and possibilities together. Big external moves might occur at this time, such as moving in together or getting engaged.

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.

CONFLICTING STAGES

The breakdown is obvious for the couple in the next 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 her. Because of the expectations of our next 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. They were going to build an empire together. Now they feel like they've grown apart. If the lines of communication had been open along the way, these changes would have been handled differently. As it stands now we see the crumbling of romantic love.

Let's listen in on Karen and Martin:

KAREN: 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. I just want what we had.

MARTIN: I don't know who you are anymore! I can't trust you. You're ridiculous.

T: Without characterizing it like that, aren't you both angry? What do you think you promised him? What were you bringing to the mix?

K: (laughs) I promised to be beautiful and sexy; and to make him look good in the world.

T: You think you're kidding, right?

K: Yes, I don't know what my message was. We were crazy about each other. We literally couldn't take our hands off of each other. You know, we were both in other relationships when we first met. Maybe I was supposed to provide romance. To give him something he didn't have in his life.

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

M: We were an unbeatable team. When I met Karen my life came together. My work made more sense; I think my whole life made more sense. Now she's always angry with me.

K: Wow, did we screw up! Is this an unfixable mess?

T: Given your model for love, this had to break down. Maybe it's supposed to break down to create something new. Somewhere along the line you have to become aware of what you give and what you need. I don't think you know who you are to each other. In a way it doesn't matter how this relationship started, your needs change with every stage of relationship. You have to recognize that and find a way to communicate. Stop blaming! 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 our job to be smart enough to see where each of you is stuck and try to connect with each other. You both had to outgrow the old model. Now you need to create a new agreement that actually addresses your needs and can work.

K: Yes!

These two have a couple of wild cards to deal with. To start with, they built a relationship while still being in their original partnerships. This implies guilt and mistrust from the beginning. Putting history aside, let's look at the dynamics in play.

What stage is this couple in the example in? In fact, they are in two different stages and therein lay the problem. Karen seems stuck between stage one and stage two, Identification and Differentiation. She wants it to feel the way it used to and yet she is finding out who she is in the world. Martin is somewhere in stage three, Assimilation. He wants stability and commitment and a real foundation for building, but he isn't paying attention to what Karen needs right now. How do we reconcile this? First, we identify the problem in simple terms, and then we fix it. Communication and agreement will hit the reset button and put them in the same stage.

Now, back to our couple in their respective stages:

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

M: She knows! (Laughs)

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

M: I need to know that she believes in us. That she wants to build a life together. I need to know that I'm more important than her friends, more important than "hanging out."

T: Can you give him that? Do you want to build this, Karen?

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

T: What does that look like?

K: Acceptance. Respect. Respect is huge! I feel like I can build anything with him if I get that. I need him to stop trivializing me and my life. I can see myself going forward with him if he gives me that.

T: That's a start. What about you Martin? Can you give her what she's asking for?

M: 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 basis of a new relationship. Through communication and connection they jump-started the process and found their way to the same stage together (Stage three). They will now 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, Martin can feel the safety and trust of partnership and Karen can receive the validation that she needs. It is a dramatically different world for them when their needs are being met.

We ask so much from relationships and we know so little about them. 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, then only do 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 not for this fluffy fantasy, people might never couple at all. Only after the first stage is worked through and breaks down can we begin to create a workable relationship.

WHAT STAGE ARE WE IN?

According to this framework we may ultimately find ourselves in five separate relationships. Each stage is so dramatically different that each creates a unique experience of the relationship. When answering the question, "What is relationship?" we have to start with what it is at any given time. Initially, it is the most stimulating fantasy ever and then, when it breaks down, it is not that fantasy. It is the opportunity to feel emotionally connected and yet it evolves to a place where we cannot get all of our emotional needs filled. It is the experience of being seen and understood, a most fulfilling experience. Having accepted that reality, 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 lockstep with one another, but we are always growing together or growing apart. The fact is that relationship, like everything else in

nature, is in a constant state of change. If we don't acknowledge this truth, we will feel tricked and betrayed.

As we start to separate what we've been taught to expect from the objective reality of relationship, we see real differences. 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. The old model demands secret hidden knowledge. We'd have more luck guessing the combination of someone's gym locker than knowing their formula for love.

In the new model, conscious relating, 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 only the signals of work that needs 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. Oddly, even within this fantasy there is a certain reality. What we see in this first heady stage 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 and a mandate.

Real and workable dynamics need to be mastered, and when we master them, 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 must not abandon ourselves. Differentiation provides the opportunity to see who I am in the context of relationship and in my life.

Forget the magical thinking. Let go of the promise of stage one to magically transform, and 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. It is essential not to lose our sense of self or give it up for an illusion. There can be great conflict in this stage, because we are angry and conflicted. The magic is gone, the pain of self has returned and the promise of the situation seems to be broken. Only after the flower dies, can the plant begin to bear fruit. We must be willing to give up the semblance of happiness for the real possibility of connection. If we had been taught to expect this stage, there would be less conflict. We can and should embrace this necessary disillusionment. Stage two gives us independence.

A sobering stage, Assimilation brings an uneasy truce, and with it the possibility of building a real foundation. The first two stages could take 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 is a time 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. By now 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 gain objectivity in this stage.

Commitment comes with the fourth stage, Integration. The timeline of this stage begins from one year onward. At this point 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 a growing feeling of contentment. We sense a union that is not based on dependency but on choice. This can be an exciting time; we embrace that which we have held at arm's length for so long. 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 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. Perhaps a year or two into the relationship we reach the stage of Creation. We feel so secure within this partnership that the good will 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 trust what we've created; we believe that the partnership can support creating a family or building a real enterprise in the world.

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; it requires passion and commitment. We have to abandon the idea that relationship runs itself, and roll up our sleeves to do the work. Awareness is the beginning of a process to create conscious relating.

For something we want so much from, we give love very little attention. Truthfully, if the relationship were a houseplant it would not survive with the little nurturing and attention that it is given. We don't even investigate 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 (the world) 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 and change the inner workings of our lives.

The couple in the example made a huge discovery: they learned that they don't know who each other is, or what each wants. They did not know that relationship unfolds in stages, or what each stage means. Knowledge is power: 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 and your partner are in.
2. Determine what stage your partner is in and why you see it that way.
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.

EXERCISE 2

Start an inquiry: discuss your mutual patterns and origins, not in order to assign blame, but in order to shed light on your relationship. Try your best to stay objective, and if the discussion gets heated, put it aside for another time.

EXERCISE 3

Identify the role that Karen is playing; identify the role that Martin is playing. Change those roles and see how the conflict would show up differently.

