

**The Idiot's Guide
To Enlightenment**

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PROLOGUE

This little guide is written for ultra-conservatives and raging left wingers, for millennials and boomers, for swingers and priests, for janitors and CEO's, for narcissists and victims, for millionaires and paupers – in other words, it's written for you and me. How you identify in life doesn't matter to the topics in this guide, because the thinking presented herein doesn't concern itself with adherence to dominant societally held beliefs, to established mores or values, to cultural movements, or to political correctness. It doesn't dismiss any of those valuable endeavors and notions, however, it does not blindly endorse them either.

While the thinking presented in this guide may be unconventional or unorthodox, nothing in here is deeply *for* or *against* anything or anybody. Nothing in here takes explicit fundamental, extreme or *absolute* stances.

The only purpose of this collection of topics is to observe what *generally tends to happen* based on many years of experience, observation, study, and informal interviews. At best, this guide offers possibly helpful perspectives which are maybe not readily findable and thus maybe not easily considerable. Perspectives that may afford you a different vantage point, that may help you understand and improve complex relational dynamics and may help you navigate the deeper challenges we all face with ourselves and those around us.

We all want to behave like good people, do the right thing, believe we're evolved, and get along. Yet, sometimes we just don't get along, we don't do the right thing, we don't act particularly enlightened, and we sure don't behave like good people. Life seems to present us with many unforeseen twists and turns and we often feel unprepared, don't know what to do, or are plain lost. Especially relational issues can often feel unclear, confusing, or too just too

damn complicated. Sometimes when things go sideways, we don't know how we got there, and we don't know how to make any sense of what's happening. We often don't understand the nature of our challenges, especially when they seem to repeat themselves over and over.

We all tend to *want* to improve ourselves and our relationships, but in reality we often fail ourselves and each other. We screw up. Add to this that during times of unawareness or stress we tend to *not* show up as our best selves, both in our relationship with ourselves as well as in our relationships with others. None of us *want* to sabotage ourselves or our relationships, so sometimes *improvement* may just mean fucking up less, or being a little bit less of an idiot.

Wouldn't it be great if in times of confusion, conflict, or things just plain going sideways, there was a little *guide* we could consult that would allow us to act just a little more

enlightened! Life is complex, we are complex and often it's just too hard to really understand complex subjects because it takes too long to really learn about them. We often don't have the time, the interest, the attention span, or the discipline to dive deep. This guide attempts to address seemingly complex topics with concision, brevity, and clarity while offering understanding, helpful insights - and the kind of practical pointers we'd like to find in a *guide*.

This unconventional collection of topics allows you to enjoy quick, independent reads of a few minutes each that may help you understand how to be more accepting of yourself and those around you, how to screw up less, how to thrive more, and how to have healthier and more successful relationships. We're all in relationships – with ourselves and our environment, and we all want to get along with both ourselves and one another better. And we all could use a sprinkle of enlightenment.

Even when things are chugging along all right for you, maybe this guide can help boost your emotional and mental equilibrium, or help towards behaving in healthier and more constructive ways than you already are. It may help you reflect on things you'd like to understand better. And when you're *not* thriving, when you're in a fog, disoriented, or just plain unhappy about things, use this guide like a relational survival toolbox, like a manual for getting along, like an Idiot's Guide to Enlightenment. And when things really go sideways and you're up a certain creek with no paddle, pick it up to see if what's ailing you might be addressed in this guide. Maybe it'll offer you a helpful perspective.

Each topic stands on its own, i.e. no other topic is needed to read and understand any one topic, although some later topics do reference notions which are addressed in some earlier topics. Some topics may be more controversial than others. Check out which topics speak to

you and take a few minutes to try them out. Take the thinking presented in here for a spin, and try it on for yourself. Have a look at where it might apply in your life or in the lives of those you care about. Maybe you or someone you know could use these perspectives and insights and get along a wee bit better both with ourselves and everybody else.

Experience, observation, study and interviews of course do not establish truth or even causation - they only establish correlation or at best apparent trends and patterns. The research approach utilized in this guide doesn't adhere to established academic methods of substantiation via citations and reference materials. If some perspectives in this little guide challenge your own - or the generally established and mainstream - understanding of things, check in with your own experience and observation before you rule something out. It's also great to ask those you trust what they think, have experienced or observed.

Conversations With Ourselves

We have hundreds if not thousands of conversations with ourselves every day. Nobody else hears them, and most of them even we are not conscious of. Yet none of us were ever taught how to have these conversations in helpful ways – how to keep our minds and hearts operating smoothly, with clarity, simplicity, effectiveness, and elegance. And society's influence tends to not help us with our internal conversations. Here are some key insights that might come in handy towards running a clean mental and emotional system.

HAPPINESS VS CONTENTMENT

The former American Supreme Court judge William Rehnquist once said 'I may not be able to define pornography, but I know it when I see it'. This holds true for happiness – it's hard to define, but we know it when we feel it. And we all seek it and pursue it. Happiness may be easily confused with states of joy or euphoria. So just what is happiness, and how well do we all do in pursuing and attaining it? And what about contentment? Is that boring? Let's look at what happiness is first.

Happiness could be described as a momentary emotion of unconflicted joy when one feels, in the moment, that one's life is heading toward its desired course. It's a place, a moment, when all one's values are in harmony with one's experience. It's a state without suspicion or resentment towards others, and without living

in the past or in the future. It's the state when one's mental, physical, and emotional capacities are effective and fully engaged in the realization of one's life.

It's interesting that one cannot really aim directly for happiness as it tends to be an *effect* – a reaction to some particular thing or event or chain of events. One could say that happiness is a positive and joyful feeling *this* side of euphoria. A state without conflicting thoughts or conflicting values, when nothing is lacking in terms of needs or desires. When things are *enough*, when we feel fully alive with nothing amiss, and nothing missing.

This of course is a tall order, and few of us often feel that nothing is lacking, that there's no conflict, and especially no contradiction in thoughts and feelings. It's rare, and for some of us it's entirely elusive. Yet, we so easily ask one another 'Are you happy?'. Why such tall order of a question? And don't we generally feel a

tiny bit of pressure to say ‘yes’. Because if we say no – then what? Happiness seems wonderful to pursue, to have as a guiding star, but how attainable and especially *sustainable* is it for most of us really?

The pursuit of happiness can be like a craving for joy. Cravings and their satiation however tend to be short-lived.

Let’s look at contentment and how it compares to happiness. Contentment means you have a fairly constant and continuous experience of life, one without radical highs, but also without radical lows. While there may well be spikes of happiness, the majority of one’s experience may be *a consistent wave of contentment*. You plan some, but you remain spontaneous and flexible. When you encounter setbacks you don’t immediately forget all the things that *are* working for you. You appreciate where you’ve come from and how far you’ve gotten in life.

The basics in your life, such as food, shelter, work, and relationships are covered in an acceptable fashion. You have things that you look forward to and you have things you like to remember. You can appreciate the big things and the little things in your life. When things aren't going your way you aren't completely thrown off your course. You consider things thoughtfully, and keep reactivity to a minimum. Your very low level of anxiety keeps you from making rash decisions. There are great times and less great times. You could have more money, but you could also have less. You don't ride high and fall low – you're pretty constant.

A sense of contentment tends to be a solid foundation for moments of happiness.

This may sound boring when compared to happiness, and many of us wouldn't want to 'settle' for being 'just' content. Most of us have

gotten used to a mentality that always wants more – more freedom, more money, more this and more that. But what is enough? When is it enough? Most of us don't have great answers to those questions. Someone once said 'The meaning of money is that I don't have enough of it'. Could the desire for, and the expectation of happiness be *too much*, maybe even a trap that's always on the horizon but never quite arrives into the present moment?

It's quite possible that as we pursue the elusive state of happiness, we overlook the possibility of steady and more attainable contentment. Most of us race forward, ahead, into the future, eyes on the prize, wanting bigger better and more. We forget that highs *require* lows in order to qualify for highs. Most of us want less drama in our life, less ups followed by downs, less elation followed by despair. Couldn't that sound pretty good – a state of humming along steadily through life, realizing it's not all good and not all bad, not all highs, and not all lows.

What about life with less regrets, less reactivity, more acceptance and a profound realization that things are pretty good and that they surely could be a hell of a lot worse. Would you forego occasional or rare moments of true happiness for many moments of contentment? Would you pay \$500 a year in lottery tickets in hopes you may win big? Or would you spend those \$500 on something that will support your life, or even spend it on someone else? Isn't it great to have choices in how we handle the many twists and turns in life? Some of us will pursue happiness, others will pursue contentment. It takes all kinds.

**I don't smile when I am happy,
I smile *in order to be happy.***

Happiness tends to be dependent on things going well. Happiness tends to vanish when times get tough. Happiness tends to be an

emotional reaction to external events or some sort of stimulation. Contentment on the other hand tends to be fairly independent of how things are going. The experience can stay even when the going gets tough, because contentment is not dependent on external events or stimulation. It's safer, more attainable, more solid, more sustainable, and it stays with us even when the outside world doesn't collaborate with our expectations and desires. Give it a think.

**Happiness tends to be fleeting.
Contentment tends to be stable.**

YOUR THOUGHTS ARE NOT YOUR FEELINGS

In practice, we generally blend thoughts and feelings to such a degree that we often can't tell the difference. When asked what we feel we often answer with what we think, and when asked what we think, we often answer with what we feel. There's lots of confusion about thoughts and feelings all around.

**It's hard to separate thoughts and feelings.
But it's well worth it.**

Our thinking can be off or distorted, yet our feelings tend to feel so damn true. When we mix distorted and automatic thinking with feelings, we have a mess. And because we often have strong feelings about our thoughts, they often *feel* real, which adds to the confusion. As it turns out, *feelings make thoughts seem real*. And as it turns out, this is an illusion: thoughts

are *not* real! They only *feel* real. If you recognize that your thoughts are not real, you will be able to dismiss distorted unhelpful thoughts – and may opt to *feel* better.

**Your thoughts are not your feelings.
Feelings make them seem real.**

This is tricky, yet it's possible. Identify your distorted thinking – here are some examples. Do you see things in black and white, all or nothing categories? Do you jump to conclusions without having hard facts? Do you magnify or minimize the importance of things? Do you focus on single negative details and dwell on them? Do you disqualify positive experiences in order to maintain a negative outlook? Do you motivate yourself with *should* statements? Do you assign motive to others without having sure knowledge? Do you argue emotionally (it feels true, therefore it must be true)?

Ask yourself:
What are my thoughts about these feelings?

We all suffer from some degree of distorted thinking. Identifying our default distortions can be extremely helpful so that we can catch ourselves when we make the critical error of *mistaking* our thoughts for our feelings. *Separating thoughts from* feelings solves a lot of seemingly real problems and can keep us from spiraling downwards and enter a vicious cycle.

Thoughts are not real. You can dismiss distorted thoughts and opt to feel better.

Once you have identified distorted thoughts, you can counter them with more reasoned, sober and balanced counterarguments. It's critical that you don't do that in your mind (remember it's your mind that tricked you into a downward spiral in the first place!), but

instead it's *necessary* that you do this *in writing*. Writing things out is the first step towards liberating us from the cyclical thought patterns of our mind, and helps us to *see with sobriety* when our thinking is distorted. Treat your thoughts as if they are outside yourself – observe them, write them down, and see how helpful or true they really are. Often, you will find that they are neither.

If you feel anxious, that doesn't mean that *you are* anxious. It means you are experiencing the symptoms of anxiety, not that you *are* anxiety.

This counterbalancing of automatic thoughts tends to reduce our anxiety almost immediately. Try it out. Over time, as we practice this internal re-education, we can respond to unsettling events in more and more balanced and reasonable ways. And once we identify certain ways of thinking as not real, we can then *choose* to feel better about things.

STOP TRYING TO MEDITATE!

Meditating is known to have great value and many benefits, but for many, learning how to meditate is daunting and hard, and 'success' can be hard to measure or attain. There appears to be a popular belief that meditating entails *sitting still, not thinking, and quieting one's mind*. And while it *sounds* relatively easy to just sit, *quiet the mind, not think, and do nothing*, it proves to be quite hard for almost all of us. This popular and generally unquestioned belief are so commonplace that most of us never question if we're going about this in a helpful manner. Shouldn't it at least give us pause for thought that it's *so damn hard* to not think - to quiet the chatter in our mind?

Those who are 'successful' at meditation report many great bi-products, such as feeling centered, calm, present, attentive, grounded, and achieving a sense of serenity. As it turns

out, the biggest issue with learning how to meditate is that we're *trying* – trying what appears to be so hard to do. This *trying* gets exacerbated by believing that we need all sorts of accoutrements in order to 'do it right'. We get all tangled up in believing that we need silence, the right background music, that we need to follow the right teacher, or need to find the right time, location, or even sitting position. It's a lot – and we're still *trying*. Most of us find it hard, and many of us feel that we just can't do it – we 'fail'. As it turns out, the door to meditation can open quite easily when we cease to *try*.

**Trying is an activity. See what happens
when you simply stop to try.**

When you're *trying* to be centered, you're not centered. When you're *trying* to stop your restless mind, your mind is not quiet. When you're *trying* to focus on your breathing, you're

not just breathing. When you're *trying* to tune out the background noise, you're hearing the background noise. However, when you're *not trying*, when you're just *noticing* and *observing* what's going on, *then* it turns out you're *centered*. When you're watching your restless mind, witnessing what it's doing, *then* your mind will quiet down. When you're *observing* your breathing, regardless of how even or stifled or shallow or deep it may be – *then* you're allowing yourself to *just* breathe. You are, in essence, just *acknowledging what is*.

The magic to meditation is to remove the *trying* and the *incessant judging* – most likely the judging of doing something *wrong*. The only 'wrong' thing about meditation is the trying. There's always plenty to notice when you're meditating without *trying* anything – there are thoughts, sounds, smells, body sensations, and *more* thoughts. And all there is to *do* is to *observe* everything that's going on. There is nothing else to *do*. Try it out - you might find

that your awareness can witness, observe, or notice layers upon layers of sensations, thoughts, thoughts about sensations, sensations about thoughts, thoughts about thoughts, and so on. There's an almost never-ending amount of things to notice or observe, and *noticing* or *observing* is all there is to do.

'No deed there is, no doer thereof.'

There's a multiverse inside all of us waiting to be explored, to be noticed, to be observed. The key to mediation is to *avoid nothing* – only notice, observe, witness – and within a short amount of practice what you will experience will amount to a serene observed experience of your inner reality. Even if that inner reality is chaotic or overwhelming, even if you have incessant inner dialog or lots of negative thoughts - the part of you that *watches* it all is a steady, serene part of your Self. Regardless of what transpires, *that* part of yourself tends to

just *be*. That part just *is* - without needing to *do* anything. You don't even have to find that part of your Self – it will find you the moment you stop *trying*, the moment you simply notice, observe, and witness all that's going on inside you. And this somewhat detached or dispassionate 'activity' can be a very peaceful experience.

The trick is to watch and observe your thoughts - rather than *follow* them.

When you watch your thoughts, feelings or sensations, the big seduction is to *follow* your those thoughts, feelings, or sensations – and next thing you know it, you are only *thinking*. *This* is the major challenge – to return to just *observing* your thoughts, rather than getting swept up by them. This takes practice! See if you can spend a few seconds, then a few minutes, just observing your thoughts, your feelings, your sensations. See if you can *find* the

moment, the ‘place’ where you get swept up in your thoughts or feelings. The moment when you *notice* that you’ve been taken hostage by your thoughts or feelings, witness yourself noticing this, and then continue to just *notice* and *witness* all that is going on in your mind, your heart, your soul, your body – in *you*. It won’t take long before you’ll be able to identify and get to know *that* place from which you can just *observe*. It is a big goal already to practice this *unattached* or *dispassionate* experiencing of your own thoughts and feelings.

Specifically, if you find criticism and judgment take over, notice the criticism and the judgment. It’s key to *not try* to stop it – just observe it arise and then observe it go its way. Then other thoughts will present themselves, or your ‘observing’ will generate some of its own. There’s no need to stop or try anything - just keep watching and observing – that’s *all* there is to do. When you watch your thoughts, you *are* no longer your thoughts. When you watch your

feelings, you are no longer your feelings. Watching them changes the power equation between *you* and your thoughts or feelings – they won't control you any longer. It can almost be *fun* to watch what your mind will cook up and present you with. Amazingly, watching or observing *in itself* can be a calming behavior.

**When you watch your thoughts,
you are no longer your thoughts.**

Maybe the simplest way to paraphrase meditating would be to call it *the activity of being present* - paying attention to what's going on in each moment. Forget about needing a quiet place, the 'right' sitting position, or any environmental constraints. Close your eyes for a few seconds or minutes, on the bus, in the shower, in bed - and discover maybe unknown parts of your own inner self. Just notice, watch, and observe. The attention you devote to meditation could change your life.

INTERNAL VS EXTERNAL AUTHORITY

There tend to be two kinds of authority we're motivated by – *internal* and *external* authority. Basically, being motivated by internal authority means we trust our own senses (information from the inside), and being motivated by external authority means we trust other people's senses (outside information). As children we're dependent on parents and others for 'informed' authority on life because we haven't experienced enough life yet on our own. As we mature, we develop that inner sense, an inner resource, which becomes *internal authority*. This means developing and trusting our senses, our intuition, our hunches, our gut reaction, our own belief systems, principles, worldviews, and our convictions.

As adults there are lots of institutions that are essentially *external authority* that we are reasonably expected to follow and obey, such

as laws, law enforcement, and the general rules governing life in groups and in society. At the same time it is our inner compass that guides us through *our life as humans* – it's our individual and internal source for decision-making, judgment calls, and for handling such basic feelings as trust, fear, curiosity, and interests.

It's a delicate process to develop our inner sense of such important decisions as what's good, what's right, what's dangerous, what's true, and what's trustworthy. It takes a lot of awareness of those in more responsible positions – external authorities – to balance what's truly needed in terms of guidance from the outside while allowing those still developing their own access to their own senses, and trusting that they will develop ok without unnecessary influence from the outside.

Being motivated from the inside, from *internal authority*, always competes with the

motivations, rewards, recognitions and feedback *external authorities* provide us with. Early on in education, children learn that there are right and wrong answers and behaviors - regardless of their own experience. Often, children learn to please adults in order to receive validation, and at times, even love. If this happens consistently, they begin to look outside themselves for love and approval. For instance, if adults praise young girls for the cute outfit they're wearing, how beautiful they are, or comment on their figure, young girls learn that people give them love and approval based on their appearance and that certain looks or body types are more valued than others.

When this sort of conditioning by external authorities happens *at the expense* of acknowledging and validating the child's internal experiences, it can set us on a lifelong trajectory to basically forget or override our internal experiences altogether. In such case, we may increasingly rely on external sources for

our sense of identity and self-worth. We may rely on others for even basic experiences such as *how we feel*.

Many of our established institutions facilitate such reliance on external sources of authority. Organized religion, the news, entertainment and advertisement industries, all present themselves to us as external authorities who *purport to know better* than we do – know better what to believe, what to idealize, whose information to trust, what products to buy, and who to get ahead of in order to be successful. Add social media and we're also being told by others – usually people *we don't know* - how to look, what to wear, what to say, what to read, where to go on vacation, in short – how to *be*. The majority of those sources of *external authority* are pervasive in most of our lives.

***External authority* also means you don't have to take responsibility and are not accountable.**

As a modern adult, it can be very hard to differentiate messages that came from the outside from messages that came from the inside. It can result in struggling to identify and meet our own needs, self-validating our experiences, and can exacerbate our reactivity to external disapproval of us or of our decisions. It can become very easy to lose one's sense of balance, basic ok-ness, and self-worth. Worse, it can lead to disorders, anxiety, or depression.

Modern life has the notion of *conditional approval* basically built-in. Most of us never even question such commonly-held beliefs as *believing that we are only worthy if we are productive*. Or *believing* that we need people to like us in order to be a good person. Or *believing* that we are valued more when we do well in school or at work. Not that many things in modern Western society foster the development of *internal authority*. To be clear, cultivating trust in an internal authority doesn't

automatically mean denying external authorities, or that we suddenly give ourselves over to every sensation and itch we feel.

There's tremendous value in being able to *identify what we're feeling*, learn to trust our body's sensations, learn to trust our minds, and not *mindlessly* going along with what peers, the media - other people in general – are suggesting, saying, or at times, even asking for or demanding. There's nothing lost when we learn to listen to ourselves, and run the ideas of external authorities by our own internal authority. There's a lot gained from becoming less susceptible to what others think, say, suggest, or demand. The development of internal authority is one of the most critically important human features so many of us have lost. Find yours. It has almost all of the answers.

**Growing up also means
trusting your own judgment.**

THE POWER OF ANYTIME BUT NOW

Much has been written about the power of being present, the power of being here and now, about how the present is really the only time we have - that the past is gone and the future isn't here yet. Still, most of us spend an inordinate amount of time remembering or lamenting yesterday, and hoping for or worrying about tomorrow. It seems built into us to forget all about the here and now and live our lives suspended between what is behind us and what is in front of us.

It is true that if we let go of preoccupying ourselves with yesterday and tomorrow, and if we focus on *right now* only, most of our worries won't have a leg to stand on. From misery over depression to anxiety, most negative emotional states *rely* on us spending our present time either in the past or in the future – or in both. Yesterday and tomorrow are huge distractions from being alive and present in the only

moment we truly have, this one now. It beckons the question of why yesterday and tomorrow are apparently more interesting to us than the present time.

Many of us feel blue at times, and get nervous at times. In other words, many of us suffer from occasional or frequent mild depressive states, and many of us suffer from occasional or frequent anxious states. Usually, depression and anxiety are not linked, as both manifest so differently. Anxiety appears as high-strung nerves and instability. Depression appears as low-strung nerves and stability, albeit unhappy stability. Interestingly, depression and anxiety are *two faces of the same coin*: anxiety concerns itself with perceived loss in the future, while depression concerns itself with perceived loss in the past.

Anxiety concerns itself with perceived loss in the future, while depression concerns itself with perceived loss in the past.

In addition to remembering great times gone by, we do spend a lot of our (present) time lamenting what happened in the past. And in addition to looking forward to tomorrow, we also spend a lot of our (present) time fretting about what's ahead. If one were to be able to remove the preoccupation with what *wasn't* in the past, and with what *might not be* in the future, a lot of space and room would open up to us. That space and room would then be available to us *here, now, today, for this* moment. Being present would be so much easier were we not so prone to lament the past and fret about the future.

What tends to draw us away from the here and now is some level of fear – fear of having lost out in the past, or fear of losing out in the future. The power of anytime but now is a great power – it pulls us backward and forward at the same time. This somewhat irresistible power makes it hard for us *stay* in the here, *stay* in the now, *stay* present. If – and that's a big if – we're able, just for a moment, to forget about what

could have been, and forget about what might be, then we can have an absolutely amazing experience of being present, here, now, in this moment. In those rare moments almost nothing is missing, and unless we're in actual physical pain *right now*, any pain coming from a perceived past or future loss would have no leg to stand on.

**Nothing beats being here and now
and nowhere else, even for a few seconds.**

This is not easy to achieve, as evidenced by how much literature there is about how to be present and about the power of being here, now. Yet, it *is* possible to achieve such momentary states. The wonderful thing is that it doesn't take hundreds of those momentary experiences in order for us to *get it* – to get what it takes to *not* be suspended between yesterday and tomorrow, but instead to be *present*, to be *here*, and to do so *now*. Even if we only have this experience once or twice, it is an incredibly powerful experience, one well worth contemplating and experimenting with.

GOOD INTENTIONS PAVE BAD ROADS

Oh how we love good intentions. How often have we heard things like ‘But he meant well’ or ‘She had nothing but good intentions’? When explaining or defending something that went sideways, we invoke *good intentions* so often that it would suggest that *bad intentions* was a realistic option. But how many people do you associate with who you know have *bad intentions*? Good intentions a pretty much a given among most of us most of the time.

Think about it, who do you know that has been truly helped by anybody having good intentions? And yet we use the *good intentions* argument to justify a lot. As if the godness of the intentions somehow mitigates the pooriness of the actions when things go sideways. It’s like a band-aid that makes us temporarily not see the wound, it’s an excuse so that we don’t have to have unpleasant confrontations.

The sobering secret about *good intentions* is that they often cover up poor or lacking action.

Of course we all want to mean well, and most of us really do almost all the time. So, if you take intentions out of the equation, you're left with *actions*. And aren't those the things – the things that actually *happen* - that really count at the end of the day? Wouldn't a focus on actions be more helpful than a focus on intentions? The old adage 'Talk is cheap, actions are priceless' has a lot to offer.

The road to *hell* is paved with good intentions.

Why do we, as people, so readily and often forget that terrible things are often committed with good intentions? Good intentions, when acted upon, can often have unintended negative consequences. And remember that

having the intention to do good things - yet failing to take action due to procrastination or laziness - yields pretty much ... nothing. Good *intentions* solve almost nothing. Good *actions* however can solve a lot of things. Forget your intentions. Focus on your actions.

The road to *heaven* is paved with good actions.

The next time you hear yourself or someone else saying 'but they meant well' or 'I know you had good intentions', take a moment to reflect just why we apparently *have to* invoke the good intentions? How is the situation or how are we served by painting over a lamentable situation with the brush of good intentions? How would we feel if we could not help ourselves to the good intentions brush? This is not an easy consideration, but a worthwhile one. We'd all benefit from focusing on actions over intent. And it's not impolite to call a spade a spade.

ASSIGNING MOTIVE TO OTHERS

'I know exactly why she did it!' 'It's totally clear what he wanted to accomplish!'. We all know such statements. So often, *we know* what others meant or intended. We're sure of it. We don't even need to ask. We can just tell. And it relieves internal pressure to assign motive. We might feel righteous and we might even feel indignant! It surely takes us off the hook from having to ask and find out. But how did we become such great mind readers and fortune tellers, how are we so sure of others' motives?

Once we clearly think and talk about it, it tends to always become self-evident that assigning meaning or motive to the actions of others is not helpful. It's not helpful because not only might we be wrong, but we tend to then not give others their chance to share where they're coming from. And we usually will leave various possibilities unexamined and draw massive

conclusions (usually negative ones) from the motives we have just assigned to others. We interpret wildly, we use singular lenses and we disempower others. And we keep the focus *off* ourselves, as it's so much easier to talk about someone else negatively than about our own - likely anxious - evoked experience. Almost nothing about this is helpful at all.

Assigning motive doesn't reduce one's anxiety.

Let's take calling someone 'manipulative'. This is generally a negative label, not a compliment, it's neither neutral nor objective language. It's interpretive, subjective, it overlooks perspectives that might be possible without this label. *It is a disempowering statement to the person who makes it as it implies or creates victimhood.* It leads one to interpret future behavior negatively. At the end of the day, it's often not much more than a negative projection

that's *appears* to be self-serving, however in reality it is actually self-sabotaging.

So little is great about assigning motive that it becomes a tremendously good exercise to see if one can do it *less*. The next time someone complains to you about what someone *else* apparently did, and especially *why* they did it, see if you can *avoid* taking sides. See if you can instead find out how the person doing the projection is *feeling* themselves. It is so much more relevant and fruitful to talk about the feelings of someone who's in front of you rather than about those not present. See if you can avoid getting roped into the triangle whose sub-text reads 'If I tell you how mal-intended someone else is, then you'll side with me'.

**Assigning motive tends to be
not much more than a negative projection.**

Do yourself and the person in front of you a favor by remaining impartial. See if you can avoid colluding with the ‘victim of the moment’. Keep the focus on the person with the strong emotional experience, *be there for them* and what is really going on for them. Chances are, it’s possibly quite unrelated to the intent or motive of whoever is not present in your conversation. Look and see what is in front of you – likely a momentarily suffering person who has confused *experiencing* with *projecting*.

The ability to look and see clearly does *not* entail assigning motive. See if you can avoid the pull of negative past experiences and negative future projections – yours or those of others. Look and see how to enhance your ability to notice, to perceive, and to be present. Ask questions when you’re not clear. See if you can help separate fact from fiction and fact from feelings. Your friends will thank you for it, as we all would like our friends to stay present with us with as little judgment as possible.

JUDGING (YOUR) PAST BY TODAY'S STANDARDS

We all do it: we judge historical events - be they yesterday or 50 years ago - with today's standards, ethics, morals, and worldviews. We can't judge the future, and even the present can really only be judged once the moment has passed. So we happily judge the past, in part because we want to understand it, in part because we want to learn from it, and in part because we may be surprised or even incredulous at what we individually or collectively did yesterday, or years ago.

When you really think about it though, it becomes increasingly clear that yesterday, in the past, we *did not have* today's ethics, morals, standards, insights, and understanding. As such, it becomes increasingly clear that we really *cannot* judge yesterday with today's yardsticks.

It makes no logical sense - and yet, we love to do it. From speakers on campus with questionable opinions to Michael Jackson, we use today's yardsticks to judge people, often *in their entirety*, by *certain aspects* of their history. We also love to *speculate* about a different past and use today's popular values to *modify* history. 'Had I not said or done xyz back then, what would the other person have said or done?' Or 'If they didn't commit those heinous acts, I'd like their art much better'. We really seem to love reinventing the past, and if we can't, we tend to be quick to condemn what we, today, don't approve of *in the past*. This is silly.

Speculating about a different past is about as futile as judging it from today's vantage points.

Why such black and white approaches to flawed humans? Many historical figures did great things *and* terrible things – shocking! Where did we get the idea that those we admire can't be allowed to be flawed? Aren't we, today, also all

flawed, with skeletons in the closet, with shortcomings, and failings? Will *parts of us* one day also be judged with yet-unknown future standards? Would our current-day achievements then get possibly eliminated from the future's historical look backwards – because we're complex, flawed, and human? Who came up with the idea that *today's* artists and auteurs aren't - or shouldn't be - as complex and flawed as those of the past? This is all very silly.

**An unrealistic *all or nothing* view
of being human benefits no one.**

So what does that leave us? Fundamentally, this only leaves us *one* thing, and that is to *accept history* as the only possible choice – *back then*. Now then, if we want to, we could do things differently today and going forward. The past in no way whatsoever can be changed: that was then, and this is now. The *judging* of the past is not even really possible - in fact it's a conceptual error. We, who we are today, weren't even there. It's an oxymoron.

**The only sensible thing to do with history
is to accept it.**

What this entails in part is the deep recognition and acceptance that it's *ok to let go of decisions made by anybody in the past*. Many of us refuse to accept parts of our individual or collective past, and by doing so we artificially limit our responsibility and our ability to learn from history. There really is no other option besides accepting history just as it transpired, warts and all included. If there was another option, we'd take it. But there really is none.

Righteous indignation is not a virtue.

Furthermore, *learning* from the past becomes a lot easier and more helpful if we *don't* judge it before we attempt to understand it. Our quick judgment *will* cloud our understanding, and not

in helpful ways. The best way to understand the past and learn from it is to accept it exactly as it transpired, with all the good and bad, *then* try to understand it, and *then* maybe, if we're able to, learn lessons that will inform our behavior today and going forward. Tall order, yes. Impossible order, no. Reasonable, yes. Better options, no.

**Judgment of the past clouds our ability
to see it as it was - and understand it.**

Suspending judgment is an incredibly hard thing for us to do. It requires a ton of mental discipline and astute self-awareness, as you'll have to check yourself to see if you're really able to look at something without having made snap judgments about it. Yet, once we realize that this *looking at the past without judgment* is instrumental in understanding it, and therefore instrumental in learning from it – then it

becomes a lot more compelling to indeed suspend judgment when looking at the past.

**If we don't understand the past,
we tend to repeat it.**

Try to practice looking at your individual and our collective histories without judgment, even if just for a moment. It's okay to let go of decisions made in the past. Try to acknowledge complexities, contradictions, and flaws. Realize that we cannot understand everything and that we never know how others got to where they have gone. See if that changes your ability to understand and learn. There is much relief and freedom in fully realizing that we simply cannot – and therefore really ought not to – judge anything behind us with today's yardsticks. It's a trap to do so – see how much you can free yourself from doing so. That was then this is now, and the *then* is best not conflated with the *now*.

OUR (UNREALISTIC) EXPECTATIONS OF OTHERS

This happens to all of us often: someone we interact with behaves outside of the norm, or outside of our expectations, and we are surprised and possibly taken aback. And then it happens again. And again. Lo and behold, almost all of us are continually surprised, as if each time is the first time. This is weird.

It seems as if we all continue to use the typical societal standards to re-set our own expectations for that person's behavior even *after* those expectations have proven to be untrue. In general, past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. Yet, we just don't use *that* person's past behavior to set the standard for *that* person's future behavior!

**Expectations are only helpful
as long as they turn out to be accurate.**

It's been said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. If that's the case, then most of us may be insane ;-). So often, we simply don't adjust our expectations when the world acts and responds in ways we truly could anticipate. Not only don't we adjust our expectations, but we often feel frustrated in the moment when someone doesn't comply with our expectations, and we then feel the desire to express that in some form. One way to do that is as incredulity: 'How can they be that way?'. Shockingly, people *are* the way they are – and we could have known better. In fact, if we wanted to be incredulous, it may be more appropriate to direct that sentiment at ourselves!

Assuming things is hardly ever a good idea.

While it can serve us at times to rely on automatically made assumptions (eg when navigating traffic), it does not serve us in relationships. Take a step back, breathe, and allow the other person the freedom to be *just the way they are today*. Doing this, we might learn more about one another, and have the opportunity to become less judgmental friends, lovers, or partners. And who wouldn't want that.

**Check out your expectations of others
and adjust them based on reality.**

We ourselves might appreciate not feeling boxed into the expectations of others. Take a step back and relax your expectations – and update them when we they've been corrected by the behavior of others. Others will love you for it, and you'll be more successful in your own relationships.

Wishing for others to be different from how and who they are is tempting, but unreasonable. Turn the tables in your mind and see if *you'd* like if others wished for you to be different from how and who you are! If you'd like to be accepted just the way you are, the first step in that direction is you accepting *others* just the way they are – maybe especially if their behavior doesn't jibe with your expectations.

**Wishful thinking means
you're not paying attention.**

Be clear, get clear, and act with the eye-opening sobriety that presents itself when wishful thinking takes a back seat. Discover others anew and give them the chance to surprise you. Accept them as they are, for only then will they accept you the way you are. And wouldn't we all like that!?

HELPING – WHO DOES IT REALLY HELP?

Helping others tends to enjoy a fantastic reputation. Who doesn't like a noble helper who empathetically alleviates suffering? Society rewards helpers more than most anybody else. Many helpers are helpers because it in part defines who they are. They are people who tend to focus on others *before* they focus on themselves. On the surface, we process that as altruism, kind, giving, and selfless. But we tend to forget to look at *why* the helper is always so apparently selfless, and *whom* the helping is really working for. Often, 'helping' is a fast way for the helper to feel one-up. We may not consider this consciously, but when helping a 'weaker' person, most of us tend to feel stronger and better. And the plot thickens.

**Being a helper means being selfless.
Or does it?**

One of the great ‘benefits’ of being a helper is that it allows us to not focus on ourselves. We get to focus on someone else’s misery, misfortune, pain, or feelings of threat. As such helpers, we may in fact ourselves feel weakened or threatened precisely when we’re dredging up our helper identity. Wait, what!?! We might help others simply in order to meet our own needs, or at least avoid dealing with our own demons for the time being. If we focus on someone else’s threats, our own threats tend to recede into the background for a while.

Helping others with that background story of our own may mean that we end up not helping others at all. If our helping is mainly serving our own needs, we won’t even notice when the weaker person no longer needs our help. It feels so good to be the competent helper that we may overshoot our stated goal by a mile. Helping in this way primarily works for the helper, and helping can be their drug of choice.

When helping feels so good, we can overlook the true impact of our helping, on both ourselves and the people we appear to help. It can serve as a massive distraction for all involved.

Helping can be an addiction.

If we're addicted to helping, chances are we'll start managing the emotions of those we help, and we do this primarily because we're unwilling or unable to manage our own emotions. 'Professional' helpers abandon their own self-work and instead of paying the price for it, end up miraculously basking in the light of the selfless helper. Such helpers forego dealing with their own shadows, their own demons, their own anxiety, and their own threats. Having abandoned themselves, they focus on the weaker people around them, and they thrive on *being of service* to those in (apparently) greater need. While this appears to

be noble, quite often however it's the helpers that are in greater need themselves.

Such helping doesn't serve those in need of help as well as it could and maybe should. 'Selfless helpers' often end up helping beyond what's healthy for those in need, and tend to project their own needs and past experiences onto those that are being helped. Such helpers often tend to project their own pain onto others. When we see others in situations that were threatening for *us* before, we tend to rev up and project our own fears and imaginations onto others. We may 'help' others with things they actually need no help with at all. We may in fact make things worse. And not help ourselves because we divert energy and attention from our own insecurities and needs.

Inappropriate helping can make things worse.

We can dress this up as empathy, altruism, selflessness, and just all-around human goodness, however we may be mistaken and misguided. Our own imaginations about serving others are *not* reliable yardsticks towards the greater good. While it's natural to want to help those in pain, we may teach them how to get rewards for demonstrating suffering. We may foster and increase dependence in them, and our great assistance may be overwhelming enough for them that they'll lose sense of when our help has been enough. And who of us hasn't been in the uncomfortable position of having to tell a 'helper' that it's good now, and that they may please stop helping us now!? It's hard to tell a helper off. 'Professional helpers' may know this secret unconsciously themselves!

Being a helper is such a compelling identity!

If we are addicted to helping, we'll find a way to make it sound really good to ourselves. We'll

convince ourselves first, and then we'll convince the rest of the world with our apparently selfless actions *how great we are*. Chances are, we *only* need all this convincing and conniving because deep inside, we don't feel so great about ourselves in the first place. We may cover this up with the help of grandiose means, we may even tell those we help how strong they are, and while helping we'll shower them in compliments. I mean, who has the wherewithal to turn down a compliment while suffering!?

Needing to feel one-up generally comes from a fundamental state of feeling one-down in general. This may have happened during our childhood, during college, or at our job. We've taken a hit. Shit happens. But if it's our shit, we ought to deal with it ourselves and do the self-work that it'll take before we develop a 'helping' identity or launch into 'helping' professions. While sounding trite, it's rather true that you need to help yourself before you're fit to help others. Self-work rules, and

besides, at the end of the day you really truly can't work on anybody else but *yourself*. We generally don't have the mandate from others to work on them. It's often over-reaching.

Help yourself before you decide to help others.

If you are using 'helping' as a substitute for relieving your own anxieties, take steps back and begin the necessary process of taking responsibility for your own emotions. This is not easy, but it's the healthy way. Only once you've developed good boundaries and a solid sense of self would it be prudent to start helping others substantially. Being a helper, privately or professionally, can be great - but check with yourself if you're doing it for reasons of your own, or truly because someone around you needs help. It makes a world of difference.

AUTHENTICITY VS MAKING SHIT UP

When was the last time you met someone who didn't feel they were inadequate in some respect? It's practically a pandemic – almost all of us suffer from not being enough, or too much. Since this sucks and is hard to admit to, most of us pretend we have our shit together and that we know what we're doing. Mostly, neither is true. And after doing this for many years, most of us find this *impression management* game tiring. It is. Pretending takes a lot of energy.

In some way it's normal that we all walk through life being busy managing the impressions we want to give. We feel we have something to lose if we don't manage how we're being perceived. For most of us, this tends to be a lot of work. But life's complicated enough without having to remember made-up stuff. And of course we at times forget that we

can only manage *ourselves* and we inadvertently often start managing *others*. This is of course a no-go, and fails with great reliability. Yet again, most of us do it.

We all know intellectually that it's a hell of a lot easier to simply be authentic and truthful, even about our own perceived inadequacies. And eventually most people *will* see through our managed identities and dressed-up truths and stumble upon our apparent 'weak' spots, physical and psychological blemishes, and incongruences. Everybody knows that it's usually just a matter of time. What's fascinating about this is that our own perceived inadequacies are really only unacceptable to *ourselves*.

Our inadequacies are really only unacceptable to ourselves.

This can be hard to believe, but becomes self-evident when you simply try it out. As an experiment, introduce some simple and bare authenticity to someone, and see how they respond. Amazingly, others tend to be a lot more forgiving of us than we ourselves are! This holds true even about our darker secrets, our deeply guarded flaws, the things we imagine would prompt others to reject us. Shockingly, they tend to do nonesuch, but instead tend to feel *closer* to us! What!?

Making up shit and keeping others in the dark makes us *and others* work unnecessarily hard, and lowers trust all around. And at the end of the day, others can feel let down when they eventually find out about our perceived inadequacies *if we've* pretended those flaws don't exist. As long as we share them with owned vulnerability *when the time is right*, it turns out that others tend to be rather accepting of our perceived foibles.

There's a cost to us and to those around us when we aren't authentic, hiding our perceived inadequacies, and engaging in impression management. But the biggest cost is the effect this has on *our own* psyche. Trapping ourselves into rigid ideas of how we *should be* is one of the most reliable pathways to ... depression. It keeps us from developing a healthy awareness of who we really are. Yes, we can always strive to improve ourselves, but we can like, rather than dislike, ourselves enough to even want to do that.

On the upside, authenticity is what actually comes naturally to us – it's what happens *before* we start hiding and managing information about us. It's easier and more effective to not tell little white lies – both to ourselves and to others. It's also hard to know when a little lie turns into a big lie, because, let's face it, we tend to be biased in our favor. And managing impressions can be a lot of work, as we have to remember what we told whom

and when and where. It's a lot of work. It's tiring.

**The big secret about authenticity is
that it's fundamentally lovable.**

The maybe biggest secret about authenticity though is that it's fundamentally lovable. It's like magic – try it out. Try being 100% authentic about something with someone, and see how they react. They tend to not only feel closer to you, but they are also more forgiving – and they will be drawn to you, even admire you. Authenticity is fundamentally lovable. Once you know this and have had some experience of it, it becomes a relief to no longer manage how we're being perceived, and instead simply be authentic. And plain honest. Less to remember, less to manage, less to make up. At the end, it's just easier for everybody. Authenticity truly is fundamentally lovable. It's like magic! Give it a whirl.

Handling Our Own Challenging Emotions

It's often not easy to know where our challenging emotions come from, what they mean, and how to process them in constructive ways. We often find ourselves in repetitive loops of thoughts and feelings which keep us from being clear and moving forward constructively. It can be helpful to find ways in which we're not held hostage by our less-than-helpful thoughts and emotions.

CONSCIENCE IS THE ORGAN OF BELONGING

We generally believe that we have a good conscience when we do good things and a bad conscience when we do bad things. This sounds true on the surface, however it's not accurate. Our conscience is much more complex than that. One only needs to look at the Holocaust to quickly understand that terrible things have been done with apparently good conscience by millions - who apparently mostly followed orders, and did so with, from what we understand, surprisingly good conscience.

Unimaginable atrocities have been committed with good conscience.

And one only needs to look to the countless victims of partner or domestic abuse in order to understand that good things – such as an abusive victim seeking help or getting out - have

often been done with a bad conscience. Many times, abuse victim even report a bad conscience when simply entertaining the good or healthy action, and many times, they report that a bad conscience kept them from doing what would have been right by *them*. Even those of us who haven't been in abusive situations, we can realize that we've at times done the right thing with a bad conscience – and maybe, at times, *not* done the right thing with an apparently good conscience.

A good conscience has little to do with doing apparent good, and a bad conscience has little to do with doing apparent bad.

So what does that really tell us? The big revelation about conscience is that, in a nutshell, it functions as our *organ of belonging*. What does that mean? Not unlike we use our nose to discern pleasurable smells from noxious odors, our ears to discern pleasurable sounds

from alarming noises - we use our conscience to discern which behavior ensures inclusion to our social group, and which behaviors may get us kicked out. As such, conscience is as critical a tool or organ as are our sense of smell or our hearing. So how does our conscience, our *organ of belonging*, operate and help us survive?

We do things with a good conscience when we believe or trust, consciously or unconsciously, that our actions ensure belonging to our group or tribe, thereby providing us with a sense of safety and identity. This group or tribe may be our family of origin, our group of peers, our nation, our current family, our circle of friends - or our adopted tribe, such as a gang, a religious group, or a political movement. Belonging to any of these groups or tribes tends to make us feel good. It is because of these 'good' feelings that it's critical to be aware that while doing things that apparently ensure our inclusion, we may commit terrible acts and possibly do so without feeling bad at all.

Conscience is the human organ of belonging.

And when we unconsciously or consciously believe, or fear, that our behaviors or actions will threaten our sense of inclusion and belonging, we may do them with a bad conscience or not do them at all – no matter how ‘right’ or healthy or ‘good’ those actions might be for ourselves. We will often sacrifice ourselves in order to *not* jeopardize our sense of belonging, safety and identity. This may mean staying with an abusive partner, capitulating to social or peer pressure, partaking in hazing at colleges, or simply not speaking up for what we believe, when we assume that the majority appears to be against our contemplated stance. Again, it’s critical to be aware that if it threatens our sense of inclusion or acceptance, we may not do the right, good, ethical or healthy thing. And if we reluctantly *do* do it, we may do it with a bad conscience.

In addition to our general sense of conscience, there's also one's *personal moral code* – what one deeply and unwaveringly believes to be right or wrong regardless of affinity to one or another group. This may sound mushy, but following such deep personal moral code tends to 'just feel right', and betraying it tends to just 'just feel wrong', and very deeply so. Because of the depth of such personal moral code, *not* following it, or not *being able* to follow it, can result in what's often referred to as *moral injury*.

**Moral Injury is when your
personal code is at war with *you*.**

Moral injury is the kind of suffering one can experience in high stakes situations when things go seriously sideways. Such derailments can have harmful results which challenge deeply-held personal moral convictions, and affect our

ability to trust ourselves - and others - in future times. What triggers such harm and loss of trust in ourselves and in others may be something we *did*, something we *didn't* do but believe we *should* have done, something we *witnessed*, or something that was *done to us*. The result of betraying – or being forced to betray - your personal moral code can lead to profound internal suffering. This may mean a deep loss of trust in ourselves and others, or feeling guilt, shame, self-condemnation, outrage, despair, and even suicidality.

Moral injury predominantly affects military veterans, but it can also affect survivors of sexual assault and abuse, imprisoned people, doctors, nurses and law enforcement personnel in extreme conditions, and for instance even Alzheimer's caregivers or veterinarians. *Moral injury* is no joke – it makes us the walking wounded and it's paramount that we don't ignore it in ourselves or those around us who may be afflicted by it.

OWNING YOUR EXPERIENCE

'You know how you feel when someone you're close to dies ... you get so sad'. The vast majority of us talk like that when we're talking about *our* experience, our emotions. Or we might say something like *'You know, he was so loved, everybody's so sad'*. For some reason, we've collectively adopted a conversational style that allows us to outsource our own subjective emotional experience. While we may do this to build possible rapport and solicit empathy, it's curious that we choose to do so by apparently not talking about *ourselves* at all, but instead talking about *others* – usually the collective *'you'*.

What does speaking about oneself in 'you' or 'we' terms do to our own experience? And what does it do to the listener? For yourself, try saying the italicized first sentence, and see how you feel after saying it. Then, compare that

feeling to how you feel after saying, instead, *'I was close to her, I am so sad she died'*. Almost all the time, speaking in 'I' terms - or *owning* the experience - makes us *feel more* by identifying more with what we've just said. So if *owning* our experience means we'll feel more of it, we're *also* more likely to feel more responsibility for our feelings, but we actually often don't want that! When it comes to our difficult emotions, we often don't really know how to speak about them in authentic ways. So we may rope our listeners into the 'you' equation to share the burden and make it easier for us.

It's *seems* harder to 'own' negative experiences than 'positive' experiences.

This doesn't hold so true for our *positive* emotions! Most of us, eg when winning a competition, don't externalize our experience – we tend to *not* say *'You know how you feel'*

when you've won a competition you've worked hard for'. In those (positive) instances we tend to be much inclined to truly speak about ourselves, *own our experience*, and instead say things like *'I feel so great about winning this competition after having worked so hard for it'*. Positive experiences are much easier to *own* for us. We feel the power of the positive experience and have little trouble owning it.

How does this all play out for the listener? The speaker who talks about themselves to us in *you* terms in some fashion *relies on us* to relate to their experience, usually to agree, or to provide validation or support. But we may or may not have had the experience we're being told about, and as such we may or may not know how it feels for the speaker. That makes the validation process a bit hit and miss. Besides, most of us don't really enjoy being roped into someone else's emotional drama.

**It's incredibly powerful
to fully own one's experience.**

However, the *biggest* downside to speak about one's experiences in 'you' or 'we' language is that it makes our experience something others can *argue* with. *Arguing with someone's experience* is something many of us do, and do often – and none of it is helpful to anybody. If however I report my experience in 'I' terms, speaking authentically about how **I** feel, then nobody can really take issue with it and argue with it. This may sound simple, but it has profound and freeing effects, especially in intimate relationships, where arguing with one's experience tends to take place the most.

Another unfortunate way for others to *argue with our experience* presents itself when we state our *subjective* experience in *objective* terms. If someone says '*It's cold in here*', the listener may not really *hear* what you're really

saying (that you're cold), and will often *take issue* with your statement. If your listener doesn't feel cold, they often will respond by saying '*I don't think it's cold in here*' - thereby missing the entire point of your statement, which was to report that you're cold. So instead of a blanket (to warm you), you will likely get an argument (about the room temperature)!

**Nobody can take your owned experience
away from you.**

Most of us have been there, and most of us find it terribly frustrating to have our experience argued with. As it turns out, we may have a hand in that, and can do something *quite simple* that will make it near impossible for others to argue with our experience. If we use 'I' instead of 'you', 'we', or 'they' and if we don't share apparently objective statements (eg 'it's cold in here'), we become more of who we are – true and authentic individuals with a perspective

that is uniquely ours and ours alone. And nobody can argue with that. It can be a tremendous relief. Try it out sometime.

We've all gotten so used to having our experience argued with, that we may have forgotten how it feels when we own our experience, moment by moment. Starting to *own* your experience can be difficult and challenging, and you may try it a little here and there to see how it goes. But any challenges are far outweighed by the immense positive effects of speaking about yourself only, reporting your experience authentically, and owning your emotions. And we may be positively surprised by how impossible it is for others to argue with our authentic reporting of our experience!

Arguing with someone else's experience is a complete waste of time.

Trying this in one-to-one relationships may be a little challenging. Trying it in groups may be even more challenging. We generally don't want to rock the boat, we don't want to be the odd man out, and we even often look to others to see if anybody shares our experiences *before* expressing it. Isn't that interesting!? We often don't want to be alone with our experience, and we often don't want to feel responsible for upsetting the status quo. Yet, even in group settings, it turns out to be surprisingly doable to simply report your own experience. You may even serve as a role model for others to open up authentically about their experience. All in all, speaking authentically about your own experience, and owning it, tends to be a win-win.

Owning your experience is an act of self-love.

SELF-DOUBT - YOUR WORST ENEMY

Nobody has ever died saying 'I wish I would have had more self-doubt'. For most of our life, we walk around with plenty of self-doubt, and for some reason we apparently believe that this is a good idea – why else do it? In fact it seems so good an idea that we just won't give up on it! Then, later in life – maybe, if we're lucky – we realize that all those years of self-doubt were for nothing. Nothing at all. Wasted negative self-talk, critical and unrelenting conversations with ourselves that simply held us back.

It's easy to project onto those that seem very self-confident: we're sure *they* don't have self-doubts *the way we do*. Boy are we wrong. *Everybody* has them, those at the top and those at the bottom. People with apparently great self-confidence are not immune to self-doubt at all. It's practically a pandemic with no vaccine.

The messages to support our self-doubt are everywhere. Parents more often than not behaved in ways that gave us the sense that there was something wrong with us (which we since internalized), the advertising industry mostly shows people better-looking and better-off than us, partners of choice may criticize us, organized religion will chastise us (or we *feel* criticized by them), even strangers may look at us weirdly. There are near limitless avenues of encouragement towards second-guessing oneself and negative self-talk. Self-doubt is perhaps one of the most insidious afflictions of modern life.

Be skeptical of your thoughts. Just because you have them doesn't make them true.

We internalize real or imagined criticism and negativity and *appropriate* the real or imagined voices of others and make them *our* internal

voices. And then the beating up on ourselves begins, and it's a vicious cycle that goes down, down and further down. It's a terrible treadmill to be on, and a very difficult one to get off of. Curing ourselves of self-doubt, negative self-talk - and self-hate - is *not* easy. However, it *is* doable, and that's really, really great news.

Un-doing many years of poor and unhelpful programming in the self-worth department is arduous work, and it generally requires professional assistance in order to add an impartial and trained perspective. But it's good work, and well worth it - if for no other reason that others will find it hard to love us if we don't love ourselves. So in order to allow the love of others in, it's a good idea to tear down as many obstacles that are in the way – in the way of love. Self-doubt and self-hate *are* obstacles.

Doubt can be healthy.
Self-Doubt hardly ever is.

To cut down on the time it takes to overcome self-doubt, take some time with these pointed questions:

How much time have you invested into self-doubt in your life up to now?

How well has self-doubt paid off in the past?

How many more days, months and years will you allow yourself to be plagued by self-doubt?

Have you ever tried to love someone who's full of self-doubt and self-hate? It's hard if not impossible. Would you like to be lovable?

What if the only thing that stood in your way was your own conversation with yourself?

How well has self-doubt paid off in the past?

Generally, there are no shortcuts in life. But it's possible to look deep into the silliness of an

unhelpful dynamic and possibly make radical choices. What if next time you felt that all too familiar voice of self-doubt coming on, you short-circuit its old pattern and simply *do the opposite of what that voice keeps you from doing*? It's possible, right? It can be done!

Since most of our negative self-talk is relatively unconscious, you only have to short-circuit that old pattern a few times in order to kick the unconscious habit of self-doubt upstairs into your *consciousness*, your *awareness*. Once it's in your awareness, it will have a much harder time keeping you in its ban, because you're now onto it and its plot to hold you back, and you can even have conversations with those parts of yourself that used to self-sabotage you.

Listening to your inner critic means taking advice from someone who doesn't like you.

Every time that silly, unloving voice reports to duty again, you now have *practice* – and an increasing number of events where you did the opposite of what you cautioned yourself not to do - and you're *still alive*. Try this out and see just how *possible* it can be to evict self-doubt and self-hate from where it's been living rent-free for far too long: inside your fine brain, body, heart and soul.

Imagine how it would be to go through the day without doubting or second-guessing yourself. Surely, you'll make some mistakes, and you'll learn from them and adapt – but that's entirely different from *not* doing things and then *not* learning from that. You can do what it takes to kick self-doubt to the curb. It's a major drag to live with it, and we've all gotten used to it to the point of no longer remembering how unhelpful it is. Most of us believe that 'This and that is wrong with me' is a natural state. It is not.

And if you believe that your inner critic and voices of self-doubt are accurately reflecting how the world feels towards you, well, remember that you're listening to someone who doesn't like you! As it turns out, others are *always* much more accepting of our perceived inadequacies than we are - always. Few are as unforgiving of us as we ourselves are. Nobody is more critical of us than we are. This is insane.

Try taking a break from self-doubt and your inner critic. You may always resume beating yourself up again if being accepting and loving towards yourself should turn out to have been a mistake. And if you said or did something and then look back at it critically, remember that it's not for you to decide how good you were. In fact, what you think is irrelevant since you didn't do it for yourself in the first place. All the energy invested into evaluating your *past* self is a giant waste of time. If others say what you said or did was good, then you did well. All you can do is love yourself, prepare and show up.

REACTIVITY VS SPACIOUSNESS

In an era of ever-shortening attention spans and persuasive diagnoses such as ADHD, in an era where longhand may well be a thing of the past and where sound bites have replaced stories, we find ourselves *responding* more than initiating, *reacting* more than acting, and *escaping* the flood of information rather than seeking to fill our buckets of thirst for information, stimulation, and satiation in gentle, careful, and thought-out ways.

To many of us the past often appears to have been better. While this is always debatable, clocks don't turn backwards, and novel phenomena are usually here to stay. It's no secret that *reactivity* is up in general, and that most of us have, as a result, become *less spacious in our thinking and feeling*. We perceive that there's *less* time to answer, to respond, to share, but also seemingly less time

to explore what and how we really think and feel about things. We only have so much capacity to process information, mental or emotional, and that bandwidth gets taken up with, well, what we allow in, and most of us allow a lot in.

In simple social conversations, it's easy to observe levels of mental disorganization, avoidance of topics, short attention spans, emotional reactivity, talking out loud to think, and liking to hear oneself think and talk. Often, our conversational partners respond to us by going off on tangents, arguing circumstantially, being indirect, focusing on the edges and not on center. Their thinking is often neither linear nor clear, and they often talk around and around possibly simple issues. Associations they make can be incredibly loose, accuracy of hearing can be very low, and people often make amazing deductions based on woefully little information. Or they just plain check out. *'What did you say?'*

When dynamics such as these happen, our bars get lowered – our yardstick for what passes for a ‘good conversation’ changes, and it’s easy to forget that there are alternative ways of handling one’s thoughts and feelings. *Spacious* thinking and *spacious* feeling means to *lower the level of reactivity*. To take pauses. To wait until the other party is finished. To listen carefully. To reflect first, before interrupting or disagreeing. To see what one feels before one acts on it. To maybe even *think* about one’s feelings before sharing them with someone else. To maybe even explore your own thinking to see if it makes sense and contributes value.

**Spaciousness is required
to access your intuition.**

Spaciousness, whether mental or emotional, introduces the *p a u s e s* we all need in order to *digest* what has just happened. While it’s most commonly believed that communication

happens while we speak and listen, it actually happens when we *don't* speak – it happens in the pauses where our listeners can 'swallow' the information we've just shared, and digest it. If someone speaks at us without any pause, most of it will go right past us. We *need* those pauses in order to absorb the input. Otherwise there really is no chance for successful communication.

In an era of near-constant input, it becomes increasingly hard to afford the pauses, the times where *nothing* happens. It becomes harder and harder to find the spaces in-between things, to claim the pauses we must have in order to absorb, digest and make sense what we've heard or seen or felt. Finding such spaces, such spaciousness, becomes increasingly necessary in order to *not* stay in a constant state of overwhelm - and ensuing reactivity. It may be of no surprise that movements around well-being, mindful living,

and mediation have all gained mainstream momentum in recent times.

Mental and emotional spaciousness helps us separate what we need and want from what we don't need and don't want.

Few adults will argue that our conversations, interactions, and our own well-being would benefit from less speed, less reactivity, and more calmness. Mental and emotional spaciousness *is* about such calmness. It's about an inner state of pausing, *s l o w i n g* things down, taking time, making time, and getting off the hamster wheel of whatever it is that 'has to happen right now'. This can start with little steps such as responding to someone's statement or question with 'I'm going to think about this'. Or responding to an email after sitting on it for a day. Or just thinking about your response before you offer it. Or reducing your contribution to its most important

essence. Or participating in conversation with less interrupting. Maybe with breathing instead whenever you feel the urge of interrupting.

Uncluttering your mind and heart makes room for what you want in your mind and heart.

New worlds will open up if you decrease your reactivity and increase your spaciousness. Affording yourself emotional and mental breathing space will make you a calmer, more considerate and more resilient person. It will increase your presence and by that, your power. It will make others seek your company more, as they will feel that you're a good listener, and that you manage to remain calm while their head's on fire. And it will reveal to yourself that you can be yourself with a lot more inner wiggle room and, gasp, inner peace.

KARMA: WHAT GOES AROUND, COMES AROUND?

The Eastern concept of karma has been adopted in Western popular culture, in that the events which happen *after* a person's actions may be considered *natural consequences* of that person's actions. The idea that the beneficial or harmful effects one has on the world will return to oneself is not new - we've been here before. Many people nowadays will sum this up colloquially with 'what goes around comes around.' The notions of 'good karma' (for 'good' actions yielding good stuff down the road) and 'bad karma' (for 'bad' actions yielding bad stuff down the road) echo through many brains over many years – without much critical examination.

While most Westerners have some knowledge that karma is a Sanskrit word and comes out of

Indian mythology, few understand its origin enough to differentiate its true meaning from the popular modern day Western use. In Indian mythology, karma is a somewhat complex dynamic, as the Indian mentality looks at *time* not as a straight, linear line or even as a river, but as a *circle* in which everything repeats itself and turns back to its own beginnings. Karma in the Indian sense needs to be understood in that circular context. Western mindsets, religions, and philosophies tend to not share such circular notions.

The Indian meaning, which is often borrowed by Westerners, *does* entail that there are effects or consequences to one's actions or deeds, which include one's *intent*. Such consequences are understood to influence not only one's future in this life, but also the nature and quality of *future* lives, since karma includes the foundational Indian belief of rebirth. Generally, Western understandings of nature and life fundamentally do not include beliefs in rebirths.

So how did the notion of karma become so popular in the West - seemingly as a guiding principle towards engaging in good deeds and towards staying away from bad deeds, or at least negatively-judged behaviors? Humans tend to abhor a *vacuum of reason*. We tend to ask ourselves questions such as 'Why did this happen to me?', 'Why is the world so unfair?', or 'Why is there so much senseless suffering?'. We wonder how it can be that 'good' people can have such bad luck, while 'wicked' people can have such good luck. We struggle to *make sense* of many things, and *especially* so of tragic events. We wonder if it is all just random coincidence, or if there is some sort of larger *plan* into which inequality, unfairness, and suffering somehow fit? There appear no reliable answers. Some of us turn to religion for meaning, and within religion, often to a God.

'My karma ran over your dogma'.

The call for a God works somewhat for those who are steeped in personal or organized religiosity. Yet even believers in a God can find it challenging to understand suffering since they tend to firmly believe that their God is loving and omnipotent. This, one stands to reason, should entail God being able to alleviate suffering - yet, he often appears to not do so. And for those who are not disciples of major religious movements, the call for a God doesn't work at all. Since organized Western religion has lost some of its hold on humanity in recent decades, an increasing number of people turn to notions such as karma to make sense of those things that don't appear to make sense.

Having a sense of meaning helps greatly in coping with apparent unfairness and especially with senseless suffering. If we don't *have* meaning, we tend to want to *assign* meaning, and there seems to be some deep need to do so. It's an almost desperate act, like clinging to

the next best floating object as we feel we're drowning. But why such despair? Why do we feel we *have* to ask questions for which there appear no ready answers? Couldn't we just live in bewilderment and astonishment, in awe of ultimate riddles such as the meaning of things, the meaning of life? Apparently not so. For some reason *any* answer seems to trump sheer puzzlement. We don't appear to be able to simply revel in the great mysteries of life – good and bad, without assigning meaning.

The human mind, for reason we don't really understand, just *wants answers!* And we don't want them tomorrow, we want them *today!* But does this urge for instant gratification miss important parts of the picture? What about the idea that meaning is *unknowable*? This is almost preposterous – with our investment in the advancement of science we somehow are not willing to tolerate the idea that maybe meaning is simply not knowable. We want to make sense of things for us as groups and tribes and

nations, but especially for us *personally*. ‘Why me?’ presents itself long before we give puzzlement a chance. Karma, then, is a handy tool to make sense of things for *me* – it can’t just be that there’s no rhyme or reason to what happens to *me*.

Yet, with definitive answers rather completely out of reach, we gladly overlook lots of details even when they don’t add up, as is the case with our modern understanding and use of karma. For one, Western popular use of karma neglects the understanding that we all live as part of complex systems - karma tends to view things from an individualistic perspective of simple cause and effect – ‘do something good today, and your windfall tomorrow will have been caused by it’. We know we are all part of systems, most of which we don’t totally understand – and yet, we grasp the first floating object that *appears* to keep us from drowning in a world that just doesn’t make sense.

Belief has amazing powers – it can make us ‘claim’ that if something is not fair today or these days or in this life, there *must* be redemption later down the road, even if that means in another life. This is what scientists would call ‘wishful thinking’. We conveniently overlook the fact that if redemption is *down the road*, we can’t possibly measure its correlation to today’s events. But deferring redemption into the future for some reason makes the – often painful – present so much more bearable. Karma, with its borrowed and adapted definition, helps alleviate the apparent unfairness or meaninglessness of life, especially for those who are not steeped in organized religiosity.

This way, our inclination to believe in karma, as an imaginary universal law, serves as a future-retroactive great leveler of all thoughts and deeds. AS such, Western use of karma is not very different from most major organized religions which tend to also derive their current-

day functionality and integrity from a post-life idea of redemption or damnation. Given that nobody has come 'back' to this life, or been provably incarnated Indian-karma-style as a human with karmic memory and any acceptable proof whatsoever, it's really rather amazing of us to invest our faith into some future time where judgment will be served, and the inequalities of today will be leveled out. Banking on things getting levelled out down the road can be an easy way to abdicate responsibility in the here and now. It can be tempting. If there will be 'justice' later, then we can allow ourselves to forego being 'just' right now.

'Karma means I can rest easy at night knowing that all the people I treated badly had it coming'. Or does it?

Children believe fanciful things, such as invisible worlds holding magical answers to their forming

minds. This is of course in part because they have not yet gained a conceptual understanding of life and reality as we know it. There and then, magical thinking may well be appropriate. That we as adults blithely subscribe to and afterlife and redemptive notions, or down-the-road great levelling dynamics such as karma is really creative and inventive. What other nature-defying laws might we collectively dream up?

But what to do if one foregoes kicking the can down the road? How does one handle, process, and digest today's inequalities, unfairness, and apparently senseless suffering? These are big questions. It might help to appreciate that these questions are all based on the assumption that in life there *should* be equality, fairness, and no senseless suffering. Few of us ever question those assumptions. It's interesting to notice that *life itself* questions those assumptions for us all on a daily basis. Yet we so rarely take the hint that just maybe life's not supposed to be as unfair or pain-free as we'd all like it to be.

THE ONLY QUESTION WHEN FEELING AGITATED

One of the easiest things ever to do is to point our fingers at others. We're almost wired to immediately see the fault outside of us when something rubs us the wrong way. It's as if there's an unconscious playbook that reads: we did the right thing – or so it appears – and therefore the reason for having our feathers ruffled *must* be outside of us. And then the 'blame game' begins. Incredulous, we're then almost surprised that the other party doesn't acknowledge their apparent wrongdoing, and when pushback comes, we tend to dig in and shore up our defense arguments. We're right, after all.

As it turns out, nobody likes being held responsible for us having our knickers twisted. And when confronted, it likely feels like an

attack to them. And when attacked, most of us feel pushed into a corner, and – guess what – we come out fighting. Usually defensive, or angry. And it all goes downhill from there, and within seconds or minutes we're in a confrontation with no apparent winner. It's a bonafide shit-show, and we've all been there: so convinced *others* are responsible for how we feel. We don't even notice how much power we've just given them, and how quickly we've assigned the victim role to ourselves. Sigh.

**When we have relationship issues,
we'll often do more of what we did before,
only with more intensity and anxiety.**

We can do better. There *is* a way to not play the blame game, to not fall into the trap of victimization, to *not* grant others power over us, and to not have to find ourselves in dreaded confrontations at all. While it takes two or more to create relationships, our own part of the

relationship issue is *the only part* we have control over, have the power to change. We inconveniently forget that when we're so sure that it's the other person's responsibility. We also inconveniently forget that they haven't given us the authority to work on them!

It's easy to single out *individuals* as the culprit or the designated patient in relationship. Yet the reality is that each of us play a critical part in producing the anxious symptoms that arise in relationships. Each of us, our behaviors, all the symptoms, and everybody's input – together they all create an inter-dependent system of behavior. What this means is that if one person changes their contribution to that system or its symptoms, the whole system must change. It's like a mobile – if you flick one part, all the other parts *must* change their status quo. It's inevitable – yet it's only possible if *you* change *your* own contribution. Changing someone else's contribution is *their* responsibility – never yours.

Therefore, there's really only *one* question to ask yourself when you feel agitated by something in a relationship: *How did I get here?*

Curiosity is the antidote to anxiety.

What did *I* do, contribute, not do, conveniently forget, force, manipulate, or hold back? *Find* the answers to these questions. Ask yourself more questions, such as: does this remind me of something I've experienced before? Do I know this feeling intimately already? Have I been here before with this person? With someone else? Do I feel righteous and indignant? Is somebody making an apparently big deal out of apparently nothing? Did I maybe do something – anything – that could have sparked the other party's strong response? How might things look from their perspective? Be curious, about yourself, and about others.

There's only one question to ask when you feel agitated by something: *How did I get here?*

Asking yourself this – and only this – question will give you the most control, the most power, the most leverage, the most authority, the best possible outcome - and it will make you a much more desirable person to be around. If you ever manage to make this fundamental shift – from looking outside yourself to looking inside yourself when something feels off – you will have made one of the most profound shifts anybody can ever make.

Remember that you cannot – and therefore must not - work on others or manage others. You can only work on yourself and manage yourself. Remind yourself of those boundaries as you learn to always ask yourself only one question when things aren't going your way: *How did I get here?*

CONFUSING GUILT AND SHAME

So often, and so easily, we confuse *guilt* with *shame*. We just feel really bad about something that happened to us, or because of us, or that we did, or did not do, but should have done. It can seem unclear just what we feel so wretched about, or why we feel tormented. Most times, we carry that disconcerting past feeling into the present and feel bad *now*. And most often we keep that troubling feeling to ourselves.

When this taxing feeling stays hidden, we might not realize that we have options: we could turn on the light and begin the relief process by first discovering if we feel *guilt* or *shame*. While they are related, they are distinct dynamics. It's critical to separate the two and identify what it is you're actually feeling. If you keep it a secret from others and maybe even from yourself, you'll suffer unnecessarily.

The big insight about guilt and shame is that feeling *guilt* means we *did* something bad, feeling *shame* means we feel we *are* bad.

Guilt tends to mean that we are a good but did something bad – likely something that jeopardizes our sense of belonging, violate our own ethics or those of the people we want to belong to. We *did* – or *didn't do* - something that our 'code' dictated we should, or should not have done. As such, feelings of guilt can be healthy as they steer us towards a healthy sense of belonging to our people or group of choice. They are like guardrails that keep our behavior from going off the road.

The great news about feeling guilty is that we can remedy it through *insight* and *demonstrated actions of reconciliation* such as *acknowledging wrongdoing, expressing contrition* and *making amends with those who*

felt harmed - and that is fantastic news. Feelings of guilt can be fully overcome. Our sense of belonging can be fully repaired. Gain the insight, acknowledge your 'wrongdoing' with contrition, share that with the other party, and propose actions that might lead towards reconciliation. You may also ask what the other party might need in order to be made whole again. It's good stuff all around.

Guilt usually is anxiety about a projected disapproving response from an *individual person we want to belong with.*

If you have fallen out of touch over something that you feel some guilt about, it's upon you to re-approach the other party. Forget the pleasantries and instead share of your process of contrition and take full – 100% - responsibility for how you screwed up, with no ifs and buts. Don't seduce yourself into addressing how the other party may have

screwed up as well – that would be *their* job. Take a stance of explicit humility and expect nothing in return. Don't overdo it with a lengthy essay. Keep it concise, tight, and clear. As a general rule, your authentic efforts of demonstrated contrition *will be* rewarded.

While guilt causes us to focus on the negative feelings of *others*, shame causes us to focus on *our own* negative feelings.

Shame on the other hand tends to mean that we feel we *are* bad. Something happened to us, or we partook in something that hit us so deep and hard, that in the depth of our hearts and minds we've quietly concluded that our true self is defective and flawed. We have feelings of failure and self-contempt, which can easily become toxic and lead to anxiety or depression. If this sense of deep shame stays unaddressed, it can be crippling, feel hopeless, shut us down, and prevent us from having healthy

relationships. Worst of all, shame tends to make us feel our punishment is somehow warranted. This sort of shame is not healthy in any way.

We will much more readily admit guilt than shame. Guilt means we *did* screw up, shame means we *are* screwed up. There's even shame about shame and there's humiliation about shame which tends to make us feel isolated and alone in a complete sense. We may not want to look others in the eye, and in some fashion, we want to disappear. Once we've been shamed and internalized that shame, we tend to become convinced that we can never change or recover.

Shame usually is anxiety about a projected disapproving response by a group or system we want to belong to.

Judging, blaming and shaming is very easy to do, but the consequences can be devastating. This is especially true when we've experienced being shamed *as children*. Many of us might remember being told things like 'you are a bad boy/girl'. Subconsciously, we tend to *not* forget those events - instead we tend to internalize them and early on in our lives develop deep-seated beliefs that we are, indeed, *bad*. As such, much deep shame originates from our childhoods. As children, we didn't yet have the conceptual capacity to differentiate between *being fundamentally good* and maybe having *done* something bad - and actually *being* bad.

**If you feel shame, know this:
you are a *good* person with *faulty* beliefs
which you can change.**

The good news about feeling shame is that it there *are* ways to emerge from the darkness it casts upon us. We *can* heal. Find a friend you

can trust, maybe a professional, and begin to talk about it. Through ta(l)king it out of the dark, and shining light onto the dark, the veil of shame can lift and slowly reduce distress as you free yourself of this toxic *mistaken* identity. It's not simple or easy, but it's possible - through introspection, and therapeutic work on your own or with a professional.

Imagine a life without profound guilt or deep-seated shame! To belong healthily and to love yourself and no longer identify as 'defective'. It's well worth putting in the effort to rectify what you feel guilty about or doing the hard work to eventually leave your shame-based identity behind you and be lighter, healthier, more connected and happier.

The wonderful thing about guilt and shame is that they both only exist in your mind, meaning they are *all yours* to work through and break free from their emotional hold.

SEX AND SHAME ARE TERRIBLE BED FELLOWS

Oh how much shame we all have around sex. It's one of the most natural and compelling drives we know, and yet we shroud it in stigma, taboos, darkness, and shame. We don't do that about our other drives such as eating, drinking, breathing, or sleeping! None of us would be here without sex, all of us want it sometime, most of us enjoy it, and yet, we move it into darkness. We generally treat sex as if it doesn't belong to us, or we to it. This is really doing a disservice to our humanity, and to truth. Who's ever been served by having shame around sex? It's really not fair, let alone healthy.

All of us have sexual shame, you're not special!

Everybody has issues around sex. Yet sex is as normal as breathing, eating, walking and sleeping. If we treat it as such and take it out of

the closet, which can be done in respectful ways, others will learn something good and healthy, and appreciate you for it. You will be doing yourself, your partner, and those you talk to a service by de-stigmatizing something that's been in the dark for too long. *Don't* leave those your issues around sex in the closet, and don't support your partner in keeping theirs in the closet. Life is not to be lived in closets!

Sex is good for you, shame is not.

Authenticity is sexy and lovable. Be honest. Don't let others guess what you like and want, what you don't like and don't want. Be direct and others will learn from you. Once you've tried being upfront and direct and honest, you'll find that it can happen remarkably easy. You might even wonder why others are not doing the same thing you've just done.

The little secret about sex and shame is that everybody likes the former and everybody hates the latter. Most of us are freaked out about these terrible bedfellows. Shame has played, and is playing a number on all of us. It's so much healthier – and more fun – to freak out together: bring it up with friends and partners, make the implicit explicit, and verbalize the things that seem so hard to spell out. Almost reliably, your partner will appreciate your example and take a cue from you.

Shame can affect your libido, your boundaries, and your emotional, mental and physical well-being. Outside of public decency, there's just about nothing good about shame in the sexual realm. Do your very best to ban shame from the bedroom, from your sexual thoughts and sexual feelings. Invite those close to you to be open and explicit about it as well. Make it a conversation one can have, rather than one that should be avoided. Others will appreciate your respectful openness about sex.

PAIN & SUFFERING, PRESSURE & STRESS

We've all suffered from pain, and we've all gotten stressed out when there's been too much pressure. Many of us live entirely stressful lives, and some of us suffer a lot from either emotional or physical pain. To most of us, pain and suffering are blurred sensations, as are pressure and stress. Of course, it would seem, one does suffer when it hurts, and of course, it would seem, one does get stressed out when the pressure is on. These dynamics are blurred enough that we no longer differentiate between pain and suffering, or between pressure and stress. We just suffer, and we're just stressed.

We might dress it up in other words such as 'Since the breakup, I've been so down' or 'I've just been miserable since my knee injury'. Equally, we unconsciously frame pressure and stress by saying things like 'It's just a very

stressful job’ or ‘I couldn’t do it – it was just too much pressure’. What we overlook is that pain and suffering are *not* the same, and that pressure and stress are *not* the same. We tend to see them as one because we’ve blurred their *distinctions*. But really, suffering is *a response* to pain, and stress is *a response* to pressure. Both of them are, if you may, *interpretations* of an otherwise neutral condition – and one we generally tend to *interpret* negatively.

Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.

What other options are there? Pain in and of itself is *just a sensation*. Pressure in and of itself is *just a constraint*. As such, pain and pressure are essentially neutral. It is up to us how we interpret the sensation or the constraint, how we handle it, and how we respond to it. Without talking about people who are into pain and people who do well under pressure, we do have actual choice in how we respond to pain,

and to pressure. It *does* require us to be able to breathe deeply and to mentally separate these dynamics from their blurred entanglement.

To experience the difference between pain and suffering, pinch yourself a little and slowly keep increasing the intensity. *Observe* how you go from experiencing a sensation to experiencing suffering. See if you can focus on it being a sensation longer, and move or shift the point where it becomes suffering. This little exercise is almost a meditation where you observe what's going on, rather than being immersed in the experience. You observing your own response to pain like that affords you a meta-perspective, and meta-perspectives tend to always be helpful. They can be practiced and applied to many other challenging situations.

Pain can be experienced as pure sensation.

To experience the difference between pressure and stress, give yourself the hypothetical task of having to re-arrange *all* the individual letters in this paragraph in alphabetical order – and you would have 3 minutes to accomplish that task. That is *pressure*, and you may or may not be able to accomplish this imaginary task. But once you give yourself that task in your mind, as if it were real, you get an immediate chance to see how much stress you mobilize as a response to pressure, and how helpful – or not helpful – that stress level would be. Breathe deeply as you consider this fictitious task, and play with *observing* your response – your stress response. As with pain and suffering, developing this meta-perspective is tremendously helpful for not just pressure and stress, but for all sorts of other dynamics.

Pressure can be experienced as pure motivation.

As you experiment with your responses to pain and pressure, you'll discover how little or how much flexibility you have in your response-bandwidth. Some of us are very sensitive/reactive and will respond instantly with suffering or stress. Some of us will be surprised to find how we can modulate our pain and pressure responses towards less reactivity, and through that, towards more control. Learning how to control one's default responses to pain or pressure is a helpful skill. It can provide us with more options, more room to maneuver, and greater flexibility when confronted with challenging dynamics.

**What are my thoughts?
What are my feelings?**

It gets especially interesting when we learn how to separate *thoughts* from *feelings*. As it turns out, most of our 'emotional' responses are actual responses to our own *thoughts*. We often

suffer and stress out because our own narratives are at odds with the experience we're facing. We *think* it shouldn't hurt and then we suffer from the pain. We *think* the pressure is too much, and then we stress out over how to deal with it. Consider the inverse of these examples. If we *thought* we'd die from pinching ourselves, then the pain would *feel* less suffering. If we *thought* sorting all letters of this paragraph was not that time-consuming, we would *feel* less stress. What we *think* is tantamount to what we *believe*, and what we directly influences what we *feel*. As such, our thoughts – and the choices we either *don't* make or *do* make about them – are much more fundamental to our emotional experience of life than we tend to acknowledge. Check your thoughts and beliefs about things. There may be wiggle room and more options ahead!

You don't have to see the entire staircase in order to climb it - one step at a time

HOPE, AND A LITTLE FEAR

'I hope so!' Hope is such a promising idea. As a desire for an outcome and a belief in that outcome's possibility, hope can be an equivalent to optimism, a counterweight to despair, and maybe even a virtue. Hope certainly is a mainstay of many religious doctrines. As long as we have hope, something in the future may always be better. Most people wouldn't want to live without hope. To many, giving up hope might indicate feeling resigned or giving up. But is all that really true, and necessary? What are the effects of hope, and how helpful is hope really?

To many, hope is very much related to fear, in that we view it as the antidote to fear, that is fear about the future, as you cannot fear the past. Life can feel unfair, the future unknown, and hope gives us, well, *hope* that things turn out in line with our desires. It's not terribly

rational, indeed it's mostly emotional. When we feel we can't affect the outcome but really *want* things to be a certain way, we tend to wrap tons of deep feelings into expressions of hope. It appears that it helps us relax and not stay in fear. But does it really help us, and relax us?

Being in a state of hope also means we either have no control or we've relinquished it. As such, hope really is the little sister of fear, which is equally based on a lack of control - and both are about the future. But when we are in states of fear or hope, we tend to *not* see clearly and *not* act rationally. We tend to *not* see things *as they are* – when we fear, we tend to see them as *worse* than they are, and when we hope, we tend to see them as *better* than they are. Interestingly, *faith* tends to combine the two, in that faith also asks us to focus on what hasn't happened yet.

Hope blurs your vision.

When it *feels like* we've done everything we could, and when it *feels like* we *don't know* what else to do, we often shrug our shoulders and turn to hope. It's handy. What we don't think about is that hope often takes the place of something we could *actually do*. As such, hope can relieve us of actions we either don't want to take or don't know how to take. What this means is that *hope is really only an effective strategy when one is truly powerless*. Think about it. Hope can also keep us in suspense and distress longer because we're not *doing* anything - all we're doing is *hoping*.

**Hope is really only an effective strategy
when you are truly powerless.**

Consider how you'd feel if you neither *feared* a worse future nor *hoped* for a better future. If you didn't have any images of how the future might or should be, it's possible that you might

then be free of both fear and hope. This would be a state of simply *not knowing*. Not knowing is just not knowing – it's not in the least giving up. And if we are *not* caught up in what we dread or hope for in the future, we might stand a better chance of being *present here and now*. And if we are present *here and now*, then this would also apply to any *here and now* in the future. Being present in the here and now – *always* – would make us more competent to do what needs to be done at any moment in time.

Who is free of hope and fear has everything.

Consider trading fear and hope for simply *not knowing*. It's *neutral* - neither fearful nor hopeful. It's *sober*. It's not being held hostage by fears and hopes. It's calm and level-headed. It's rational and allows you the freedom to spend your emotional energy on other things – things you ideally have some influence over.

FEAR & LAUGHTER – HUMOR & FREEDOM

Laughter and humor turn out to be very complex and little-understood behaviors with many competing theories trying to explain their various occurrences. Fear on the other hand is much less complex, and easier to understand in its primal nature. So what could laughter and fear have in common? Turns out, a lot. What joins laughter and fear is that they *cannot* be experienced at the same time. We tend to not think of, or feel, laughter and fear at the same time, or in the same thought, or the same moment. The reason we don't think of those two together is because they cannot exist at the same time.

Fear and laughter are mutually exclusionary – we simply can't be full of fear while we laugh, and we simply can't laugh while we're full of fear. Fear tends to encompass lots of emotions - with the exception of laughter. And laughter

can encompass lots of emotions - with the exception of fear. Laughter is almost impossible during moments or states of fear, and fear is almost impossible during moments or states of laughter. Think of times you've fully experienced either emotion – the other emotion simply isn't available.

**When you laugh at your failures,
you cease to be afraid of them.**

There *are* some circumstances where we laugh when we're apparently scared - such as in horror movies – and we possibly do this for the very reason that laughter banishes anxiety, thus counteracting if not displacing real fear. Fear cannot abide humor, and we all view laughter in the face of fear as incomprehensibly courageous, and interestingly *stronger* than fear. Laughter dispels and trumps fear.

And then there are oodles of situations that are ruled by one - to the exclusion of the other. Consider most churches and religious services – maybe it’s thanks to the implied ‘Fear of God’, or ‘Fear of the devil’, but laughter is generally *not* present in those situations. Laughter in most faith-based organizations – eg in churches – would likely undermine the piousness and rules-based obedient behavior. Laughter doesn’t take anything seriously. Most organized religious hierarchies tend to employ fear as part of their faith structures, and would likely lose their hold on people if things were ‘funny’. Fear relies on the absence of laughter – you cannot laugh and be afraid at the same time.

Fear relies on the absence of laughter.

You may have seen this in movies more than you may have experienced this yourself, but think of fear-inducing situations where a responder to such situations simply bursts out

laughing. The person attempting to inspire fear will simply lose their power within a second if the responder reacts with laughter. The 'fearful' situation becomes 'laughable' and thus loses its entire negative effect. Quite possibly, laughter is the single best recipe for countering fear.

Looked at from another angle, people who are rolling around on the floor laughing will not be able to grasp a dangerous situation that might be present – they are, for the time being, basically incapable of allowing the emotion of fear into their minds and hearts. Even in survival situations it can happen that dynamics *appear* to be funny, and thus bystanders who feel entertained may fail to take a life threatening situation seriously – *because it's funny!* Much damage can be done to people in perilous situations when onlookers, flooded with feel-good emotions of 'fun', fail to grasp the severity of a situation and fail to *empathize* with the fearful state of a person in danger.

Fear usually relies on the *past* (experience) and the *future* (unknown) to work. Our internal stories that compare an *unknown* future to a *known* past make fear in the moment possible. That means that when we're fearful, we depart from the state of being present in the moment. *Laughter* directly counteracts our stories of the past and the future and brings us back to the present moment. 'Laughter is the best medicine' could well be deeply true.

Laughter is an excellent way to get present.

Fear of others, of strangers, or of people with more authority – those 'social' fears are all mitigated by humor and laughter. It's near impossible to maintain fearful distance to strangers or distance in social hierarchies when you're just howling with laughter. Irresistible laughter is also contagious, thereby connecting people. Laughter as such also functions as social glue – it brings all of us closer to one another.

THE MYTH OF GOOD GUYS & BAD GUYS

Oh how we all love to see the world through the lens of *good guys* and *bad guys*. From Hollywood movies to international military conflicts, there always appear to be *the good guys*, and *the bad guys*. When it comes to ‘Good vs. Evil’, we’re almost all on the side of the good guys, and we’re generally more than ok to fight the bad guys. To some degree, our current world view even relies on the separation of people into good guys and bad guys. But are we, and is the world, really separable into angelic people and evil people? And is that kind of black and white separation helpful – or could it possibly even be harmful?

A knife is neither good nor bad, but if you hold it by the blade, you are in the wrong.

It may be *too easy* to divide the world into *good guys* and *bad guys*. For one, there are many shades of grey between black and white. And are there truly bad people? How many *bad guys* have you met yourself, in person, where you can surely state that they are *bad guys*? As it turns out, most people are neither – neither all good nor all bad. As it turns out, there aren't just cheaters and liars - and then all of us, the honest people. People who lie and cheat *all the time* tend to be in the vast minority. As it turns out, so are those who never cheat or lie – those too are in the vast minority. In fact, with extremely rare exceptions, most people lie and cheat *a little*, here and there - maybe a little on their taxes, maybe a little with the speed limit, maybe a little with an erroneous refund in their favor, or maybe just with a little white lie.

Here and there, most of us cheat & lie a little.

If the truly wicked and the truly saintly are in the vast minority, isn't it curious that the vast majority of us seems to be so eager to divvy up the world into just good guys and bad guys? It beckons the question of how this benefits or helps us. It does make us righteous, indignant, and fosters our sense of belonging *to the right people* by making sure that, at least in speech, we don't belong to *bad guys* - but that those bad guys are *other* people only. It makes the world an easy place where we are on the 'right' side. But is this really true, or don't all of us feel on the 'right' side – from our perspective?

This is not a very strong and healthy position. It allows us to overlook all the little cheats and lies that we ourselves have committed, it allows us to have pictures of enemies in our minds – 'bad actors' that needed to be eliminated – all without us having to eliminate anything within ourselves. It allows us to see a world in which problems are *outside* of us. It stokes our senses of righteousness and indignation, it justifies

negative and uncompassionate behavior towards ourselves and others, it justifies us in seeing other people as less-than-human, and it justifies us feeling chill about international military operations against so-called ‘bad actors’. It polarizes our worldview, decreases our ability to remain compassionate, and assigns blame without taking any responsibility for ourselves, our actions, and our beliefs.

**In war, one side’s *good guys*
always become the other side’s *bad guys*.**

This of course immediately raises the question of those ‘bad actors’ potentially if not likely also seeing *us* as bad actors – from their perspective? It’s very hard to argue that this would not be the case. In that way, we’re all engaging in a game of ‘othering’ – the practice of viewing or treating a person or group of people as intrinsically different from and alien to ourselves. Would we really *want* others to

view and treat *us* that way? Chances are we don't, in which case it would be sensible to *not* do that towards others either. After all, people who speak other languages and have different skin tones or physical features look just as strange to us *as we do to them*.

Could it be that there are no bad guys *and* no good guys at all, but just 'us all' – people doing their best in life with the information and education and skill they all happen to have? Could it be just an illusion to identify *good guys* and *bad guys* at all?

**It's silly to adhere to beliefs that are rooted
in a one-sided and insular reality,
especially when there's outside evidence
to the contrary of those beliefs.**

OVERCOMING TRAUMA: WALKING WOUNDED

Trauma is individual. Nobody can ascertain what was or is traumatic for another person. In essence, if it *felt* or *feels* traumatic, then it was or is traumatic. Very rarely will we encounter someone whose life has been nothing but a breeze – in *their* experience. Some of us have been traumatized a little, and some a lot. Almost all of us are walking around wounded and in one way or another, scarred - and scared - on the inside. Yet we tend to walk through the world as if none of this damage exists.

Walking wounded, we still put one foot in front of the other, and we do the best we can. Of course we want to heal, overcome, and move on. Needless to say, it's not as easy as 1-2-3. Some of us try to forget, some of us do a lot of reflection and self-work, and some of us engage the assistance of therapeutic professionals to help us come out the other end of what can feel

like a long and dark tunnel. But *how* do we know if our efforts have paid off, *when* do we know that we've dealt with it enough, when can we move on and truly leave it behind us? It can be overwhelming and feel like being in a jungle for too long, where the way out and onwards can be unclear or not even visible.

We tend to repeat what we haven't repaired.

Yet there are ways in which we can tell that 'it's good now' and that we can *move*. It starts with being able to entertain, at will, thoughts and feelings about what happened. It starts with no longer feeling inescapable emotional charges about the experience/s. It starts with being afforded some choice about recalling the experience/s, meaning thoughts and feelings about it don't intrude into our current lives at random. It starts with being able to speak coherently and appropriately about the experience/s in the here and now. It starts

when recalling those events doesn't entail further significant damage to our self-esteem. It starts when we can make some sense of what happened, no matter how unfortunate and painful it may have been at the time.

**Trauma may not have been your fault,
healing however is your responsibility.**

Those steps are *not* easy feats, however they do demonstrate that you're coming out of the tunnel of emotional damage. It's simply *not* easy for most of us to talk about historic traumatic experiences in the here and now without much emotional charge. But it *is* of critical value and importance to strive towards that ability. If we don't manage to gain that amount of distance between what happened and who we are now, then we will always remain in the ban of past traumatic experiences. We can pretend we're fully functional and reasonably well-adjusted, but

we'll be *pretending*. And we really don't want to be pretending when it comes to healing from trauma. The stakes are too high to pretend.

Trauma tends to feel overwhelming as long as we leave it be. But once you have a roadmap and a desired outcome or state, it can begin to feel manageable. It's like being lost in the jungle and all of a sudden seeing your way out from a helicopter perspective. Starting with your honest status quo, your roadmap will eventually take you to your desired end-state – the place when and where you can tell that you're good now, and that you can leave it all in the past. It's very helpful to invest in such roadmap and to get clear about how far you'll want to come.

Walking wounded, we pretend we're alright when often we know, deep down, that we're not – yet – alright. Take stock, think about a roadmap, describe a clear goal, and invest in what it takes to heal. Map it out for yourself,

share it with those you trust, and realize, most of all, that almost all the people around you are in the same boat – we all want to forget certain things, are working on some things but not others, or haven't really managed to get away from being just plain scared and scarred.

**Healing trauma requires patience, gentleness,
yet also sobriety and perseverance.**

Imagine a day, a future where nothing from old traumas has a hold on you anymore, where your actions and reactions are in no way ruled by what happened way back when. You have choices on your way to there, choices of acknowledgment, investment, and work. But that doesn't mean it can't be done. Getting free and clear of old traumas and scars *is* possible – we just have to be extremely sober about how far we've come and how far we've still got to go. Pretending to be alright is *not helpful* when it comes to overcoming trauma.

Conversations With Others

Being clear within ourselves and having good conversations with ourselves is one thing, however being clear and having constructive conversations with others takes even more effort. When communicating with others, and especially when the stakes seem high, we often fall into certain habits and traps that keep us from showing up as our best Selves. Some of these habits and traps might benefit from a deeper understanding, so that communicating with others can take less effort, and yield more constructive results.

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY

Let's face it, none of us ever learned how to communicate really well. As adults, most of us have sat through too many meetings or lectures that were too damn long, not clear or succinct enough, without enough new and relevant information, and delivered in dreary or monotonous ways. Maybe unsurprisingly, this is actually a reflection of most of us: we talk for too long, are often unclear, share irrelevant or old information, and are not varied or dynamic in our delivery. So others get impatient, confused, and tired – and sometimes all three. Most times, those 'others' is us. Wouldn't it be great if communicating effectively was taught in school? Imagine how much easier relationships could be!

None of us learned how to communicate well.

So we've met the enemy, and it is us! Yet, effective communication *can* be compelling, a pleasure to experience, and even a pleasure to deliver. Generally it's effective when it is four things: *concise, clear, relevant, and delivered with variety*. Needless to say, that is the rare exception. But it is entirely achievable. Take a bit of time to see how your communication is, and ask for feedback if you're unsure. Adapt. Try again. Improve. Repeat. Not only does it feel good to be able to express yourself clearly and concisely, it also feels good to be understood. You will feel better and your listeners will love it. It's win/win, and warm and fuzzy all around.

**Others love it (and us)
when we make it easy for them to listen to us.**

The payback of communicating effectively is enormous – all we have to remember is the last time we really loved listening to someone and how enjoyable that was, and also that it made

the speaker rather lovable. But it means we have to *adapt*, as we've likely learned to *pad* our arguments and stories, to be a little repetitive, a little defensive, to do a little extra explaining, and occasionally include a jab at someone. It's important to realize and acknowledge that these seemingly normal behaviors are all poisonous to effective communication.

What's paramount is to keep it simple, clear, and clean. No padding, no defending, no explaining, and no attacking. Trying it, you may find that it's hard – *but* – that it's worth it. Speak of your own truth, keep it simple and concise, *avoid* talking about what others did or didn't do, and don't muddle your point with excessive padding, fill-words, defensiveness, over-explaining, or veiled attacks. The best communication is concise, simple, full of heart, full of presence, and elegant. Play with it until you can find all those elements in how you want

to express yourself. You will learn to love it and people will love and admire you for it.

Great live communication entails concision, simplicity, heartfulness, presence, and elegance.

It takes practice to become aware of just how much we pad our points, talk around subjects, use fill-words, are a little defensive, or include tiny attacks on others without being overt about it. If there's a conversation you're anticipating, it can be helpful to record your side for your own educational purposes – listen to it and see how much you've muddled your point, or how you could make your point with more brevity, more concision, less words, more clarity, less defensiveness, and maybe monotone delivery. It will feel much better if you trim your sentences, talk for less long, and be more dynamic in your delivery. And others will appreciate it greatly – guaranteed!

ARGUING WITH SOMEONE'S EXPERIENCE

Our intentions tend to be good when we're trying to make others feel better, or when we feel they're not seeing things accurately, or when we want to mitigate their suffering. How often have you heard – or said – things like 'There's no reason to be afraid' or 'Don't be sad' or 'Come on, you're not that old' or 'That's not what you said' or 'I didn't say that'? We mean so well when easing the pain of others or our own.

It can seem so normal to hear or say such things that we no longer wonder if this is a good idea. And because we mean well, it sure *seems* like a good idea. However, it actually is not. We forget what this really is – it's *arguing with someone's experience*. For some reason, we've all been raised with the idea that arguing with the experience of others is a good thing. It is not.

**Everything someone tells you is true.
They are reporting their experience of reality.**

Most of us feel not heard enough, not seen enough, and not loved enough. And then others argue with our experience to boot. This is incredibly unhelpful, and yet, it's so easy to do – most of us have done it or do it. It requires discipline to really hear someone out without knee-jerk responses that try to make it better but really, just make it worse. When others argue with our experience, we tend to start doubting our own internal experience, and it's downhill from there. We may lose trust in our senses, trust in our intuition, trust in believing ourselves, and eventually, we may lose our self-confidence. This can be detrimental to mental and emotional health.

**To argue with someone else's experience is
a waste of time and can be quite harmful.**

Nobody appreciates reporting their experience and having it argued with, children or adults. Most of us already doubt ourselves enough - without help from others. Especially children must be allowed to trust their own senses and experience if they are to grow up with believing in themselves and healthy self-confidence. Instilling self-doubt at a young age is nothing but detrimental. We've all either been the recipient of this, have observed it happening, or have done it to others ourselves. We would all be well advised to avoid this at all cost.

The easy flip-side of this all-too popular dynamic is simple and great: validating someone's experience has only positive outcomes: once others feel *heard*, life tends to become a lot easier for them almost immediately – *and* surprisingly, as a result, it becomes easier for you as well. Additionally, validating someone's experience does *not* mean that we're saying that they're *right*. They are,

after all, just reporting their experience and we are letting them do that. That is all.

The big surprise about validating someone's experience is that they instantly relax.

See if you can manage to *not* argue with someone else's experience and let it be. If you absolutely can't help yourself and want to make it 'better' for others, *ask* if they'd like your input or opinion. Chances are, they're ok without your opinion. And that's ok. If it's *you* who's uncomfortable with someone else's experience, well, that's good stuff for you to examine! As a general rule, always validate another person's experience – always. It's all they have: they are reporting what's true for them. An example of a *helpful* response might be something like 'It sounds like you were really afraid. Wow. I hear you. What about it scared you?' And they will tell you all about it, and amazingly, that makes it better for them right away. Try it out.

ASKING WHY VS HOW: FIGHTING VS LEARNING

We are all in relationships, and it at times feels natural to wonder 'why', eg 'Why would they do that?', 'Why didn't you call?', 'Why did this or that not happen?', 'Why is that?' Yet we rarely get a truly satisfying answer to the question of 'why'. The asking of 'why' usually starts with us having assumptions, which we then project onto others in the form of *assigning motivation* to them. 'I don't know why he wouldn't call. He would if he cared'. We become so sure of the motivation we believe they should have, that we find ourselves disappointed when they don't comply with what we think ought to be the case.

And when others don't comply with our assumptions and projections - when we feel negatively surprised by the behavior or

response of others – we tend to take it personally. Most often, we don't even notice that we've just taken something personally that quite possibly had nothing to do with us. And as if that wasn't enough, we often go even further by feeling indignation or outrage - then we've *really* taken things rather personally. Asking 'why' bears some unsavory fruits!

Asking 'why' always implies someone else's motivation, and we simply cannot know anybody's motivation at any time, hard as we may believe we should. Furthermore, asking 'why' by definition incorporates speculation and interpretation. Both are terribly unreliable ingredients *if* one wants to find out what actually happened. Regrettably, more often than not we'd rather be 'right' than find out what actually happened. There can be a strange compulsion to feel a little victimized at times. At times this can give us a warm and fuzzy feeling, because it makes us feel like we're right.

When 'why' is the starting point, our judgment tends to enter the equation quickly – too quickly - and we tend to find ourselves taking sides (mostly our own or that of people close to us) and then we assign *blame*. Rather quickly, we tend to act as if we're the prosecution, the judge, and the jury all in one. In our minds, we compare someone else's actions with *our* desired belief of what their motivations should make them do, forgetting that we're not them. We may be so habituated to doing this that we may not even realize that we're doing it. Not being aware of doing it, we may not realize that asking 'why' or 'why not' often leads us down a dead-end street where there's neither real learning nor a true resolution.

Most of us don't really know *why* we do what we do – especially children don't know.

Asking 'why' tends to put others on the defense. Asking 'how' doesn't really put others

on the defense. They can simply share or explain - rather than defend. And when people are defensive, they will most often create safety for themselves by infusing their story with strong emotions that don't help *them* - and it actually doesn't help us either. It's a generous act to allow others to just *share* instead of having to defend themselves. Asking 'how' instead of 'why' opens up that dialog. 'How did your day go, that you didn't end up picking me up, which I thought you would?' is a very different question from 'Why did you not pick me up?'. 'What's all been going on?' is a much more welcome – and open-ended - question than 'Why didn't you call?'.

If you want a fight, ask *why*.
If you want to learn something, ask *how*.

Asking 'how' can take the easy shapes of *what*, *where*, *when*, and *who*. They are all inquiries into *facts*, not *motives*. Facts are just that –

facts. When facts are not clouded and infused by emotions, they become *knowable* to us, and release us from the clutches of automatic emotional responses. *Facts* tend to bring out amazing qualities in us, such as understanding, compassion, and empathy. It bonds us as people rather than distancing us from each another. Going the 'how' route vs the 'why' route brings us closer and makes us less reactive. Asking 'why' tends to raise the stakes, even if minimally. Asking *what, where, when,* and *who* lowers the stakes and anxiety.

Asking 'why' tends to create distance.
Asking 'how' tends to create closeness.

If instead of asking 'why' we were to ask 'how', we would learn a lot more - we'd learn about our biases, our preconceived notions, and our assumptions and projections. Plus, we'd actually learn a lot about others. If we stick to the facts and ask *what* happened, *what, when,*

where, and to whom – then we tend to get a lot further in our understanding. This allows us to go beyond ‘who’s right’ and it doesn’t immediately push others into a defensive position. It avoids the taking of sides and can be a learning experience about yourself and others – the *system* in which something took place.

Asking ‘why’ tends to escalate any situation.

Asking *what, where, when, and who*

tends to de-escalate any situation.

Using this approach, you’ll be surprised what you can learn and how it can broaden your horizon. It can expand your capacity for understanding and compassion, it can strengthen the bond you have with others, and it can calm both you and the other person down. Asking ‘how’ rather than ‘why’ can provide relief from knee-jerk judging, blaming, and taking things personally. And best of all, we may expand our capacity as humans.

NICENESS VS HONESTY, KINDNESS VS TRUTH

It's an eternal debate: should you give preference to being honest at all times, or should you give preference to being nice at all times? The world can appear harsh and it can seem sensible to always want to be nice, or at least kind. And hard truths can, at times, hurt others. So, which course to take...?

We don't want to hurt the feelings of others, and therefore often feel compelled to either say nothing, or not speak the whole truth, because we either assume that the truth will hurt, or because we don't know how to be kind *and* honest. And it's hardly a secret that most of us are too hard on ourselves & too unkind to ourselves. Everybody can use more kindness.

**Kindness is behavior coming from genuine care
for another person's best interests.**

Yet, niceties and kindness in the form of lies – or by lying by omission - typically only causes short term satisfaction. It makes others apparently happy in the moment, and saves you from having to express uncomfortable truths. Yet, it can be the root of bigger problems down the road for all involved. Often, in retrospect, we wish we would have been more honest, had we only known *how* to be kind *and* honest.

Lying by omission is still lying.

One could argue that the nicest and kindest act of all is helping others so they can help themselves, and this more often than not will have to involve the truth. While there are rare occasions where kindness trumps truthfulness, learning how to be kind *and* honest tends to yield the most rewards. So how can you combine being nice, being kind with truthfulness and honesty?

**Religious Mother on her deathbed:
“Son, do you think I will go to Heaven?”
Atheist son: “Yes, I’m sure of it.”**

One surefire way is to speak *your truth* by talking about *yourself* – report *your* experience. Avoid talking about uninvolved parties and avoid talking about what the other person did or didn’t do (eg ‘well, *you* didn’t confirm our meeting’) - hard as that may be. Consider the *context* of your truth, and see if you can *frame* your truth. An example might be ‘I know we’ve both looked forward to our visit. I want to be available and present for our visit, and I realize now that I’m not feeling well enough to show up the way I’d like to. I’m wondering if we could re-schedule?’

Niceness or kindness and honesty or truth are not mutually exclusive: sharing about yourself honestly and with respect for others allows you to communicate effectively and kindly.

Keep in mind that *unsolicited* truths (especially about others) and truths without a shared context are usually not a great gift. If someone doesn't ask for your opinion, it's best not to volunteer it. In general, see first if what others need is kindness, as kindness is always a welcome gift. Be nice and kind, but *not* at the expense of what's true for you, as kindness without truth is not really kind at all. Practicing *kind honesty* may feel hard, uncomfortable, unnatural, and can take time and practice. Give yourself permission to struggle with this. It's well worth the effort.

**Kind truth is factual information,
no matter how distressing,
offered respectfully with a gentle, caring heart.**

Honesty *with* kindness can actually help us to recognize the many vulnerabilities which we all share and that underlie so much of our

collective behavior. Then, moments of apparent conflict don't have to make us feel disconnected, isolated and alienated – instead, they can actually connect us more fundamentally to one another. They can allow us to recognize the familiar fears, dreads, hopes and desires in all of us. These feelings drive so much of all of our behaviors. While we at times find them so difficult in others, it turns out that sharing your *own* experience of them - *your* truth - tends to connect us rather than alienate us. Being kind *and* honest creates closeness despite our fears that it creates distance.

Kindness without truth is not really kind at all.

VENTING – BECAUSE IT FEELS SO GOOD!

Boy does it feel good to vent sometimes, to get something off our chest. It makes us feel so good in the moment. It's almost like the psychological equivalent of having to go to the bathroom – there's an urge, and then a great sense of relief. But do we ever really wonder why we vent, what it's motivated by, and especially, what it achieves? What's really going on here? It can be a foregone conclusion that since it feels so good, it must be a good thing.

Generally, when we have the desire to vent, we can tell that it helps relieve pressure that's built up inside of us. And generally we don't know what *else* to do with that built-up pressure. The desire to get something off our chest is usually strong enough that we forget to consider the *before* and the *after* of venting. The *before* would be how we got to this point of high internal pressure that wants to relieve itself.

And the *after* would be what we have achieved with the venting, and to where it brought us – and those who we likely roped into listening to us.

Let's look at the before – how we got there. Generally, the pressure, or anxiety that builds up inside of us is of a *relational* nature – meaning the anxiety arose in the context of a relationship. And *if* we feel the need to vent, it generally means that we feel unable to relieve that anxiety *within* the relational context in which it arose. This is key: we *feel* like we can't address, process, and resolve the tension or pressure *within* the context where it got created. So if we consider the *before*, then it becomes clear that venting to a third party doesn't solve anything where maybe it should – and where the agitated energy really belongs.

When you feel like venting, ask yourself how this helps you resolve your conflict.

Looking at the after, it gets a bit trickier, and presents two dynamics. One, we've now roped a third party into our equation and maybe got validation, support, or even righteous indignation from them. While this *feels* great in the moment (we were right, after all!), we now have an ally who's actually not part of the original equation, and as such, ultimately unhelpful. Besides, our ally now has to sit with what we unloaded on them, and they probably didn't ask for that, did they? Secondly, since the pressure and tension *appears* to have subsided, we now have no strong need to *actually* address our strong feelings in the context in which they arose – the original relationship. So we're actually missing that boat.

Venting doesn't soothe anger – it fuels it.

Some repetitive dynamics are *virtuous cycles* – the more you do something, the better things

get, and some repetitive dynamics are *vicious cycles* – the more you do something, the worse things get. Venting is part of a vicious cycle, especially because once the built-up internal pressure is relieved *elsewhere*, 99% of the time down the road one will find oneself over and over again in essentially the same repetitive dynamic. It may not be with the same person, it could be with serial partners. Either way, if we don't resolve problems *where* they occur, we tend to be presented with them time and again.

It becomes clear that venting, despite feeling great in the moment, turns out to *not* be a good way to handle and resolve internal pressure at all. In essence, we flee the scene where it took place, we rope in third parties who are not party to the original dynamic, we get their validation, support, and maybe even indignation. Then we feel good, the tension has relieved itself, and we return to the scene in hopes all those bad feelings will never return, which of course, they do.

Venting solves nothing.

Knowing this, consider what you might be doing if you feel you just *need* to vent about something. See if there's any other way you can address this internal tension and anxiety. See if there's a way in which you can address it *within* yourself, and if that fails, *within* the relationship where it arose. Within *yourself* is the very best place to address it, as it most likely is *your* very own anxiety - and that most likely didn't just get invented in the relationship in question. Chances are you've experienced it before, possibly for the first time a long, long time ago. See if you can find where and how it originated for the first time. It was probably very upsetting, but figuring this out will help to understand its origin. Once you know where it came from, you'll have a much better chance of dealing with it.

And if you're the third party who gets roped into someone else's anxiety, consider how you can be supportive *without* letting them vent and *without* agreeing with them. Both things are hard, because we somehow believe that being a good friend entails listening to anything and everything our friends want to tell us. Furthermore, we somehow believe that being a good friend entails agreeing with them, especially if they're very distraught.

In wanting to be supportive, consider that it might be *more* supportive to *not* listen to them vent. Consider that you facilitating their venting may keep them from addressing and solving their problems where they belong. Venting doesn't come from a strong place, it comes from a weak place. Good friends support each other's' strengths, not each other's weaknesses.

Venting robs you of the power you really need to address whatever is bothering you.

UNSOLICITED OPINIONS, ADVICE & HELP

An all-time favorite. So many of us just know a little bit better than others do! And it can ache when you see someone apparently struggling and you know just how they could be helped. If they only did this or that, or did it another way, then they'd be happier - or the world would be a better place. We're sure of it. We want to help and share what we surely know. Small problem: nobody asked for our help or our opinion. Oops!

Advice is supposed to work well for those who request it, not for those who give it.

It gets interesting when we're in the position of being *the receiver* of such unsolicited opinions, advice, or help – very few of us ever like being told what to do, or how to do it. Even if the help is good help, and even if the opinions are

valuable, we might still knee-jerk reject both, simply because it rubs us the wrong way to be told what to do – if we didn't ask for it. Sometimes, we don't notice what's actually going on because the given advice *appears* to have our interest at heart, eg when we hear things like 'You deserve better' – which is usually followed by 'Here's what you should do...'. And sometimes others get righteous and indignant *on our behalf*, which again appears to be supportive, but in reality only means that *they* have a dog in a fight that's not theirs. Don't get fooled by righteous indignation!

Unsolicited opinions, advice and help usually work better for the *giver* than the *receiver*.

Think twice when others tell you what's allegedly true for you – how did they become such an expert on *you*? Consider if them telling you what to do may work particularly well for *them*, in fact maybe even better for them than

for *you*. Ask yourself why *they* appear to have a dog in *your* fight. You might be surprised at the answers you uncover.

Why do we dislike it so much when we're on the receiving end of unsolicited advice and help? If you look closely, unsolicited opinions and help are actually small boundary violations. Without being invited, others come a little too close to us – and – if their opinion or help is allegedly 'good' for us, it implies that in some fashion they are *superior* to us. Therefore, on an unconscious level, it means that we feel talked down to. Think about it. People who offer unsolicited advice and help often do feel superior to others.

Unsolicited offers of opinions, advice, or help generally amounts to talking down to others.

When we are about to dispense unsolicited opinions or offer unsolicited help we tend to overlook that this only makes such great sense in *our* world, not in the world of the receivers. In their world, it more likely than not will actually generate some *stress*, because it implies they know less, or may even be stupid. Think twice before you mind someone else's business without being invited. Be considerate.

**Giving unsolicited advice or help is
minding other people's business
and amounts to small boundary violations.**

When others really want our opinions or help, they will generally ask for it. Don't treat them like little children who just don't know enough. Honor the boundaries of others. If you really can't help yourself, do check with the receiver if *they* feel the need for an opinion or for help *before* you jump in. Most times they're just fine without your input or assistance!

ACTIVE LISTENING & OPEN QUESTIONS

Communication is hard enough without things getting lost along the way. In a conversation, it's quite normal for person A to say one thing to person B, for the actual message to be another thing, and for person B to hear yet a different thing. This level of confusion is often the norm because none of us ever learned how to communicate, and especially, listen effectively.

Listening is the most fundamental component of interpersonal communication skills.

Active listening is a practiced technique that pays enormous dividends, and can feel fantastic to all parties despite a little learning curve. It requires you to not only listen well but to also respond *effectively* to what others are saying.

You may have to combat your tendency to interrupt, finish others' sentences, 'know what they mean' right off the bat, interpret, or relate what you've heard to your own experiences. You may have to learn to restrain your impulses, pay a lot of attention, and to be willing to understand others even if it may be uncomfortable to you. But others will love it when they feel heard, seen, and understood. It is well worth the investment and makes for much better and easier relationships.

Active listening means you're interested instead of interesting.

The steps are easy: pay attention, withhold judgment, and when your immediate memory fills up with what you've just heard, ask if you can reflect back what you've heard thus far, and then summarize what you've understood. Then, ask if you understood them right. Chances are, they will want to clarify something, and the

process repeats itself. When they are done and feel understood, ask ‘Is there more?’ Chances are, there will be more, and the process repeats itself. This may seem arduous in theory, but in practice it’s amazingly simple to pull off.

**Active listening means you
listen to understand, not to reply.**

Eventually, your conversation partner will feel fully understood, and they will love it, and they will love you for it. This is about the only way to make sure that others feel fully understood, and once you build that into your relationships, you will realize enormous gains, increased flow and surprising ease in your relationships. In the context of business communication, this process can be adapted and simplified – and it will still work like a charm.

If you find you need to ask a question while the other person is speaking, see if you can ask only clarifying questions to ensure your understanding thus far. When you're done listening and have understood your conversation partner, you may want to share of your own, and ideally, your partner will be able to listen to you the way you listened to them. Despite this seeming hard, active listening actually makes communicating easier, as it cuts out all the distracting noise.

Active listening is giving others the gift of feeling heard and being understood.

When asking someone else questions in general, see if you can ask *open* questions. Open questions are *not* answerable with a yes or a no. Questions that can be answered with a yes or no would be *closed* questions. Open questions tend to keep a conversation going, while closed questions tend to end

conversations. Even though this seems like a small modification, it's actually a huge difference. Asking open questions allows others to share whatever they want to share in their own words – which means that we'll learn a lot about them. Asking closed questions doesn't allow others free expression, it locks them into a yes/no dichotomy. As a result, we'll learn very little about others when we ask closed questions.

People love being asked open-ended questions.

Examples of open-ended questions may be 'What happened?' or 'How did you feel about that?' or 'How do you feel about some dinner?'. Examples of closed questions may be 'So they ignored you?' or 'You were angry?' or even 'Are you hungry?'. Play with that. You'll find out that asking open vs. closed questions leads to entirely different conversations!

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL LISTENING

When listening to someone, we must filter what we hear through our own mental models in order to comprehend it, and as an internal process that is entirely normal. At the same time, most of us quickly and automatically seek to establish rapport by *offering* responses that indicate that we are, in some fashion, *like them*. We can *relate*, and hence we often quickly interject our own experiences or views. This tends to happen in the service of being alike, having shared experiences, and thereby establishing rapport. Additionally, most of us tend to interject our experiences and views in order to *show interest* – or so we believe.

When you listen to someone else, see if you're thinking mostly about you – or about them.

We want to show interest in others in part because we want others to show interest in us. So we listen *autobiographically*, often filtering everything we hear through our own past experiences. This is the norm. However, herein lies a fallacy because as *autobiographical* listeners we tend to ask questions from *our own* frame of reference, offer or give counsel based on *our own* experience, and explain others' behavior and even motives based on *our own* behavior and motives. In other words, most of what we say as listeners may in fact have little or nothing to do with the speaker's experience!

If you listen autobiographically, you steal the speaker's story and make it all about you.

If we're the speaker, it can feel like we share something about ourselves, and the listener responds only with references of their own experiences, and only really allowing us to finish our sentences so that they interject their

experience, their views, and maybe even pass judgment or give (unsolicited) advice. They interpret what we are saying entirely through their own filters. This type of conversation will invariably be about the listener and, consequently, isn't really a two-way conversation. As a speaker we often don't know why we walk away from this type of 'conversation' feeling ignored or empty.

**Autobiographical listening
doesn't promote relationships.**

Especially those of us who are more introverted can end up quite frustrated when we find ourselves talking with an autobiographical listener. We try to share of ourselves, but may quickly get drowned out by their own experience our little story evoked in them. We may try, time and again, to 'take back' the conversation, often to no avail as the listener generally has no idea that in an apparent effort

to relate to us, they're actually hogging the air. While it can feel difficult to overcome this experiential 'one-sidedness', it is doable. You may inquire if you could share a bit more about what you had already started talking about before you, in your experience, got interrupted. Generally even autobiographical listeners will be very open to such an inquiry.

In order to listen in a way that makes the speaker feel heard and understood, consider *not* focusing on our own relatable experiences - and instead exclusively focus on the speaker's story. Try some modalities such as nodding, brief verbal affirmations such as 'I see' or 'I understand', and eventually try *rephrasing what you've heard* so that you can see if you got it right. Try to ask *clarifying* questions about what the speaker said, and try to feed back *the feelings* you've heard mentioned. Most speakers are essentially motivated by feelings, so inquiring about them tends to be welcome.

This is also called *reflective listening* - where you pay respectful attention to the content and feelings of the speaker, and then reflect back to the speaker what you've heard them say. *Reflective listening* can be summarized as *hearing and understanding*, and then *letting the speaker know* that they are being *heard* and *understood*.

**Listen in such a way that
others love to speak to you.**

Demonstrating understanding and concern shows the speaker that you're actually interested in what they have to say. It may not sound like a big deal, but it actually *is* a big deal. Feeling heard and understood is one of the most respectful gifts we can give others. It will feel great to them, they will love you for it, and you yourself will appreciate it when others are listening to you in that way.

HANDLING CONFLICT WELL

Conflict happens. It's always just a matter of time. When it shows up, we tend to do one of two things: we either avoid it or we handle it poorly. After all, disharmony sucks and nobody's learned how to handle conflict well. And often the stakes feel high, maybe too high, and then we're as good as deer in headlights! To boot, conflict tends to bring out the worst in us: it makes us go unconscious, we freeze up, become defensive, aggressive, passive, resistant, avoidant, resentful, and more. All this is *bad* enough, so we tend to seek harmony at all cost. Often, that cost can be too expensive.

**Avoiding conflict or not handling it well
tends to hurt you and your relationships.**

Since conflict invariably happens, why not be ready for when it shows up? If you learn how to

handle conflict skillfully, it's quite possible you will actually like it. Preposterous? Try it out by keeping this overarching guidance in mind: *be tough on the subject, but be soft on the people*. Everybody's own inner critic is strong enough without anybody's help from the outside, and conflict tends to bring out the worst in all of us – so keeping in mind to be *soft on the people while being tough on the subject* tends to be a great guiding principle.

Conflict tends to bring out the worst in us.

In line with this guiding principle, here's a fool-proof 4-step approach to handling challenging conversations skillfully. *Always* start with establishing **common ground**, rapport, and make that explicit. There's a backdrop to the conflict, and chances are, that backdrop will reveal the common ground you share. Share it explicitly upfront, no matter how big or small it may be. Examples might be 'I know we both

love this program’ or ‘We’ve been good friends for years’ or ‘You and I have been colleagues for a while now’. Most of us *skip* this critical first step of establishing rapport. Don’t skip it.

Then **frame** what it is you want to talk about. *Outline* the subject, and how long you’d like to talk about it. This eliminates surprises, provides structure and creates safety. The other party will appreciate this structure immensely – they now know what they’re in for. Examples might be ‘I’d love for us to discuss the challenges we’ve had with the weekly reviews, and our chat should take about 10 minutes’ or ‘I know we’ve had our differences about this project, and for the next 15 min or so, I’d like for us to talk about a possible resolution’. Now you’re both set for the actual conversation. Even this second critical step gets overlooked by most of us.

Third, have the **actual** talk. Most of us come to conflictual conversations with a lot of pent-up energy which can result in avalanches of words. Avoid monologues of more than 3–4 sentences.

See if you can avoid saying ‘you’ a lot – stick with I-statements as much as possible. Be tough on the subject, and soft on the people. Allow for all parties to be fully heard and understood. See if you can acknowledge feelings, yet keep them separate from facts. Feelings are not facts. It’s tremendously helpful to separate facts from feelings. While this is the bulk of your challenging conversation, keep it tight and again: avoid monologues of more than 3-4 sentences.

Lastly, **close with a recap** of the talk in order to arrive at a *shared* understanding. Most of us fizzle at this point and all too often we leave a challenging conversation with no clarity about what’s next. If there are actions to be taken by somebody down the road, this is the time to be specific about them. Make next steps and future accountabilities clear to all participants, including yourself. This *shared* understanding and recap of a challenging conversation is worth gold. This final step also tends to get overlooked when we think about having tough conversations.

**Be tough on the subject
and soft on the people.**

Since most of us skip step one (establishing common ground), step two (framing the talk), and step four (closing with a recap), we tend to just stumble into the conversation, ill-prepared, nervous, stressed, and full of anxiety. We not only forget to establish rapport, to frame the conversation, and to provide closure, but we are probably not at our best *while* having the talk. Most of us just want to survive challenging conversations, but as it turns out, we quite easily can do better. We haven't learned it as kids, but we can learn it now. Try following these 4 steps and see for yourself. With a bit of practice, it can actually be enjoyable – because you've gotten good at something that seems so inherently difficult. When handled well, having challenging talks *successfully* means that new information gets *absorbed*, not rejected.

GIVING & RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Without feedback, we would all be relatively maladjusted and wander through life somewhat aimlessly. We rely on feedback in order to know the effects of our behavior, and to course-correct when necessary. And even though we're all too familiar with the phrase 'constructive criticism', the unfortunate reality is that most of us suck at giving helpful feedback, and most of us aren't that great at receiving feedback either. Almost all of us have never learned helpful and healthy ways of giving and receiving feedback. This may be in part because the dynamics of helpful and healthy feedback are generally not very well understood.

There are two key things we tend to forget about helpful feedback. One, most of us have a strong inner critic – we generally have more negative feelings than positive feelings about how we're doing. And two, when providing

feedback, most of us start with, and tend to focus on, what we think *could be done better*. What this means in practice is that in addition to our own inner critic, who most likely provides us with negative self-talk, we then get a double-whammy by hearing what we could do better from the perspective of others. This adds insult to injury as it tends to validate our own doubts that we didn't do so well, and, quite possibly, that we *did things wrong*. Needless to say, this is *not* how helpful feedback works well.

Words are the most powerful force available to humans – use them carefully and wisely.

It is fascinating that despite most of us knowing this, we, as feedback givers, tend to *still* start out with, and focus on, what the other person could improve – or plain didn't do so well. And as the receivers of feedback, it is tremendously hard to *not* take feedback *personally*. We seem to just be wired by default to take it personally

and process it as a reflection of *us as a person* – which it hardly ever is. As a result of taking feedback personally, and as a result of dreading the piling more criticism onto our inner critic, most of us will *avoid* seeking out feedback. For the very same reason, most of us will also have resistance against receiving feedback. Since we know this, we are often unsure about if and when to provide feedback to others. But what this means is that we all tend to receive a lot less feedback than might be helpful to us!

**Receiving negative or critical feedback
only tends to increase anxiety in the receiver.**

Yet, feedback can be given in healthy and helpful ways. Such feedback tends to have three key ingredients. First, the feedback giver ideally starts out with what they *like* about what the receiver did or does. Secondly, the feedback giver then requests *permission* to provide

feedback. And thirdly, the feedback giver is tough on the content, but soft on the person.

Since 'critical' feedback can feel like an attack and often elicits our unconscious fight, flight or freeze responses, we are often in unhelpful states when wanting to process feedback. Thus the initial affirmation of positive feedback is *instrumental* towards the receiver relaxing their reactive subconscious, and deactivating the trip-wire-ready inner critic from kicking into full gear. Once the receiver has heard a number – ideally more than one – things they did or are doing *well*, things that were *liked*, or ways in which they were *effective* - their mind tends to miraculously relax. If this first step is omitted, it's near impossible for the receiver to process the feedback in helpful and healthy ways. For feedback *givers*, this first step of positive affirmation tends to *not* come naturally or easy. However, don't underestimate its essential value – practice it.

**‘I don’t mean to be critical of you, but...’
is not helpful.**

Secondly, obtaining permission from the receiver to receive feedback is no less instrumental. The receiver’s mind will be infinitely more open to hearing what’s about to come if they have given explicit *permission*. Once they have given permission, their mind instantly relaxes and opens up. Such permission is best obtained by asking the receiver something along the lines of ‘Would you like to hear some suggestions on how you could improve your game, or how you could do even better?’. Note this this language does not contain the words ‘feedback’ or ‘criticism’, as those words are not helpful. Ideally, this is a ‘real’ question, meaning the receiver must feel as if they’re truly being asked – so ask it as a real question, and honestly wait for the answer.

‘I know you didn’t ask, but I think you should know that’ is not helpful.

Thirdly, remember that the receiver’s inner critic is already really good at finding fault with them. Try to not contribute to this by falling into the trap of giving feedback about the *person* – instead keep your feedback to *specific things* they *did* or *do*, *didn’t do* or *aren’t doing*. This is *best* achieved by focusing your feedback on *your own experience*. Eg ‘I noticed that I got distracted from what you were saying each time you looked at your phone, so I think you’d have more of my attention if I could keep a bit more eye contact with you while you speak’. Keep your feedback about *your experience* (eg ‘I would like it if you’re more direct’ or ‘I’d feel more connected and open if we spoke somewhere with less distractions’) Avoid talking about the *person*. Keep your feedback about your experience, your preferences, and your desired behavior. Again, stay away from criticizing them as a person (eg ‘I thought you

were wrong not to speak up'). It is important that the receiver understands, as part of the feedback, what *effect* their behavior has on their audience. Knowing the *effect* of their actions allows the receiver to focus on their *actions*, rather than their *person*.

Focus on what is said, not who said it.

From the receiver's perspective, it's never easy to *not* take feedback personally. Rather than shying away from feedback, see if you can *lean into it*. This leaning into feedback can be helped by a couple of realizations. One, realize that you're the same person *after* the feedback that you were *before* the feedback. Secondly, realize that you're *not* obligated to take the feedback. And thirdly, know that different perspectives *can be helpful* – especially when multiple independent sources provide similar feedback.

Giving and receiving healthy & helpful feedback are tremendous skills to develop.

When providing feedback, it's very helpful to keep your comments *brief* – small bites. Try to not speak for no more than about 3 sentences. Anything much longer will likely be perceived as a monologue, and flood the receiver. Always address the receiver directly – avoid speaking about them in third person *while* they're present.

When receiving feedback, see if you can avoid rebuttal or argument – see if you can just say 'thank you for that' and then mull it over on your own, when you're less prone to be reactive or defensive. You can always rebut it later ;-). Even when feedback was given in helpful ways, receiving it and processing it constructively is not easy. Practice asking for feedback by framing your question along the lines of what others would like to see more of, or less of. Elicit their 'I' statements. It's powerful to give and receive feedback in this manner.

MANIPULATORS ARE ALWAYS OTHER PEOPLE

Manipulation has a truly bad rap. Most of us don't like the feeling of being manipulated, and most of us have plenty of examples of having been manipulated. And most of us would be quick to say that *we* don't manipulate others. So who are all the manipulators? The shocker is, manipulation is committed by *most of us*. Say what? Indeed, there's no separate sub-species that does all that manipulating – we have met the enemy, and it is *us*. Identifying *being* manipulated is a lot easier than identifying when *we are* the manipulators.

At its absolute worst, manipulation can be dark and vicious, and can include narcissistic, Machiavellian and sociopathic behaviors. We all may know someone where we suspect some or all of these harmful traits. Then there's straight-up and overt manipulation, which most of us can spot and can either learn how say 'no' to, or

somehow avoid it. We can generally sense when someone has ulterior and self-serving motives and is not upfront about their motives when interacting with us. Dealing with obvious manipulators is hard - but doable. What's really tricky to spot and deal with however is *subtle* manipulation. There are unfortunately near endless examples, many of which disguise themselves as apparently selfless efforts!

Someone telling you 'I only want what's best for you – trust me' is hardly ever a good sign.

Many of us have walked into a store intending to buy 3 things, and ended up buying 10, or twice the needed amount of something *because it was on sale*. Often subtle manipulation is wrapped in deceptively good-looking 'envelopes', such as *good advice*, or advice from an *apparent authority*, such as someone wearing a white lab coat with the title MD on the name tag. Businesses sometimes hire

people to form lines outside their stores, as this manipulates others (i.e. *us*) into believing that the business is selling things that are either highly desirable or in short supply – or both.

Manipulation for good purpose is still a manipulation.

Then there's the advice industry with apparently stellar and proven 'how to' advice which, apparently acting in the interest of the readers, dispenses straight-up manipulation techniques. Consider the dating advice industry, where people are routinely encouraged to change their natural behavior in order to make themselves apparently more desirable, or to keep suitors in pursuit longer. Not only is this subtle manipulation misunderstood as 'helpful advice', but it sets up an *adversarial dynamic* in relationships before they have even started. Such advice, at the end of the day, is *not* in your

best interest. Don't start off a relationship with false pretenses. It never pays off in the long run.

And in relationships - platonic, romantic or business - we often have creeping feelings that we are being manipulated ever so subtly. Others may say they *need us*, or they just act *needy*, or are clearly *under-functioning* in certain areas, or otherwise manage to control parts of our behaviors and lives without us having signed up for it. This is often done with apparently reasonable stories which blind us to the underlying manipulation. And sometimes we're simply being shut out by the famous silent treatment. Being manipulated in relationships is often *passive-aggressive*, such as an inaction when an action would be appropriate (e.g. staying silent when a response is expected), or such as hostility by virtue of defiance (e.g. showing up late for meetings or being purposefully slow when speediness is expected and appropriate).

**Just because something isn't a lie
doesn't mean it's not deceptive.**

Passive-aggressive behavior is often a *pattern of avoiding direct and honest communication and showing passive hostility*. Being on the receiving end of such behavior tends to elicit anxiety in us because of the discordance we experience between what we perceive/feel and what the other person is saying. Being passive-aggressive is like being a wolf in sheep's' clothing. It's not anything anybody enjoys, and yet, it's a favorite form of subtle – or not so subtle – manipulation, for allows the manipulator to avoid having to be overtly angry or hostile.

Most of us *do* recognize manipulation when it happens to us. It's much harder to recognize it when *we* are the ones doing the manipulating. Remember, there's no 'other' group of humans that does all the manipulating, and we're not all victims. This may sound sobering, but since we

cannot change the *other* manipulators, the only manipulators we *can* change are ... US. If you want there to be less manipulation, the only constructive way forward is for you to take responsibility for how you, at times, may be manipulative yourself.

**Avoiding straight and honest communication
tends to bring out the worst in us
including being manipulative.**

What might be signs within our own behavior that point towards us being manipulative ourselves? For one, avoidance of straight and honest communication tends to bring out the worst in us: if we *feel* that we can't achieve our goal by going a straight line, we'll invariably come up with a circuitous route that more often than not will have some level of manipulation in it. This may be hard to believe, but have a look at your own ways and communication styles to see how often you avoid the straight and

honest path and instead come up with all sorts of creative ways to get yourself off the hook of being direct, honest, and straight.

Manipulators are *an outcome engineers*.

It's entirely human to want to avoid difficulties, and that doesn't justify *being manipulative*. Remember that since we don't like the feeling of being manipulated, nobody else does either. See if you can communicate your likes and dislikes straight-up – being authentic and real with people puts *you* in an influential position to make genuine and rewarding connections with others. If you *can* do that, then there's really no need to get creative, err, manipulative.

Handling Our Challenging Relational Emotions

Achieving and maintaining a healthy sense of Self is hard enough on our own, but it's even harder to achieve and maintain a healthy sense of Self when we're in relationships. While we tend to seek out relationships, they often end up threatening our sense of Self. In that dance between individuality and togetherness, we time and again seem to come across certain relationship-based topics and challenges. We could often use a little help when navigating relational challenges.

LOVING SOMEONE & BEING LOVED

Nobody's ever looked back at the end of their lives saying 'I've had too much love'. Let's face it, there's usually a shortage of love in peoples' lives. Most of us could use more love, both receiving love and also giving love. Most of us fear we're not being loved enough, and some of us fear of not being loving enough. All in all, love tends to be in short supply. It would appear that none of us ever really got enough love, and it does appear to be one of our rarest commodities as humans.

One part of this love business is relatively easy to sort out. Tell those who you want to be loved by that you love them. It sounds deceptively simple, but people love hearing that they're being loved. Nobody you love and who you tell that to will respond with 'I don't want to be loved by you'. And curiously, it will make it much easier for them to reciprocate the favor

and express or show their love towards you. Being loving and communicating it is one cool favor you can easily share with the world. As a bonus, it pays dividends!

We accept the love we think we deserve.

Another part of this love business is a little less easy to sort out. Aside from love being at times misappropriated as a guise for deviant, controlling, or abusive behaviors, there's fundamentally no good nor bad in love. In the domain of love - the complex emotion - there really is only discovery and exploration, with tons of never-ending room for what we are able to experience, share, give, receive, and create. Yet, when we love someone, we never tend to ask ourselves the simple question of *why we love*: is it because of how it makes *us* feel, because of how it makes *them* feel, because of how *we* feel together, or is it because something *new* gets created when we love one

another? These are not easy questions to ponder, yet getting clear on those questions can be a complete game changer. It's an interesting question to discuss with friends. And if you're daring, it helps even more to talk about this with your partner.

Love is the most complex beautiful human emotion we can give and receive.

Many of us *wait* for love to be *just right* to the point of going for years without giving and receiving love. We make it so rarified and precious – and unfortunately *conditional* – that we wait, wait, and wait some more for it to present itself in just the right way. But this is like saying ‘Let's not cook or eat unless we have the perfect ingredients or meal’! It may be much more reasonable to *find love where you can get it*. Although love is rarely considered to be a ‘practical’ subject, it's surprisingly enriching to *be practical* about love. Fill your

love bucket by accepting love more when it comes your way – and by *being* more loving whenever you get a chance.

It's enriching to be rather *practical* about love.

This kind of discovery process might shine a light on what kind of love you're living and what kind of love you're giving: it could be selfish love (you feel great), it could be selfless love (the other person feels great), it could be shared love (you both feel great), or it could be that your love and the love of your partner are co-creating an entirely new and enhanced dynamic that needed the two of you in order to come about. It may also be interesting to learn more about your own motivation behind caring for or loving your partner. Your love for them may very well serve as a means to satisfy your own needs and desires, and it's important to not pass fast judgment on that. This turns out to be true for many of us, and it's worthwhile to

explore it a little. Very few of us are motivated to care for, and love others *strictly* out of genuine concern for the well-being of others. There's lots to discover in how love connects and bonds us all.

The potential big surprise about loving someone is that if you're lucky, your love for them and their love for you creates something new that didn't exist before. There's the potential for a love that's bigger than each individual, a love that has ripple effects out into the world. Such larger love can create more goodness and more positivity than just two people alone. Even just seeing two people who are positively and happily loving towards one another already uplifts us. It's contagious to be around in the best of ways. A large and expansive love like that is worth *striving* for - yet maybe not *waiting* for. Live a little, love a little!

Find love where you can get it

NEGOTIATING THE CURRENCY OF POWER

Power between people has a bad rap, and some of us don't want to deal with it. Yet, harmony among us all requires stability, and stability ultimately depends on social order whether we like it or not. If one looks closely enough, that social order tends to be established and maintained through negotiating the *currency of power*. This is done by all of us *all the time*, whether we like it or not, whether we're aware of it or not. There is almost no break from or escaping it. Just like breathing, where we have to inhale, then exhale, so do we take, and do we give all the time.

Everywhere in life, we initiate, and we respond. There really is no option to *not* do that, and this is just as true for *negotiating the currency of power* – we always vacillate between yielding some power or influence, and claiming some power or influence, all the time. It's a constant

give and take – we follow, then we lead, then we follow, then we lead. It's normal and natural. It's like breathing. It just *is*. Let's use 'power' and 'influence' somewhat interchangeably here.

**Power is like air - it comes in and it goes out,
just like breathing. We inhale, we exhale.
We take, we give. We lead, we follow.**

Learning about *how* to negotiate the currency of power, or influence, can be illuminating. When it comes to the currency of power, when it comes to leading or following, we all have natural defaults – places we feel most at home at. Some of us follow more, some of us lead more. Some of us are more deferential, some of us more authoritative. Some of us might even be submissive, and some of us might even be dominant. That's ok. It just is, and we just are. Think about your relationships, professionally and personally, and see where you've observed

this ongoing give and take, and see where your natural power place is. Chances are, you know already where it is. This is natural and normal.

**Negotiating power is just like breathing,
it happens whether we want to or not,
whether we're aware of it or not.**

Generally, if you're deferential (even for a moment) you enjoy less influence, and generally, if you're authoritative (even for a moment) you enjoy more influence. Generally, the less power or influence you have, the less space you'll take up, and the more reactive or quick your movements may be. Equally, the more power or influence you have, the more space you'll take up, and the less reactive and less quick your movements may be. If you think of an eagle, then think of a chicken, you'll see that this illustrates itself easily. By default, we ascribe more power and influence to an eagle than we do to a chicken.

One may wonder about there being no power differential between people – when one is even, the same or equal. While that idea may sound appealing, power and influence behave just like the air we breathe. We can hold our breath for a short while, but then the inhaling and exhaling *must* start again. There really is no other option if life is to go on. Two people having *equal* power or influence in a conversation would mean both talking at the same time - or neither talking at all. It can't last long either way because it won't work. To illustrate this in your mind, imagine a busy downtown pedestrian zone with many people milling about. At any given time, there will be strangers walking apparently straight towards one another. The only way this doesn't turn into a mass disaster is when one person *yields* and another person doesn't yield, but instead takes the path offered by the yielding. This is the unconscious and functional rule we all behave by. One gives, one takes. One defers, one is authoritative. One takes up more space, one takes up less space.

Now, if we didn't follow these inherent rules of negotiating power or influence, the pedestrian zone would instantly devolve into a mass disaster. If the parties that are apparently walking straight towards one another would both yield at the same time, they would instantly face each other again, and neither of them would get anywhere. As humans, we abhor such situations and tend to course-correct *constantly* - and long before it comes to such stalemate. We tend to not want to tolerate such stand off for more than a small fraction of a second. Equally, if neither party yields, people would be aiming for one another and running straight into each other. It would be an understatement to say that this would not be tolerable! There would be instantaneous confrontation and fights. We will avoid *that* flavor of a standoff at pretty much all cost. In either scenario – when all are yielding, or when nobody is yielding – the pedestrian zone would come to an immediate and complete standstill. Practically, we will never allow for this to

happen. We will yield, and not yield, *all the time*. And for each give, there will be a take, and for each taking, there will be a giving.

Negotiating power is a constant see-saw of give and take within a zero-sum equation.

While we *do* this negotiating of the currency of power at all times, we generally have no idea how this negotiation works – we just do it – and we are generally *utterly* unaware of doing it at all. Maybe we have so little language for this profound dynamic, and are so unconscious of doing it all the time because we do – negotiate - all this almost exclusively with *non-verbal* communication. Long before we employ words, we are very busy negotiating this dynamic of either being more deferential or more authoritative *in any given moment* with lots of non-verbal tools. We use our eyes, head movements, facial expressions, gestures, gait, posture, and overall physicality. We use sounds

accompanying our inhaling or exhaling, make funny noises such as whistling, and finally - if and when we use words - we use the volume, pitch and speed of our voice long before the meaning of our spoken words have the impact we think they have. Words really come last. Long before we get to the talking part, most of the negotiation of power or influence will have been settled – we just aren't that aware of it.

It's reasonable to wonder why we are we so unaware of this. It turns out that our eyes, skin, ears, and senses of smell and taste send millions of bits of information per second to our brain. It appears that scientists have determined that the amount of data our *consciousness* can process amounts to somewhere around 40-150 bits per second. The resulting ratio is beyond staggering, indicating that more than 99.9% of incoming information is not being *consciously* processed by us. What is being excluded from conscious processing seems to either be constantly discarded by our

brain or it's being unconsciously processed. It's within that vast body of unconscious processing that the negotiation of the currency of power appears to take place. As a result, we're usually not aware of it at all.

More power is not better than less power, and less power is not better than more power.

Negotiating the currency of power doesn't only happen between people, it can also happen between people and objects, and between people and space. How we interact with objects and how we interact with space follows the same guidelines of how we interact with people where we negotiate the give and take, the upper and the lower hand, the following and the leading. Stage actors seem to be the only people which learn the art of consciously interacting with objects and space. Their moment-to-moment, and often constantly changing relationship with not only other actors

but with objects and with space is an intrinsic part of the creative tension we as spectators enjoy. If there is no active moment-to-moment negotiation of power and influence between actors and actors, actors and objects, and actors and space, we as spectators tend to fall asleep. We find it boring.

**There's an appropriate amount of power
for every moment and every situation.**

As a general rule, as humans we tend to strive 'up' in terms of power rather than 'down'. Few of us strive to be homeless, most of us strive to be a bit more successful or well off. While few of us strive to have *less* influence, and while more of us strive to have *more* influence, it's important to note that more influence is not better than less influence. In fact, with more power or influence comes more responsibility, and not all of us *want* more responsibility. The majority of us is just fine being a tad more

deferential and follow, rather than being more authoritative and lead. It's easier.

A knife is neither good nor bad, but if you hold it by the blade, you are in the wrong.

Both deferring and leading have their appropriate place and time, and this can change from moment to moment, second to second. As such, being more authoritative is no better or worse than being more deferential. Negotiating power or influence are a *situational* dynamic – in one moment we yield, in the next moment we don't yield. This is part of how social order functions. We give, we take. In and of itself, the currency of power is *neutral* – like air. When one is more *leading*, it really only means that one is more worthy of attention than when one is *deferring*. We simply pay more attention to leaders than followers, and while some of us want the attention, some of us do not want it.

One is *always* negotiating one's power relative to others, to objects, or to space. Always.

Play with paying attention to some of the ways in which this currency of power or influence is negotiated, pretty much at all times, by those around you as well as by yourself. Try to notice where on the power spectrum you land by default. Play with a little deviation from your natural default 'place', and see what happens if you surprise the world with slightly different behavior than they may know from you. Or simply walk through a busy pedestrian area and experiment for yourself! For a few minutes of experimentation, you could decide that you'll *always* yield to *everyone* - or - that you *won't* yield to *anyone* and only stay your own course. You could also simply *match* each oncoming person's exact behavior. You're guaranteed to have an illuminating experience involving lots of unforeseen and spontaneous responses from strangers, ranging from consternation over laughter to anger!

Here and there, now and then it tends to be mandatory for us to adjust our own default power place a little in order to get along, just as we sometimes take shallow breaths and other times take deep breaths. We tend to barely be aware of such occasional adjustments. However, once you sharpen your eye for the near-constant negotiation of the currency of power, it may become hard to *not* notice it anymore. Once you become a little proficient at *adjusting* your own behavior *consciously*, you will notice the profound change this will have on how your environment responds to you. As a general rule, if you follow more, others will *have* to lead more, and if you lead more, others will *have* to follow more. It's a constant see-saw of give and take and as illustrated by the downtown pedestrian area scenario, it's a zero-sum equation.

**Leading necessitates deference,
Deferring necessitates leadership.**

BOUNDARIES – TRICKY BUT GOOD

Very few of us grew up with healthy role models that showed us what healthy boundaries look and feel like. As a result, most of us have had plenty of experiences where our boundaries have not been honored, or where we have not honored the boundaries of others. Most of us just plain don't know what healthy boundaries are.

Healthy boundaries mean knowing where you end and where others begin. Try sitting on the floor and drawing a circle around you where you think you end and others begin.

Healthy boundaries ensure that you're physically, emotionally and mentally stable and safe. Good boundaries are good for you. They establish a sense of autonomy and respect for both yourself and others. Boundaries can be

about personal space and touch, about possessions and money, about all aspects of sexuality, but also about feelings, thoughts and ideas, and about time and how it's spent.

Defining *and communicating* boundaries is *self-care, self-work*. Don't rely on others to set them for you – they don't know you as well as you do! Know your rights, your needs, your limits, and your values. It can help to write them down and looking them over. Trusting your gut and your instincts tends to be a really good idea. When you're in doubt, always go for 'no'. It tends to be safer.

The big news about good boundaries is that they won't scare the right people away.

Treating the boundaries of others is just as important as having yours treated well. Respect the rights, limits, needs, values, and instincts of

others – as much as you’d like your own respected. If there’s no clear ‘yes’ from another person, take it as a ‘no’. It tends to be safer.

**Honor the boundaries of others
the same way you’d like yours to be honored.**

You might worry that setting boundaries may make you seem unfriendly, confrontational, or may get interpreted by others as your rejection of them. It’s critical to realize that this worry largely happens only in your mind. It *is* possible to set and maintain boundaries without upsetting those you care about. Define and communicate what you’re up for *early on*, then be flexible – as long as you don’t give up yourself in order to preserve perceived harmony. Most of us actually do that most of the time – we give *ourselves up in order to preserve perceived harmony*. It’s something most of us have learned as a survival skill, and

then we've forgotten that we no longer need that skill. This is a good skill to unlearn!

Don't give up yourself in order to preserve perceived harmony.

Poor or mushy boundaries are neither healthy nor attractive: all you'll attract will be people with poor boundaries themselves, and then it is open season for boundary violations. Once boundaries are crossed left right and center, it's not only hard to get healthy again in a relationship, but you're likely going to suffer emotional, mental, or physical distress. Avoid this at all cost. It's not worth it to suffer through. If your boundaries in a relationship are deeply violated, it's often too much to fix, or outside of your control. In such cases, it may be best to get out and *work on yourself first* so that you'll be attracting healthier people down the road. It's worth it - healthy boundaries are non-negotiable in *good* and *healthy* relationships.

GIVING UP SELF IN RELATIONSHIP

We all know about the necessity and value of compromises and concessions. We do what we have to do in order to get along peacefully. Yet, all too often, we do this at the expense of our own values, our own selves, and our own self-determination. We often lose our *differentiation* in relationships – we merge part of our selves with what we believe is necessary in order to maintain the relational peace and harmony. Without us really wanting this to happen, parts of our selves get *absorbed* into the relationship, and we can ‘lose ourselves’.

Most of us will have had that experience – of losing parts of ourselves in relationship – and wish we wouldn’t have done so. It is not easy to understand *why* and *how* we so readily give up parts of ourselves. If we haven’t developed a very strong sense of Self we can be prone to not even realize when our boundaries get

transgressed, either by ourselves or by others. Along the way of giving up parts of ourselves, we may notice *some* things, such as increasingly thinking, feeling, and planning more around *the other person* than around our Self. It's usually not because we inherently *want to*, but somehow we feel compelled to do so, as if moved by a bigger force than our own intent and will. An unfortunate result of giving up Self in relationship is that we, our Self, loses confidence, direction, and energy. And with that, anxiety tends to go up!

Two half selves do not make one full self.

This usually goes both ways in that both partners find that too much of each Self has been absorbed into the relationship. What ends up existing in a dominant fashion is kind of 'conglomerate' that comprises two emotionally 'fused' or undifferentiated selves. As such, both selves often become what could be called two

‘No-Selfs’, and the main relational entity becomes a co-created vehicle of *apparent* harmony and peace, which both partners will work hard to maintain. Yet, the cost of such ‘harmonious’ vehicle often is giving up parts of Self, and each person will present only a slice or an imitation of a real Self. Most such relationships at best hobble along, and at worst are doomed. We’ve all observed, or been in, a relationships that functions like that.

Are you responsible for yourself or for them?

So how can one maintain ‘Self’ in relationship, engage in compromises and concessions, and not lose confidence, direction and energy? How can we best preempt the invariably arising of anxiety? Anxiety or emotional reactivity is a response to a real or imagined threat. We all know that both involve physical manifestations, such as heart rate changes, gaze aversion, fight or flight responses, and heightened alertness or

fear sensations. One good step to take is to *recognize* those moments of anxiety in ourselves and then *immediately* step back from them and ask yourself *where and how* you've experienced that anxiety or reactivity before in your life. Go as far back as you can - even into your childhood - because chances are, you're not responding this way for the first time. Most likely you've learned this response a long time ago, and it is *there* where you have to understand it, so that you can start working on responding *differently* when *old* triggers show up in your *present* relationship.

**Just because it *feels* true
doesn't mean it *is* true.**

Reactivity and anxiety in thinking, feeling, and behavior tends to show up as chronic patterns. We tend to stumble upon those patterns time and again throughout life. In general, they have all developed in the emotional field of one's

family while growing up, so it's helpful to have a close look at how *anxiety* and *reactivity* showed up within us and all around us when we were little. Once we can have a long-distant look at the origins of those dynamics, we can gain a wee bit of *perspective*, and can begin to gain greater conscious control over our stress response.

This entails increasing our ability to think, perceive, speak and act from a *fact-based* rather than a feeling-based assessment of what is going on. *Feelings* then become *one* of the facts that provide valuable information in deciding what to do in a given situation. This tends to be much more helpful than using the knee-jerk *emotional lens* which colors and distorts perceptions and decision-making. When noticing some anxiety arise inside yourself, a good question to ask yourself is 'What are my thoughts about these feelings?'

What are your thoughts about these feelings?

No matter how young or old, it's always a good idea to work a bit on *differentiating* yourself from others you're in relationship with.

Differentiation of Self includes well thought out principles, morals, and ethics, which enhance developing a solid sense of Self. A person with a solid sense of Self will *not* be swayed by fads or opinions and will *not* feel pressured to think, feel, and act like others do. A solid Self will be less susceptible to social pressures and social competition. This is a tall order, but well worthy of pursuit and investment. Differentiating yourself step by step means you decrease the chronic anxiety and become *less* reactive to what the others think, feel, and do.

See if you can define your position and boundaries early and up front. Do what you're up for, then be flexible and provide options that may work for others. Do your very best to not

give up Self to preserve perceived harmony. Ask yourself if you are responsible for yourself or for them? Consider yourself *less* with how others may respond to you. When pushback comes from others, *stay* the course - *and* stay connected.

Differentiation of Self is juggling the opposing life forces of togetherness and independence so that neither is threatening the other.

The degree to which you can think and act for yourself while remaining in contact with emotionally charged dynamics tends to determine your degree of *Differentiation of Self*. As you become more differentiated, you can maintain a separate, solid Self even when confronted with considerable stress and anxiety. The key goal is to manage your own anxiety by choosing thoughtful actions that keep you connected without giving yourself up.

APOLOGIES & FORGIVENESS – WHAT WORKS?

Apologizing and asking for forgiveness are so popular that we tend to not question how – and if - it works. Saying 'I'm sorry' and offering an apology generally means we didn't mean to upset someone, but did it anyway. So far so good. When it comes to asking for – or offering – forgiveness, it gets more interesting.

Forgiveness as an idea tends to mostly have originated in religious contexts. Yet today, many of us no longer live in strong religious contexts. Generally, offering forgiveness means that we no longer harbor ill-feelings or ill-will towards those who have wronged us. Sounds easy. But is it? When we've forgiven someone, did we truly transcend *their* wrongdoing and *our* hurt, did we leave it all behind us *for good*, did we really *forget* about it and did we truly *let it go*?

Asking for forgiveness from someone we've wronged seems to come remarkably easy to us, as if we've got a *right* to ask for it, and as if those harmed *should* forgive us. That's a lot of *unchecked* assumptions that may beckon further consideration and thought. Additionally, how do we decide what is 'eligible' for forgiveness and how do we decide if *forgiveness* is the right thing to ask for? If you think about it, the apology-forgiveness equation is actually quite complicated.

**Being at the ready to apologize
and ask for forgiveness makes it so much
more tolerable and acceptable to screw up.**

We often don't consider how apologies and asking for forgiveness address the *degree* of wrongdoing or hurt. Anxiety can also show up quickly, as the stakes often seem unreasonably high – because if we *don't* forgive, we run the risk of the trust being irreparably broken, and

relationships being de facto over. Such high stakes present the question if there isn't another way, another approach towards reconciliation when the bedrock of relationship - trust - has been damaged.

Look into the eyes of the person you hurt and see if you can feel their pain.

Offering remorse and contrition while taking full responsibility is a necessary and great step as long as it's heartfelt and the receiver believes it to be heartfelt. If however, after that, we ask for forgiveness, the burden of relieving the pressure of imbalance will reside with the injured person! They are the hurt party who likely had to give up something in the process of getting hurt. Isn't seeking their forgiveness asking them to do *even more*? If you think about it, that looks like all the grief *and* the work is very one-sided.

For some reason, we usually don't consider the idea of *making things right*, restoring lost balance by word and deed, *making it up* to the wronged person, *making whole*. We forget about the option of pulling even in the spirit of *restorative justice*. The burden of righting a wrongdoing could be distributed, if not be the responsibility of the wrongdoer. Think about the times you've felt wronged and were asked for forgiveness – wouldn't it have felt better, been healthier and more effective in the long run if the wrongdoer had *made it up to you*?

***Making things right is much harder
than asking for forgiveness.***

Another dynamic that tends to be overlooked is that of *moral imbalance*. When someone has been wronged and then forgives the wrongdoer, it tends to elevate the *forgiver* onto a higher moral ground. First they were injured and now they're magnanimous enough to

forgive the wrongdoing. They likely will remain the 'bigger' person for having forgiven, and the wrongdoer will likely remain in the forgiver's moral debt. Healthy relationships ideally do not feature moral imbalances.

If you've wronged someone, and you've apologized, consider what you could do *before* you ask for forgiveness. Think hard. If you don't come up with anything, ask the injured person to think about what it would take, what you could *do* to make it right. This is often a great idea as it puts the injured party in the driver's seat. See if you can restore the lost balance without asking for forgiveness. In order to avoid asking yet *more* of the injured party, and in order to avoid the injured party ending up morally superior for forgiving you, see if you can 'make it right'. *Making it right* tends to be a better way for truly transcending a wrongdoing and have it truly be forgotten over time.

POWER STRUGGLES - THEY HAPPEN

Power struggles suck. Most of us try to avoid them at all cost, and usually, we fail. Invariably a power struggle presents itself, and then we're mostly screwed, because at the end of the day, there will only be losers. The biggest loser tends to be the relationship itself, because power struggles create distance and resentment. Usually, both parties involved feel that they have something to lose and consciously or unconsciously become somewhat rigid and inflexible when something important to them appears to be at stake. Fascinatingly, we don't actually know what's at stake most of the time.

**The question of a power struggle
is never *if*, only *when*.**

Almost all of us tend to be attached to being right and don't enjoy being wrong. Because we

feel right! Unfortunately, the other party may feel just the same way. We often reason *emotionally* – we think we’re right because we *feel* right. Emotional reasoning is hardly ever helpful, yet we often find ourselves doing it before we’re even aware of doing it. Thus we tend to not see power struggles coming – they tend to come out of nowhere, they tend to escalate quickly, and all of a sudden, there’s lots at stake. Or so it feels. And before we know it, we’re in the thick of it.

What’s really at stake however? On the surface, it appears that it’s just about being right or being wrong, and often about something apparently menial. But power struggles *are* power struggles because they carry a much bigger price tag. What’s at stake are usually trust, safety, and a sense of belonging or unity. When we feel that something as intrinsic and important as trust, safety, or our sense of belonging are at stake, we freak out, as the stakes feel high. Key here is that the stakes *feel*

high, even though they may actually not be that high.

**Power struggles can be 100% avoided.
Simply give up on being right and refuse
to play the winning/losing power game.**

When you experience a power struggle in progress, you really have two choices: you either engage in it, or you don't engage in it. Power struggles only have losers, even when it may appear for some time as if there was a winner. And power struggles tend to have not one possible loser, but multiple guaranteed losers: trust, safety, and a sense of belonging all tend to suffer when a power struggle is taking place. Engaging *at all* is already a lose/lose proposition, so if at all possible, try to simply not engage at all. It'll feel hard, but consider that it'll only be a power struggle if *you* engage and participate. *Consider simply not engaging.* It's like magic if you don't engage.

This is *not* easy to do, but well worth the effort. Alternatively, once you realize that you're in a power struggle, you can *stop the bad game* and call it out. Share that you feel you're both in a power struggle, and share that you'd like to not be in one. Explore what you can jointly do to opt out of the power struggle. Invest your energy into a discussion about *alternate ways* to address the issue at hand. There usually are. You may also simply *concede* in the moment, and just go with whatever the other person wants. Give them slack, even let them feel right and righteous, grant them their escalated emotions. Just because they're worked up about something doesn't mean you have to join them. And it doesn't mean they are right and you are wrong. It just means you won't play your part in a power struggle.

The big bad news about power struggles is that nothing good ever comes of them.

COMPROMISE VS CONCESSION

Compromise! It's so popular and relied upon as a seemingly necessary ingredient for successful relationships, business or personal. Few people in relationships will ever say 'We didn't have to make compromises'. Somehow, it's just understood that compromises are 'a necessary evil' – something we've got to accept and learn to love, because without it, we won't be getting along. But have we looked under the hood of compromise, have we explored alternatives?

Too often, with compromise, nobody wins – and we seem to think that this is good enough. We don't really notice that both parties will engage somewhat reluctantly in things they don't really want. Often, this means that while we appear to get along, there's some teeth grinding, and everybody loses at least a little. We tend to overlook that compromise over time engenders *resentment*, little by little. It can

add up and one or more parties often feel, after months or years, that they've compromised so much that it's chipped away at who they used to be – and then we are decidedly not happy. We may have abandoned ourselves 'for the sake of the relationship' – which seemed to make sense along each step of the way, but often, we are now at minimum not happy, and possibly not even there anymore – we might be *gone*.

Compromises tend to foster resentment.

What if there was a better way to negotiate differing needs and desires along the way? What if we forgot about compromises and instead looked at *concessions*? We all know we can't all have and do only what *we* want in personal or business relationships. There are times where the other party's needs or desires will be different than ours. But what if we took these situations as *opportunities* to kindly, full-

heartedly, even lovingly say ‘I’ll happily do that for/with you, because I care about what you want’. And do so with pleasure, not with resentment.

We could show up for those we want to get along with by *happily* conceding things, doing things with or for them we *know* they would love with or from us. We could do things for others without any teeth grinding, any resentment, and any abandoning of Self. It would be our full Self that gladly, even lovingly, will *want* the other party to have *their* experience with or thanks to us. We could show up fully for others in this way. Full of understanding, full of support, and full of pleasure. And, they might do the same for us!

**Concessions can be granted full-heartedly
and without fostering resentments.**

And if we can model that notion of concessions, we'll look for it, attract it, and engage with it. Relationships *can* be built on concessions, rather than on compromises. And we can rely on knowing that the other party will give concessions of their own in order to bring us joy and satisfaction. It's simply a different way of looking at how to get along. Lovingly affording one another concessions propels a relationship to higher ground.

It might help to remember that if we love someone else, we really should not have any agenda for *their* life, both in detail as well in broad strokes. If we have an agenda for their life, we would in fact be adversarial towards them, as we would want them to want something that they don't want of their own volition. In other words, we are really only on their side if we want what *they* want.

This can be hard to swallow and to see through practically, but it's tremendously helpful to remember when we inevitably come to a crossroads where we and those we're in relationship with want to take different paths.

The question to ask ourselves then becomes if we can love someone even when what they want is not what we want - within some give and take, within some balance? If we're *not* adversaries, being supportive of the diverging wishes of our friend or partner can be such a great gift to give them. They will love us more in return. Even if their and our paths will take us in different directions. Sometimes, that's what it takes – even just temporarily. It requires a lot of trust and confidence in one's own senses. But loving someone to the degree that you don't stand in the way of *their* direction forward - that is a great way to love. Concessions make that a lot more feasible than compromises.

TRIANGLING IN RELATIONSHIPS

Triangling in relationships is something we all do, yet tend to not be aware of and thus don't really have a good name for. Engaging in a triangle happens the moment we talk about our thoughts or feelings about *one* person with a *different*, third person. This could be talking with co-workers about the boss, with friends about your partner, with fellow students about the teacher, or with one neighbor about another neighbor. It's something most of us do, and do so often. We tend to never wonder why we do that, and we also tend to never wonder how healthy it is.

Most times such triangling is of a negative nature, meaning we'll talk *against* people behind their back. We keep our disapproving or unhappy feelings to ourselves, and then let them out when the person who they are about is no longer present. It's so much safer, after all.

But one of the reasons it feels safer is that it keeps us from having to confront - and sit with - our own negative or disapproving thoughts and feelings. It allows us to find validation or empathy with the help of third parties, and it 'saves' us from having to address those thoughts and feelings with the people they are really about. Generally, triangling relieves anxious energy within us, anxiety we'd rather not shoulder on our own.

None of us learned how to handle anxiety well.

There are many other examples of triangling that slip through under our radar, such as gossiping, having an affair, joining movements that are very strongly pro or against something, or focusing excessively on one's child or pet at the expense of thinking about one's own partnership or one's own life. Triangling often means that someone will be taking sides, and it

usually serves as a way to relieve the pressure that our anxiety has created inside of us.

So many things about the unconscious habit of triangling feel so good in the moment that it's very hard to recognize when we're doing it, and even harder to abstain from doing it. Add to this that most of us have been doing it most of our lives, and it becomes clear that most of us don't recognize it when, as a third party, we're being roped into a triangle. A friend just wants to talk to us about something that's weighing on their heart, a coworker has amazingly great or terrible news, a child feels misunderstood by one parent and seeks out the other. Triangles are practically part of life as we know it.

Most of us probably grew up in an environment in which triangling seemed necessary for survival and emotional health. So we adopted it and have been on auto-pilot ever since. Few of us will decline a friend 'in need' who desires our

empathetic ear, and few of us will resist the pressure of choosing who's 'right' in a conflict we're being told about. It takes a lot of awareness, understanding and discipline to resist the temptation of initiating triangles, and it takes a lot of awareness, understanding and discipline to avoid being roped into triangles by those close to us.

Triangling appears to feel great in the moment yet actually creates barriers between people.

While triangling is practically baked into our lives, it presents us with real challenges. For one, triangling turns out to not be supportive of relationships or emotional health at all. Over time it tends to *increase* the anxiety it initially appears to ease – the 'system' within which the triangulation happens tends to become more anxious rather than less anxious. Triangulation tends to disrespect boundaries, increase passive-aggressive behaviors, deflect from

where the issues are really situated, and harm healthy intimacy. Not triangling is hard as it faces three challenges – one, how to recognize *that* we're doing it or are being roped into it, two, realizing *why* we're doing it or allowing ourselves to get roped in, and three, *how* to stop and get out of unhealthy triangulation.

Triangulation is a covert operation and usually discredits someone not present.

Step one – *recognizing that we're doing it* - tends to be understanding two things. First is that most of us are doing it most of the time, meaning that it's likely so pervasive that it's become largely unconscious and we'll have trouble recognizing it in the first place. This alone takes some awareness, some discipline, and some practice. See if you can identify it when or where it's happening! One easy-to-overlook place it can happen is when a parent is closer to a child than they are to their own

partner. Ideally, their parental relationship comes first in terms of closeness. The second thing to understand is the true downsides of triangulation. This means realizing that most times it's fundamentally unhealthy, dishonest, disrespectful, manipulative, and even narcissistic. It solves nothing. It *increases* anxiety and tension rather than reduces them.

Step two - realizing *why we're doing it* - starts with interesting questions. Is it that we're shy? Conflict avoidant? Controlling? Fearful? Cowardly? Unskilled? And if we're being roped into it, do we feel 'special' because someone confides in us, wants to know *our opinion*, has elevated *us* to the status of judge? Finding answers to the *why* is tremendously helpful as it points us back to the relationship where the tension or anxiety that generated the triangulation really comes from. It's *that* relationship where we need to take the most important steps, likely steps of addressing things directly. We all would benefit from

learning how to talk about challenging matters in calm, honest, and kind ways. We all would benefit from knowing how to say what we mean and mean what we say. It's hard, but it can be done and it's so much healthier than talking behind others' backs.

Who really wants to be manipulative and narcissistic?

Step three - *how to stop and get out of unhealthy triangulation* - has two sides. Side one is about stopping a triangulation *you start*. Whenever you want to talk (likely negatively) about someone without them present, ask yourself if you would still be alright if you passed up this apparent opportunity? Chances are, you *would* be alright – and you'd be doing yourself, those not present, and whoever you were going to rope into your triangle a huge favor. Do your best to *not* complain about others behind their backs, to not vent, and to

not ask others to take sides (usually *your* side!). *Keep and harness* that energy for where you really need it and where it really belongs – in the relationship where you’re experiencing some tension. This is *not* easy – but it *is* doable, and it’s really healthy for you and those you relate to.

Side two of step three is to avoid getting sucked into the triangles of others. Avoid taking sides, even when asked. Realize that if you become party to a triangle, you’re *taking on* some of their anxiety. Maintain good boundaries and refuse ‘having’ to agree or disagree. Stay neutral and help yourself to language such as ‘Well I hope you two can work it out’ or ‘Have you thought about taking this up directly with the other person?’ or ‘What do you think are your options in this situation?’. Be *curious*, and help the ‘roper’ learn more about themselves by using language such as ‘Well this sounds like it is hard for you – have you come across this kind of experience before?’

**Triangulation *appears* to relieve tensions,
however it actually increases tensions.**

Practice good emotional hygiene and be a good partner or friend by keeping clean and strong boundaries, leaving tensions and conflicts where they belong. If they are yours, solve them yourself, and if they aren't yours, don't become part of the web of anxiety of others. It may seem that good friends take sides, but consider that you might be an even better friend by not taking sides. That way, you respect and honor both your own and their boundaries. It's both powerful and empowering!

WHEN SOMEONE REALLY LOSES IT

We've all been there when someone we're with just loses it, breaks down, sulks, stops talking, freaks out, yells and screams, has a hissy fit, or is in a deep funk. It can feel so serious! More often than not we're clueless about what to do, how to help. Since we haven't been trained for melt downs, we tend to go into crisis mode and possibly freak out ourselves a bit as well. We do our best, but often it's not helping. We feel helpless - and that hurts, especially when who's having such a hard time is someone we love. So, what should we do?

**None of us have learned how to
be there for others in crisis.**

When one person shuts down and seemingly pushes the other away, it is really the person who shut down that has the harder time. Yet,

typically it's the *other* person that then reacts to, or is triggered by, the one who's shut down. If we're the ones shut out or pushed away, it's easy to overlook the pain of the person in crisis and make it all about ourselves instead. This then exacerbates the issue at hand and tends to make the situation worse by presenting *two* conflicting if not competing negative emotional experiences.

Not taking things personally is hard, but key.

An important ingredient of mature love in a relationship is that when this scenario happens, the other person moves *towards* the one who lost it, and seeks to understand, support and sooth that person's pain. The big question is if you can be present and supportive to the other *in the face* of being shut out and pushed away? Can you recognize that the person who shuts down has *priority* in their pain, and that you'll have to take a number?

This is not easy, as most of us quickly get flooded with our *own* emotions and fail to see past our own issues in the heat of the moment. Yet, it's imperative to learn to be able to do so if one wants to be a healthy, loving and supportive friend or partner. This requires learning how to *get yourself out of the way* so that you can be the supportive person your partner needs you to be as long as they are in crisis.

**Getting yourself out of the way
is hard, but key.**

Here are some thoughts if you'd like to succeed at being there for others in crisis: Consider yourself an ER doctor for the time being – your own needs and desires are *no longer* relevant. Put *all* other plans on hold until this crisis is resolved. Forget about who you *were* and focus on who you *can be*, and *need to be, right now*.

Your number one objective is to reach the other person *emotionally*. This is *not* a time to be conceptual or intellectual in any way. Stay out of your head and away from facts. Your inner state ideally is one of calmness and solidity, and *competent servitude*. The *other* person now rules, and you are in a service position *only*. Your ego has no role in this equation.

You'll be in charge from a *deferential* position.

Your overall main job is to provide the other person with deep comfort. Forget 100% about asking the other person what they need. This is *not* a time to quiz the other person in order to see if what you're doing is working or not – just quietly observe how they respond and adjust your behavior if needed. Again: forget about asking the other person what they need. They are in crisis, and it's *your* job to see what they need.

This means that you're *in charge* from a *deferential* or serving position. Getting the other person to stabilize and normalize will take however long it takes – you can't rush the river. And there *will be* a changed landscape when the other person has left their crisis state and returned to relative normalcy – and returned to you. It will be apparent and it will feel good to both parties. At that point, you can show up again with your own experience, your own needs and desires, but not until then.

Nobody has ever learned this and few people are good at it. Yet, even if you do only parts of this, chances are you will help a person in crisis more than they've ever been helped before. It's invaluable. And being on the *receiving end* of such assistance is an enormous and positive experience for the person in crisis – they will feel grateful and indebted to you. And with a bit of practice you'll get better at this awesome way of being there for someone who's in crisis. It's a powerful experience on both sides.

TRAPS OF RELATIONAL VICTIMHOOD

There are no words that can adequately describe the pain and trauma that comes with having been victimized by a perpetrator, be it psychological, emotional, physical, or sexual. Working through such trauma is incredibly hard if one is to ever recover one's identity beyond that of being a victim. Abuse often leaves no visible scars and it can be hard for others to comprehend the damage that was once done. And having one's dignity robbed on top of the communicable damage can leave scars for life.

There are the defenseless being victimized by those in official power, there are the marginalized and persecuted by regimes, there are the innocent randomly victimized by complete strangers, and there are those who are *relationally* victimized, where one or more people are suffering from the abusive behavior of one or more people – usually people they've

known briefly, or known for some time, and usually people who seemed initially benevolent, yet turned out to be perpetrators.

This is about *that* last group of victims and perpetrators. Within that, there tend to be two extreme – emotional - ways of looking at the dynamic. One extreme immediately assigns all responsibility to the perpetrator, and the other extreme assigns some, most, or possibly all responsibility to the victim. *Both* extreme perspectives over-simplify an incredibly complex dynamic and view it only in a *binary* way - by looking at *only* the individuals involved in the victimization process. As such, neither perspective tends to be helpful. Relational abuse tends to happen within a *system* of which both perpetrator and victim are a part of and in which *both* play certain roles that contribute to this extremely lamentable dynamic.

**Righteous indignation is understandable
and solves nothing.**

We always tend to remove participating individuals from the complex systems they are a part, thereby overlooking that all of us are part of *systems* which influence our individual behaviors. This applies to perpetrators and victims as much as it does to anyone. When relational abuse takes place, emotions run understandably high, and we tend to have the reflex of wanting to *take sides*. This is actually *not* helpful as it prompts us to lose our neutrality and our ability to see clearly. When our emotions run that high, we simply forget to consider *if* and *how* each party contributed to what transpired. Sometimes, even considering those questions raises ire, however, they are just questions, not judgments.

Specifically, two things tend to get overlooked when one only sees a binary (good/bad) and

individualistic equation. One, looking at *how and why perpetrators do what they do* tends to be omitted. This happens very easily as it's natural to ostracize perpetrators – someone that bad seems to be deserving of being thrown out without a second look. Two, it feels natural to rush to the side of the victim and do all one can to help ameliorate the inflicted harm – without inquiring how the victim got into the abusive relational situation in the first place.

If the goal is to minimize future abuse and victimhood, and *if the goal is* to prevent the victim from becoming victimized again, then it becomes imperative to *not* omit the backgrounds and psychological reasons which underpin who both perpetrator and victim became. As such, it becomes *necessary* to look closely, and somewhat dispassionately, at how both perpetrator and victim ended up engaging in abuse, each from their vantage points.

There are now finally good studies and books on *how and why perpetrators do what they do*. They are relatively eye-opening in terms of degrees of responsibility, and many are worth reading. There is less critical work available on how the victims got to the abusive situation. The notion that the victim *also* plays a critical role in the abusive system is more taboo and harder to tackle in dispassionate ways, as emotions understandably tend to run very high for the victim perspective. Yet, the old adage that 'it takes two to tango' unfortunately also holds true in relational perpetrator-victim dynamics.

There are no victims - only volunteers?

One emotional side-effect of relational victimhood tends to be a drastic reduction in felt responsibility and experienced power, which is entirely understandable. Yet at the same time it's the victim that could benefit

more than anyone from an *increase* in responsibility and power *in order* to facilitate their healing and eventual re-emergence from victimhood. *Felt* responsibility and *experienced* power can be very empowering, and at the end of the day, it seems both are needed in order for victims to eventually be able to shed their victim identity and return to a healthy identity. While it may seem counterintuitive, a continued focus on the perpetrator is much less effective in preventing further relational abuse.

Accepting responsibility for your circumstances generates the power needed to change them.

We cannot make the world a safe place. We can only make ourselves equipped to deal with an unsafe world. Thus, the shortest path a victim can take towards emerging from victimhood is to claim two things - *responsibility* and *power*. This is best achieved by attempting to answer the simple yet difficult question of *how they got*

there – and then learning from it. Sample questions might be along the lines of was anything obvious ignored, were any warning signs not heeded, was the situation volatile even *before* the relational abuse, was the perpetrator tempted/taunted by anybody, were you prepared and equipped to handle the situation/s that led up to the relational abuse, did you seek support when things felt off during times leading up to the relational abuse, were there signals inside yourself you overlooked, did you trust others more than you trusted yourself, etc.

None of these questions are easy – but they are *helpful* in claiming responsibility and power in terms of one's own contribution to a terrible situation. It's important to realize and acknowledge that one has zero power over the other person's contribution. It's equally important to realize and acknowledge that pointing fingers *never is empowering towards*

oneself. Righteous indignation is understandable, yet doesn't solve anything.

Hard as it may be, one's own contribution is the only worthwhile place one can look. From a victim's perspective, it's never easy to acknowledge one may have had some responsibility in relational abuse, yet *therein* lies the power or *claiming responsibility* and returning to *a state of power*. Powerlessness and loss of dignity tend to be the two biggest emotions that victims of relational abuse report. A restoration of power unfortunately – or fortunately – can only come from inside.

**Trauma may have happened to you yesterday,
but doesn't have to define you tomorrow.**

CONSENT IS EVERYTHING

Consent isn't just about sex. In many ways, subtle and not so subtle, we've all had experiences of others imposing their will onto us without our consent – and we generally don't like it. Sometimes we don't notice it, such as when manipulative advertising or opaque sales techniques make a sucker out of us. But we never like it, especially when we know that it's happening. It tends to feel demeaning if others force their will onto us when we haven't signed up for it. For those of us who *do* impose our will onto others, it can make us feel very powerful, which tends to imply that we somehow don't feel powerful enough without resorting to extreme measures.

Consent isn't a luxury, it's really a basic human need or right. It's the foundation of most healthy human interaction. Yet, it's amazingly easy to forget about that and do things that

involve others without their knowledge and consent. There's nothing good about taking others for rides they didn't sign up for. It's too dangerous. Even for you. While there may be short-term winners, in the long run everybody loses when consent is not obtained first. Eventually, the *systems* suffers if individuals haven't suffered already. This dynamic spans from sexual relations over door-to-door salespeople to clandestine online cookie collection of one's browsing habits.

The absence of a 'no' is not a 'yes'.

There are seemingly benign ways in which our consent is not assured, and then there are serious and traumatizing ways of not ensuring our consent first. The expensive truth about lack of consent is that without knowing it, we can create lifelong damage if we don't have consent and don't respect it. Despite knowing this, and despite knowing that we can do better

than that, we easily and sometimes casually take others for a ride, and possibly fuck them up for years to come.

It doesn't have to be that way. Consent is tremendously powerful, and attainable – all we have to do is *ask!* Sure, sometimes we'll earn a 'no', and then we have to respect it by all means, and we'll have to move on. But if we have another person's consent, we're in something *together*, there's no manipulation or violation of boundaries, and a lot more good stuff can happen than will happen without consent. Consent is often much more attainable *if* we're not clandestine about our intentions. Once attained, it's powerful – we have a mandate, we're in something together, we can collaborate to achieve possibly great things.

**Consent ideally is enthusiastic,
not reluctant or coerced.**

Remember that the absence of a *no* is not the presence of a *yes*. It just isn't. You must go for a clear *yes*. One fantastic guideline tends to be to only ever do with others what they explicitly want you to do with them. You'll go further, you'll go better places, and you'll be liked and loved. It's a simple equation. Checking in along the way is not that hard, and explicit mandates are powerful.

Most of us will acknowledge that in the heat of sexual passion there can be ambiguities among everybody involved. Sexuality is a complex dynamic, and we all play intricate parts in it, many of which we're not particularly aware of. During times of sexual arousal, not everybody always wants to talk *contractually* or is even in a state of mind clear enough to talk and to explicitly think about consent. Often, we may be intoxicated, which makes the consent business even more challenging. All this makes consent unfortunately somewhat of a moving target as it pertains to sexuality. If we claim

otherwise, we're either wishful, idealistic or naïve. Most of us have been in sexually charged situations where explicit consent was *not* part of the equation, and we were all fine with it. Other times, we're not fine, and those are the times we have to pay extreme attention to, so that we don't end up doing something we'd rather not be doing. That all being said, the absence of a *no* is never the presence of a *yes*.

**Compliance can feel like an act of survival.
Don't let it come that far.**

Consent is easy, attainable, and never a bad idea. Nobody likes being used, disregarded, or demeaned. It's simple enough to conclude from this that we shouldn't do onto others what we don't want others to do onto us. If you want to do something that involves others, be upfront, honest, open, ask questions, get permission, and establish consent. Consent is everything.

HOW TO SURVIVE BULLYING

Everybody hates them, most of us know one personally, and almost everybody is afraid of them. Bullies. Most of us would agree that they are a truly bad idea. So how come they're so prevalent? How do all those bullies we love to hate manage to continue their deplorable and harmful behaviors? Bullying is rampant among and around us all, from schools to colleges to the military to the workplace. While about half of all US states have anti-bullying laws that make bullying at schools illegal, it's still a prevalent and detrimental dynamic especially in schools.

Bullies don't bully to fight – they bully to win.

It's important to acknowledge that bullying is typically an ongoing and not an isolated behavior. There tend to be three typical and

common ways in which people try to respond to bullying: we try to ignore it, we confront the bullies or we turn to an authority figure to try to address it. Ignoring it of course not only doesn't help but actually tacitly *approves* it. Confronting bullies is easy to say and much harder to do than it would seem. And reporting it often comes with real-life consequences that limit its effectiveness or keeps it from being reported in the first place.

It's not always easy to determine what constitutes bullying or being bullied. People argue about it, and people argue about its effects. It is unfortunately not clear to all of us that being bullied, hazed, harassed, or demeaned is often traumatic and can leave those on the receiving end frozen and terrorized. Despite its cultural prevalence and wide-spread occurrence, the effects of bullying are often underestimated. It tends to have very detrimental short-term and long-term effects. To appreciate its effect and danger, we only

need to acknowledge that people – especially younger ones - have committed suicide after being bullied relentlessly.

Trying to stop a bully by teaching a child to stand up to the bully is like teaching the weakest child to be stronger.

We often believe – or maybe want to believe – that bullying happens occasionally, here and there, but that it's not an ongoing dynamic. Yet bullies almost always tend to be *serial* bullies, meaning they indiscriminately move from one target to the next. This is an important thing to not overlook. Victims of bullying usually take what happens very personally, because, among other reasons, they don't know that it's not about them at all, that they are nothing more than an interchangeable 'next in line' victim of the bully.

Some bullies tend to have a Jekyll and Hyde nature – they may be vile, vicious and vindictive in private, but innocent and charming in front of witnesses or in public. Often, nobody can - *or wants to* - believe this individual has a maybe sadistic or vindictive nature. This makes soliciting help to combat the bullying especially arduous. Often it's only the current target of the serial bully's aggression who sees both sides, which makes the pursuit of intervening especially challenging.

Bullying rarely happens in total privacy – usually there are witnesses and bystanders. The role of those witnesses and bystanders is often not understood well. While they may not like what they see, voicing any opposition to the bullying can instill fear *in themselves*. They might fear being bullied next, fear losing friends, or fear violating their sense of belonging to their social group by breaking the apparent social codex of silence. Yet, bystanders and witnesses are often plagued with guilt for years afterwards for not

having intervened. It's important to appreciate that intervening is a lot easier said than done. And even then, it is not a reliable way to stop bullying.

Not all forms of abuse leave visible bruises.

The easiest way to stop bullying is if authority figures such as parents, teachers, supervisors, and human-resource staff intervene. However, most people in those roles have neither experience nor *training* in how to combat bullying - or in creating environments in which it doesn't happen in the first place. As such, many people in authority figures can actually make the situation worse due to ignorance, inaction or ineffective actions. In some cases such as hazing rituals at colleges, where *surviving* being bullied is viewed as a rite of passage, authority figures often support bullying and the people doing it. By doing so, they are not only

facilitating its continuation but are effectively increasing the marginalization of the target.

**Bullying builds character
like poison creates resilience – it doesn't.**

People who get targeted by bullies tend to have little choice or control over which authority figures they can turn to, and how such matters should be addressed. One of the best means of support is to find a counsellor or psychologist who is trained in handling bullying. While that again is easier said than done, it's imperative to address being bullied so that it doesn't disappear from awareness and doesn't become something we just put up with. It's too detrimental to just put up with.

Being ridiculed or decimated in public is much worse than when it happens in private, because it increases the amount of shame the target

feels. Thus, victims of bullying often carry a lot of shame with them, which further reduces their ability to speak up and solicit the support they need. If being bullied or hazed happens in a public context, the *shame* targets feel can be crippling and freeze them in an existential state of limbo.

Living or working with a bully can be a devastating, draining, misunderstood, and ultimately futile experience.

If creating bully-free environments is almost non-existent, if intervening by bystanders is rare at best, and if reporting it to authorities is hit-or-miss, what are the best options for surviving when facing a bully? Keeping in mind that bullies tend to not give anybody mandates to change them, the best option for surviving a bully is to *get out* - leave the environment where the bullying happens. Change classes, schools, jobs, or relationships. Easy to say, hard

to do. In fact, many will protest this course of action by arguing that it's too hard or even impossible. Yet the reality is that if nobody is stopping the bullying, and if the bullying is clearly detrimental to the target, the very first choice to look at tends to be whether to sustain more damage from being bullied – or to get out.

A target of bullying tends to be 'selected' by the bully for their relative *weakness* when compared to the bully. Bullies tend to have a specific 'target' group. To understand this, it helps to understand which groups bullies *do not* go after: other bullies or people of equal or higher 'power', rank or status; those who are of *almost* equal – but slightly lesser - power, rank or status; and those at a very low 'power' level – from the bullies perspective, they tend to be boring and not worth the trouble.

This holds the clue for how to survive a bully *without* getting out. Using a rudimentary scale

of 1 to 10, let's say the bully is at level 9 in terms of power, rank, and status. If you're at a level 1 or 2, you tend to be boring to the bully. If you're around levels 3 to 5, you're the perfect lunch for the bully – you're their prime target. The bully will get off on demeaning you. Let's jump ahead and imagine you manage to present yourself at levels 9 or 10. Unless you have official authority over the bully, you *do not* want to confront a bully by increasing your level of power, rank and status to around their level or higher – it *will* get ugly. And while the bully might love to get dirty in an ugly fight, consider if you want to get dirty.

This leaves us with levels from around 6 to 8, and that's where it gets interesting. If you show up at those levels, a bully tends to *begin to take you seriously without feeling threatened* that you're about to usurp their power. You'll become *interesting* to the bully and can be seen as someone they can tolerate and respect as an *almost-equal*, as long as they don't feel

challenged by you. This may sound complicated, but it's also practical. If you play with this and try it out, you'll find it'll work like magic.

**Toughness is not *being a bully*,
it's having backbone.**

If there's a bully around you, and you're a potential target, there tend to be three options. One, you can decide to *be played* (target of bully). Two, you can decide to *not play* (get out). And three, you can decide to *play* (rise to just below the bully's power). So if you don't want to suffer under a bully, and if *getting out* is not an option you're willing to take, surviving *just under* a bully with minimal psychological damage tends to be your best option. That means ramping up your level of power, rank, or status – *to just below that of the bully*. It's neither ideal nor easy, and it might not be something you'll want to do – but sometimes, it can be the only viable option.

WHAT BREAKS A RELATIONSHIP

How many times have you heard someone say ‘I really should have stayed in that relationship longer’? All too often, we’ve sailed past initial red flags, hoping that exposure to time will render them pink if not white. Once we’re ‘in’ and committed, we generally try really hard to make relationships work no matter what. Often, neither party is happy, but we *stay* – and often, *overstay*. We give ourselves and the world lots of reasons for why that’s the better choice. Yet, sometimes it’s just isn’t.

Many things that cause friction in relationships can be addressed, ameliorated, repaired, and maybe even changed if all parties want to. At the same time, we often feel the problems are caused by *the other* person, and yet, paradoxically, we often think that we can change things in the *other* person. We generally cannot. Equally, we often *hope* that if

something happens - a move, a change of jobs, a baby - then they will be different – but generally, they won't be different at all.

There tend to be 5 specific dynamics or events which can – and generally will - break a relationship. They are: addiction, major tragedy, incompatible morals, infidelity, and abuse. We often don't recognize them, don't take them seriously, underestimate their gravity, believe we can overcome them, or feel like we've invested so much already that walking away now *feels* like not honoring our own investment thus far. And then we tend to *stay* beyond healthy limits. Let's have a closer look at those five deal breakers in order to better understand why it's so hard to move past them, no matter how much we want to or how much we try.

Never ignore the real deal breakers.

Addiction can really only be addressed by the addict – don't fool yourself into believing that you can help them. You generally cannot. And most addicts will *not* help themselves *as long as you do*. Being with an addict will generally never result in a healthy relationship. More often than not, once the addiction is discovered, it'll end a relationship even when we *try* to make it work.

Major life-altering tragedies can rip apart the very fabric that made the relationship what it was in the first place. It is beyond anybody's control when major tragedy strikes, and generally, it ends healthy relationships. As is the case with addiction, this is mostly only understood in retrospect – we can often only determine what it was that broke the relationship when we look back at it.

Incompatible morals tend to undermine the trust, compatibility and necessary shared wavelength in a relationship. Truly incompatible

morals will undermine a healthy relationship and erode the fundamental ingredients necessary for a healthy relationship.

Infidelity is always tough and everybody knows this. Yet, many of us try to make it work past that. Often *how* we attempt to repair it won't return us to a healthy relational state. Usually, and this may take time to reveal itself, infidelity ends a previously healthy relationship.

Abuse can be either a moving target or clearly visible to all involved. Don't be a frog in slowly heating and eventually boiling water: the frog won't get out before the water boils – and dies. Abuse kills any relationship. The challenge is identifying it, and then having the courage to get out. This can be a major undertaking.

Most often we identify and look at these deal breakers only in hindsight, after we've

overstayed a relationship, worked too hard or suffered for too long, and eventually just *couldn't* continue. *By then* we've most likely endured hardships that negatively affected our own dignity, sense of self-worth, confidence, or our balanced perspective about what's healthy and what's not healthy. It's never worth it.

**Sometimes moving on is the healthiest
and only thing you can do.
Do it earlier rather than later.**

If you identify any of those deal breakers in your relationship, consider yourself lucky while unlucky: you've identified what keeps you from flourishing, and you can save yourself months and years of agony, trying everything, and – at the end of the day – *failing*. There's no need for you to fail when your partner failed or the relationship just failed. It happens. When you see it, get out, lick your wounds, and move on.

Acknowledging Gender Differences

Sex isn't what it used to be, and the genie isn't going to go back into the bottle. In an age of much transformation, confusion and understandably high emotions in the areas of sex, gender, and gender identity, there appear to remain certain timeless differences between the feminine and the masculine energies and dispositions, regardless of how and in which physical appearances they manifest.

WHAT THE FEMININE NEEDS FROM THE MASCULINE

The masculine, most men, have no clue about what the feminine, most women, truly need in relationship. Turns out it's as easy as 1, 2, 3. Relationship problems for the feminine can usually be broken down into one or more of the following areas. Let's use 'man' for 'the masculine' and 'woman' for 'the feminine' interchangeably here.

First and foremost, a woman needs to *feel safe*, and in a relationship setting, it's the man's' job to provide her with that feeling. This encompasses physical, sexual, emotional, mental and spiritual safety and security. The man's opinion of whether a woman feels – or is - safe is *irrelevant*. The only thing that counts is *her experience*. If she doesn't feel safe with her partner, she will look elsewhere for safety.

Secondly, a woman needs to *feel* wanted and desired. This includes everything from looks to touch to sex to compliments. It is again her experience that counts, not the man's opinion. And if she feels less than wanted and desired by her masculine partner, she will look elsewhere for that signal of being desirable and desired. Affairs can commence because of that.

And thirdly, a woman needs her masculine partner to be confident. Confident in himself, in the world, in emergencies, in intimacy. Again it's her experience that counts, not his opinion. And again, if in *her* experience he lacks confidence she will seek out the company of other men that in her experience are confident.

The secret about what the feminine needs is that these three experiences are all it needs.

Almost all other feminine desires and wishes and needs can be folded into one or more of those three areas. Here are some examples. Trust is part of feeling safe. Trust can also be part of him being confident in situations. Feeling protected is part of feeling safe. Not being put down is part of feeling safe, as is having her boundaries honored. Feeling loved despite flaws is part of being wanted. Compliments and sexual desire are part of feeling wanted. Feeling supported is part of feeling safe *and* wanted.

If one of those three areas is underserved, a relationship can hobble along, though the lacking component/s tend to present themselves as contentious issues in the relationship. If however more than two areas are not fulfilled, a relationship is generally doomed. It may take a month or a year, but generally, it's doomed. And if all three areas are unfulfilled, it's generally hard to even cobble together a relationship at all. It may seem

overly simplistic or overly reductionist, but generally, almost all relationship issues for the feminine can be reduced to one or more of these three areas. Play with it in your mind and see for yourself.

The feminine needs to feel safe, wanted, and feel that their masculine partner is confident.

If a woman lacks fulfillment in one or more of these relational areas, it's very helpful to know what the issues are about at their core. Knowing this, challenges can generally be worked on in the relationship. The masculine can benefit from understanding how he is not sufficiently providing what is needed by the feminine. Often this will enable him to grow further into his masculinity and it will allow the woman to relax more into her feminine energy. In short, it can be a great and rewarding growth experience for both partners.

WHAT THE MASCULINE NEEDS FROM THE FEMININE

Myths about what the masculine, men, need from women abound. There is more confusion than clarity. Maybe in part because of that, most women – the feminine - have no clue about what men truly need. This can wreak havoc on a relationship. What the masculine needs is a little harder to understand than what the feminine needs – it appears to be one area where the masculine, men, are more complicated. Let's use 'woman' for 'the feminine' and 'man' for 'the masculine' here.

First and foremost, the man needs to *feel* respected. Whether the woman feels or believes that she respects the man is *irrelevant* – it's solely the man's experience that counts. This is as paramount for the masculine as feeling safe is paramount for the feminine. If a

man feels disrespected by his feminine partner, he will seek respect from other women.

Secondly, men need to *feel* needed. If a woman partner can pretty much do most things on her own, he may not feel needed. Yet, he must feel needed, otherwise he'll seek that validation of feeling needed elsewhere. Again, it's his experience that counts, not her experience or opinion.

Thirdly, a man needs to *feel* free. This is not about disloyalty or promiscuity. Feeling free for the masculine is comparable to not feeling owned, possessed, inundated, or smothered. It's a feeling, not some objective fact. If he doesn't *feel* free, he'll seek the company of women who provide him with this feeling. Affairs can start because of this.

The big news about what the masculine needs is that these three experiences are all it needs.

Most if not all masculine relational needs can be seen through these three lenses. For example, emasculation or being laughed at is part of feeling disrespected. Being domineered is part of not feeling free. Having his male friends with whom manly things are done is part of feeling free. Being argued or fought with in an adversarial manner can *feel* disrespectful. Hyper-competent feminine partners can undermine his need to feel needed in that their prowess can feel like competition. Being competed with, in turn, can be part of feeling disrespected.

If one of those three areas is lacking, a relationship may hobble along, but if two or more of those areas are in disrepair, a relationship is generally doomed. It may take months or years to unravel, but generally, it's

not going work. As is the case with women, what men need tends to be rather simple, as most masculine desires and needs can be folded into those three main areas. And any masculine desire that's not addressed that way is usually addressed and covered by the woman's needs – and vice versa.

All the masculine needs in a relationship is to feel respected, needed, and free.

If something is lacking in *one* of those three areas, it can generally be worked on in the relationship with the woman. The feminine can benefit from understanding how she is not sufficiently providing what is needed, and often such need dovetails with a need of her own. In other words, it's rare that one partner 'delivers' everything while the other partner is severely falling short. This understanding can enable both to jointly grow further – he into his masculinity and she into her femininity.

HOW THE FEMININE AND MASCULINE ORGANIZE

The masculine and the feminine can be so at odds at times. Yet they are generally deeply attracted to one another. The masculine generally doesn't understand how the feminine organizes among themselves, just as the feminine generally doesn't understand how the masculine organizes among themselves. In fact both genders tend to be entirely in the dark about how their counterparts truly operate. Most people even tend to be somewhat unclear about how they themselves organize, as this is not taught in schools or explicitly handed down over the generations by elders.

When trying to understand others, we all tend to extrapolate from our own position and perspective. In the context of the feminine and the masculine this tends to be less than helpful. While we all tend to have both feminine and

masculine traits in varying degrees, we also tend to have much more of one than the other. If we understood what was critically important to *us*, we could stand up better for ourselves. And if we understood better what was critically important to those who're very much *unlike* us, we could accept and support them much easier. Both genders may benefit greatly from understanding what the masculine and feminine *organizing principles* are, what their relationships to *power* are, what *qualities* their *identities* are based on, and what their *key messages* to the world are.

Femininity's organizing principle tends to be '*Seeking Communion*' and its speed is *slow*, meaning this is pursued and accomplished slowly. Feminine identity tends to have *implicit* power as its foundation, meaning its demonstrations of power are *indirect* and *implied*. The feminine *identity* tends to be based on the qualities of interdependence, relationship, collaboration, accommodation,

adjustment, and love. The feminine tends to have a *process* orientation, and invests in beauty, and the maintaining of culture. The key feminine message to the world tends to be '*Like Me!*'.

The key feminine message is '*Like Me!*'.

Likability reigns fairly supreme among the feminine. A woman who is deemed 'unlikable' will rarely be accepted by a group of other women. Additionally, if a single woman in a group attempts to assert her superiority (being *unlike* the rest of the group), she will generally be kicked out of the group - in part because demonstrating superiority (rather than *likeness*) would be considered 'unfair competition'. Contrary to how welcome it is among men, direct competition tends to *not* be welcome or appreciated among women, and hence not naturally built into the feminine. This can show itself in business settings where women often

feel challenged, disagreed with, disregarded, or simply talked over. Behaving in these 'competitive' and apparently adversarial ways tends to be a *normal* masculine trait – that of vigorous competition – and thus most men are clueless how their competitive style affects women in business settings.

Another key difference between the core traits of the genders shows itself by women *down-playing* things about themselves when they are among women. They may respond to a compliment about their jewelry with 'oh, it's nothing, I got it on sale at JC Penny' – possibly even if they did *not* get it on sale at all. Among women, this tends to signal the *absence* of a competitive threat, and is thus welcome, if not expected. The downplaying also aims towards *likability*. The notion that women tend to be much more critical of other women than men are of women may refer to the danger of a *competitive threat* and *unfair competition*.

The feminine tends to always down-play.

Masculinity's organizing principle on the other hand tends to be '*Seeking Prowess*' and its speed is *fast*, meaning this is being pursued and accomplished as quickly as possible. Masculine identity tends to have *explicit* power as its foundation, meaning its demonstrations of power are direct and explicit. Masculine *identity* tends to be based on the qualities of independence, competition, authoritativeness, influence, and leadership. The masculine tends to have a *solution* orientation, and invests in strength, and the maintaining of technology. The key masculine message to the world tends to be is '*Respect Me!*'.

Just as likability does among the feminine, *respect* reigns fairly supreme among the masculine. A man who's not deemed 'respectable' will rarely be accepted by a group of other men. Contrary to women, men who

assert their superiority in a male group are generally accepted by the group, although they will have to prove it. The group might need him on their side down the road when there might be competition with other groups.

The key masculine message is ‘*Respect Me*’.

Competition among the masculine tends to be welcome as it helps the dynamic of *establishing rank*, which may well be the top masculine organizing principle. Unlike the feminine, which tends to abhor explicit ranking among itself, the masculine *needs* rank, and ranks itself constantly, even in public. The masculine *likes* to know where they fall in the rank order. It’s important to note that per se it’s not worse to fall below another man than it is to land above another man. In other words, the *order itself* is much more important than being high in that order.

In business settings, interruption, vigorous debate, disagreement, and proving the ‘superior value’ of one’s own idea are *normal* efforts of ranking and thus *expected* masculine traits. The masculine doesn’t even notice those dynamics. The feminine however tends to be acutely aware of these dynamics and more often than not, finds itself challenged by them. This of course makes eminent sense when we look at the feminine organizing principles, where direct competition is practically verboten. The feminine is usually unaware of the meaning of these default masculine behaviors and thus regrettably often tends to interpret them as *personal to them*.

Another key gender difference shows itself by men generally up-playing things when among men. As an example, they may respond to a compliment about their boots with ‘Aren’t they great? I spent \$200 on them and bought two pairs’, even if they may have been on sale for \$150. Among men, this signals might, prowess,

capacity, confidence – value - and is thus strangely welcome.

The masculine tends to always up-play.

The overarching feminine and masculine organizing principles, identities, and key statements can be correlated side-by-side.

Overarching principles:

‘Slowly seeking communion’ vs. ‘Quickly seeking prowess’

Identities:

‘Investing in Beauty’ vs. ‘Investing in Strength’

‘Interdependent’ vs. ‘Independent’

‘Communal’ vs. ‘Agentic’

‘Cooperative’ vs. ‘Competitive’

‘Process oriented’ vs. a ‘Solution oriented’

‘Accommodating’ vs. ‘Authoritative’

‘Adjusting’ vs. ‘Influencing’

‘Loving’ vs. ‘Leading’

Maintaining ‘Culture’ vs. ‘Technology’

‘Equal’ vs. ‘Hierarchical’

‘Indirect’ vs. ‘Direct’

‘Nice’ vs. ‘Firm’

‘Apologetic’ vs. ‘Defended’

Handling of Power: ‘Implicit & indirect’ vs.
‘Explicit & direct’

Key Statements:

Key Belief: ‘I’m not better than you’ vs. ‘I’m
better than you’

Key Behavior: ‘Down-Plays Self’ vs. ‘Up-plays
self’

Top Investment: ‘Reputation’ vs. ‘Performance’

Key message ‘Like Me’ vs. ‘Respect Me’

MASCULINE AND FEMININE NEEDS AT ODDS?

If key roles in a relationship are largely reversed, such as in FLR's – Female Led Relationships - there tend to be no fundamental conflicts about needs. Role reversals tend to be conscious choices that work for those involved and there are numerous flavors. As long it works for all involved, basic needs can all be met well. It's a different story when roles are not explicitly reversed, or when only some needs are over- or under-developed. Let's interchangeably use 'woman' for 'the feminine' and 'man' for 'the masculine' here.

When *key* needs of both partners collide, there tends to be a lot of potential for friction and dissatisfaction. In such cases, one of the partners demonstrates a high priority need that's similar or identical to that of the partner. For instance, a woman may have a high need for feeling respected by her man, or a man may

have a high need for her to make him feel safe. This 'confusion' of needs tends to lead to, well, confusion and a conflict of interest of sorts.

**It's easy to overlook millions of years
of differences between masculine
and feminine desires and needs.**

This tends to present a conundrum, and most times, those involved are not aware of the conundrum's nature. As gender identities and gender roles are increasingly fluid and reversible, this dynamic presents itself more and more, and most times, those involved are frustrated, checked out, seek distance, or find an alliance outside the relationship in order to keep the relationship alive at all. Needless to say, none of these behaviors solve underlying issues or conflicts of interest. Let's take a closer look why such confusion or conflation of needs turns out to be very problematic.

For instance, most men won't offer the type of masculine energy a woman desires if the need for respect is *also* a tantamount need of the woman. Regretfully that is the case because her need appropriates a dynamic from *his* playbook, and the price tends to be less masculinity than she desires. He may be secretly angry, commit less than he could, fulfil his need for feeling respected elsewhere, or just check out. Equally, most women won't offer the type of feminine energy a man desires when his well-being depends on her to satisfy *his* need to feel safe. She may become frustrated, adversarial, withholding, or disappointed. He will likely experience less feminine energy from her than he needs because his need to feel safe borrowed a critical ingredient from *her* playbook.

**Complementarity of needs and desires
is key in successful relationships.**

To ameliorate such confusions and conflations of interests in an ever-fluid and changing world around sex, gender, and gender identity, one needs to re-visit the drawing board - go back to the basics, and see what each party wants, needs, has to offer, and needs to offer. From that drawing board, one can make more informed decisions about which path forward to take. Sometimes this increased understanding will reveal relief, provide insights for mutual growth and a joint way forward. Other times it may reveal clarity and sobriety about possibly tough relational decisions.

Either way, fluid identities and fluid roles require more awareness, more consciousness, more conversation, more exploration, more honesty - and more bravery to stick up for what works, and what doesn't work. Sometimes round pegs don't fit into square holes, other times pegs and holes can be consciously shaped to ensure mutual complementarity.

FEMININE DIGNITY & MASCULINE HONOR

Dictionary definitions of personal dignity or personal honor are reliably vague. Few nations or cultures have agreed on definitions of those terms. We all know how it *feels* when our dignity or honor has been violated or diminished, but it's terribly hard to put into concise words. Both dignity and honor are related to – but not the same as – esteem, respect, regard, reputation, and rank. It's complicated, and it helps to *differentiate* terms.

Let's look at esteem, respect, regard, and reputation - they can interchangeably be considered *as the degree to which others admire and trust you and are willing to follow you*. Let's look at rank - it can be considered as *the level of authority bestowed upon you socially – the position you inhabit within the psychosocial pecking order of any one group*.

So where does that leave dignity and honor? For one, both have to do with experiencing one's (private) *intrinsic value* and *self-possession* - as experienced by the person whose dignity or honor is the subject, or in question. When someone is in full possession of their dignity or their honor, it can be visible to others. We perceive that such people are in full possession of their sovereignty, that they have 'agency', that their 'Self' is congruent with their physical body (meaning it's exactly where their body is), that they are *not* displaced by traumatic experiences, that they have internal strength, inner peace, and an inner equilibrium, a 'settled-ness' that radiates out. It tends to be a beautiful and compelling sight to behold.

While men can experience issues around their dignity, and women around their honor, dignity and honor are of different *nature* and *importance* for the feminine and the masculine. In modern times, dignity generally tends to be

of higher importance and greater intrinsic value for the feminine, and honor tends to generally be of higher importance and greater intrinsic value for the masculine.

Understand how your dignity and honor are maintained, and protect them fiercely.

A woman's experience of and investment in her dignity is a private matter. It is directly associated with her femininity and her *sovereignty* and *value* as a woman – and with that her *power* (and *freedom*) as a person. A man's investment in and experience of his honor is a public matter. It is directly associated with his masculinity, his freedom, and his *pro prowess* as a man. It could be argued that a woman's dignity is as costly and prized to her as a man's honor is to him.

A woman's dignity in some fashion is her highest valued *private possession*, which means that having it violated or diminished it is more costly to a woman's sense of self than almost anything else. Having her dignity destroyed is one of the worst experiences for a woman, and it's even worse when it happens in public. Correspondingly, a man's honor in some way is his most valuable *public possession*. If there are *witnesses* to his honor being in question or not left intact, the experience will be processed by him as especially *emasculating*, and hardly anything is worse for the masculine. Being shamed or emasculated in private is a terrible thing, and when it happens in public it's much worse. Public shaming or emasculation are among the most traumatic ways to steal someone's power

Somehow, women carry their dignity closer to the surface than men carry their honor. It may be for this reason, or reasons of the patriarchy, that women tend to be *quicker* to feel

humiliated than men feel dishonored. Either way, because of this, women tend to be more susceptible to shame, and thus to the negative effects of shame, such as low self-esteem and low self-confidence. It may well be that emasculation (being stripped of honor) on the masculine side in some fashion equates humiliation (being stripped of dignity) and ensuing shame on the feminine side.

Don't trade your dignity or honor for anything.

The loss of dignity for the feminine and the loss of honor for the masculine cannot be underestimated in their damage and long-term effects. Both are fundamental assaults on one's personal power, or experience of personal power. Embarrassment and feeling shamed undermine our senses of value so deeply that we often will have a hard time even acknowledging that it happened. We may have shame about the shame, which compounds an

already-lamentable situation. When being in one's body no longer feels safe, losing one's dignity or honor can make people leave their bodies or check out - in search of a safe place. They may return, but more often than not, the damage has been done.

Rebuilding a man's sense of self (and his confidence) is extremely hard to do once he feels emasculated, just as rebuilding a woman's sense of self (and trust in herself) is extremely hard to do once her dignity has been shattered. It may take years of self-work or therapy to recover their personal sense of power, and some never fully recover. These traumatic experiences for the masculine and the feminine are unfortunately rather commonplace *in part* because generally the feminine doesn't understand the sky-high importance that honor holds for the masculine, just as the masculine generally doesn't understand the superior importance that dignity holds for the feminine. Both gender identities would benefit greatly

from developing more understanding and compassion about one another in those very critical and existential domains.

**If your dignity or honor have taken a hit,
do whatever it takes to repair them.**

LAUGHTER AND GENDER, SURPRISE!

Humor, levity and laughter are such important dynamics – they make us feel good, they break tensions, and they bond us together. They make us forget about everything else for as long as we laugh about what’s funny. As it turns out, humor and laughter are actually so complicated that no definitive theory of humor has yet been developed and adopted. There are many kinds of humor, and we don’t understand them all – for instance when we laugh at offensive jokes, at seemingly inappropriate times, at someone else’s misfortunes, or out of embarrassment. And interestingly enough, humor and laughter have different levels of meaning and importance for the masculine and the feminine. Let’s interchangeably use ‘men’ for ‘the masculine’ and ‘women’ for ‘the feminine’ here.

Laughter is highly prized by us humans, and not unlike how we feel about love, we generally

want more laughter in our lives than we have. What's interesting is that we may not always know why or that there may be a difference between men and women. As it turns out, when meeting and getting to know men, *women* tend to prefer men who make *them* laugh. On the other hand, men tend to prefer women who find *them* funny. Said differently, in general women won't place a high value on men laughing at their jokes, and men in general won't place a high value on women making them laugh. While many women tend to believe that being funny or witty is an attractive and important relational quality they should aspire to, most men won't endorse that belief. Nobody seems to have figured out just *why* humor and laughter hold such different places among the masculine and the feminine.

**Humor and laughter brings all of us closer.
For the duration of laughing together, there
seems to be no distance between us at all.**

Here's a stab at this mystery. In general, a woman's top priority when getting to know a man tends to be her *safety* – emotional, physical, and sexual safety. Laughter so happens to be the antidote to fear, as you cannot feel fear while you're wholeheartedly laughing. It tends to be *either or* – both at the same time are practically impossible. Thus, when you're laughing, the fear for your safety is momentarily removed, and hence you experience a sense of *safety* while laughing. And from the feminine perspective, the state of feeling safe is an incredibly positive and important state to be in. Being made to laugh supports the relaxation of the concern for safety. Thus women tend to highly value those men who make them laugh. If you peruse dating sites with written profiles, you'll often see women in their profile stating that 'making them laugh' is a huge plus, maybe even 'the quickest way to their heart'. You won't find the equivalent in male profiles.

**We tend to not laugh with those
we feel threatened by.**

So what about the masculine side of this equation? Well, men primarily want women to find *their* jokes funny. This has the answer to the question of ‘why’ almost baked into it already. If a man fulfills one of the ‘tests’ for a woman to feel *safe*, he’s not only one step closer to being chosen, but he’s also closer to getting what he needs the most from the feminine – feeling *respected*. The desire and need to feel respected tends to be the masculine’s #1 priority in relationship. Making a woman laugh yields this experience of respect.

Let’s look at the *additional* high priorities of women and men, and how they’re being addressed by women’s and men’s differing preferences when it comes to humor and laughter. After safety, women tend to look for *feeling wanted* by the masculine. Well, how

many men tell jokes to women who they have no interest in or don't want to be admired and respected by – especially in the world of dating? So the woman's experience of *feeling wanted* is also partially satisfied by a man's sense of humor and by her laughing at a man's jokes.

A woman's third most important ingredient in successful relationships tends to be her experience of her masculine's partner *confidence*. It takes self-confidence to tell a good joke or to be truly funny, and thus even a woman's need for her partner to be confident is partially satisfied by her laughing at his funny stories or jokes. Men with low confidence tend to be less funny, tell less jokes, and make women laugh less.

After feeling *respected*, the masculine's second and third most important relational needs tend to be the experience of *feeling needed* and the experience of *feeling free*. If a man satisfies a

woman's top three relational needs, well then he's already pretty needed, and thus *feels* needed. And being funny, entertaining, and having a great sense of humor all require autonomy, independence, a sense of agency and self-possession, freedom of thought, and maybe even a sense of relative worldliness. As such, being experienced as funny to some degree even supports the masculine need for *feeling free*.

There's a not-so-funny saying in the dating world that 'A woman's top fear when going on a first date is getting killed' – and 'A man's top fear when going on a first date is being laughed at'. While it sounds extreme, most women and men can relate to this saying at least a little. The implication for the feminine is clear and understandable – her safety is truly her #1 priority, and until a first date, her date is a stranger to her. The implication for the masculine may initially not be as clear and understandable. But if we consider that - from

his perspective - emasculation is one of the worst things that can ever happen to a man, and that feeling respected is a man's top priority, then it becomes quite clear and understandable how *being laughed* at on a first date is like a death knell to the masculine.

Laughter makes us feel safer and stronger.

It may seem curious to mention the threat of being killed in the same vein as the threat of being laughed at. But what counts is the *experience* a woman has when her safety and dignity are not assured, and what counts is the *experience* a man has when his respectability and honor are not assured. It's also interesting to observe that while dignity and a loss thereof can be experienced by the feminine *and* the masculine, there appears to be no feminine equivalent for *emasculation*. It appears to be a singularly masculine threat.

It's important to clarify that a man's perspective of a woman's experience of her safety doesn't matter at all – the only thing that counts is *her* internal experience, and such experience is often hard if not impossible to understand and empathize with by men. Equally, a woman's perspective of a man's experience around feeling respected or emasculated doesn't matter at all. All that counts is *his* internal experience, and this is often hard if not impossible to understand and empathize with by women. Both sexes, genders, or gender identities have a lot of room for learning, appreciating, and understanding one another in this important area of relational dynamics.

**No woman likes feeling unsafe.
No man likes feeling disrespected.**