

THE SHIFTING SANDS OF TIME

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The roles of men and women are like shifting sands on a beach. The undercurrent is rushing in from somewhere out on the horizon and no one is sure exactly where it will land. The result is not just white foamy surf roaring onto the beach, seaweed being dredged from the deep ocean or shells being crushed with the power of the water... but at this time many men are feeling a little like those shells, a bit crushed and not sure which way to swim to avoid getting caught in the undertow. Women also are swimming out beyond the safety zone and feeling a bit lost.

Once upon a time women just wanted to be protected. Then they learned they could protect themselves. Then women wanted the security of a man with a job until they learned they could also earn good money. Women wanted sexual pleasure but with the craziness of working and raising babies, time disappears and passion dissipates. Women put their energy elsewhere! What did men want? Who knows, I doubt if they were ever asked... they have always been the hunter gathers who do what they can do to keep the peace or keep women happy. With little or no education for anyone in what relationships are really like when the tough times walk through the door, things often go a little haywire. Then the rot sets in and the criticism and sometimes the yelling or the long silences start followed rapidly by other things that push us further apart. Of course all these things are the illusionary mist that wraps around the relationship that goes wrong... they are the excuses used for not being willing to find a better way to make relationships work. Let's walk away and fall in love with someone else like someone on a trapeze, flying from one relationship to another and every now and then stopping to lick our wounds before starting again.

Make no mistake, relationships are work... And hard work at that! It is far easier to live on a desert island with no one around you; for men they don't have to share how they are 'feeling' and put down the toilet seat and women don't have to nag because their intimacy needs are not being met. I wonder why it is that we work so hard at getting a University degree to do what we love in our working life, yet we rarely put the same energy into making our relationships better? Perhaps because at school and university there is a logical sequence to events, each subsequent year the work gets more difficult yet we are prepared for it by a teacher who explains what is expected of us and how to achieve our goals. In relationships unfortunately we actually don't have a sequence to events. We think when we "fall in love" it is going to be forever... we have no clue what to do when it goes wrong and many never figure out why it went wrong in the first place and then are too scared to attempt another relationship. Also our parents are our first teachers and many people would not consider that relationship to be one they want to emulate yet there are not that many great relationships around to have as a role model.

Women, when they become stressed, talk to their friends, look after the kids or animals, clean up, water the garden and as they do their stress level goes down and oxytocin which is the bonding hormone goes up. So women reduce their stress through social contact with others. Men on the other hand have an increase in adrenaline when stressed, a reaction that prepares their bodies to run or to stay and fight. This reaction is enhanced by testosterone while the "tend" response is enhanced by oestrogen. Talking does help men as well, providing they feel safe without any criticism or put downs. When job or other stresses in a man go up, so too does the flight or fight response and this can bring about an increase in anger/rage or withdrawal.

Men asking for directions is often a sore point for women however asking for direction can be an emotional loaded situation that goes back to childhood. Kids playgrounds are not always comfortable places for boys. They learn early how painful it is to be made fun of when they don't know something. Asking questions reveals ignorance. Boys learn early that the male world is made up of winners and losers. For a sensitive intuitive boy it is not safe to express sympathy for

someone who is being picked on because then the same thing might happen to him and he might get excluded or outcast too. Men don't have as many choices as women do when it comes to life work. Women can work or not, give birth or not, do a bit of both. For most men it is work work work. So boys are conditioned from early on to be strong, be tough, win, keep their feelings to themselves and then women wonder why they have trouble communicating with each other! More and more men men admittedly are becoming house husbands (terrible term) but when that started people called these sensitive men all kinds of names because they were staying home while their wives brought home the pay cheque. Most men we speak to really want to be actively involved in their children's births and childhoods yet it wasn't that long ago that men weren't even allowed to be at the birth! They want to have relationships that work but delving into the emotional world of feelings is not as safe for men as it naturally is for women.

So in the world of men, many have not been allowed as children to speak about how they feel...it was just not the done thing! Their fathers often die without having told them they love them or are proud of them, they don't really understand the emotional ups and downs of their mercurial partners so many find outlets in alcohol, sport, computer games or the infamous 'shed'. Here are some comments from guys about what they do or don't do:

What good will it do to talk about it. That won't change a thing!

My feelings will pass" so I just shrug them off as unimportant.

I try to keep busy..... very busy.

I don't like feeling hurt so I act angry instead.

I divert attention away from my true feelings or deny the feeling outright.

I replace my feelings with logic and I rationalize my way around the feelings.

I have learned to tense my body so I simply don't feel.

Obviously none of these things are conducive to lives that work with ease and grace. Then we wonder why the suicide rate in men is escalating daily and why 50% of marriages break down and it is women who initiate divorce in 4 out of 5 cases and 70% separations.

Generally that old saying: You don't recognize what you had till you lose it" is particularly true for relationships. Good relationships are taken for granted too often rather than being given the nurturing and respect they deserve and need to keep them alive. In healthy happy relationships, the immune systems of the couple are stronger than couples who are unhappy. This has been tested with blood samples. Happy people have a greater proliferation of white blood cells (the fighters of disease).

So how do we become happy with ourselves and with our partners and/or our lives? Perhaps we could start by having some rules by which to live as individuals as well as couples.

First we must learn to speak the truth, to ourselves and then to our partners. We need to find a way to express our hurts not from a place of "You did this and I feel".... But from a place of "I feel sad when I feel unheard." This takes the 'make wrong' off the partner and they can often hear it from a different perspective. One of the things that happens is that people don't speak the truth and then because they have held it in for so long, finally it explodes into a frothing, spitting volcano of venom that hurts everyone around and is non productive. Telling the truth is not easy because as children when we told the truth often we were punished so we hold the same thought in relationships. "If I say what I really feel, you might leave me/hate me/shut me out".

We can also learn what is really underneath our feelings. Is it something from the present or more likely is it something from the past that the person we love has triggered and so it feels like/looks like/sounds like them? Rebirthing has a saying: "love brings up anything unlike itself for the purpose of healing".... This means that whatever it is that is "up" for you right now is probably a recurrence of something not dealt with as a child... so do the work on yourself now and heal your

childhood; do the work on your inner child and watch the adult in you grow up.

For so many people, especially in arguments we finish up being the 5 year old child encased in a 20, 30 or 40 year old body ranting and raving and throwing a tantrum. Unfortunately our partner is often doing exactly the same (perhaps by withdrawing and going silent). These are not two adults having an upset, there are two little kids whose needs as children were not met and they learned a set of behaviours that they are still using as adults and it is not working!

A small point here, lots of people (more likely women) do personal development and then get excited, go home and tell their partners they need to do a course too! Very off-putting to be told you *Need* to do something. It makes people feel broken and no one is.... many are damaged and hurt but no one is broken! We personally believe that it is wise for both people to continue to grow through doing work on themselves. From our perspective as facilitators, there is nothing worse than having a room full of people who, when asked why they are there say: Because my partner sent me/told me I had to come/ was going to leave me if I didn't come etc.... People can only grow when it is their time and we have to remember that. Think of that old saying: You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. Sadly it is often when people are either so unhappy or the relationship is not working that they finally turn inwards and look to some personal growth. Wanting someone to change is an incredible waste of energy.

Find things to do to honour yourself and acknowledge every day. Honour yourself by giving yourself time... time to walk, time to think, time to listen to that beautiful piece of music, time to meditate, time to do nothing.... Acknowledge yourself every day for what you have achieved, even if some days all you can do is acknowledge the fact that you are still breathing! Then do the same for your relationship. So what if you hate comedies... hire a funny video that you know your partner will love; so what if you hate football, sit down and watch a game with the person you love. I am not suggesting you do this all the time but every now and then. The other point to that is let them have their funny videos or their football match without you going into your withdrawal state or nagging state or wherever it is you go when you don't get your own way. I believe we can all have everything we want in relationships.

At the end of every day acknowledge them for three things they have done for you, something as simple as making you coffee is the place to start. Eventually you will become so conscious of what your partner does do for you that your appreciation of them will go up, so too will your desire to do lovely things for them, which in turn will increase the level of intimacy between you and hey presto, you are once more orbiting in love!

John Gottman who is a world leading analyst of relationships says there are certain signs that relationships are in trouble and need work.

1. The way it starts! The discussion one partner starts triggers the partner's response which is negative, accusatory or sarcastic. If it is going this way within 3 minutes of the conversation starting he says pull the plug, take a breather and start over. (You could have that as a rule... one person says what they need to say and the rule is that the other person has 24 hours to think it over and come back with a response, by which time the energy has settled and a more rational end result is likely).

2. The 4 Horseman of the Apocalypse. These four killers of relationship moments are: Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, Stonewalling (or leaving or withdrawing... the silence treatment). Have an agreement that if one of you is using one of these techniques, the other will agree to remind them. Humour works great in these cases as it is hard to be angry when laughter is erupting. A friend of ours says to her partner: Oh you are talking to your guardian angels again

are you? They have agreed to this methodology and it works every time. Laughter ensues and the danger has passed.

3. Flooding. Where whatever is being said to you is so overwhelming that you are left in shock and that leads to feelings of being defenceless. If this is a constant then you spend your time thinking about how to protect yourself from the onslaught and the only safe way to do that is disengage emotionally from the relationship. Solution for this is having an agreement that you will speak only from the "I" and that you will not deliberately verbally attack the other person. If it happens (from habit), then the person who is being flooded needs to walk away immediately it starts.

4. Body Language. Any kind of body language from the heart rate increasing, to sweaty palms, to rage are powerful signs that you are processing whatever information is being yelled at you thus it is harder to pay attention and you are left with little in your arsenal to cope with. Of course if one is raised in household where yelling and screaming are the keys and hostility is the norm, then one is emotionally vulnerable and the consequences of that are that as adults you start off with a low response factor to stress. Again have an agreement about what will work for both of you when this happens.

Like I said in the beginning, the sands of relationships are shifting...relationships are not the easiest things in the world to do well but they are the easiest things to do badly. However there are ways and means of changing our responses so we are no longer stuck in our movie, but instead we are watching it, giving us the valued tool of objectivity... so why not use them?

1. Do the work on your inner child and heal the past (even if you think there is nothing to heal!).
2. Do some rebirthing.
3. Do some counseling/body work/ meditation
4. Do some work with Emotional Freedom Technique.

Of course you will forget and go back to the way it was sometimes, but the more you practice, like everything else, the better you will get and in the end it is not about the arguments you have, it is about the friendship and the desire for harmony that will carry you through the tough times. The more you heal the child in you, the more the adult can come forth and the more your world and the world around you will change. To have peace on the planet we must find a way to achieve peace in our hearts.

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