
Removing Questions from Your Relationship Space

Thought of the Month: May 2007

Okay...here's the situation...

I come down to the kitchen on a Saturday morning of a workshop weekend. My intention is to go outside, blow the endless leaves off the sidewalks and parking area, vacuum the family room, and then help Donna with any leftover preparation for breakfast so we are ready for the couples arriving in one hour.

Donna greets me with, "Why are you wearing that good sweater?" (Now, many of you are thinking, "So what's wrong with that question?" and many of you, probably living with the first group, are thinking, "Yeah, that's like the questioning I get all the time.") Back to the kitchen...

I'm sure Donna is thinking, "I just bought that for him and he'll get it messed up and then I'll have to try to clean it!" (Remember, Donna grew up learning to look out for all possible outcomes of situations, trying to prevent bad things from happening, and taking care of whatever went wrong. So her question is perfectly understandable from her world.)

The only problem is that her "Why..." question irked me and I retorted with some sarcastic quip that I have "conveniently forgotten". (You see, it triggered a whole reservoir of feelings I carry from growing up hearing that I wasn't capable...I didn't do things right...I had done it wrong...a perfectly understandable response from my world.)

Well, we dissolved this potential powder key with a brief dialogue. (Brief because we already had lots of understanding and dialogue about our stories.) The point is...

Are your questions to your partner (or your children) creating positive energy and connection in your Space or are they polluting your Space:

- "Why do you drive so fast?"
- "Why don't you listen to me?"
- "Why don't you spend more time with the kids?"
- "Why do you spend so much money?"
- "Why don't you ever want to have sex?"
- "What did you do with the keys?"
- "Are you really going to have another drink?"
- "Why is your room always such a mess?"

Most questions in a relationship have the potential to be disconnecting and off putting. They immediately put the lizard's defensive measures in motion in our partner (or children)...just as the adversarial relationship set up in press conferences between the President/White House staff and the media with all those questions.

The questions above (which are very common, I think) all contain an implied statement of feeling and/or fear on the part of the sender. It is precisely this authentic, conscious expression of feeling and/or fear that can foster positive energy and connection in the space. It could sound like this:

- "I feel scared when we drive at this speed."
- "I feel like you don't care about what I think when it seems you don't hear what I say."
- "I just love watching you and the kids play together."
- "I am concerned that we will have to work extra years before we can retire and enjoy time traveling together."
- "I feel so close to you when we have sex."
- "I'm afraid I'm going to be late when I have to hunt for the keys."
- "I am concerned about your drinking."
- "I feel scared that I'm not teaching you how to take care of things and that you won't know how to take care of really important things when you are grown up."

Your partner (or child) will respond far more positively and generously to these sincere statements of feelings which focus on you rather than on them and what they are doing wrong. If they don't respond, just ask them to mirror! (The greatest gift can occur if both you and your partner get very curious about how the feelings connect to your story...remember the 90 - 10 Principle.)

Here's the challenge for the month...try going 48 hours making statements about your feelings/fears, eliminating questions and let us know how it goes.

We'd love to hear from you. Let us know about your questions, experiences, thoughts about and/or ideas for these new "Thought of the Month" notes.

With great encouragement and hope,
David and Donna

Fear and Shame in Your Relationship

Thought of the Month: June 2007

THIS JUST IN! Talking about your relationship may do more harm than good!

That's right! Just ask Steven Stosny and Patricia Love, who have co-authored a wonderful new book entitled (of course), *How to Improve Your Marriage without Talking about It*. Now, before turning your back on the wonderful world of Imago, let's be clear about what they mean.

The thesis of the book is that when women want to talk about the relationship (which they do), it almost always triggers feelings of shame and failure in men. The man, in turn, reacts by running away, getting quiet or getting angry. This, in turn, ignites a big negative reaction in the woman who feels that the relationship really is falling apart.

Women often learn in childhood that the way to reconnect a relationship is to talk about their feelings. Other women understand this and it works just fine. But the minute a woman exposes her feelings to her man (unless, of course, they are totally happy feelings) the man feels inadequate and shamed that he has not been a good enough protector or provider. So the man relies on what he probably learned in childhood...to withdraw emotionally and to go out and play football, or spit, or kick dirt, or whatever he does to relieve his feelings of inadequacy...and the woman becomes fearful that she is alone and disconnected (which is what women most fear).

It's a great book! I'm telling you! The hope in the whole thing is to learn that for most women, the need to talk is just to relieve their natural fear and anxiety about the relationship. Many women learn early to be the "guardians" of relationships. It is equally helpful to learn that men feel that the overwhelming main purpose of their lives is to protect their wife and family. Anything that threatens this instinct, no matter how subtle, throws a man into some reaction of shame and failure.

I (David) hate to read books, but this one is easy, especially Chapter 13 which is just for men. Try it!

With great encouragement and hope,
David and Donna

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The Value of Stretching

Thought of the Month: July 2007

Here's how it works. I learn what helps Donna feel safer, happier, and more connected in the marriage. Then I become conscious of doing some of these things even when they are out of my comfort zone (which they usually are). Of course, she is doing the same thing, hopefully.

EXAMPLE: It seems like a pain to me to fill up the gas tank unless the gauge is well below empty. (Actually, I get a kick out of seeing just how close I can come to running out.) Of course, this drives Donna crazy! In her world it makes sense to fill up before the warning light comes on. So my stretch is to give up my little game and fill up more often than I think necessary. An even bigger stretch is to fill up for her when I know she will be driving next.

This action does several important things. First, it relieves her frustration and anxiety about running out of gas. Second, it allows me to grow into a more sensible and thoughtful posture about a simple thing. Third, it produces a warm feeling in Donna that I am willing to consider her feelings. Finally, it gives me the chance to be the hero/protector/provider that most of us men want to be.

EVERYBODY WINS! Silly example, you say?

A bigger deal is Donna's stretch of hiking, river rafting, skiing and all manner of other physical activities with me (and, of course, there's NASCAR). These things are initially scary or uncomfortable for her. Of course, they make me feel loved and connected. Again, she grows a part of her "lost self" and I appreciate it.

Here's what you can do. Listen carefully to your partner's childhood story to discover what your partner never had; what they were frustrated with; what they were scared of. If the childhood story is not apparent, it's okay. Just take the current frustrations, deprivations, or anxieties. Then do one small thing that you will contribute to a safer, more connected feeling in your partner. Notice how this will feel unused or maybe even uncomfortable to you. Don't be surprised if this unusual, uncomfortable feeling goes away after a time.

One of my biggest stretches ever was to have couples in our home for the weekend workshop. It made me feel very uncomfortable to be "invaded" like that. But now I genuinely look forward to welcoming the couples into our home for the weekend.

Growth happens...but never without conscious stretching.

With great encouragement and hope,
David and Donna

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Exits and the Need to "Show Up"

Thoughts of the Month: August 2007

Exits occur in intimate relationships in all shapes and sizes. An exit is a behavior or involvement, unconscious or thought out, that takes us out of the energy in the Space between a couple and into some other place.

Let me add that it is an exit only if the relationship Space suffers because of the energy displacement. Plenty of activities are part of my life by necessity or choice that do not involve Donna, but also do not harm the relationship...like going to work or taking a shower. But if I am staying later and later at work, or getting to be more than just friends with that person at work because it beats being with my Donna, then we are talking exit.

The good news about an exit is that once it is identified and closed, the energy can be renewed in the relationship where it belongs. Let me insert here that the Imago concept that nature has a good reason for our being together with our partner. It simply provides the best opportunity for our maximum healing and growth.

Now here's the bad news...once we get involved in a serious exit, say, an affair or substance abuse, it is very, very difficult to leave these physiological and emotional highs in favor of that same old relationship that brings us more pain than pleasure. We forget that the old relationship once made us happy, much less the idea that the old relationship is our best avenue to growth even in pain. People who exit to one emotional "safe haven" after another really don't grow very much so they continue to find themselves with familiar feelings no matter who the power struggle is with.

SHOWING UP---Blessed is the couple who learns early to show up with each other at every "opportunity". And you know what we mean by "opportunity"!

Doubly blessed is the couple who finds themselves faced with a serious exit and then, through the long, conscious road of showing up around all manner of feelings and trials, can work their way into a bright, conscious, new relationship. This new creation will be stronger and more joyous than anything either had ever imagined. Showing up, then, is the antidote for exits serving both as a preventative and a cure.

So, please honor your partner and your relationship by showing up...tell your partner how you feel, whether good or bad...it all can lead to intimacy if done in dialogue. AND it will eliminate the need for exits!

(For further pleasure: Check out *Shower the People* by James Taylor. Sing it to each other!)

Hope you have a "Great Wind-Up" to your summer!!!!

With great encouragement and hope,
David and Donna

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The Greatest Little Question in the World!!!!

Thoughts of the Month: September 2007

It's a little question with huge potential for clarification, consciousness raising, healing and growth. That's a lot!

First, the situation...

Sally knows she is getting more and more irritated but she doesn't quite know why. Her husband Fred, just left the house and his half-filled coffee cup and half-eaten grapefruit remain on the kitchen table. No big deal, really...he was late for work.

As she takes his dishes to the sink she notices several soda cans stuck to the counter and a sink full of dirty dishes with food dried on them. This is the result of her teenager's late night snack.

She opens the dishwasher but alas, it is full of clean dishes waiting to be emptied. She is at the boiling point and the day has just started! And she needs to get to work herself!!!

Her son finally emerges from sleep shortly before noon. Sally is locked and loaded with her question. (Note that this is not the question!) "Would it kill you to unload the dishwasher once in a while and put your own dishes away?" Many of you are now thinking, "What's wrong with that question? It sounds very familiar."

Familiar...yes!
Reasonable...yes!
Natural...yes!
Cathartic...maybe?
Justified...yes...yes!!!
Effective...NO!

Okay, you have been very patient waiting for the greatest little question. The real question for Sally to ask herself at some point during this frustrating morning experience is, "What am I afraid of?" I have come to believe this is a most useful question to ask of myself whenever I am reactive to Donna or ready to boil over anywhere in my life.

In Sally's case, the first answer may be, "That's easy...I'm afraid I am living with a bunch of slob!"

Next question..."Now what am I really afraid of? Hmm...I guess I'm afraid I'll be stuck and trapped in this role of doing everything for everybody with this bunch forever!"

Next question..."And what hurts about that? Hmm...Well, I will be perpetually seen as the b----- of the family which is not who I want to be with them."

Next question..."And what does that remind me of from my growing up? Oh, my gosh...it's just like when I was a kid and had to make sure everything was just right so would stay calm and no one would get hit." Or another answer might be, "It's like when my Mom got drunk and I had to take care of my little sisters."

So the question that really opens up our consciousness and can lead to intentional dialogue is, "What am I afraid of?" This, followed quickly by, "What hurts about that? What that reminds me of from my childhood?"

Try asking this of yourself the next time you are really frustrated with someone you love and let us know what you discover!

This is just one of the transformational tools we will explore more deeply in our Advanced Workshop October 6 & 7. Come join us!

With great encouragement and hope,
David and Donna

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David's Latest Puzzle!

Thoughts of the Month: October 2007

Here it is! Why do we treat other people...the general public, perfect strangers...with greater respect and generosity than we do our partner or our family?

Years ago, I remember an uncle of mine who was kind and funny and experienced as generous by everyone who knew him. I liked him myself and I always felt attracted and energized by this jolly fellow.

On one weekend I stayed in their home and I was horrified at the way this man treated his own family. He criticized his wife (my aunt) mercilessly. He put down his kids (my cousins) in every move they made. I was so confused at the stark discrepancy in how this man behaved with his family and how he seemed in "the world."

Is this you? Or anything like you? Why do we feel we can lose our generosity or respectful posture once we cross the threshold of our own home?

Do we take our partner for granted? ("She knows I love her and I'm just criticizing her for her own good!")

Do we feel like we can let down our guard and be who we "really" are (e.g. crabby, grouchy, unavailable, silent, stingy, etc.) with our spouse and family? ("They'll understand...I've had a tough day.")

We had better rethink these assumptions! If we truly believe Imago concepts then we know that our partner will be much more triggered by our actions and our attitudes than the general public. So it is really stupid for us to think we can act with less care and sensitivity around our partner. We actually have to ramp up our sensitivity.

If a stranger tracks mud into our house we are so forgiving and polite about it. That's natural, I suppose. But if our family member does it, we tend to read them the riot act.

Maybe it's because we have unresolved frustrations or a persistent negative image of our partner:

*"He never cares about how hard I work to keep a nice house."

*"She never laughs at any of my jokes."

*"He never pays attention to what I need."

*"She is always too 'busy' to relax and have fun with me."

These negative images we gather of our partner can get crystallized in our minds and our imaginations. They can prime us to be less generous and forgiving with them than we would be with others with whom we have no history.

Well, guess what? Our negative images are fueled by our childhood story. Our partner only taps our story. (You knew this, right?) Beyond that we fell in love with our partner for some very positive and essential reasons. (Still true!!)

So the answer is to grow a greater consciousness about how we are treating each other and why. Back to Dialogue again and again!

With great encouragement and hope,
David and Donna

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Is Anger Ever Okay?

Thoughts of the Month: November 2007

After a while, as people are grasping the Imago concepts of relationship and connection, the question often comes up, "What about anger?" It's as though people feel that if they really get it, if they are really moving toward a conscious relationship, then they shouldn't feel angry anymore, or that their partner shouldn't feel angry anymore.

Indeed, Harville Hendrix himself is currently saying that the expression of anger is not constructive in intimate relationships. He told us last week that the new edition of *Getting the Love You Want* has all the exercises expressing anger removed (or exorcised, if you will.) "End all negativity" is his new mantra.

Here's what I want to say about anger...

It is true that just venting anger only leads to more anger. (Remember when we were supposed to beat on pillows to rid ourselves of rage and anger? It didn't work!) It is also profoundly true that anger is a secondary emotion, a symptom of a deeper hurt or fear. Now I'm sure you remember last month's "Thought..." about the most important question of all which is...which is...okay...I'll tell you again. It's "What am I afraid of?"

Hey, guess what?! This month I even have the answer to "What am I afraid of?"

For most women it is, "I'm afraid our relationship is going to hell!" (or to pot or wherever relationships go when they are ruptured.) For most men it is, "I'm afraid that once again I'm going to be shown to be inadequate...a lousy husband...a failure!"

Women tend to express their fear/anger with criticism while men tend to express their shame/anger with lashing out or hiding. (Now, we've polled our many lesbian and gay couples and it seems like their experience is similar...one partner comes with fear of disconnection and the other comes with shame of inadequacy.)

But what does this have to do with anger? And is anger okay? Just answer the question, David!

Of course, anger is okay! It is real. It is natural, even if it is a symptom.

Anger is like fog...it may be undesirable; it may cause difficulties; it may be all too common in some places (it may keep us from seeing the city of Vienna for six expensive days and nights during the Imago conference last week even though everyone said, "You'll love Vienna...it's such a beautiful place!"). But to say it is not okay is to deny something about the real world in which we live.

Also, anger has a useful purpose in terms of protest. And, you might ask, "Protest of what?" Anger is an emotion in protest of the rupture of connection which creates fear in all of us...apartheid, for instance...or women's rights...anyone's rights...a baby screaming on an airplane. Do we muzzle them or is their anger (their protest) okay even if it makes us uncomfortable or scares us? We deal with it.

"Be angry, but do not sin" is a rather abstruse verse of sacred wisdom that probably means, "Of course, you're going to be angry. Dummy, but you don't have to stink up the relationship because of your secondary and symptomatic reactivity to some small thing that triggered your reptilian childhood response!" (I'm sure that's what Paul would have said if he had known Imago language!)

In other words, be yourself with all the feelings that arise, use the tools, and always honor the space between you. I, personally, am a good ways from ending all negative thoughts and feelings in myself. (Give a hailstorm a break!) But I am getting closer and closer to maintaining positive and abundant thoughts and behaviors at all times in our relationship space. Hooray! (This is Donna... and he really is!!!!)

Please share your thoughts about all this with us and let us know what things you would like us to consider in future "Thoughts for the Month".

Hope you have a wonderful, relaxed, and connected Thanksgiving...a conscious time for practicing abundant thinking!

With great encouragement and hope,
David and Donna

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Staying Connected through the Holidays

Thoughts of the Month: December 2007

It is the holiday season for most folks in the Western World. And while this can be a time of celebration and family connection, I've noticed some holiday hazards for couples. Here are a few:

- The holiday season can be stressful, especially for women who usually wind up doing the shopping, cooking, arranging family stuff, worrying about how drunk Uncle Bill will get, etc. I notice that men tend to escape or avoid these extra stresses, which can, in itself, lead to conflict.
- Extended families and in-laws usually come into the picture which, for many couples is a built-in source of conflict.
- The extra business and effort to be with the larger family can take a couple away from each other, even if all the families get along.
- Spending, debt, and other stress about money seem to peak around this time of year which adds another potential conflict ("opportunity", I mean) for couples.

Here are some tips:

- Men...for heaven's sake, help her out with stuff, even if you are not that much into it! You will be her HERO!
- Women...for heaven's sake, tell him thank you and that you appreciate that is willing to help, even if he doesn't do it exactly the way you would have done it.
- Use dialogue to strategize and plan for the visits with extended families. Learn about each others desires and fears ahead of time. Also, strategize ways you can "check in" with each other throughout the time and stay connected.
- Develop some simple rituals or traditions for you as a couples and/or your nuclear family. Slow it down and really connect meaningfully with those you live with.
- Dialogue again about gifts and spending expectations. You know by now that you, as a couple, are probably at opposite ends of the galaxy from each other. Also, remember that generosity and giving does not have to involve just money. (And be sure to show up and tell each other clearly what gifts you may want so your partner doesn't have to guess and get it wrong!)

Donna and I wish for you joyful, relaxed, blessed and connected holidays.

With great encouragement and hope,
David and Donna

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