

Where Am I?

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“Many women today feel a sadness we cannot name. Though we accomplish much of what we set out to do, we sense that something is missing in our lives and – fruitlessly – search “out there” for the answers. What’s often wrong is that we are disconnected from an authentic sense of self” – Emily Hancock

As with any potential pathology, it is important to have some background knowledge when we consider why relationships go wrong. At a very basic level, I’ve reviewed the neurochemistry of our developing brain throughout our lives and the “high” associated with early stages of love. Suffice it to say that as we develop, so does our relationship but sometimes this concurrent growth does not follow the same curve and we find ourselves at an impasse. The question arises, “where did I go in this relationship?” or “who have I become?”. It is very common in early romance to view differences as negative and to strive to eliminate them. The pull for acceptance and belonging is fierce. Friends and family will note changes in behavior as a person bends and molds around a potential love-mate. Eventually, however, we all must exit this stage of a relationship, re-gain our critical thinking centers previously deadened by infatuation, and return to the real world. There is a cost to the individual and, as times passes, that cost becomes too great; a decision must be made. As the real “self” in the relationship re-emerges there may be a tendency to try to change the other person, improve them somehow. Grasping at individuality, the couple will often need space from each other. Some couples remain at this stage of push-pull their entire married lives with minimal true commitment. Women, especially, fear loss of the relationship which would mean being alone or starting over, both, seemingly, a greater tragedy than conforming to their partner’s view of how they should be or act. Men, seek reassurance and by virtue of biology and socialization, are much less able to communicate their emotions. This is when sexual expression becomes more important for a man and any form of rejection, a direct blow to his self-esteem. Paired with a woman who feels controlled, unappreciated and has an internal struggle with her loss of independence, this couple is doomed. If they stay together, they are gaining separation from their true identity and resentment bubbles into the bedroom as each feels lost in the other’s unrealistic expectations.

Thankfully, some couples weather this power-struggle storm and move beyond it into a quieter, more peaceful stage of commitment and stability. The greatest characteristic of those who make it is the ability to remain distinct within the relationship. This does not, necessarily, mean space or independence.

The word used to describe this process is “differentiation” and it involves balancing the desire to be together with the need for remaining separate. A poorly differentiated person is constantly looking to others for approval and acceptance

and will conform to what she thinks others want of her, thereby, losing contact with who she really is as a person. At the opposite spectrum, some poorly differentiated people will impose their views on others in a controlling and sometimes violent manner, as we have all seen with bullies and domestic violence cases.

While a well differentiated person sees the importance of nurturing close relationships and functioning well with others, she does not allow other's opinions or actions toward her define who she is. She can unemotionally analyze the actions and reactions of those around her without associating those responses with herself. She can determine what the best course of action is in a situation by objective assessment and remain true to her own belief systems without apology. Furthermore, her well-differentiated spouse would never expect or demand apology for actions in-line with the autonomous values she maintains. In fact, he would cheer her on.

Consider how liberating it would be if we had unconditional love and support from a partner (who may or may not *agree* with everything we do) while we set a course to live our very best life. Imagine the freedom of not allowing our own feelings, or those of our spouse, to control us. Visualize the beauty of living with a person who is *as* concerned with our happiness and well-being as we are with his. We could relax together into mutual reflection about how to support each other and celebrate our successes as though they were a win for the team, not the person. This would be the ultimate balance of individuality and togetherness. This would be true (self and marital) love.

#### References:

1. The Passionate Marriage. David Schnarch. Beaufort Books, NY. 2009.