

## IDENTITY, INTIMACY and LASTING RELATIONSHIPS

or "How to have a 60 year wedding anniversary."

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Almost a year ago when Marjorie and I celebrated our 60th year together, acquaintances asked, "How did you do it?" My flip answer, "Live long enough." The question deserves a considered response, which I am about to attempt. Not autobiographically, but as if I were "a wise old man."

This is 'old hat' to most professionals, who apply principles very well to other people. Failures at intimacy are often directly traceable to a diffuse sense of identity. To successfully get close to someone else requires that I be clear on who I am. How can another relate with me, when what I am is "all over the place"? It may take the form of a sticky, clinging dependency, whereby I am whatever you want me to be, at any price. And you cannot afford my being other than what you thought I was when we came to live together. Therefore one becomes incredibly possessive rather than risk losing a part of oneself. When you are fused with me as if we were totally and completely one, differences become threats, and as they increase, they bring on panic, driven, desperate measure, often including crimes against others.

Persons who suffer from identity diffusion are sometimes attracted to stable persons, but discover, to their dismay stable persons don't play the game according to their rules. One can never fully control a person who knows who he is. It is destructive to insist on it. We owe it to ourselves to be responsible for ourselves and never depend utterly on anyone else. Paradoxically, two such independent persons can get along famously with one another and enjoy a full and a deep intimacy. Otherwise, the attempt to make a relationship work results in a mismatch.

The same logic pertains to feelings. Feelings may thrust themselves upon me unbidden. How I respond to these feelings is up to me. I may avoid a lot of pointless struggle in acknowledging the feelings as mine. This is acceptance, which is the first step toward returning control to myself. What I do with feelings which I'd rather deny, and how I respond in the world where I find myself is indeed a matter of my choice. Beyond the choice of 'knuckling under,' or even modifying my precious beliefs about myself, I have the choice of going where I'll be understood and appreciated. I am not helpless, unless I choose to be.

I speak to and in behalf of individuals whom I seek to empower. We are not putty in our mate's hands. I am entitled to my expectations too, but I can only insist on those which I have complete control over, my own expectations of me! This is my last line of defense against those whom I fear may run my life. Couples' relationships that impede a person's individuality are doomed to an uphill and probably fruitless task.

So how do I cope with the fact you are not me? I respect your right to be you. Indeed, I find your different ness interesting. I'm glad you're not a carbon copy of me. The frequently heard "We have nothing in common" is an exaggeration, but it misses the point. We are not in competition with one another. One reason that I relate well with you is that you complete me. Complementary relationships are much easier to live with than are competitive ones. Especially when one runs out of steam. The division of labor, or let us say, initiative between us defines our relationship. That which annoys me, I accept and discuss to determine negotiability in a spirit of goodwill, which allows me to let you be who you are. Besides, that's a two way street. Of course you reciprocate.

A "balance" between us becomes a matter of 'tit for tat' accounting. If you give in to me on this I'll have to give into you on that. What a bore! Don't you see that it is impossible to ever present a gift under such a policy? Where has the love gone? The religious concept of grace is instructive. One cannot earn a gift. A gift is freely presented without strings attached. Obligatory proportional response reduces the gift to a form of bribery. This includes emotional as well as material gifts. Let me give to you out of my abundance. I've quite enough love I do not require instant restoration of depleted stock. Moreover, I accept gifts from others. You are not my only source. Nor does what I give others deprive you. If you have me, you're not in short supply.

The concept of balance, however, applies to something within me. This is why I must pay attention to my own needs and not deplete myself utterly. The point is that I do not automatically look to you to do it for me. I know you're available and usually willing but see that I am not the only figure on your horizon. Some things you need to do for you too, and then we can come back to one another refreshed, and able to keep on giving, especially when it's unexpected.