

Relationships Double-Edged

In the oddity of a world filled with pain, we are designed for relationship. The oddity of that dichotomy rests in the fact that much, if not most of the pain that we experience is at the hands of other people; in the context of some sort of relationship. Most of our pain is people related, or in some way directly or indirectly caused by the influence of other people. Take people out of our lives and our lives might be a bit empty, but they're likely to be a whole lot less painful as well. So this thing called "relationship," the very thing that we were intimately designed for and is core to the entirety of our existence is the very thing that causes us most of our pain. How it is that what we desperately need is the very same thing that can be so desperately devastating?

Double-Edged

Life is such that the more we need something the more vulnerable we are to that thing. The greater that something can bless our lives the greater it can also be a curse. The more the power something has to save us, the more the power it possesses to likewise destroy us. In the strange dichotomy of life things are entirely double-edged; being things which can bring incredible blessings while at the same time having inherent within them the power to damage and even destroy . . . sometimes beyond comprehension.

It's interesting that life should have within it such a fragile diversity. This diversity renders most of life entirely less than safe, always a risk and something of a tentative balance that can tip either for us or against us with the slightest wind of happenstance. It all makes life a precarious journey full of thin and sometimes indefinable lines that we attempt to walk in a manner feverishly designed to avoid pain and incur pleasure if that's somehow remotely possible. Relationships are one of those things which can bless or curse.

Relationships as Non-Negotiable

John Donne penned the famous words, "No man is an island." Living in abject isolation is entirely outside the character and frame of our construct as human beings. We are built for relationship; unfathomably shaped with a hole that only others can fill; the ultimate hole being that which only God Himself can fill. Relationship is not some sort of addendum or remote need of which all other needs easily eclipse. Rather, relationship is fundamental to our well-being; a non-negotiable part without which the fullness of our humanity simply can't be experienced. It might even be said that without relationship the fullness of our humanity itself is called into question. Yet it is here, in this most fundamental place that we are so terribly vulnerable.

Three Ingredients to Safe Relationships

We've lost real relationship because we've demanded the needs of self. Exercising the needs of self reduces relationship to something of a tentative acquaintance that is sustained on the sole condition that the individual's needs are met in the exchange. It's all about the take-away and it has nothing to do with the investment. This is nothing of relationship and nothing of what our deepest needs really are.

First, relationships are mutual interactions that prioritize the other person, putting them decisively at the forefront of the relationship. It's selfless. It rests entirely in an investment and has no interest in maneuvering for a pay-off. It's about expenditure of self for the enrichment of another . . . plain and simple.

Second, the relationship itself is squarely placed second to the needs of the other. Simply

2 - Craig D. Lounsbrough, LPC

put, the interests of the relationship are secured in a position superior to the interests of the individual. This suggests that the bond of relationship is superior in both strength and importance over the resources of an individual person alone and in isolation. Insuring the sustained strength and ongoing existence of the relationship is primary over securing one's own needs which in and of itself evidences our deep need for relationship.

Finally, the individual themselves stand third; in a position that is both subordinate and life-giving. Relationship by oneself is not relationship; therefore the position of the individual is of necessity behind that of the other, as well as being behind that of the relationship which is defined by the sustained union of both parties. We are built up as we bow down. As James so beautifully puts it, "humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (James 4:10).

Sound Principles Easily Forfeited

Such principles sound reasonable and quite right only because they've been diluted by endless repetition. Sure they're right, but actually doing that which is right distinctly marks the difference between someone who converses and someone who commits. We should be vigilant, realizing that life's greatest truths are often perceived as great in principle until we are faced with whether to actually implement them. Because we conserve and don't commit, we are left with the landscape of our lives void of real relationship.

Such a prioritization is the stuff of a vigorously selfless commitment to another, wed to a willing abandonment to sacrifice oneself in all manner of things up to and including death itself. If you think through these last few lines, you will of necessity be struck by the intensity of them. Yet, this structural prioritization fully insulates the relationship and provides a solid protective function to the relationship itself.

It is this very template that elevates the interactions between two people so high that few of these interactions can genuinely be labeled "relationships." Many so called relationships look the part. They have some of the characteristics and traits that make it look sufficiently so. The verbiage is good; the interactions at times intense and at other times joyful. There are rich moments and ones that are likewise meaningful. There is play and prayer, battles and bantering, tender moments and tough trials.

Yet, if the relationship breaches the needs of self and asks something a bit too much of the individuals, it will dissolve into ashes and be scattered to the winds of time and tides of adversity. We would do well to re-evaluate our relationships; whether those are our friendships, the relationships within our families, our spouses, the relationships with our children, or most importantly our relationship with God. Do we really have relationships or do we have a thin facsimile? Are we walking arm in arm with others, or are we walking with others entirely alone? Is that hole within us aching empty? If so, re-evaluate your relationships. It may transform your life.