

## Repeat Performances

*“What we are aiming at when we fall in love is a very strange paradox. The paradox consists of the fact that when we fall in love we are seeking to re-find all or some of the people to whom we were attached as children. On the other hand, we ask our beloved to correct all of the wrongs that these early parents or siblings inflicted upon us. So that love contains in it the contradiction, the attempt to return to the past and the attempt to undo the past.”* Lines from Professor Louis Levy in Woody Allen’s movie, Crimes and Misdemeanors (1989)

Changing the cycle that often presents itself in serial relationships requires courage and patience. Courage comes when we begin to seek understanding of our role in ‘failed relationships’. In my personal experience, I often blamed my partners for their weaknesses as the source of failure of relationships. Only when I began to understand more of my part, did I begin to develop the skills that allowed me to engage a partner that would allow me to maintain a growing and loving relationship. Patience is active persistence and engagement in growing and understanding me.

It is estimated that the number of couples co-habiting has increase 10 times within the past generation. We live in a day in which serial relationships are more common than ever. Our culture has accommodated serial relationships and they are more accepted by individuals and institutions. With less social pressure to marry, this pattern is likely to continue and perhaps increase even more in the coming decade.

The lines from Crimes and Misdemeanors describe some of the process that occurs in the unconscious aspect of our relationships. As long as the influences from our past remains in the unconscious, we are likely to repeat behaviors within our relationship or seek relationships in which these patterns can be played out. The failed relationship, one in which learning and growth doesn’t occur, is likely to repeat several times. Accusations often include “fear of commitment” as the reason for their partner’s weakness.

I have been challenged in relationships with the pattern that might be called ‘the rescuer’. My early attraction was to women that allowed me to take care of every need they had. Eventually, I would become resentful and angry because of the imbalance in the relationship. When a relationship ended, sworn never to repeat that error; I found myself attracted to another woman that was needy or what I perceived as needing help. After several failed relationships I ‘hit the wall’ – knowing I have to do something about me. A friend, who was a skilled therapist, began to guide me on my journey. The journey took me on the path of understanding my relationships in my family of origin.

Failure to believe that you are a part of the pattern is common. Repeating destructive patterns can even begin to seem compulsive. When certain ways of thinking and feeling are repeated, there is almost a need to repeat experiences that validate these thoughts and feelings. Repetition of these patterns isn’t conscious; there isn’t a desire for some self-punishment or harm intended. Instead the repetition is intended to bring a different and more fulfilling outcome or conclusion to our relationships. This is a way to find solace and healing for wounds and disappointments that have been with us for most of our lives.

Those early years of our learning are quick and powerful. Many of the conclusions we made as small human beings was not tempered with several years of experience, but was received as “this is the way it is!” and filed it in the vault called “life decisions”. Our survival in the universe meant learning and adapting to all of those patterns in our family of origin. It is very difficult to disassociate hurt and disappointment from those nurturing and positive aspects of our childhood. The hurts and disappointments leave a void or sense of something missing. I analogize this to the experience of completing a 1000 piece jigsaw puzzle with one of the pieces missing. There is a sense of incompleteness; our eyes are continually drawn to the “void” begging for the ‘missing piece’. There is little satisfaction knowing that one is 99.9% successful. Everyone has at least one ‘one missing piece’ while others may have many.

The family into which I was born was loaded with dysfunction. Good people, but with a lot of ‘Sampsonite’. My father was a good provider working long hours. My mother, stayed home taking care of three kids. Mother was challenged with a number of issues based on a difficult childhood and was emotionally needy and often turned to me as a confidant and, as I began to understand – surrogate husband. This early programming set the stage for my relationships with women. I began to understand my need to rescue encouraged dependence and promoted a feeling of inadequacy in my partner. This is the courage component of change. Looking at myself!

For some there may be a pattern of attraction to a ‘challenge’. Someone that is emotionally and often physically unavailable is perceived as a challenge. This pattern might occur with a woman whose father was not available either because of work or divorced parents – frequent broken promises; promised time together but preempted by business or other ‘important’ reasons; many apologies followed by a promise to make it up; or gifts that would be given in lieu of time. Repeated relationships can occur, each seeking to win the attention of an unavailable man. Akin to the ‘challenge’ is the pattern to ‘transform’ someone into the partner of one’s dream soul mate. Interestingly, the more the ‘transformer’ seeks to transform; the more the one needing the transformation distances from such an ordeal.

Attraction to passive partners is often a reflection of having grown up with a passive parent with the pattern of becoming distant and often rejecting. This relationship often begins well; conflict isn’t a part of the relationship until passivity gives way to anger just below the surface. The passive partner may either act out the anger or distance themselves to protect the relationship from the ‘ugliness’ of the anger. Acting out the anger and/or distancing occurs until the relationship ends and sets the stage for the next installment in the series.

Fortunately there was that ‘penultimate’ or ‘next to last’ relationship in my life! When I ‘hit the wall’, I knew I had to change. If, I was to have another, it would be for life! I experienced a sense of calm in my life when I reached this decision. I began to do work on myself! I discovered that I was becoming more thoughtful and open to learning. Self-revelations began to come; insights into my past history gave new understanding as I began to re-write my history seeking a more objective interpretation. Many of the road blocks to my relationship challenges in the past, to my surprise, I had built and maintained. I began to experience the value of understanding my personal history and its influence on my behaviors, feelings and beliefs about relationships.

During the 26 years in my relationship with my wife, I continue to learn and grow. Those lessons learned from childhood still have a strong influence in my life, they don't completely disappear. I still struggle not to be the 'big brother', the 'rescuer' and 'fixer'. It slips out when I'm not expecting it. This is where the patience and persistence count; each time I adjust my beliefs and behaviors – just like peeling an onion – a new lesson for growth is presented! One of the lessons that I review often: the challenge is not my partner but my old programming – those beliefs fixed in my unconscious over 60 years ago!

A relationship which seems doomed can have new life and vitality when both partners engage in intentional work to create the quality relationship both intended. It takes courage and patience! Learning from the difficulties from the past can be a beautiful redemption of a relationship that has been weakened by unconscious patterns. I benefited immensely with help from a skilled therapist. Counseling and/or relationship coaching is a tremendous help to accomplish this most worthy task!

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