

Chapter 2

Growing the Relationship

Life is change and movement. That is the nature of the universe and of the life energy that flows through every living thing. We have to change, evolve and grow throughout our life span or else we die a slow death—become hidebound and lifeless.

Similarly, our relationship has to be renewed—to expand and grow—for it to stay alive, fresh and stimulating. Growth of the relationship supports and encourages our own individual growth. In the same way, our deepening awareness and capacity for love constantly brings new life to our relationship. The more we give to the relationship, the more it expands, the more we gain and the more we grow.

What a relationship ceases to develop, it becomes stuck. Stuckness is the sense that things are not going anywhere but we cannot do anything about it. We are burdened by problems that never reach resolution: “no go” areas in our relationship that cannot be talked about. Being stuck for extended periods is unnatural and intolerable—like realizing we are inexplicably trapped or imprisoned. When a relationship is stagnant and confining, we become resentful, blame our partner and think about escaping.

Sometimes a relationship pauses in its movement forward. This should not be confused with being totally stuck. Pauses are plateaus on the journey: a time to draw breath, gather ourselves before we take a leap forward; a time to contemplate our situation and smell the roses. These plateaus are natural, but if they get entrenched, if we neglect the relationship for too long, it may get frozen and immovable.

Relationships tend to plateau when life is demanding and requires so much attention we think we have no time to share our inner life with our partner. This happens most often in the middle years of a marriage when career, finances and children’s needs are all encompassing; the energy of youth and the euphoria of first love have waned. Couples get disheartened by the difficulty and tedium of everyday life and blame the stresses on their partner and the relationship—as if these should magically solve every problem.

The relationship is like a plant we have forgotten to water; it seems tired and wilted but with a little tending, it can recover and begin to grow and blossom.

Imagine you are caught in a traffic jam and finally the car in front of you starts to move. You feel relief, a release of tension and even exhilaration—now you are on your way again. That is a relationship that gathers momentum after a plateau. Sometimes when you move forward it is so slow it seems almost imperceptible. We only recognize progress because we can look back to see how far we have come. As long as there is movement—or even the potential for movement—we are not totally stuck. It is not time to give up on the relationship.

If a relationship pause is like a traffic jam, being totally stuck is the vehicle breaking down: you need a tow-truck and a mechanic—and the car may be beyond repair. The major difference is in the quality of your joint intention and commitment. When there is love and an intention to keep working on the relationship, as long as both are truly committed to sharing and growing together, there is not just hope but real possibility.

On a day-to-day basis, progress is reflected in both small and large transformations. What positives should we look for? We certainly recognize them when they happen: more ease and relaxation, deeper understanding of each other, less doubts, fewer harsh words and tense moods, more joy and intimacy, easy companionship and teamwork—and so on.

In a healthy marriage there can be no toxic secrets and only infrequent lingering resentments. Fights should come and go like minor skirmishes that do not leave open wounds or scars. Stresses, misunderstanding and hurt feelings get resolved quicker than in the past. Affection is more constant with unexpected upsurges of tenderness for our partner; we are certain we are with the right person. Day-by-day, the relationship gets more spacious—and we know we are growing with it.

Growing Together, Growing Apart

When we share, we grow together; we are on the same journey, treading the same path. But when a couple gets stuck and stops sharing, most often one or both head off in different

directions. Soon they find themselves travelling far apart—or one is left behind while the other wanders.

Separate interests, friends and activities are essential and helpful: they enrich our times together and create more chances for sharing. The relationship does not grow stale if we bring new experiences back to our partner after every separation. However, once a section of our life gets disconnected and hived off from sharing, it starts to exert a captivating magnetism of its own. It pulls us away from our partner and out of the relationship. The life-blood of relationship is love. At its simplest, love can be described as positive attention directed toward each other. Anything that decreases or degrades this loving attention is problematic.

The drive to earn money or have a stellar career at the expense of a home life is a common cause of degraded attention. Addictions of all kinds—work, alcohol, drugs, gambling, exercise, sports, computer games, cleaning the house, trolling the internet, even socializing—any activity that is compulsive and time-consuming sucks energy away from commitment and connection to our spouse. The difference between an activity that enhances or damages the relationship is its motivation. Is the activity enriching for both my self and for the relationship or is it just for me? This is the question we have to ask. Secrets, addictions and obsessions are inherently selfish and self-centered. They exclude rather than include; they consume rather than expand attention.

Of course, a major source of disconnection and divorce is sexual infidelity. Many affairs begin somewhat innocently. We meet an interesting person at a party; we re-contact with an old flame online; we make a friend at work. What do we tell our partner: nothing—or an offhand superficial remark? Do we own up to a small tremor of sexual attraction? If the experience is not shared honestly, we create a secret, fuel for fantasies and future assignations. We have hidden a part of ourselves outside of the relationship container—and it will mutate and grow.

If you ask most people why they had an affaire, they usually say their marriage was unsatisfying, their sexual needs were unmet and they were unhappy. Basically the relationship was stuck and dull; there was not enough physical and emotional sharing and vitality. Most telling, the unfaithful partner does not

take responsibility for their part in the stuckness; they blame their spouse or the situation. The allure of a secretive, exciting liaison—in contrast to the drudgery of the marriage—was too hard to resist.

There is a minority (usually but not always men) for whom the thrill of sexual conquest, the desire for new sensual experiences and the fear of loss of freedom mean that are almost certain to wander. They may declare love for their spouse but they cannot commit deeply enough or share themselves for the marriage to stay bonded. These wanderers are stuck in their own immaturity, unable to draw on the relationship to grow beyond their own self-satisfaction. They often end up alone with a string of divorces under their belt.

The basic rule: if we are not growing together, we are growing apart. Growth has to be for both and not just one—both have to embrace the value and intention of change. Shared growth is nourishment for our souls. As the relationship expands, our experience of our spouse and our self expands in concert. Relationship becomes the crucible for personal growth.

Love and Friction

How does relationship help us grow? The answer is through love and friction. Love is the great healer, the universal force that nourishes and propels all positive change and evolution. Our partner's love provides the support, safety and invitation for us to become a better person. When we know we are loved—that we are lovable—it becomes easier to love ourselves in a way that is neither selfish nor self-centered. Love breeds love; through being loved and learning to be more loving in return, we develop as compassionate true human beings.

Most of us had less than the perfect love we needed as an infant and child. We are inwardly confused about giving and receiving affection, about how to resolve hurts and resentments. We have pressing childish needs for attention and caring; these interfere with our ability to be open and giving. Experiencing love from our spouse, we can grow past our restrictions to become the person we are meant to be.

Love makes it possible to live with another person—but it does not make it easy. We all have our peculiar flaws and idiosyncrasies, so sharing a life with another is bound to be

somewhat abrasive. Like two rough pebbles rubbing up against each other, relationship is often uncomfortable and scratchy. However, friction eventually smoothes jagged edges, polishes the surface and allows the light to shine through. Most important, the challenge, frustration and conflict of relationship, helps us grow in awareness.

To foster awareness we have to be confronted by our own blindness. Who better to do that than our loved one? Being with a person who mirrors our strengths and weaknesses, our potential and flaws, naturally increases our awareness of our self and of others. That allows us to recognize what and how we need to change

Love and friction are paired teachers. Mechanical love without frictions leads to self-satisfaction and a life of sameness. Friction without love is stressful and disturbing. Each is necessary to help us develop the two essential aspects of being human: loving-kindness and awareness.

Loving-kindness means we put the happiness and wellbeing of our spouse on the same level as our own. We practice the Golden Rule: treat your spouse as you wish your spouse to treat you: be loving, friendly, considerate and generous. Naturally, if we are self-critical and hard on our selves, we have to treat our spouse better than that. Growing in loving-kindness means we actively look for ways to make our partner happy by making efforts to be kind and considerate. Without loving kindness, we will be selfish, manipulative and tend to put our own needs and desires before anything else.

Loving-kindness is a beam of warm light that emanates from our heart: awareness is the quality of mind that knows how to guide that beam. Without awareness we do not recognize and understand our part in the relationship. We are clueless why our spouse reacts the way he or she does. We blame the other person for any difficulties, excuse our own irrational and hurtful behaviors and allow ourselves to be driven by automatic and unconscious reactions. Awareness is the key to understanding the complexities, not only of the relationship but also our own self.

As we grow in awareness, our expectations of relationship and our spouse become more realistic. We do not keep score about who is getting the better deal; it is more important to be

loving than to be right. We seek to become less selfish and more selfless, to find more ways to make the partnership richer. We remember that our spouse is there to teach us greater awareness and deeper loving-kindness. Why would we not be eternally grateful?

Summary

- Relationships have to change and grow or they become stuck and stagnant.
- During some periods, growth slows down and plateaus; this is not the same as being totally stuck.
- Committing to sharing and growing will jumpstart the expansion of our relationship.
- If we do not grow together, we will tend to grow apart.
- Relationships grow through a balance of love and friction—we need both loving support and challenge.
- Sharing love heals our emotional wounds and allows us to develop deeper loving-kindness.
- Friction with our loved-one helps us develop awareness and recognize our need for personal change.

Practice

Think about the following questions. Jot down notes to remind yourself.

- Is our relationship changing for the better? How has it changed during the last five years?
- Am I confident our relationship will continue to grow stronger?
- How have I changed and grown as a person in the last five years?
- How has our relationship helped me grow?

Have a conversation with your partner.

- Share your responses to the questions above.
- Discuss: How can we support the growth and development of each other? What do we need from each other to make personal progress?