

## **THE SANCTUARY OF RELATIONSHIP:**

**A Woman's Point of View**

**By Tricia Clark-McDowell**

*“To have a friend is to make of this earth a garden”*

One of the first things that comes to mind when I think about the criteria of true friendship in a relationship is that a friend is the kind of person you want to have along on an adventure. Of course I see most all of life as an adventure, so by now I realize that I need deep levels of friendship. I no longer have to survive one hundred percent on my own. What a revelation! I used to have many of my adventures alone because I wasn't used to reaching out to others. I simply hadn't learned to trust any one. I also suffered my sorrows alone, feeling that I didn't want to burden others with my problems. But now I know better. I've matured into accepting that I am meant to be loved and appreciated through special friends, and I would rather share most of the good *and* difficult times, the exciting *and* ordinary experiences with an intimate other and/or with dear friends.

Although I have learned how to overcome tremendous challenges — whether physical, mental, or spiritual — largely on my own, part of my transition into welcoming more friendship into my life came about because I finally realized that I truly have something worthwhile to offer to a deep friendship, at least more qualities than liabilities. I very much want to share of myself because it no longer feels appropriate or healthy to hide away protecting myself. I feel that I have consciously striven, over the years, to be more and more honest and straightforward with friends, yet diplomatic and understanding of their own needs, sensitivities, and limits. I have also learned to scale down my expectations. A sage once said, “I have no expectations of others, therefore I cannot be disappointed with their actions.” I wouldn't say that I have progressed quite that far yet, but I'm working on it. And I respect that each of us must feel the freedom to act according to the dictates of our own heart, unhampered by the guilt trips of those around

us. I don't even want to ask something of someone that they feel unable or unwilling to give, because it would not result in a win/win situation, which is what I try to aim for.

Friendship in intimacy has been particularly challenging to me. To be honest, Forrest and I haven't always been very good friends to each other. Looking back, it seems that we each felt as though we had too much personally at stake in our marriage to be able to voluntarily relinquish any of our power or sovereignty to the other. In our pride and self-protectiveness (for we were really very fragile), we erected veritable fortresses around ourselves that were well fortified and well defended until gradually our hearts could learn to trust and open. Because of this difficult dynamic, we came to rely on the sanctuary of our friendships with others to cultivate and hone the qualities we needed to bring more into our marriage. So our close friends became the basis for acquiring the interpersonal and social skills necessary for the marriage to survive and ultimately to thrive.

I have thought a lot about my current standards or criteria for high-level friendship. No doubt, I wasn't wise enough to understand the importance of some of these points in my younger years, but, as always, my mistakes and perhaps my loneliness helped create the fertile testing ground in which to discover what works and what doesn't work if one desire to keep a close connection with someone for a long time.

### **Tricia's Criteria for Lasting Friendship**

- Unconditional love
- Open-ended time when together (at least some of the time)
- Mutual commitment to supporting the other's personal growth
- Sincere concern for the other's best interests and overall well-being
- Ever-deepening trust and high-level honesty
- Enjoyment of each other's company and the ability to laugh and have fun together — even when doing ordinary things
- Willingness to share or hear anything — no secrets
- Respectful communication
- Evolving soulfulness

- Realistic expectations of each other
- Ability to turn to each other in a crisis or “dark night of the soul”
- Desire to bring out the best in each other and to help moderate or shift “the worst” through understanding and patience
- Lack of manipulation or guilt-tripping
- Frequent expressions of gratitude for the friendship
- Patience and forgiveness when something temporarily comes between you
- Loyalty to the friendship over time and distance
- Doing whatever is required to stay connected as the circumstances of your lives change
- Integrity in keeping commitments made to each other
- A good sense of humor

Once I had a friend named Steven, whom I met when I lived in Southeastern Kentucky, the year following my graduation from college. In the thirteen months I spent in Appalachia, Steven was really my only true friend, and yet we were relatively young and inexperienced. Still, we cared for each other a lot and never made the mistake of becoming lovers. Probably the two greatest things we had in common were our love of nature and our strong interest in photography. I had just gotten my B.F.A. in Photography from University of Illinois. But instead of continuing on to graduate school back east, as I had planned, I had a last minute change of heart. I decided to pursue the adventure of living in a part of the country that was as different from my own middle class roots as possible.

I was lucky enough to get a job as a photographer for Kentucky Youth Research, which in actuality was trying every way possible to insure future funding for Project Head Start. This important program was about to lose its long-time government funding from the Office of Economic Opportunity. As their official photographer, I traveled throughout the state visiting and photographing a number of remote pre-school day care centers that cared for the impoverished children of local miners, many of whom had little or no access to nutritious food or a quality education.

I met Steven at one of the centers, and we immediately hit it off. We subsequently had many adventures together – mostly mini-photographic expeditions in which we tried to face new technical and social challenges through which we upgraded and honed our craft. Steven was very shy around adults, but he excelled in his interactions with children. I learned a lot from him. Sadly however, we didn't quite share the deepest parts of ourselves because we were both wounded and hiding. Neither one of us had the ability to articulate in words the hurt we felt inside. We could tell pieces of our stories, in a sense, but not really articulate the depth of our pain.

Steven's father had walked out on his mother when Steven was still very young, and his mother had never re-married. Being without a father had resulted in a lack of exposure to male role models (For better or worse). The upshot of this, in Steven's case, was that he was very shy and rather effeminate. He had very little confidence in his abilities or future. This is where I tried to make a difference, bolstering his belief in himself in every way I could. It seemed to be working because Steven actually applied for and got a job teaching photography classes for children, which gave him great satisfaction. It seemed to be the perfect job for him.

After a year, I tired of country music and the locals' limiting perceptions of me as an outsider. I moved to Colorado. Steven was disappointed, probably more than he ever let on, but we stayed in touch. He even came to visit me in Aspen, where I worked as a ski photographer. But I was too preoccupied by that time with my new life and boyfriend, and I did not connect as deeply with him as I had in former times. My job was exhausting and, for some reason, I didn't think my boyfriend would be able to handle this strange friend coming on the scene. I wasn't honest with either one of them, and I definitely didn't have Steven's needs in mind. After that visit, I never saw him again. A few months later, I received a letter from his new housemate, Glenn, whom I had met back in Kentucky. He wrote that Steven had committed suicide, blasting his life away with a shot gun way up in a remote area called Copper Creek. The words of a poignant Judy Collins song about her dear friend's suicide often haunt me: "...The heart that sorrow broke in you can never be repaired. Bart, I know I let you down somewhere..."

I was deeply shaken down to my core. I knew I had once been one of Steven's closest friends, and yet it seemed that I had failed him. I never learned what his motive was for

ending his life, so I developed my own theories. I think that perhaps he was gay, but felt unable to tell anyone. He also might have felt responsible in some way for his Mother's unhappy and unfulfilling life. And then again, he might possibly have been in love with me, and never had the courage to tell me. I'll never know. But after his death, I thought long and hard about the purpose of friends. And I tried to be a better friend to those who crossed my path. I could, no doubt have given Steven sanctuary in his deep pain, but I wasn't paying attention. I wasn't awake. But he gave me the parting gift of waking me up, and for that I will ever be grateful. (1,994)

### **The Sanctuary of Intimacy**

We recently had the pleasure of hosting, here at Cortesia, a small bachelor party for a long time friend and local musician two weeks before his first marriage at age thirty four. It was to be an evening of improvisational music. Of course women were not allowed, so I planned on making myself scarce, as they say. Mostly I just worked in the garden, (while Forrest and Jeffrey sat and talked to me as they waited for the other men to arrive). Then I spent a long time sitting on the sunset bench watching the sunset. Strains of lovely music floated out across the ridgetop. Unexpectedly, I was invited to join the group for dessert. I felt honored. As we sat there with our cake and champagne, Forrest proposed that we each offer a bit of personal wisdom to Brad that could aid him in his upcoming marriage. Given that we had all been married for years, this seemed like an interesting idea.

Jeffrey spoke up quickly and with great certainty. Make up quickly after an argument, he suggested, so that conflict is not extended unnecessarily. Wonderful advice. Then David shared the idea of honoring the "otherness" of your mate. He felt that it was important to recognize that we each see life in different ways, and that's okay. By honoring each other's individual differences and uniqueness, he felt, we could uphold the health of the relationship as a whole. Brad is marrying a Japanese woman, so he could definitely appreciate this thought.

Forrest went next. He commented that married life is enriched by creating one or more meaningful rituals together that are shared on a daily basis. He used the example of

our ritual of watching the sunset together most every night. Having experienced just an hour or two earlier the beauty of a sunset from our ridgetop, the point was well made. I had images, too, of our friends Sharon and Steve sitting around their beloved evening fire, and of a couple I have been seeing for years, walking their dogs together every morning. Simple yet soul-nurturing activities that serve to bond a relationship.

I went last. I suggested to Brad that he take very good care of his soul and support his partner in *her* pursuit of soulfulness, so that each of them could grow spiritually as individuals and insure that the marriage continues to evolve and deepen spiritually as well. We've seen so many couples go astray because their focus is on work or mere survival, and somehow they never get around to sharing together the things that really matter. A kind of barrenness begins to take over, and in time the gulf between them becomes too wide to cross. So of course I wish for Brad and Mitchico, and all who choose to walk the path of relationship with integrity and honor, that their heart may show them the way.

### **THE SANCTUARY OF RELATIONSHIP**

Discovering the deep and lasting sanctuary possible within an intimate relationship with another human being is one of the most richly rewarding experiences in all of life. It can also be one of the most challenging tasks we will ever attempt. And of course, there are many more examples of relationships that are minimally fruitful, if not failing entirely, than there are instances where a soulful kind of harmony and balance exists in spite of the pressures of the world.

Where might be the humble starting point for a truly soulful relationship between two adults who aspire to love one another deeply over the long term? What common ground can they tread upon safely together to lay the solid foundation needed to withstand the inevitable challenges ahead? We believe that the most important tool two people could have and share is mutual spiritual beliefs, as I alluded to above. Even though there are so many day to day tests and duties and obligations, none of which may *seem* to relate to spirituality, keeping the image and knowledge of a higher ground jointly in mind helps to propel a couple through the hard times.

Forrest and I did not fully realize how wounded we were coming into our relationship twenty some years ago. Each of us appeared to be an intelligent, well-adjusted, creative, loving human being simply looking for the right *other* person to appreciate and love us enduringly. Our wounds were, of course, somewhat buried and forgotten when we first met, and our hope and optimism led the way. Out of that initial clarity grew our spiritual bond, and within a few months of getting together, we were clearly unified in at least one respect: we shared a strong devotion to meditation and we practiced it faithfully morning and night. This isn't to say that we were very *good* meditators, mind you. I especially had a very difficult time focusing my mind long enough to concentrate on the techniques we were so carefully taught. A nearly continuous stream of wayward thoughts distracted me from my lofty goal of inner stillness. But I tried, day after day, and sustained effort seldom goes unrewarded.

Interestingly enough, however, as our devotion to our spiritual path deepened, so did the conflict in our marriage. It's not that meditation was to blame. It's just that our souls began awakening, and the pain and fear and anger so long held in began to be released. We were becoming more real. Looking back, I know now that this was inevitable. It simply had to happen. As I said, we were both far more wounded than we really knew, and only the safety net of our soul's gradual awakening could create the relatively secure space in which to begin our slow healing together. But there were many, many phases: a one act play that unexpectedly extended itself into a huge epic production. I only signed up for the first act, but it was such a challenging role that I just couldn't stop. In many ways it was a tragedy, to extend the drama metaphor, but other tones began to creep in to keep things interesting. Eventually, our Forrest and Tricia production became more like a tragi-comedy-melodrama-romance.

We each wore many hats, believe me, astounding our friends with our versatility. One day or week one of us would expertly play out our wounded child while the other generously agreed to be the stern, overbearing parent. Then we might reverse these roles for awhile. After that one might step out as the confident, respected professional while the other pined away feeling deserted, insecure, even jealous. We got lots of mileage out of this scenario over the years. Then there was the romance theme, where one hotly pursued the other who feigned disinterest.

When children came into the picture, we could beautifully mirror the mistakes we thought our parents made with us, replicating some of their behaviors perfectly and overcompensating in the opposite direction in other areas. There were many choice scenes and one-liners depicting these various conflicts until we finally grew up and took responsibility to act *now* like we might have wished we were treated back *then*, and let the rest go. Our childhood is over. It's time to move on.

I share some of this not because our particular melodrama was either memorable or worthy of emulating — I assure you it wasn't. But throughout all these unending theatrics, of which our friends and family understood little, we still somehow managed to maintain and deepen our spiritual practice. We meditated, we prayed, we forgave each other- day after day after day. Always the determination was summoned to work out our differences and to try again. Unbearable days became peaceful nights; weeks and months of conflict produced amazing insights into life and love and the renewal of hope. Seemingly endless tears and grief and anger gave way to the artful articulation of our souls deep yearning. We produced heartfelt poetry, hauntingly beautiful music, a serene garden that glowed with color and vitality, wonderful classes and projects and publications that helped and inspired those even more in need of inspiration and healing. Aren't we often only a step or two ahead of those we seek to help?

The supreme irony of life may well be that out of the deepest pit of despair rises the courage and the vision to transcend everything dark and choose the light. Most of us seem to need a buddy to wander around in the darkness with, otherwise we would be too afraid to go there at all. Who but our partner, our life mate could be so eminently qualified to expertly and constantly remind us of how imperfect we are, how afraid, how unwilling to change? Without such an infinitely unpleasant yet valuable human mirror thrust in front of us every day *for years* most of us would never know our own darkness well enough to even tiptoe into it, much less embrace it. And thus we would have little or no hope of ever transcending that darkness.

Some may well disagree with me, but that does not concern me. I will say it again. Without Forrest mirroring to me the glass-like fragility of my own emotional state, I would not have come to the place where I was finally so disgusted with blaming him for my own pain that I actually began to confront my shadow. Of course, all the while

Forrest was undergoing a very similar process himself. And thus, as I began to transform, he began to transform. Our synchronicity was uncanny and no doubt divinely orchestrated.

We have often characterized the painful unfolding of our relationship as firewalking. And it is true that we were often burned in the process of purifying our love for ourselves and each other. It can be no other way. But we can also define the work we do to create true and lasting intimacy in another way: as sanctuary work. No one says this work will be easy. There are some victories that come more easily than others, to be sure, but still, there are often many more failures than successes, at least at first. Sanctuary work is predicated on the philosophy that the earth and all beings are sacred. If we are to live in harmony with other beings, we must try to respect them and to *understand* them, even if we think that we do not agree with them.

Once I became clear enough to realize that I cared deeply enough about Forrest to really want to understand him, then it became much more difficult to hold onto blame and anger towards him, even when it seemed justified. I became less reactionary and much more interested in understanding *why* he did what he did and *what he needed* to really feel at peace. When I grasped what his deep needs were, I could be honest with him and myself about the part I could play in seeing that those needs were fulfilled. I knew that I couldn't do it all, just as he couldn't take the responsibility to "make or keep me happy". But we became clear about taking responsibility for ourselves and at the same time deeply supporting the other. Complicated stuff.

In many cases our friends encouraged us in this long journey, but there were also a number of times when they were all too eager to convince us to throw in the towel. "Stop torturing yourselves," one or another would say. "Go find someone with whom you're more compatible." "Quit wasting your life..." And on and on. It was good to feel their empathy at times and to have someone with whom to share a particularly painful episode, but we never seemed to be willing to take their advice. Divorce? Giving up? It's not part of our character. So in reality, every time I was urged to end the marriage, I simply became more determined to make it work.

Surely our love for God and our love for the God in each other- the same God that we both meditated upon every morning and every night- would guide us in our souls' deep

yearning to find peace with each other. This was our belief individually and collectively, held to in spite of every indication to the contrary. It took us nineteen years to prove to ourselves beyond the shadow of a doubt that we were right. Had we found that we were wrong, we would have gone our separate ways, no doubt, and tried to at least preserve a friendship. But it means ever so much more to have truly entered into the sanctuary of our marriage, in the fullest sense of the word.

We continue to grow and evolve, knowing that we are safe to explore the outer reaches of what a relationship can be and attain. This means giving each other full *freedom* and full *support* to be the best that we can be, again both individually and collectively. Neither our personal needs or our needs as a couple take long term priority over the other, but there are periods where one or the other is the focus for the time being. For example, I have a great love for traveling, so when the need becomes strong, I might take a trip with my mother or a friend, or even alone, for two or three weeks. And Forrest is involved with occasional concert tours with his musical group or intensive periods of recording, while I tend the home front. These individual pursuits are important and do not mean we are less committed to each other. We simply know now that there are certain things we prefer and need to do alone or with someone else. And ultimately, because our solo sojourns feed our soul, they also feed the relationship and strengthen our life together.

Although we used to be, we are no longer ashamed of our past conflicts, though possibly we have had more than the average couple. We have also taken more risks, and the risks have paid off. If we had tried to play it safe, just on the basis of self esteem alone, it might have been easy to justify having an affair or looking around for someone who required less work and less commitment. Had we each continued our righteous blame of the other so that we could protect and uphold our own sense of correctness and virtue, we might never have awakened enough to change ourselves. I believe a good marriage or a long-term intimate relationship is a high maintenance operation, not for the faint of heart. To get the sweetness of the bloom, much hands and knees work must be done to prepare and enrich the rocky soil and coax it lovingly back to fertility and health. In our culture we have learned to have high expectations of marriage or intimacy, but often they are unrealistic testimonies to our naiveté about the importance and integrity of laying

groundwork. For possibly the same reasons our gardens are full of pumped up, chemically-fed, greenhouse induced, hybridized super-flowers that fail to hold up in the long haul, when the glamour wears off of our relationship, it's too easy to want to throw it away and go back to the marriage nursery to look for a better specimen. We should throw out all the pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, and miticides, dump the toxic husband sprays and wife bombs, and try loving kindness and respect, curiosity over fear, acceptance over judgment. It's ever so hard to do, especially with any consistency, but it's infinitely worth the effort.

Remember the perfume ad that says, "Want him to be more of a man? Then try being more of a woman." I would offer this: If you want a relationship that is deeply loving, deeply supportive of your individuality, and full of joy, spirit, and adventure, then believe in it so passionately that you truly become that kind of a person and thus attract that kind of a mate. Believe in it with your whole heart and soul, day after day, even as the devoted meditator believes fully that at *any moment* God will appear and the divine goal will be realized. Don't look back, look forward and *know* that your prayer will be answered. We would not have the deep yearning for shared love with another human being if the seeds of its fulfillment were not already planted within us.

## **MOVING THROUGH CONFLICT INTO DEEPER HARMONY**

In Stephen and Ondrea Devine's inspiring book, "*Embracing the Beloved*", a concept I found to be particularly valuable is an idea they learned and refer to as "opening the heart in hell". As soon as I read the words, I knew immediately what that meant. They say that relationship is good practice because it can teach you to open your heart in hell.

In their words, "All our growth is clearly an expanding beyond our small selves into the spaciousness of the Beloved. When we are moving gently and without force towards our edge, toward the fire, hell transforms into heaven — letting go of the pain into something greater. Letting it all float in the Beloved means not changing or getting rid of anything — no resistance — simply meeting the old in a brand-new way. Cradling our pain in the arms of the Beloved. Fear arises, joy arises, anger arises, and each dissolves in

a mind that does not close. Breathing in and out of the heart together, each the breath of the other, each the breath of the Beloved.

“But we are so addicted to our suffering we will fight to the death to protect it. And woe to the person who, even unintentionally, triggered that pain. We hold our ground, even though it is hell. Resistance stops us in our tracks, unwilling to go beyond its fiercely defended edge. Fear (actually a sign of growth at the edge) demands we withdraw into safe territory, old strategies, old pain, a familiar hell. But in relationship, growth insists that we let go and expand into the unknown. Hell is the absence of the Beloved.”

Every intimate relationship, if taken seriously and lived deeply, has the potential to lead us in *and out* of hell, perhaps over and over again — for years. Some of us learn through this endless recycling process and eventually find our way through the labyrinth into peace within and some degree of harmony in our relationship. Some of us do not. But given a solid enough commitment to growth, on the part of both people, the way of peace can usually be found. Even once found, does harmony in marriage last forever? How do *we* know? But realistically, is there anything on this earth that is truly permanent? Holding on too hard to newly won equanimity can even be a little dangerous. Constant peace may be a long term *goal*, but at present it isn't necessarily my *expectation*. That would seem unrealistic, and I'm not wanting to set myself up for disappointment.

There's definitely danger afoot, I believe, when for any reason we become either complacent about or utterly dependent on the stability of a certain state of affairs. Even the experience of a long period of harmony between two people does not mean that their work is done. Constant effort and vigilance are needed. Sometimes the outside pressures are simply too great, and someone or something breaks down, temporarily disrupting the peace. At other times, one or the other in the relationship experiences an intense, unexpected shake up, change, or growth spurt (a more positive way to frame it). When any one element is altered significantly, all the other parts are eventually effected. This pattern of interconnection is usually evident in the relationship from the very beginning, and yet if we're not watching closely, we may be frequently surprised at the far reaching effects of a single event or comment or miscommunication.

Forrest and I have been inspired by the ground-breaking work of Dr. John Gottman. In his bestselling book, “The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work”, he draws on the extensive research he has done over the last twenty five years with literally thousands of couples. Dr. Gottman maintains that he can predict whether a couple will divorce after watching and listening to them for just five minutes — with 91% accuracy! Regarding the purpose of marriage, he states, “In the strongest marriages, husband and wife share a deep sense of meaning. They don’t just “get along”— they also support each other’s hopes and aspirations and build a sense of purpose into their lives together. That is really what I mean when I talk about honoring and respecting each other.”

“Very often a marriage’s failure to do this,” he goes on to say, “is what causes husband and wife to find themselves in endless, useless rounds of arguments or to feel isolated and lonely in their marriage. After watching hundreds of videotapes of couples fighting, I can guarantee you that most quarrels are not about whether the toilet lid is up or down or whose turn it is to take out the trash. There are deeper, hidden issues that fuel these superficial conflicts and make them far more intense and hurtful than they would otherwise be.”

### **THE SIGNS OF TROUBLE IN A RELATIONSHIP**

As extracted from “*The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*”

by John Gottman, Ph.D.

1. **Harsh startup of discussions** — When a discussion leads off with criticism and/or sarcasm (a form of contempt), it has begun with a “harsh startup” and is generally doomed to failure.
2. **Four types of negative interactions** (called “**The Four Horseman** of the Apocalypse”)
  - **Criticism** — While a complaint focuses on a specific behavior, a criticism ups the ante by throwing in blame and general character assassination, i.e. “What’s wrong with you?”

- **Contempt** — Sarcasm, cynicism, name-calling, eye-rolling, sneering, mockery, and hostile humor, all forms of contempt, are the worst of the four horsemen because they convey disgust fueled by long-term negative thoughts about the partner. In any discussion, they cause more conflict rather than supporting reconciliation.
  - **Defensiveness** — This is really away of blaming the partner and saying, in effect, “*You’re the problem, not me.*” Hence defensiveness is unproductive and generally causes the attacking spouse to escalate the conflict rather than apologizing or backing down.
  - **Stonewalling** — By tuning out the other person, a stonewaller disengages from an argument and refuses not only to fight back but to listen, make eye contact, or respond in any way. The message is one of total disinterest. According to Dr. G., in 85% of marriages, the stonewaller is the husband. He believes this is because the male cardiovascular system has been shown to be more reactive than the female and slower to recover from stress. It is a biological fact that men are more overwhelmed by marital stress than their wives.
3. **Flooding** — When a spouse’s negativity — whether in the form of criticism, contempt, or defensiveness — becomes so unexpected and overwhelming that it leaves the other shell-shocked, they will do anything to protect themselves and to avoid feeling flooded in the future. Thus they choose emotional disengagement.
  4. **Body Language** — Physical distress symptoms of flooding include elevated heart rate, hormonal changes such as the secretion of adrenaline, mounting blood pressure, sweating, etc. These activate the primal alarm system of “fight or flight” and severely affect one’s ability to pay attention, process information, or creatively problem solve.
  5. **Failed Repair Attempts** — Repair attempts are efforts a couple makes to deescalate tension during an argument, thus preventing flooding (for example: “Let’s take a break,” or “Wait a minute, I need to calm down.”). Humor is another type of repair attempt. When these efforts continually fail or go unnoticed, the marriage is in serious trouble. All of the first four indicators can be present, and a marriage can still be happy *if* repair attempts are successful.

Forrest and I certainly had a degree of harmony early on in our relationship, but conflict began to creep in with the pressure of step-parenting, financial struggles, the embarking onto a spiritual path, and periods of significant emotional clearing. Also, as I gradually became more confident in my professional work, our marriage changed because I began to speak up for myself in new and unexpected ways. I became unwilling to be dominated even in small matters. If I wanted to go out to dinner and a movie and Forrest did not, why should I feel guilty about calling up a woman friend to go with me instead? Being the designated keeper of the plants in the garden, if I felt that I needed a new hose or some new plants to fill in a damaged area, then (within our budget) I bought them. In years past, I would have denied myself these basic rights, automatically expecting Forrest's resistance. Being unwilling to risk speaking up about it, I would have silently endured his so-called oppression, even while I was steeping in resentment. This kind of resentment is deadly. Like an underground spring, it bubbles up in the oddest places, even sabotaging the times when things seem to be going relatively well. One can't keep a lid on anger and resentment forever- without paying a great price, that is. Oh, if only we had had Dr. Gottman's book back then!

Placing these turbulent feelings into the context of sanctuary work is another way to provide a safe framework in which to attempt to deal with them honestly. Sanctuary work asks that we spend time every day regenerating ourselves and nurturing our soul. During that time, whatever comes up is viewed dispassionately, yet with a tremendous amount of *compassion*. During our moments of sanctuary time, it is not only possible but necessary to carefully analyze the origins of such things as relationship conflicts. We can do this safely in private, with the goal of trying to see not only our point of view but our partner's as well. Before the other person can be approached regarding a certain issue or point of conflict, there must be sense of relative clarity and calmness, and at least some degree of openness to the possibility of resolution. Sharing insights is one thing, dumping resentment on one's partner is another.

If one approaches their mate with integrity and appropriate timing, even intense differences can be discussed without hostility. The time must be right for both, free of the distractions of children, phone calls, and other obligations. The place chosen for the discussion should be neutral and very safe (probably not the bedroom). One person

should be allowed to talk free of interruption while the other listens respectfully without comment. Then the other speaks. If, following this, the energy in the room is still very tense, perhaps this is all that can occur initially. A good discussion can only follow if there is a perceptible softening. Better to stop the session before another fight ensues. Perhaps more thinking and pondering in private is required before the next level of personal understanding can be arrived at, which could then be creatively shared with the other.

It's often difficult to willingly give up our desire to be right when differences occur between us and our mate, or with anyone else. Most of us have made a significant investment into seeing ourselves as the one who knows best and "has it together". Of course, we may realize as well that this very attitude has repeatedly gotten us in trouble over most of our life. It is truly fascinating to undergo a shift in this all too often inaccurate viewpoint.

The change may begin with an increasing willingness to compromise in the event of a conflict or disagreement, not out of guilt or shame, mind you, but because it feels fair and right. It ceases to feel good to get ones way 100% and watch the other person go off dejected, demoralized, or, worse, resentful. That sort of outcome ultimately never works because it creates another wound rather than providing a real solution. After all, a lasting solution depends on each person going away satisfied that the right and fair thing has been done. But sometimes a compromise creates its own complications. The reason mere compromise *isn't* always enough is because, even though some agreement has been reached, it may be that neither person goes away truly satisfied. Then both are likely to harbor resentment in one way or another, even if it doesn't surface for awhile. Hidden resentment may be redirected towards someone else, children or co-workers, for example. Or it may pop up at very unexpected times, as I mentioned earlier, when the relationship seems to be doing fine.

Willing, graceful compromise is superior to resentful compromise, it is true. And that may be very appropriate some of the time. Mature individuals can see that not all their desires are *really* desirable. But there are times when a conflict with your mate is particularly intense and neither one of you is interested in any form of compromise. In the space that is necessarily taken at that time, when each is nursing their wounded pride or

feelings of anger and frustration, a certain softening can occur that begins to open the door to healing. One simply has to be willing, out of deep love for the other person, to step out of the emotionality of the issue enough to become curious. “I wonder *why* she feels so strongly about that.” “What deeper wound from the past has our current conflict exposed?” “What truth exists in the hurtful things he said to me?” “Why am I really holding so intensely to my point of view?” or “If I do feel right about this, how can I help my partner to better understand me without causing so much conflict?” “What have I failed to communicate?” And so on...

What I’m talking about here is a transformation from the rigidity of an “I am right, they are wrong” attitude” to a flexibility and curiosity and a strong desire to *understand* one’s partner, as I mentioned earlier. This is the “opening of the heart in hell” that the Devines speak about. When this desire to understand is greater than the temptation to judge and condemn, new doors and new possible solutions do open up. If only one person feels this way, they can still soften their own resistances enough to help their partner to do the same. They can lead the way back into a place of forgiveness and receptivity so that harmony can begin to reestablish itself. If both people in the relationship can seek and desire to understand and serve the other, then many conflicts will literally solve themselves.

Here is one example. Forrest used to be very insistent that I be home at a certain time when I drove into town to do errands. If I arrived home later than 5:30 pm, he would be upset. I, on the other hand, hated time constraints of any kind and viewed them as oppressive and unnecessary. I wanted to be able to come home whenever I pleased. Since I only went to town a couple days a week, I inevitably ran in to one friend or another. Perhaps we would have a long talk in the grocery store or even go out for tea. Invariably, I would lose track of time. Before you know it I would be late, arriving home at 6:00 or 6:30pm. or even later. Forrest would be angry and I would stubbornly refuse to listen.

Sadly, it took us a long time to understand our individual part in creating this conflict and the childhood histories that had programmed us to feel as we did. As one of eight children, I was constantly told what to do and when. By the time I reached college age and left home, I had already vowed that I would never again be controlled by time *or*

other people. After my first semester, I refused to take any more 8:00am classes or to get up early, and I stayed up as late I pleased. Forrest, on the other hand, was extremely time-efficient and responsible, just as his father had been. And just as his father had always arrived home from work exactly at 5:30pm, ready for dinner, so did Forrest. All through graduate school and ever since, he has been a model of timeliness.

On the other side of this historical pattern, we understand each other better now and have each taken on some of the opposite point of view. Forrest has learned to be more flexible and not to make unnecessary demands on me regarding time. I have learned to be more aware of time and to call if I will be late. And I have also come to *prefer* being home by 5:30 whenever possible so that I can be a part of preparing a nice dinner. Neither one of us has really compromised, you see. We have each willingly changed our behavior and thinking to include the needs of the other, as well as shifting our own preferences. This usually works out quite well, with only occasional regressions. This is just one of many examples of why a greater effort to truly understand our mate and their behaviors pays substantial dividends in the peace of mind created in a marriage.

This one attitudinal shift alone can help eliminate the bulk of the conflict that occurs. Consider this analogy. We love our garden even though we will never fully understand all the plants and creatures that reside within its boundaries, many of which compete for finite resources. But peaceful co-existence and lasting harmony is clearly possible if we steward the garden well. Diversity is healthy, for there is room for everyone. Similarly, most of us know by now that we will never fully understand our mate or why our partnership is the way it is. But we try, day after day after day, to the best of our ability. And with a sense of underlying compassion, we give grace for our mutual failings and thanks for our successes. We honor the “otherness”. Then, even in the face of periodic conflict, the marriage can still thrive, providing an ever deeper feeling of sanctuary and a deeply satisfying means to give and receive a tremendous amount of love.

The more you feel the pain of the circumstances in which you presently find yourself, the more you can be assured that you are indeed in the perfect place to glean the most from the powerful lessons of life. Remember, everyone is in the process of learning the same basic lessons. But because each human being is so unique, they need their own unique training program. Hence there are no two human scenarios that are exactly alike.

It takes a master playwright indeed to conceive of all these scripts, so artfully interwoven scene after scene until each soul finds that perfect peace and divine attunement. A marvelous and endlessly complex drama, to be sure.

And how does one truly find their place within the unfolding plot and play their divinely given role with equanimity and style? By persevering and believing, of course, that the outcome of all ones efforts will ultimately (even if not immediately) be favorable. What else is there but to do our best and have faith?

When, from time to time, I lose sight of the depth of my heart connection to Forrest, I light candles and soothe myself and try to remember. A quiet voice whispers to me from afar, gently encouraging. It says: “In this life which has been so full of pain and sorrow, struggle and strife, you were given this man to love enduringly that you might forget the past and learn to trust again. Let go of your fears, let go of all your pain, and embrace God’s most precious gift to you. Never doubt him, and if for a moment he should doubt you, then shower him anew with your heart’s devotion and hold fast to the certainty, the absolute knowing that this life, this love you share is your means of salvation. You are perfect partners in the soul’s long journey home, and you will both get there — together.”

### **Attunement: Practicing the Presence of Peace**

Once when I was particularly distraught about my sense of conflict with Forrest, I prayed long and deeply, opening myself to whatever guiding wisdom could come through me as I picked up my pen to write. The following words, which I call an “Attunement”, flowed out effortlessly, without any thought:

“Be in the moment with love- fully in the moment with love. This will end all pain. Open your heart in every experience so that it embraces without fear. Then you will enfold your past. In the temple of peace I will always be there. And you will always know the right thing to do. No one will be your enemy, because you will have made a true friend of yourself.

Love always finds a way beyond all tears and pain and sorrow. Love is the only way. Peace comes when you feel that love. Don’t be afraid to love with a vast capacity to

forgive. Feel me in the deep pools of your eyes filled with tears. Feel me in your aching body. Feel me in the weight of a heavy heart. I am reminding you ever to love, soothing you with every cool breeze, filling you with my love when you eat. I live within your every noble thought, your every kind and loving deed. If you listen, you will do the right thing always. You will not cause pain or feel pain, and the past will have no more power over you. All pain will be gone from your body.

Lift up your heart to soar above all frailty to the realm of Spirit. A heart focused on me will always be happy. Eyes which behold me can never weep. You are never alone in your struggles. Expand your physical body into mine and be comforted by my presence within and around you. Feel the glow of my light softly illuminating all dark crevices filled with your past bad experiences. Soon you will be empty save for my grace. You will be a vessel of pure love, a worthy container for my work and blessings, an emissary to a world in need. But first, you must purify yourself.

Be guided only by my wisdom. Do not listen to your ego; you have nothing to be ashamed of. All is well. Listen carefully to the silence within you, which is ever filled with my presence. Trust what you learn there. It will enliven you and bring joy into every moment, as if you are a song emanating from my lips, softly touching and soothing all beings. *All* beings.

Such is the human power to transform. But it must always be done through gentleness and kindness, with words that stroke and inspire. I am grateful to speak through you, but I can only do that when your heart is quiet and at peace. Only then can you hear my voice and feel my guidance, strong and true, ever leading you towards your own inner truth and Self-realization. Within you is a vast place of calmness and bliss, a beautiful temple of peace that opens to the sky. Upon the altar there, place the offerings of each day of experiences, no matter what happens. Visualize the altar as being white, as a symbol of your high ideals and intentions. Let it be made from marble, that I may chisel you to my design and make you a worthy instrument of my peace, which is infinite. Blessings will flow beyond anything you can imagine, strengthening you and empowering you like a pillar that reaches up to the heavens. I seek many pillars to construct this temple.

The words of the Great Ones are within you. Let them emerge in their own way and time. They will reach and touch a world that has forgotten the God of small things. I hold

things great *and* small, yet it is the humble gestures that touch me so deeply: the forgiveness of unkindness, the setting aside of anger, the patience with ignorance.

Remember, peace is the way of the soul. Accept all in the spirit of peace, as it is given to you. These experiences are all my gifts with which to teach you. May you be filled with the sweet fragrance of my presence, refreshing you and guiding your every thought. Come and go in peace. Breathe in my peace. Give it to all.”

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Excerpts from forthcoming book: **Islands of Grace: Creating Sanctuary in Daily Life**. By Dr. Christopher Forrest McDowell and Tricia Clark-McDowell