

WASHINGTON ETHICAL SOCIETY

Sunday Platform Address

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"WHY LOVE FAILS"

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The WASHINGTON ETHICAL SOCIETY is a humanist educational and religious community of people who come together seeking to improve the quality of human relationships in their lives and in the world.

Through our Sunday meetings, children's Sunday assembly, high school, adult school, service projects, and other programs we seek clarification of the purpose of life and principles to live by.

We affirm human worth and dignity, and trust that people have the capacity to create an ethical society.

Platform Addresses are held each Sunday at 11:00 a.m. All are welcome.

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WHY LOVE FAILS

Our local bookstore promises to feed our hunger for intimacy with a feast of recipe books for making love. The titles whet the appetite and the chapters prescribe the ingredients. Yet, despite high hopes, love often fails to rise or jell. Instead it becomes soft and runny at the edges.

Fundamentalists preach that liberals and humanists have damaged familial love and endangered American society by ignoring traditional values. Liberals and humanists understandably duck the blame. They prefer to be free from the oppression of authoritarian communities which enforce the old values at the cost of human suffering, repression, and dishonesty. Between these polar positions lie some important questions about how love works and what family practices and values best serve individuals and society.

The high divorce rate may not indicate a deterioration of old values. It may represent the higher standards that individuals are setting for the quality of their love relationships. The responsibility for ethics, shifting for centuries from the community to individuals, has now been taken from church, family, state, and neighbors and placed on the shoulders of each citizen.

This new burden was not borne by earlier generations who were trained from youth to approximate a community standard which was not confused by the myriad of choices we face today. Therefore, many married and single people experience pain and uncertainty about love relations on a scale never before known. People who yearn for more love than they have yet created in their lives become modern pioneers embarking on an ethical expedition in search of a love that provides deeper spiritual and emotional intimacy.

Obviously love fails for many different reasons. But underlying all the specific reasons, love fails when couples do not recognize that relationships must be built, stage by stage, like carpenters raising a house a section at a time.

When people choose to build a relationship, they confront different challenges in each phase. When the conditions of each stage are ignored, problems clutter the relationship like so many dirty dishes. Struggle and emptiness overshadow feelings of love. When the challenges are met, the relationship provides the benefits of the next stage. Each of the four basic stages can be descriptively named: Being Alone, Falling in Love/Symbiosis, Power Struggle, and No-Fault.

The existence of these four stages has not been verified experimentally. They were conceived while working with individuals and couples and observing the pattern of relationships over many years. Furthermore, when couples were given this model during times of pain and chaos, they seemed to overcome their sense of hopelessness and return to the task of building their relationship.

If this theoretical model seems true in your experience, perhaps it will be of service to you.

Stage 1: Being Alone

The ability to live alone is a very significant achievement for a human being. At its best, being alone is the ability to be autonomous. Its negative dimension is the inability to relate to other people. Aloneness can become isolation and loneliness; autonomy can become alienation.

Frogs abandon their polliwogs before they even hatch, but humans need intense caring from conception through adolescence. Infants have no consciousness of themselves as separate beings. They must learn to distinguish reality from the imaginary. A young child cannot distinguish what is in her mind from what is in her room. Lying in her dark bedroom at night, she imagines a monster, but she believes it actually prowls her room.

Children gradually learn to distinguish between themselves and others, between reality and imagination. Over time, they learn: "These are my thoughts; these are my feelings; these are my choices. They are inside of me and not even my parents know them. They are mine." While a child learns to control her body, feelings, and will, she also learns through experimentation that she can sometimes control or influence other people. Once she decides what she can and cannot do, she begins to have an identity, a sense of who she is.

Once these so-called "ego boundaries" define identity, a human being needs additional verification. In youth identity exists while living in an environment that is established by someone else. We know who we are in our parents' environment or in school. We may know who we are at work. But who are we when we are alone?

Until I have the experience of being alone, I cannot be fully certain of who I am. I need to sit in my own place, choose my own furniture, create my own atmosphere and level of neatness and messiness, organize my life, and find out what kind of friends I choose and what kind of entertainment I prefer. Being alone is an essential first step in building a good relationship.

At some point, though, living alone ceases to develop autonomy and turns into isolation and alienation. We have now built a life for ourselves and can look around and see what it is. But can we be ourselves when living with another person? Do we have the strength to say yes or no? Do we dare risk anger and rejection? Can we give and can we surrender? Do we have the courage to ask for what we want when we are living in an environment that is co-created with someone else?

The limitations of remaining in Stage 1 are illustrated by a story about a hermit. In 1291 the Holy Roman Empire was in great peril. For centuries, popes without any armies had upheld the rule of the Church by very clever political maneuvering. But now kings who were building nations, wealth, and armies were increasingly challenging the authority of the Pope and the Holy Roman Empire.

When the Cardinals met in July 1291, they needed the strongest Pope they could find, because it would be his task to save the Holy Roman Empire. They selected Pope Celestine V, who was known as the most holy man of their day. He had spent his life alone in the wilderness, avoiding all vices. He had sacrificed and prayed to God his whole life.

As his first act, the new Pope built within the Vatican a small, windowless room into which he moved. The Cardinals soon realized that they had chosen a recluse for their Pope who had no education or experience in civilization whatsoever. He was a mountain child who could not relate to kings, peers, or servants. By December 1291, the Cardinals had gained his resignation and elected a new Pope. Celestine knew who he was alone in the wilderness, but not when he had to relate with other people.

Stage 1 reflects a paradox in human nature. Human beings are self-contained, separate individuals. No one has our genes. We each have our own thoughts, feelings, and dreams, but the scope of an individual does not end at the skin. The ability to express feelings comes from living with sensitive people who express feelings. The ability to reason emerges by engaging with a mind that reasons. The ability to make choices develops from living with someone who also makes choices. Rubbing against another person develops us and makes us strong.

Stage 2: Falling in Love/Symbiosis

People need people to develop. In the first stage, one experiences a yearning for relationship. Aloneness becomes loneliness, autonomy becomes isolation, and a natural desire arises

for somebody we can care about and who will care about us. This yearning to belong supplies the energy we need to search for somebody to love. Spontaneously we open our environment and our ego boundaries to make room for a significant other person.

Stage 2 is falling in love. Ecstasy, hopefulness, and exuberance abound, and life looks rosier. Suddenly we drop the ego boundaries, which have defined us but also isolated us. We are willing to try new things because we are infused by the personality of the other person. Everything we do matters because somebody matters to us and we matter to somebody. Every moment is a new experience. We discover old things for the first time together. We cease being separate, alone, alienated.

Two people join together to become one. Thereby each partner becomes half a person. It feels wonderful to be half a person, because someone else is taking responsibility for the other half. Obviously, despite the honeymoon feeling, special problems arise in Stage 2 because "falling in love" is also symbiotic. Symbiosis occurs when two organisms supply basic needs for each other in such a way that neither can live separately.

The experience of falling in love should never be denigrated. It serves like a booster rocket to get the relationship off the ground. The unconditional love now and forever will nourish the union. The honeymoon should be enjoyed as long as it lasts.

When it ends, there is a choice to make. Does it mean this was the wrong person and this is how it ends? Issues and problems continue to pile up. Should we continue?

Honeymoon love exists between two people who know each other relatively little, even though they think they know each other to the core. The abundance of new love occurs not only because we open our hearts to this person, but also because we experience our own capacity to love, which is itself limitless and wonderful.

In addition we fall in love with our perception of who the other person might be. In fact we do not yet know who they are or what they are going to be like so our bliss has no bounds in reality.

After a time, we experience the other person in a variety of situations and get to know them. Some of what we get to know we will find very difficult to love. This is because we are attracted to a person partly for what we have in common and partly for some very different qualities that the other person contributes. But a large part of us falls in love with our own projection of the other.

At first our new partner appears to fill a very desirable

role in our lives. We each cast our special person differently, depending on our own needs and desires. But each of us has our own favorite drama for which we audition a leading man or leading lady.

Here are some examples: Perhaps I have been a workaholic and need someone to laugh with, to play with, to give me pleasure, and to turn me on. Or perhaps I can enjoy myself but do not feel good about myself. I need to be with somebody who is successful, who can reassure me. Or maybe I want to feel taken care of and need somebody who needs to be needed. Or maybe I am placating and like to be with people who are a little more rash and rebellious.

Whatever the specific drama: "The rocks in my head will fit the holes in yours."

In the symbiotic union, it appears that these missing parts of oneself are now the responsibility of the other person--for example--"I've contracted with her to turn me on or, instead, to keep my life organized."

Pause for a moment to be with your own thoughts. Focus particularly on a special person in your life. When you think of this person, what do you want to be given? Notice practical things as a clue to a deeper kind of nurturing that you may expect.

When I do receive this kind of nurturing, I feel especially important, almost as if some great force supports me. Whatever darkness exists melts away, and the future seems warm with sunlight.

But there is an opposite reality, because along with the illusion that the other person is supplying extra nurturance, daily life reveals another truth.

We begin to discover areas of conflict. I like order while she is messy. Her bedroom eyes shine less brightly amid her dirty clothes strewn around our room. At bedtime she wants sex, but I feel tired. I need help with my job, but she needs to talk about hers. Her directness and honesty with people embarrasses me and angers my friends. I shop for price while she looks for quality. I like to sit down for supper, but she eats on the run. I like to win arguments, but she hates to be wrong.

In the privacy of one's deepest being comes a sickening realization: This beloved is not the one. Our desires, tastes, prejudices, timing, and needs are all different. What a mistake!

Stage 3: The Power Struggle

The symbiotic honeymoon is over. Now true love has a chance

to begin. But first we face Stage 3, for the power struggle starts. We think perhaps we can save the relationship and recreate the honeymoon.

"I'll train her, teach her, force her if I must, but she's going to be the person I want. If she would change in just these few ways, I would really feel good about this relationship again."

The power struggle to force the other to give us what we are missing deploys two weapons: fear of abandonment and fear of engulfment. Abandonment and engulfment are fears that correspond to two fundamental human needs -- to belong and to be autonomous. People need to belong, to love and be loved, and to be included in a relationship. At the same time, people need to be autonomous and separate, to act individually, to be able to say yes and no, and to be conscious of making their own choices.

During the power struggle we try to force the other person to play a certain role by threatening them. We do this by threatening their need to belong by abandonment or their need for autonomy by engulfment. Since everybody has these two basic needs, they also have these two vulnerabilities that can be worked on in a million creative ways.

All of the abandoning strategies say, "I'll cut you off if you don't give me my way."

Threatening violence or actual violence is the most primitive abandoning strategy. One does not experience belonging to someone while beating or threatening to beat them.

In another abandonment strategy you can treat the other person as irrational, childish, insane. "I claim reason and sanity; you should see a therapist." Or abandonment can be in the form of emotional or physical withholding.

All abandoning strategies say, "I'm going to cut you off; I don't need you as much as you need me. I'm going to withdraw from this relationship if I don't get my way."

Engulfers have their own strategies which say, "I'm going to tie you down so tight you're not going to be able to breathe without permission. I'm going to tie you down so you can get loose a little only by giving me my way. I'll sell you your freedom."

The engulfing strategies can rely on dependency: "I just can't do it myself; you come and do it. I just can't."

Conversely engulfers may embroil others in organization:

"You know that belongs in the cupboard on the second shelf on the lefthand side. I don't see why you can't put your things away. You can't even keep house without me."

Engulfers also threaten with demanding needs. "I have a lot of needs; I need you, and I need you a lot. I need. I need a lot, a lot, a lot. I need all of your attention. And maybe that won't be enough. I need."

Another engulfment strategy is hysterical emotions. "I just can't handle it. It drives me crazy. I can't do it anymore."

But the ultimate weapon of engulfers is guiltmongering. "My feelings are so hurt. How can you do that to me?"

As withholding is the ultimate weapon of abandoners, guilt is the nuclear bomb of engulfers.

A power struggle follows a basic pattern. You should be able to chart most of your struggles from this pattern. We will discuss three or four moves, and you can decide whether you customarily take the position of an abandoner or an engulfer.

The abandoner demands, though it may not seem like a demand. But it is a demand because there is an enforcement behind it which says, "If I don't get it, I'm going to start undermining our sense of belonging and our confidence in the relationship a little bit. I'm going to threaten some things or start withholding emotionally a little." Or, "I'm going to start eroding your self-confidence so you really worry about what I think of you."

"Somehow I'm going to shake the foundations of this relationship if you don't give me what I want," says the abandoner.

In the power struggle, the engulfer responds by placating, by giving in to what the abandoner wants. But she carefully keeps track of grievances to be flung back later when she will have the edge. After he starts enjoying the relationship that he has created by forcing her to sacrifice for him, she will retaliate by reminding him of how much he owes her.

She threatens his autonomy by demanding that he reciprocate immediately by playing the role she expects of him. She has him indebted whether he wants to give or not. "I do these things for you; don't you owe me? You always have time for other things, for other people; you never have enough time for me."

Or she may say, "Can't you show more sexual interest?" Or it is the reverse, "Why are you always interested in sex?" It can go

either way. The basic question is, "What kind of man are you, anyway?"

The engulfer induces guilt: "If you loved me, you'd do what I want, as I do for you."

As abandonment terrified the woman (in this example), engulfment now terrifies the man (in this example). He does feel some real guilt, because he did coerce her by preying on her fear of abandonment. He gives in, but feels suffocated. He believes that this may be the beginning of total surrender. He will be engulfed and never free again.

Before long he asserts himself by threatening to abandon again. "If you don't stop demanding and making me feel guilty all the time, I'm going to leave you. You're just too needy, too crazy, too irrational to live with. That's why I can't give more to this relationship." He shakes the foundations again.

The woman, who wants to belong, will placate again. But as before, she accrues more debts and ammunition. She makes a list. She now knows his deficiencies which she can use sharply and cleverly, like so many poisoned darts.

For many, the power struggle lasts a lifetime. Others may choose divorce.

With divorce, aloneness and the yearning of Stage 1 returns, and again this may lead to falling in love/symbiosis. Once again when the power struggle stage is reached there awaits a lesson to learn. Increasingly, people are taking time to study Stage 3 to learn how to escape the vicious cycle and transcend the power struggle barrier to no-fault love.

Stage 3 begins to wane when we recognize the reasons why we do not give up the power struggle. Each partner derives particular benefits from the struggle. If we look carefully and honestly at our power struggles, we might find our attachments to it.

The polarization of the power struggle creates an experience within the relationship that "I am separate; I'm isolated."

You know you are separate when you are fighting, and when you act selfishly it seems all right: "I'm angry at her, she deserves it anyway." The polarization justifies being insensitive to the other person's feelings and wants and paying more attention to your own.

There is a feeling of safety in not being intimately connected but living parallel lives for a while. Although the need for autonomy here is real, it is being exaggerated until it becomes polarization and isolation.

While isolated we deny our needs and desires for belonging. When we are close to somebody, we begin to pay attention to our needs and feelings.

But in the power struggle, we keep our defenses up. We are emotionally combat-ready, so our needs and vulnerabilities do not flow out so easily. The softer feelings are put aside while the accumulated cruelty and grievances are finally unleashed.

As painful as it might be, you are embroiled in a great drama, driven by a cause. You become strangely obsessed with each other. Attention and energy fly between you with a new intensity,

The high energy and aliveness can be perversely rewarding. To retain the benefits of the struggle, our unconscious minds will keep recreating the power struggle, unless we use the conscious mind to create a better option. Is the high energy and attention possible without acting out the cruelty?

Stage 4: No-Fault

The no-fault relationship, Stage 4, begins with a significant change in perspective about the nature of relationships. We first must renew our faith that joy, pleasure, tenderness, and love are possible.

Such a relationship is not born, it must be built. In the previous stages partners expected favors from one another; in Stage 4 they work on a common project called "our relationship."

A relationship is an entity, a thing, a space to inhabit, a series of experiences and agreements within which we choose to live. We build it by including habits from previous relationships, by trial and error, and by remodeling and redecorating as we go.

Painful conflicts signal a need for attention, for building. Problems are not the fault of either person, but result from the ignorance of each of them. Problems are undeveloped parts of us which we bring to the relationship. They are barriers to loving, which we all have in some way. A first step in Stage 4 is to identify these barriers.

Both partners' job is to create a relationship in which they

help each other to dissolve their individual barriers. The constructive stance is: "My responsibility is to dissolve my barriers, and I need and want your help."

For most of my marriage I took responsibility for my wife's barriers and said, "I'm going to free you of your barriers by chopping them down one at a time." She was always defensive.

When each of us takes responsibility for our own barriers and asks the other for help, the barriers come down much more rapidly, because defensiveness is replaced by cooperation.

When I start to engage in a power struggle by abandoning or engulfing, I now choose to step back from the strong feelings and contempt and view them as a signal of something deeper. It is like throwing a switch in my consciousness. I suddenly back up for a larger perspective of who we are and how our marriage has been. What is our relationship like, and what are we doing right now having this mean screaming fight?

I have to ask: "What's the whole picture?" To fight so desperately and strongly must mean that I also have a very strong, unmet need. Power tactics are a cry for help--a poor, hard to understand cry for help, but a cry for help all the same.

When I can identify my need and ask for it without attacking because it has not already been satisfied, I have a better chance of getting it met.

Pause again, reader, to be with your own thoughts and feelings. Again bring to mind someone who is important to you, but this time imagine your biggest complaint. Within this complaint you can find what you want.

Translate the complaint into a request for what you want. Imagine yourself negotiating, perhaps demanding at first, but then really asking for what you want.

This procedure of stepping back from the attachment and energy of the power struggle, discovering the complaint, and translating it into a want puts us into a Stage 4 relationship.

Conclusion

Each of the four stages carries a specific challenge. Stage 1 challenges us to be independent, self-responsible, and autonomous without becoming isolated or denying our loneliness, because our

loneliness is our yearning for relationship. We need to recognize in Stage 1 that the ability to relate to another takes practice, like anything else. True autonomy comes when we learn to say no as well as yes, and to ask for what we want while sharing our life with another.

Stage 2 is a joyful merging, but people who lean on each other have difficulty standing alone. In time resentments build up, for no one can make up for our underdeveloped parts or climb over our inner barriers to loving.

The abandonment and engulfment struggles of Stage 3 are signs that we are feeling our deeper needs strongly and are ready for a no-fault relationship where those needs can be met.

To build a no-fault relationship, we need to encourage each other to walk alone, on our own two feet, while trusting that although either of us could walk away, we will not.

Instead we can remain related even while saying no to each other. We ask for what we want, or even fight, and still keep everything within the relationship. We do not use our unmet needs as a justification for threatening to abandon our partner.

The necessary lesson of Stage 4 is that we can allow each other to be truly autonomous while staying connected. We can give each other permission and support for real autonomy, rather than retreating into isolation and polarization.

Beneath our daily routines, beneath our dramatic struggles, beneath our needs, there exists in each of us a person who wants to love and to be loved. Each person needs to feel both autonomy and belonging or else becomes defensive and cruel. Love resides behind the personality and all barriers. Seeing and feeling this inner being deep within yourself and your partner is the aim of loving.

THANK YOU, THANK YOU!

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