# The Valued Relationship

# For any enterprise its important to now where you are going, where you want to be going, what you want, how you are doing –– in other words to have some sense of direction.

# This notion of reflecting on what you want and aspire to in a relationship led one of the founders of modern relationship therapy - Harville Hendrix - to help couples by developing a relationship vision - an agreed understanding of what they wanted from a relationship.

# The relationship vision is a good way to provide a sense of a common purpose. But its important not to be too vague about the goals – like to be happy, to have a successful marriage. Its easy to state the lofty goals and then just hope that it will turn out right.

# A much more useful base for a relationship is to decide what you want your relationship to look like.

# One of the most common questions I ask people who come and see me is – what was it like growing up in your home? What did it feel like?

# What was the kind of atmosphere between your Mum and Dad.

# It’s very interesting that everyone can answer this question and of course what kind of answers do you think are quite common:

# What of course you would like to provide for your children is a home that they could report on many years later as being – what – loving - caring – supportive – generous.

# These are values – values are more important than visions because they provide a guide to what you can do right now and keep on doing. Its more important to know the qualities and characteristics of the relationship you want to be part of than have a grand vision. So the values become the vision and the vision becomes the values, and just as it is important for individuals to define their own values – the person they wish to be so it is important a couple define their values and work together top create the relationship they want to be a p[art of.

# Its important to know what you want and what you care about in a relationship and it’s important to share this vision and come to an agreement about what you want your relationship to look like and be characterized by. This vision provides the essential first boundary for your relationship.

# An expressed and shared relationship vision is a beautiful thing – it focuses the couple on working as a team and is an essential guide at times of conflict. One of the key exercises I get couples to do is to work out together the things they want their relationship to be about – what would, in their eyes be a successful and meaningful relationship. By working together to define these characteristics the couple align their individual aspirations into a shared dream.

# The relationship vision also connects with the work of that other great leader in the field of relationship therapy - John Gottman who has looked into the basic elements of successful relationships. These could be seen as core relationship values.

# So lets take a look at some of the core elements of what’s needed and what works to build healthy and sustainable relationships.

# Respect

# Respect might sound a bit odd in the context of a love relationship but it is a vital building block. It is important to remember that an adult love relationship is not a replication of a mother-son or father-daughter relationship. For some people the emotional intimacy of a relationship triggers feelings of comfort that resembles something of their earlier family relationships, what happens then is they begin to act like children – for example we all know about “mummy’s boy” or “daddy’s little princess” when this posture or attitude is channeled into the way a partner might behave with their spouse it can spell disaster. Some traditional family arrangements encourage participants to be submissive or dominant. Some encourage, usually unconsciously, a man and woman to relate like a parent or a child would. This arrangement robs the love relationship of its potential and the individuals involved of their chance to grow.

# So its always good to remember that a healthy adult relationship should have an “adult to adult” feel about it – that doesn’t mean you can’t be playful and coy but it does mean that at a fundamental level you treat your partner with at least as much respect as you would show to a professional work colleague or friend. It also means taking responsibility for our part in the relationship and sharing the responsibility for the relationship as a whole. This is what is sometimes called the equal power relationship.

# When there is respect in a relationship both parties can feel safe and know that there is a secure basis for working things out when there is conflict and difficulty. It provides a safe haven. So while maintaining an attitude or practice of respect the associated feelings are safety and maturity.

# But if respect was all there was to a relationship we might have a functional business partnership but little else – for an effective relationship more is needed – and it starts with an attitude of positivity to your partner.

# Fondness

# Fondness is like liking but the word “like” is a bit like “happiness” – lets face it - it comes and goes. It is a bit like the mood or the weather and you wouldn’t want to base a relationship on that. Fondness means that you adopt a posture of seeing the positives in the other and cherishing those and not focusing on the negatives. Of course you must like the other person but you can also choose to build on this basic attraction by turning towards those aspects of your partner you really like rather than accentuating the parts you object to.

The feeling you have when the other is practicing “fondness” is that you are being appreciated and negative aspects are not highlighted – we are supported to look at these in our own way. Its not the job of our partner to cajole us to perfection.

This brings us to one of the great hurdles in our relationships – the desire of one partner to make the other into the one they want. This project is fatally flawed and is one of the biggest sources of relationship conflict and breakdown. **Your partner is not your project**. Whilst most would agree to this, many people have a critical voice in their head that constantly finds fault with themselves and it is very easy to then transpose this to the behavior of the partner. Indeed the partner can become a convenient scapegoat for ills not only of the relationship but for the critical partner as well. This often leads to a series of controlling behaviors. At its most extreme is what we call violence. Interestingly the term “violence” is now being used to describe a whole range of non physical behaviors such as emotional abuse, verbal abuse, psychological abuse etc. This is not surprising as they all share the common psychological element: the attempt by one party to control or coerce the other to do what they want. It is the desire to control, the belief that it is acceptable or necessary to control and the conclusion that control is a solution that does the most damage and this desire, belief and conclusion needs to be confronted. The boundary here is to take responsibility for your own behaviour but not your partner’s. A healthy relationship depends on two people who are individuals relating. If one partner gives up their individuality they can no longer relate.

Often people in relationships are not aware that they are being controlled or controlling. I often give out a little questionnaire that tests out the key elements of the controlling relationship and this can often be a revelation. Getting beyond control, subjugation to the equal power relationship is a key issue in relationship therapy because relationship that involves **coercion or control** is unhealthy and stifles growth.

When one party tries to take the choice away from the other person by controlling them they are violating the first rule of all relationships – it is a matter of choice. Some people have developed the belief that they can dominate and direct the other party and maybe even that it is right to do this. Mostly people get these wrong ideas from the families they grew up in – maybe they watched their mother or father abuse and control their partner and so they think this is OK – or even normal. But most people I see who had controlling parents hate the thought that they could be ending up doing the same thing but often don’t know how to stop it. They can change but they need to create their own model of a healthy relationship and not fall back into repeating what their parents did.

# So fondness and appreciation signal the right approach – they reflect the belief that the other party is actually their own person who can be appreciated for what they are, not molded to what you want. This belief also leads us to the next stage of really trying to understand this complex and strange being who is our partner. And it is this quality of really trying to understand the other person that sets us up for the final stages of successful relationship.

# Attention

# Being appreciated by your partner is great but life’s complexities often need more than a general attitude of goodwill. We also need to be understood.

# For this we need to express and work through a whole range of complex emotions and thoughts and responses of others and ourselves. It is often quite messy. Life often serves us up things we didn’t ask for and do not want. It is in how we respond to these unwanted challenges that we build our strength and indeed ourselves. For this we need, or can certainly benefit from, the support of a loving partner. And what can this partner do to provide such support. When problems arise one of the most natural things in the world is to offer solutions. Things we could do to fix the problems.

# Sometimes this is actually helpful but often it is not and actually gets in the way. If the solution was fairly obvious we would likely be able to work that out ourselves. The more complex problems of life, such as dealing with a difficult relative, or managing a delicate work situation have no simple and obvious solutions.

# The most valuable gift of a loving partner at this stage is to be there fully with us, to attend to us, to hold us with full and complete attention to hear our feelings and hold them with us. This loving caring attention is a sublime gift that lets us know that we are not alone and although the problem might be hard they are with us all the way. It can be quite transformative. We feel understood.

# Admiration

# Once we are able to really be with our partner through life’s difficult terrain we might start noticing that we really are starting to know them in much greater complexity. We know more about them than anyone else and as we get to really know them with an attitude of respect, fondness we find that we admire them. Knowing the particular challenges and difficulties brings out their hidden demons but also their hidden strengths. When we see it all we can truly appreciate and value their world and their effort within it. The experience of the partner being held in this way is a profound sense of being valued – or loved.

# Love – that much over used word – why did it take so long to emerge? Isn’t love what drives the whole show? Of course. Love is the common thread if you like from the falling in love stage right through to the greater love achieved after all the falling out of love, the power battles and so on. There is not time here to go into the theory of love and its growth, but in the way described here for a vital relationship love is one of the key driving forces or imperatives that bring it altogether and keep driving it forward – it could be thought of as a key dimension or axis of the relationship pyramid.

# The other key dimension is “trust” If what we have talked about so far could be thought of as building blocks, then trust would be the mortar that holds it all together. Trust is the continuing expression of faith in the relationship as a suitable vehicle to hold us. Trust is needed at every level, and if trust is lost the building starts to fall apart or can not get beyond the very basic stage. Trust is built by continually proving to you partner that he or she is safe with you. The notion of holding the sensitivities and vulnerabilities of the other is the key here. For this means that you have created a special place, some might even say sacred space where a privileged relationship has been created. It is important to understand the boundary implications of this. Most would understand this means an exclusive physical relationship. And we all know that being physical with someone else amounts to unfaithfulness. However a common problem for many men is understanding how the boundary also includes emotional material. A common problem is a man who shares himself emotionally with another woman and thinks because they did not have sex there is no problem. Women typically see the relationship in terms of both physical and emotional intimacy, whereas men miss the importance of the emotional intimacy, hence relationship therapists see many couples dealing with the fall out of the emotional affair. The point here is to get a clear vision of the intimacy boundary incorporating both physical and emotional dimensions.

# A third axis of the relationship pyramid is friendship. Although it sounds incongruous when talking about a love relationship, basic friendship or good will is fundamental to enliven a relationship. Of course you want to be more than just good friends but that attitude of friendship, goodwill and camaraderie helps boost you through a lot of difficult times and helps build the joy in the relationship which is fundamental to a healthy relationship.

# When trust and appreciation are in place you will feel your relationship to be like a positive friendship. Obviously it is much more than a friendship but that quality of friendship where you feel like you are part of team and your partner “is on your side” is definitely there. From all this you can start to build your dreams and aspirations and support each other in your positive life journeys appreciating both the individuals within that vision as well as the union.

Friendship, like fondness and a belief in the relationship, all provide the basic intention to make the relationship work, to make the relationship grow and thrive. This belief and this attitude means you build up a “repository of good will” or what one other relationship expert calls the “love bank” – it is this repository that allows you to get through conflicts and difficulties. To say to your partner ”maybe you’re right” even if you think he or she is not technically right but needs to feel like he/she is right today. Being able to give way on little points and be generous wherever possible will be noticed by your partner and essentially represents a huge deposit into the love bank. Then in future difficult times you have lots of capital to draw on. Gottman call’s this “positive sentiment over-ride” actually its not a bad description because its kind of like an anti-skid device on a car it can stop a conflict turning into a crash. The ability to always be looking for a positive solution that works for you and your partner. As parents we are given a wonderful opportunity to see what love looks like because we do everything we can to support our little ones. Whilst we should not treat our partner as a child we may wonder how we can be so supportive and generous to our children whilst at the same time so critical of our partner.

And in the Endeavour to build a positive vehicle to support and nurture the growth of you and your family there are three “boundaries” of discipline to observe that will guide you in the right direction.

The first we discussed concerns the ultimate goal or direction – knowing what it is you want, what you intend and what you are striving for is the first and most important guide.

Second we discussed the important attitude that we take to our partner of a true partner and not a child, a project or a someone to be merely tolerated, so this is coming to the relationship with respect for the other as an equal partner.

The third discipline we discussed is to choose to focus on what is productive for the relationship and not necessarily what is in our own self interest. The relationship is not about a competition of needs or wants but a place where we build a reservoir of calm, safety and support and so by focusing on what we can give we slowly and sequentially build a strong relationship which will indeed support us to grow as giving and generous people.

# So to sum up. A healthy relationship builds on love, trust and friendship It does this through an attitude of respect which creates safety. On this basic experience of safety and attitude of fondness cerates appreciation leading to being understood and valued. Through all this two people are able to bring their best selves forward and help each other become better people which is the ultimate sign of a successful relationship –

# *In the journey for a better us I become a better me.*