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The Space Between

A 4 part series on the Art of Confrontation

Part 1: The Elephant in the Room

It has long been my conviction that the space between people, in any relationship, is best kept clean and clear - in other words, no real upset left to languor; unspoken, unattended and potentially toxic. This is a tall demand and takes a high degree of self-awareness, determination and a heartfelt willingness to confront - a dirty word in most people's mind.

Confrontation is mostly viewed as something to be avoided at all costs. We tend to believe that if we just leave the issue alone, it will go away, take care of itself - denial becomes our best friend, convincing us that everything is fine.

The challenge is when everything is NOT fine and an unsettling issue continues to reside in your heart and mind, creating tension in the relationship and potential long-term damage. This creates a pile of toxic waste in the space between you and the other person - and each unaddressed issue adds more toxic waste to the pile and dis-ease ensues. After awhile, the pile is so big that to have a conversation you have to peer around or over the pile, holding your nose (because of the stench), pretending it isn't there - it's exhausting. The potential for meaningful conversation becomes remote and the possibility of break-up or break-down is almost guaranteed.

Sounds awful, doesn't it?

The alternative? Muster up the courage to confront - not out of wanting to be right, make the other person wrong, seek revenge, do damage of any kind - rather out of deep caring for the quality of this relationship in your life and a heartfelt devotion to being true to your Self and honest in your life.

Meaningful confrontation is an art form - it is a journey toward a mutual truth. Very rarely do we start out knowing the reality of any situation; we embark together with an intention to arrive at a place of mutual reverence and respect for each other and the relationship. And the only way to gain this skill is to be willing to fumble through a few confrontations, learn, grow, practice and improve.



Part 2: In Preparation

Skillful confrontation is a vital aspect of every healthy relationship - it is one of the ways we gain depth, clarity and intimacy. Without it, relationships can blow up or fizzle out. To engage in skillful confrontation requires a delicate balance of self-reflection, accountability, open-ended inquiry and a heartfelt desire to care for the relationship, no matter what. That's really what it's all about - caring enough to fight for a healthy, meaningful, thoughtful relationship.

And, not every annoying quirk or foible is worthy of confrontation. It's helpful to appreciate the individual differences in how each person approaches life - loading the dishwasher, music preferences, driving habits, toilet seat position, hairstyle . . . you get the idea. These are just the everyday ways that each of us expresses our very unique way of being in the world - they are NOT deal breakers (unless you are total control freak!). Too much confrontation can be as detrimental as too little.

If you are in the midst of experiencing an issue that lingers, festering beneath the surface, felt but not spoken - then it is time to consider having a caring, meaningful, open discussion with the other person or people.

To prepare:

- Be willing to feel your feelings all the way through, let them wash through you, noticing the intensity and the endurance. If you feel angry, hurt, vengeful, betrayed, sad - let all of the feelings have some time with you. They cannot do any harm as long as you consciously witness, without judgment.
- What is your part of the equation? There is no 50/50 in a relationship, there is only 100/100. Be open to your 100% of the situation. Again, not as a source of blame or judgment - only as an inquiry into your contribution.
- Talk to people who are going to help you find a way to resolve rather than exacerbate the conflict. Be wary of getting people on your side, enlisting them in how right you are and how wrong the other person is - it is rarely a matter of right and wrong but more a matter of trying to understand.
- Remember that you care about the quality of this relationship - otherwise you wouldn't be taking the time, effort and energy to have a conversation. If you have made a monster of this person, see if you can soften the edges and remember they are human - they may have made a mistake, not handled something very well, been careless . . . human.
- Let go of thinking you know how that person will react and what the final outcome will be. Approach the confrontation with curiosity and an open mind. You may be pleasantly surprised or unpleasantly shocked. Be prepared for any outcome, allow for all possibilities.

Part 3: Now is the Time

You've pondered, reflected, felt and now it is time to try your hand at a meaningful, conscious, respectful confrontation. Here is to how to proceed:

Approach the person in a way that is respectful of time and place. State your issue(s) clearly and without blame. Here is a good way to begin the conversation: "I would like to talk with you about something that has been bothering me. I'd like to start by giving you my version of the situation and then I'd like to hear yours." With this statement, you are not claiming that your version of reality is the only reality; rather, you are immediately acknowledging that there may be another way to look at things. You are conveying a willingness to see things differently and to be in an open ended inquiry.

Once you have said what you have to say - and keep this initial statement brief; listen carefully. Let go of any need to immediately respond or defend your version of reality and see if you can really hear what happened for them in the situation. Turn on all of your capacity to be empathetic and really stand in their shoes. See it from their point of view and assess how you may have contributed to the misunderstanding. Were you careless, insensitive, unconscious? This does not mean that they didn't play a part; it just means that you are taking your 100% responsibility and letting that lead you to the next question or statement.

It is important to be in the rhythm of the confrontation (YES - confrontation has a rhythm!) There is an ebb and a flow to this process - there is a time to stand firm and a time to yield; a time to push forward and a time to step back; a time to be forceful and a time to be soft; a time to be adamant and a time to accommodate.

The key is to be in the process of arriving at the truth . And that takes a fierce commitment to being open, honest, self-reflective and vulnerable. When both people are working to find common ground and understanding, the confrontation resolves with ease and grace - even if it takes several encounters to really settle the issue.

There is something quite beautiful about mutually seeking to push beyond the edges of understanding into the deeper realms of true relationship where you can break new ground, find greater depth, grow beyond the current status and forge new bonds.

And, of course, it's not always so easy. Sometimes the other person is not available for a conversation, won't take responsibility, is full of blame, can't hear you, doesn't think there is a problem, is abusive to you, makes excuses, simply lacks the capacity - the list is endless. These encounters are, clearly, much more difficult to maneuver and don't always end in any kind of resolution.

Indeed, I thought this would be the last installment in this particular series, but I think it is important to address how to handle the more difficult confrontations. So, once again, stay tuned for the final (no promises) installment of the essential art of confrontation.

Part 4: And In the End

I have covered the concepts, the preparation and rules of engagement for a meaningful confrontation - what if, despite your efforts, the issue lingers, the tension remains and there is no way to clear up the space between you and the other person?

There are times when the other person simply will not enter into a loving, productive, caring encounter. It takes an open heart, a receptive mind, the confidence to honestly take a look at your 100% and the capacity to move beyond right/wrong and into the truth. This is NOT how everyone operates. Many people want to be right no matter what, lack the capacity to self-reflect, can't get beyond their own anger or hurt in order to participate, and, and and . . .

When it is clear that there is no equitable and meaningful resolution, it is time to let go. Not easy, may not be what you want to do, yet it may be the best thing for the relationship. There is wisdom in letting go and realizing there is nothing more you can do and it is best not to beat the subject to death. You may remain connected to this person, but perhaps not as close. You may feel more guarded and there may be a break in the bond but it is not completely severed. There may be opportunity down the road to find your way through the uneasiness and take another go at caring for the relationship.

Another way of letting go is to simply agree to disagree - there are times when there is no mutually agreed upon truth. The acknowledgement that there is a difference is healthy and often not a deal-breaker. The relationship remains intact with no residual tension.

And there are times when the inability to come to resolution is a deal-breaker and it is in the best interest of everyone for the relationship to end. Sometimes confrontation leads you to the realization that the relationship is no longer supportive, is not what it once was, has outlived its value in your life and it is time to end it. Confrontation gives you access to the feelings that have been below the surface and leads you into a more authentic and honest place with yourself and the other person. Sometimes a relationship is over long before it actually ends - confrontation is the gift that brings you into right relationship, even if that means the end.

Whether confrontation brings you closer, creates distance, strains the connection, deepens your rapport or severs the bond - when it is handled with integrity, responsibility, love and an intention toward the highest good for all concerned - it is an informative, healthy and very meaningful way to get real with yourself and the relationships in your life.

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