Relationship Reflections

We form relationships of all kinds to satisfy our needs for love, companionship, security, recreation, financial stability and so on. If these relationships are primarily harmonious; provide a feeling of well-being and are easy to maintain, they worthy of continued involvement.

Occasionally however you may find yourself involved with others who bring you stress, discomfort and even misery. You stay involved and keep coming back; trying to manage, control and endure for the sake of the relationship itself. If you learn to see relationships as the mirrors that they are, revealing where you need to grow, you can discover much about yourself.

Most everyone we are involved with in our lives is a mirror for us in certain ways. All of our relationships – our families, children, friends, co-workers, neighbors and of course romantic partners – reflect part of us back to us. Often how we feel with someone is usually an indication of how we feel with the parts of us that they mirror.

Generally we find that the easiest people to get along with are those who reflect aspects of ourselves we are aware of and comfortable with. These are usually people we seek out and are drawn to in everyday friendship. The people in our lives who make us uncomfortable, who annoy us or with who we feel judgmental or even combative toward, often reflect a part of ourselves that we find uncomfortable and try to disown.

We all invite people into our lives who represent qualities opposite to the ones we are most identified with. In other words they reflect our disowned selves, and we mirror theirs. These are often the most emotionally charged relationships. We either love or hate them, or often times both, we feel attracted to them and/or uncomfortable, judgmental, annoyed or frustrated. The stronger the feelings, the more important the mirror they are for us. They are showing us something that we need to understand in ourselves.

In the movie “Jerry McGuire” Tom Cruise’s character is struggling with his vulnerable and emotionally available love interest because he is uncomfortable with his own emotional needs for intimacy. When he finally recognizes and accepts this, he goes to her and says the classic line…”You complete me”, which is his way of recognizing and accepting a part of him previously disavowed.

We are usually not consciously aware our relational attempts to become complete, whole and integrated. Since it is particularly difficult to look inside of ourselves to see what we’re unaware of, our relationships can be one of the most valuable sources of information in our lives. This does not mean that we need to hold onto harmful or inappropriate relationships. It means as long as they are in our lives, or as in the case of past relationships, in our thoughts and feelings, we can use the relationship as a learning experience.
For example, if you are rigidly identify with strength and self-sufficiency out of a fear of being vulnerable, you may be attracted to vulnerable people that you perceive as “too needy”. The mirror is reflecting your need to recognize and accept your own vulnerability.

Conversely, if you identify with being so loving and accepting that you are often taken advantage of, you may find yourself in a relationship with a domineering person who exploits this side of you. Leaving you feeling controlled or victimized until you learn to acknowledge and accept your own assertiveness at which point that relationship will either become more equal or dissolve.

These are cases of opposites attracting one another. Unconsciously seeking someone who represents that disavowed aspect in them self in an effort to become whole. The challenge is to be open to that part of them self they are being shown and learn to accept and express those parts appropriately their lives.

Sometimes difficulties in a relationship mirror a part of yourself you need to heal. An example may be a family member, close friend or co-worker who is experiencing grief or loss which you find intolerable because it is stirring up some unresolved grief / loss within you.  It is a gift and opportunity to recognize this and once identified, might enable you to be more willing to listen and empathize with their experience.

The topic of relationships is a complex subject. In my practice, I see a lot of people who are dealing with a pattern of hurt and conflict in relationships past and present. Over time we are able to use our therapy relationship as a kind of “relationship laboratory” to discover and address the pattern, to gain perspective, understanding and resolution. If you are willing to entertain the idea that relationships reflect the steps you need to take in your personal growth, you can begin to use them as a powerful guide on your path to more harmonious interactions with others.

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