

UNDERSTANDING RELATIONSHIPS FROM AN IMAGO PERSPECTIVE

By Laura Marshall, LCSW (May, 2013)

Why do fools (and everyone else) fall in love?

We are attracted to people who remind us, often on a deep, perhaps unconscious way, of those who were most important to us as we grew up. Usually we choose people who combine both the best and the worst qualities of our parents. Thus we unconsciously recreate for ourselves the familiar love environments of our childhood. Unfortunately it's human nature after a while to be most aware of those aspects of our relationships that are difficult or dissatisfying.

For example, Anna grew up in a family in which her mother was often sick and unavailable. Her father worked two jobs to make ends meet and wasn't home much. Anna learned quite early to be self-sufficient. She married Derek, a smart and ambitious engineer. She was attracted to his intelligence, ambition and sense of humor. Here at last she thought is someone who will take care of me. Unfortunately Derek often had to work long hours, recreating Anna's early experience of abandonment. Perhaps Anna even made the experience of estrangement worse by being irritable and withdrawn when Derek did finally come home from work.

We are also attracted to people who possess our "lost selves". These are the qualities that we learned as children were unacceptable such as anger, assertiveness, sexuality, vulnerability, etc. Lost qualities can also be positive. Often as children we are told that we are lacking in some essential way - we are not pretty, smart, attractive, talented, athletic, and so on. At a deep level we all long to be whole. We are therefore attracted to people who possess the very qualities we think we lack (hence the saying "opposites attract.") Derek, who was shamed as a child for being needy and sensitive, was attracted to Anna's vulnerability and ability to talk about feelings. Now however, he is beginning to feel trapped and irritated by her constant demands for attention. "Why" he asks himself "doesn't she understand how much pressure I'm under?"

Why do couples fight about some issues and not about others?

Different issues will be *hot* for different couples. Couples tend to fight when their sense of safety and security is in some way threatened. When we feel unsafe our "old brain" takes over to protect us. The "old brain" is the part of the brain that is in charge of the survival of the organism (us) and it will do whatever is necessary

(including fighting viciously) in order to keep us safe. When do we feel unsafe? We feel unsafe when core issues such as feeling securely attached to others, feeling competent, feeling seen, heard nurtured and loved, and being in control of our own choices get triggered. When Anna feels (perhaps inaccurately) that Derek is pulling away from her she panics. It feels just like when she was in school and her parents could never come to her school play. From this place of panic she will do everything she can to pull him back including nagging, manipulating, complaining and criticizing. Unfortunately none of this works, making the situation even worse. Derek on the other hand experienced his father as very demanding and his mother as always being on his case. "She had to know where I was, who I was with, every damn thing I did." When Anna demands that he spend more time with her he feels criticized and crowded - and the battle is on.

Are all relationships doomed? Is there any way to break this vicious cycle?

Breaking the cycle is very simple, and also perhaps the hardest (and most rewarding) work you will ever do. The first step is to make a firm commitment to yourself to do everything you can to make your relationship a safe one to live in. **DO THIS REGARDLESS OF WHETHER YOUR PARTNER IS WILLING TO MAKE A SIMILAR COMMITMENT.** By enhancing safety you reduce the likelihood that either of you will resort to attack, withdrawal, manipulation, etc. (see below for tips on creating safety in relationships). The second step is to work on becoming conscious of what your core issues are. Notice when you become upset. Ask yourself whether the current issue reminds you of a childhood experience or early trauma. Try to be aware of the ebb and flow of your feelings and to practice communicating them gently to your partner. "Intentional Dialogue" (described below) is a very effective way of talking about these difficult issues. When Anna was able to describe to Derek how lonely and frightened she felt as a child having to take care of herself, Derek switched from irritation to compassion. He asked what he could do to help, even though he still needed to work long hours. Anna asked if he could call her in the evenings to remind her of his love. She also thought that a "date night" once a week might be a good idea. Derek was happy to put these simple changes into effect, and was amazed at the impact they had. Anna and Derek both occasionally still panic. Now, however, they know that if they talk about what is happening they are actually able to use these moments to enhance their emotional connection.