

From the Kitchen

14 March 2012



Why can it be so difficult to relate to another person in a consistently positive way? On the other hand, what makes it possible for a man and a woman to stay together after the first flush of lust borne of the urge to procreate? Is the lust between individuals in a gay coupling borne of the same urge?

The difficulty in continuing to relate may come from the ways in which a partner reminds one of past events, often from childhood. The reminder may not be at a conscious level – we easily and automatically react to something said or done (or left unsaid or un-done) and we are thrown back mentally and emotionally to a similar or identical occurrence in our past. We lash out before we even know what we're doing. Or we freeze or retreat.

I have quoted Liz Greene before: “We are fated to the extent that we are unconscious”¹. She, in turn, may have been quoting someone like Jung. It is the unknown unknown that can dictate how we respond to the words and behaviour of others. To make it more interesting, we are often attracted to someone as a partner who reminds us (usually unconsciously) of a significant figure from our childhood – and thus we so often set up the circumstances that allow us to play out the childhood traumas, again and again.

This human tendency ensures employment to legions of therapists and royalties for thousands of authors of self-help and psychology books and may ensure the survival of publishers.

There are models of the human psyche that acknowledge this propensity to react in the present to unresolved events from the past – many of them talk of an individual embodying both an adult and a child, often along with many other possible aspects of being: teacher, acolyte, tyrant, crone, etc. There are many pathways offered to an understanding of what makes us who we are and as many tools for dealing with this complexity in a way that may lead to more of it coming into consciousness, thus reducing the unplanned and unwanted reactions to (often) innocent behaviour of a partner.

Not *always* innocent, though. We can form habits of speech, behaviour and omissions that bring a particular reaction from a partner and lead to a corresponding sense of satisfaction or righteousness in us; or lead to corresponding anger or bewilderment in us, although, at an unconscious level, these may *not* be unexpected.

It is quite remarkable that so many of us do stay in relationships for as long as we do, because the repeated action/reaction duet can grow progressively harder to cope with. In many cases, people become comfortable with such a duet, becoming co-dependent and mutually collusive in perpetuating the behaviour.

The truism that a relationship needs continual work to keep it healthy and vibrant is based on these dynamics. To avoid falling into stifling co-dependency or other unhealthy situations, two people need to be brave and honest enough to keep examining their part in whatever is happening, looking for what has so far remained undiscovered or suppressed. There are no easy remedies when the past *is* uncovered and named, although this in itself can go a long way to mending.

This gives an interesting perspective on the concept of past and present. There are many things from our past that inform our present. Another way of looking at this is that all our experiences are in the present and those we perceive as being past are our presently remembering past events or experiences. Our ‘automatic’ reactions to what another person says or does may seem to be ‘out of the past’, but they are very much in the present.

This gives a clue about how to deal with these ‘past’ things – ‘bring’ them into the present. We cannot change the past in any meaningful way; however, we *can* choose how we act in the present. Thus, if we find a reaction seemingly coming upon us from the ‘past’, we can learn to step aside from that. We can also accept that who we are now, to a large extent comes from our past experiences. However, the people and places that taught us to be a particular way are, in most cases, no longer around to exert their influence. The only way to change our past-driven reactions is to deal with them in the present. This is one of the secrets to keeping a relationship healthy and dynamic and worth being a part of.

1. see *From the Kitchen* [#114](#); [#76](#); [#65](#)