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By Wendy Copeland

A Tale of Two Trees: Separate and Connected in Relationship

For at least 10 years now, I have spotted a card in the “Anniversary section” of the greeting card aisle in a well-known card store. On the front of the card is a picture of two trees, intertwined. The card goes on to tell the story of two different trees that grow up together in the forest. Each tree is unique and distinct in every way. Yet as they grow over the years, they become intertwined with one another. The author praises the anniversary couple, likening them to the two trees: a couple consisting of two unique individuals, yet exclusively intertwined.

My original reaction to this card was a bit cynical. After all, have you ever seen two different species of trees intertwined together? Perhaps I could imagine a vine wrapped around a tree, instead of two trees. But the vine situation would not imply health in any way – this would more likely resemble suffocation! Two different types of trees, intertwined, would be unusual at best. Unnatural is a word that comes to mind more readily. Is it somewhat unnatural for two different people to become so closely connected that they resemble two trees intertwined? How do they avoid suffocating one another? Squeezing the life and uniqueness right out of one another?

In my thinking, two solid trees intertwined might suggest that two separate realities exist yet co-exist. I am me...you are you...and we are one. Now that brings on new levels of confusion. In the initial phase of romantic relationship, couples seem to fairly easily exchange ideas and perspectives, without fear or discomfort. They experience connection and a sense of oneness. They often magnify their similarities, and seem relatively undisturbed by their differences. They savor togetherness, seemingly one with each another.

Yet if they stay together long enough, conflicts arise and they grow painfully aware of their differing perspectives and views of reality. What initially felt blissfully unified is now experienced as jolting, annoying, and even threatening. Sound familiar? Have you ever felt annoyed, or even threatened, when your partner sees a situation in a manner significantly different than your own? When your partner has such a differing opinion, do you ever feel charged, irritated, critical, or sarcastic? Have you ever felt like you need to put down someone who has a different take on the world than yourself? If you say yes to any of these questions, you are officially human. You also might be a bit self-absorbed!

For this discussion, self-absorbed can be defined as making decisions or judgments based on your personal perspective, from your world-view. My judgment of the anniversary card is an example of self-absorption on display: I judged the “worthiness” of the anniversary card based on my own personal perspective. Being self-absorbed is part of the human condition. It can serve in critical decision-making, helping us look out for ourselves and our needs. However, self-absorption can also be divisive and contribute to the undoing of our most intimate relationships.

In previous articles, we talked about childhood and how we learn how to survive. We were self-absorbed as infants, children, and most certainly as teenagers. Self-absorption was a developmental necessity – that is, self-absorption helped us focus on meeting our needs so that we could survive and grow up. Being self-absorbed is normal. The only problem with self-absorption is that it can also make us argumentative, critical, and hard to live with. Know any teenagers like this? Some people affectionately call teenagers pre-beings! In relationship, we can sometimes act like pre-beings. We can be extremely self-absorbed.

As adults, we have a new developmental need: to become more aware. That is, more aware of others, of how to be in relationship with others, and how to contribute and function in a larger community. Having an understanding that my perspective is only one among many grants me some measure of awareness.

Let's look at what was going on with the anniversary card and me. Initially, my self-focus produced a judgment. But awareness permitted me to understand that the creator of the card and many others might hold an opinion different from mine. Awareness is essential to healthy relationships and a key ingredient to in being a couple. I am me...you are you...we are one...and one more important detail. I am not "The One." We are two individuals capable of unity but not exact sameness. You don't have to be just like me. I don't have to be just like you. And the best news is we don't have to destroy one another to have unity. We can co-exist.

Hmm...maybe that anniversary card with the two trees is on to something. In relationship, having sameness with your partner can create a sense of safety: "we are so much alike... he knows what I need and vice versa...he can almost finish my sentences for me." And what do couples say when they are in conflict and feeling unsafe? "He is so different from me! I don't know how we ever got attracted to one another! What was I thinking?"

"Sameness" is like an elusive oasis in the world of relationship. It always seems to elude us – just out of our reach after the initial attraction. As real-world pain sets in, we tend to become self-absorbed. We still want to be one, and to feel unified. But for some reason our partner is no longer cooperating. Most likely, they are in pain too. They might also be self-absorbed.

In the crisis of it all, we might think that if our partner could adopt our understanding of reality (like a good clone), then we might feel safer again. Then we might return to some predictability. We view our relationship and its dysfunction from the center of our sense of self, and through the reverberations of self-pain. "If she would just do this, then I wouldn't feel this way..." We become self-absorbed, and that self-absorption separates us. It produces a loss of empathy (or understanding) for the other. Sadly, self-absorption can become an unyielding source of blame. So pain can lead to self-focus, self-absorption. When pain enters, it pulls attention away from others and back to self. When we become self-absorbed, we lose empathy for others.

For example, imagine that you and your partner are enjoying a beautiful walk on a sandy beach at sunset. The waves are lapping gently over your bare feet, and you are sharing a pleasant time of connection. You take in the sound of ocean tide and taste the fine-misted, perfectly salty air. You are exchanging loving words of tenderness and affection as the sky beholds a wondrous display of violet, red, pink, orange, and hazy gold. Your inner being is joyful and at peace . . . you feel connected. Then, unexpectedly, you step on a washed-up stingray. Your foot fires up in excruciating pain. The nerve endings in your foot scream at you, and you feel nauseous from the intensity of the pain. At that moment you become completely self-absorbed. Nothing really matters except finding relief and relieving the pain. Your lover's words are no longer melodic. In fact, their voice is irritating and as they lamely attempt to calm you down. You lash out in frustration, "Can't you see how much pain I'm in? If you can't see that I'm in real pain, then you can go on without me. I'm stopping here!" You are no longer connected. You are in pain.

When pain enters the scene, the world seems to shrink. Nothing matters

so much as alleviating the pain. Your perspective becomes the only valid perspective at that moment and your empathy for others escapes you. You return to self, and away from others. Self-absorption is a human relationship dilemma. Marriages struggle to hold up under the duress of two self-absorbed partners. Self-absorption is often a part of ourselves we do not readily see. In fact, we typically deny it. Our loved ones and partners are often the ones to point out our blind spots – to call us to awareness. Awareness in relationship surfaces when we begin to grasp that our reality looks and feels differently than our partner’s reality. Awareness creates the possibility for growth. Awareness can prompt us to pause, turn our focus to our partner, and genuinely inquire. How do we inquire and become more aware of our partner’s reality so that we can reconnect? One way is through dialogue.

Dialogue, in relationships, is a specific communication tool to help two partners connect on a deeper level of understanding. This kind of dialogue is not a script that bounces back and forth between two characters, as in a play or movie. Dialogue in relationship is an interactive, structured way of communicating. You cannot watch dialogue. You *participate* in dialogue.

When you dialogue with your partner, you suspend your opinion long enough to understand your partner’s perspective. You are aware that your partner has a different reality than you, and the dialogue provides a means to grasp their world. Dialogue honors your partner’s differences, setting aside your opinion in order to hear and understand. ***It is making room in your world for another.*** When you do so, your partner becomes a full-fledged human being again, without fear of annihilation or abandonment. Dialogue is a way to step out of self-absorption and into a vehicle that moves you toward respect, understanding, and empathy. This vehicle goes beyond you and your partner, to a place of shared understanding.

Dialogue Steps

There are three key steps regarding dialogue. Each step moves you deeper into connection and empathy. In order to begin a dialogue, make an appointment by checking with your partner, “Are you available? Is now okay?” One person will then send a message, and the other will receive the message.

The receiver has three key tasks: first, ***mirror*** your partner. Mirroring is a way to verbalize that you heard your partner. Mirroring develops your empathy for your partner and their *content* (or what they are saying). “So what I hear you saying is....” Mirror your partner after a few sentences so that you can keep up with the content. Second, ***validate*** what your partner is saying. Validation is not agreement. You can validate someone with whom you totally disagree. Validation simply means that you can imagine from another’s perspective how they could think that way. Validation develops empathy for your partner’s *thinking*. “I follow what you are saying. Your viewpoint is as valid as mine...and what makes sense to me about that is...” Lastly, ***empathize*** with your partner. Empathizing develops a felt understanding of your partner’s *feelings*. You can truly imagine what your partner’s experience might feel like – to walk a mile in their shoes. You can stretch and say, “I imagine you might feel (hurt, angry, frustrated, afraid, embarrassed, etc.)...”

Dialogue is hard work. It takes you out of your self-absorption and brings you back to a place of empathy and the potential to reconnect. Dialogue requires intentionality on your part – to purposely seek connection with your partner. You move beyond fear and self-protection to a safe place of shared understanding and empathy.

Two trees, separate, yet intertwined. I can see it now...



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