

Allure Article – for Sunday, July 2009

A Priceless Gift: Honesty

If I am hurting you in some way but you aren't telling me what you think or how you feel, how can I adjust my behavior? I am not a mind-reader. In fact, I don't think I've met anyone yet who is. Since we know people can't read our minds, why do we assume that they can figure out how we feel by our subtle (or exaggerated) indirect messages? You know what I mean... sighing, rolling of the eyes, stoic silence or on the other hand, sarcastic remarks, cursing, yelling or stomping out.

Such ways of communicating are all too common in marriage. Have you ever heard this: "He should know how I feel! I shouldn't have to explain to him the ways he continually hurts me" or "My wife should understand me and stop bothering me. I shouldn't have to tell her again." Expecting people to comprehend unexpressed thoughts and feelings is a recipe for conflict and eventual disaster.

A client* of mine had been married for five years. After her first child was born, she began feeling uneasy. It seemed that her husband went out many evenings and often came home late. She began checking his cell phone and noticed phone numbers unfamiliar to her. When his phone rang in her presence, he would glance at the number before answering and either let the call go or leave the room. She suspected that he was seeing someone. Rather than addressing her fears honestly, she held her growing anguish inside. She continued her "covert operations." At night, she would position herself on the bed as far from him as she could, hoping he would pull her to him. When that didn't happen, she would cry silently.

Her husband saw her distress. But he was unsure how to deal with it. He feared telling his wife that he felt overlooked now that their child had arrived. He desired to grow their relationship but feared she would dismiss his suggestions. Gradually, he allowed the disconnection to increase and began looking elsewhere for support. In their emotional isolation, he could not see that she wanted to support him. Both were unreachable because they feared the other's reaction. Their decision to remain silent widened the growing chasm between them.

Interestingly, both were expressing their disappointment to friends and family members. Yet, neither would admit their hurt to the other. They were living together pretending nothing was wrong. Each felt the sadness of living a lie. Lips remained sealed as bitterness increased and anger built. The silence they thought could prevent conflict actually fueled their hostility. Eventually verbal violence erupted. There is wisdom in the old adage, "The truth is violated by falsehood but outraged by silence."

Withholding honesty to avoid conflict leads to relationship disintegration. The distress we want to avoid pervades the atmosphere—And, it is felt by all, even children, whether it is spoken or not. The longer honesty is withheld, the worse the outcome tends to be. Unquestioned assumptions are nursed. Higher and thicker walls are constructed. Interactions that once brought joy begin to produce dread.

It is not necessary to go down this road of misery. Honesty can lead to more pleasant and productive relationships. This holds true not just for marriage partners but for friends and co-workers.

I spent years as a manager in the corporate world. One of the most difficult duties I had was to keep employees who worked for me informed about the acceptability of their performance. It was easy to praise outstanding performers. But dealing with those whose work needed improvement was more

challenging. I had to learn to give balanced feedback, including their strengths as well as their weaknesses. Approaching another only to criticize can be demoralizing. As I learned to value all my employees and truly desire their success, being honest became easier. Now in my work with life coaching clients (and with my husband, children and friends) I am practicing the same communication skills. Honesty is best given in the context of loving connection. At times I picture myself as a nurse gently supporting a patient as I clean out and medicate a wound.

All of us have the ability to sense tension. We know when something needs to be addressed. Often we ignore this intuition because we don't want to uncover and deal with the issues.

One reason for this avoidance is our fear of disapproval. We think, "I better not say anything. What if I am wrong? I may upset them. They'll think I'm prying. If I'm honest I may lose this friendship."

When we hide our truth we are denying others a precious gift. Given with sincere intention for good, honesty can stimulate healthy growth in our relationships.

Here are some practical ways to offer the gift of honesty.

1. Dip the arrow of truth in honey. Then point it at the issue not the individual. Sharing honestly doesn't mean attacking personally. Simply offer your perspective. Don't accuse. Express your concerns; then be willing to listen to what the other person has to say. The kinder the approach, the better the result. As you speak, acknowledge the good you see.
2. Give the truth in regular doses. When we don't make truth a natural habit, pressure builds. A desire to express what is in your heart is a creative urge. Repressed creative urges lead to inappropriate, hurtful expression such as cutting cynicism or cruel judgments. Words of wisdom throughout the ages remind us not to let anger fester. Leaving things unsaid for another day leads to greater conflict and deeper difficulty. As Elvis once said, "Truth is like the sun. You can shut it out for a time, but it ain't goin' away." Use the sun of truth to warm and nurture a relationship, not burn it.
3. Honesty opens the door to further honesty. Be prepared to hear another perspective and welcome it. Let your honesty foster healthy dialogue. Gandhi put it well, "Honest disagreement is often a good sign of progress." Making room to express and acknowledge differences helps us become better people. It also increases our ability to develop enduring relationships.
4. Expressing truth kindly is an art that requires practice. If you are afraid of telling someone how you feel, you could start by writing it down or doing a role play with a friend to practice. When you are ready to speak your truth, take a few deep breaths. It's okay to let your friend or spouse know, "It's hard for me to say this..." Be vulnerable. Be patient with yourself and your partner as you grow your skills.

Your assignment this week is to choose one concern that you've kept inside that needs to be expressed. Open to Wisdom. When the opportunity arises, allow yourself to speak. If it feels right, drop me an email or drop me a note on Facebook or Twitter. I'd love to know how it goes.

Food For Thought

"Do you love the truth more than you need to be loved, or do you need to be loved more than you love the truth? Can you find what is true for you and share it with sensitivity? Learning how to do that is the path

that each of us is on. No one can get off the path. That path is your life. The only question is how long you will walk on the path before you realize where it is leading you, and appreciate what is on it.”

Gary Zukav

*Please note: Identities of all clients mentioned are changed sufficiently to ensure their privacy.

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Patricia Omoqui is an internationally recognized inspirational speaker, life coach and writer. Patricia’s mission in life is to inspire people to move beyond fear so they can reach their full potential.

To share your thoughts about this article, please email Patricia at allure@patriciaomoqui.com or visit her at her website: www.patriciaomoqui.com.