

Chapter 9

Commitment



*To be or not to be may be the question,
But the answer is commitment.*

-Stanley Phillips

Well, that leaves us with one last ingredient that goes into the making of great relationships with the people who matter most. The *C* word—*commitment*.

Have you ever seen the look in someone's eyes when you use the word commitment?

It has become a cliché in American culture to point out the odd responses, the brittle nature of people faced with the prospect of commitment.

Let's see if I can demystify the idea for you.

A solid, committed relationship can be one of the most fantastic experiences possible. It can exist between friends, lovers, even co-workers. Commitment from someone else sometimes means that you can stop measuring your words and be yourself. You can express your thoughts and feelings clearly.

Commitment is the glue that holds our relationships together. It is the choice of courageously becoming involved and staying involved. But more than just involvement, commitment is the choice to create relationships that are open in which both people do honor to the relationship by acting responsibly towards each other and themselves.

If you stop and think about it, commitment is not a thing, it is an action. Commitment is a conscious choice to act. To act in a specific way, to act towards a specific direction. The act is a simple act. It is an act of honor, an act of consideration. Honoring your partner. Always considering the well-being of the relationship.

Commitment is forging a path that we remain true to. A path in which we shun the tools of blame and shame. A path in which we shed the toxic influences of our self-centeredness and irresponsibility.

Indeed, commitment is a space that exists within each and every one of us. A space from which we create our journey in an honorable fashion.

A journey in which we create a path of acceptance rather than condemnation.

A journey in which we create a path of responsibility and integrity rather than momentary self-gratification.

A journey in which we create a path of personal freedom rather than domination and control.

A journey in which we create a path of openness and self-expression rather than hiding our true selves from each other.

A journey in which we create a path of understanding and tolerance rather than judgment and scorn.

Ultimately, commitment is a choice. A choice of connection or a choice of avoidance. You see commitment is a choice to hang around through the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Sadly enough, all too many people avoid points of pain in a relationship that become too sensitive. Yet, it is staying connected to the painful, challenging parts of who we are and what our relationships are that give our relationships new life and rejuvenation.

In college, I had a roommate who's name was Bill. He was a great guy. He was outgoing and happy for all of the world to see. He was perceived as carefree by almost everyone I knew.

The strange thing about being Bill's roommate was that he had bad dreams. And when I say he had bad dreams, I mean really bad dreams. Almost every night after he would go to sleep, he would sit up in his bed and gasp for breath as he jolted out of a nightmare.

We talked about it often, but, there never seemed to be a pattern in the dreams. I know that he eventually went to see a therapist, but by then, I had lost touch with him.

Years later, I saw Bill at a party and asked him how he was feeling.

“Good, Steve, thanks for asking,” he said.

“I hope you sleep better now,” I said.

“I sleep great now. You know, that’s the most amazing thing.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I know you are a professional Psych kind of guy now, so you probably know this stuff. But I found out in therapy that a lot of the bad dreams came from me not letting anybody see me for who I really was. I wasn’t honest with myself and I couldn’t be really honest with other people.”

“What do you think that has to do with sleeping?” I asked.

“I couldn’t live with myself like that. I was always afraid if I looked honestly at myself, I would be abandoned or something. There was this part of myself that I never wanted to see. I thought if I looked at the part of me that was dishonest, for example, that it would hurt me. So I never looked at that part. I bottled it up and judged myself for it. I was a mess.”

“I understand what you mean,” I said. “You thought if you couldn’t tolerate parts of yourself, then no one else could.”

“Yea, I think so. Because of that, I never found the ability to sustain a relationship until then.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yea, I couldn’t commit to being with someone else until I found that I could commit to myself.”

Commitment in any relationship is an active choice. I once asked a friend, a woman I respect deeply, to tell me what her understanding of commitment was.

“Steve,” she began speaking gracefully, “such a thing is not the end point between two people. Commitment is not something that you arrive at as a result of a great journey. It is an active choice you and your partner make every day.

“Neither may persuade the other to make the decision, it must come of their own free will. And for most of the world, it is never discussed on a day to day level. Lovers feel it, friends understand it, partners, well, they simply live it. But my dear boy, you need to realize that commitment is not a destination, it is the journey.”

She paused and looked back at me and said, “One more thing, Steve. Commitment is only possible when you know who you are. You must know your needs and desires, you must know yourself. Commitment is the act of waking up every day and meeting the other person face to face. And I quote a great writer when I ask you, ‘How can we meet someone face to face until we have faces?’”

She was right, we wake up each morning and find ourselves ready to do the best that we can that day. In the end, that is the embodiment of what commitment looks like on a day-to-day basis—tackling all the aspects of our life head-on rather than running. Running from all the challenges, those very gifts that appear in our lives, eager to teach us an important lesson about ourselves and life.