

P A R T 2

*P*inpointing the Issue



*Since nothing we intend is ever faultless,
and nothing we attempt ever without
error, and nothing we achieve
without some measure of finitude and
fallibility we call humanness,
we are saved by forgiveness.*

-David Augsburger

The Most Important Choice of All



Anybody can become angry—that is easy; but to be angry with the right person, and to the right degree, and at the right time, and for the right purpose, and in the right way—that is not within everybody's power and is not easy.

-Aristotle

Let me caution you as you begin to read the three chapters in this section. They each deserve your undivided attention. Take your time with the information I present to you. Use your highlighter. Write notes in the margins. Do the exercises. But most importantly, take your time. Be patient. Be kind to yourself. Self-forgiveness will be your greatest ally in our new adventure. There's an unfortunate truism about learning, you'll inevitably struggle in the beginning. You and I both expect it to be that way, so there will be no surprises. Every mistake you make along the way will not be an indictment of you or these new skills, only a necessary step to your final destination.

There's good reason to mix caution with your enthusiasm. The skills that I'm going to discuss with you throughout this book are so potent, they're so empowering, your mastery of them will change the tone of your relationships forever. Please, please, don't set yourself up to fail by creating initial expectations that are too high for both you and your partner. This is a time for both of you to be kind to and encouraging of each other.

Okay, with that said, I'm going to talk about a very specific relationship skill that's the bridge between unresolved and resolved conflict. It's the core relationship skill used in the process of making molehills out of mountains. I call it *pinpointing the issue*. Let that sink in for a moment. Don't go rushing into the rest of the material. Try and focus on those three words, *pinpoint-*

ing the issue. In time, this phrase is going to be one of your greatest allies, an ally that will empower you, enabling you to create relationships that are less conflictual, more fulfilling.

Now take your time with the following point I'm about to make. This point is *the* fundamental premise of pinpointing the issue. In order to resolve many of the unresolved issues in your relationships, you must understand what I'm going to tell you next. *Most of the conflict that exists between two people has two levels to it, not just one.*

The first level is the precipitating event of the conflict, which I refer to as the *circumstance*. The second level is the oftentimes unacknowledged aspect of the conflict, which I refer to as the underlying relationship issue. The *underlying relationship issue* is an issue that lies hidden beneath the surface of the event or circumstance that precipitates an argument. The relationship between the circumstance that precipitates the conflict and the underlying relationship issue is like the saying about a wolf dressed in sheep's clothing. The underlying relationship issue is the wolf, it's simply dressed in sheep's clothing—the circumstance, so that it may better hide its presence.

Pinpointing the issue is the relationship skill you will use to resolve conflict by identifying the *two levels* that exist in most of your conflicts. As you're better able to identify these two levels, you'll find that you have a choice about which level to focus on when you try to problem-solve with your partner.

Why, you might be wondering, should you care

whether there are different levels to the conflict you experience with your partner? After all, you might be thinking to yourself, all I'm interested in is being able to watch the TV shows I want to watch, or what's the big deal if I leave the toilet seat up or down, or what does it matter if you squeeze the tube of toothpaste from the middle or the end of the tube.

Here's what's in it for you. Focusing your problem-solving efforts on *both* levels will enable you to more effectively resolve your relationship issues with your partner. This premise is critical to the process of making molehills out of mountains. Until now, it may be that you have only considered the fact that there's only one level while totally ignoring the second level. The very reason so much remains unresolved between you and your partner is because *both* levels of the conflict don't get addressed. Until you address *both* levels of the conflict, it's likely that you'll remain stuck with your partner in a vicious cycle, unable to resolve the core of the problems that are present in your relationship.

Being able to identify, as well as talk about, both levels will lessen the building tensions between you and your partner. It's easy to see why that would be. Inevitably, there are important unresolved relationship issues that lurk beneath the surface of those seemingly petty examples I mentioned above. Relationship issues that are smoldering and festering, patiently waiting for you and your partner to acknowledge their very existence, taking up more and more space in your relationship, the longer you choose to ignore their presence.

Unfortunately, most of us spend all of our time spinning in circles, focusing only on the surface level of the discord.

What you need to understand is that most conflicts that remain unresolved between you and your partner do so because you're focusing solely on the surface level without addressing the issues that lurk beneath the surface.

What I want you to understand at this point in time is the following: *when you and your partner are stuck, when you are repeatedly visiting unresolved issues, it's likely that the issues that you're talking about are not the issues that you need to be talking about.* Quite simply, you need to shift the focus from the circumstances of your conflict to the underlying relationship issues that are hidden in the events that precipitate the conflict.

Let me give you a short, simple example to try and make a complex idea a little more understandable for you. A man continually promises his wife that he'll take their dirty laundry to the dry cleaners. Yet time after time, he *forgets* to take it, leaving it for his totally exasperated wife to take care of. Each time he forgets, she becomes angry with her husband. Time after time they try to create a plan to ensure that the husband will follow through on his promise, time after time he doesn't follow through.

This maddening circle continues. The reason why it never gets resolved is because the husband and wife focus only on *one* level of the conflict, the *circumstance*, which is the problem of how he can get the dry cleaning to the cleaners. However, they completely ignore the second level of the argument which is the *underlying relationship issue*.

Let's take a look at what the *second level* to the conflict might be. If you asked the husband to talk about how he feels about his wife and the relationship, he might say that

he feels like his wife is always on his back. He believes that she never *appreciates* the things that he *does* do for her. In fact, he believes she only focuses on the things that he *doesn't* do.

If you asked the wife what she feels about her husband and the relationship she may tell you that she feels like she is being *taken for granted*. She feels more like an errand boy for her husband rather than his lover. Both husband and wife are feeling unappreciated by each other, but they never take the time to talk to each other about their hurt. They only focus on the dry cleaning, which is the *circumstance*, not the *underlying relationship issue*, which is feeling unappreciated by one another.

What's the big deal, you may be wondering. Let me ask you this, is the dry cleaning the sole issue worthy of this couple's focus or are the relationship issues that I just mentioned likely to be *as important*? Furthermore, if you agree that the most important focus of discussion needs to be on the relationship issues, how likely is it that the dry cleaning problem will go away until they begin to focus on them?

To bring this discussion full circle, experience has taught me the way out of this trap is by mastering the relationship skill: *pinpointing the issue*. This skill will enable you to step out of the cycle of futile arguments, unkept promises, and angry reactions. And the secret to pinpointing the issue, the first necessary step is accepting the fact that there are two levels to most conflicts: the circumstance and the inevitable underlying relationship issues.

Let's take a moment and practice identifying the two levels of conflict by looking at the following scenarios.

Scenario #1



A husband tries to limit the dollar amount his wife spends on her credit card. She shows her husband who the boss is by digging her heels in and refusing to change her spending habits.

The circumstance: Disagreeing over how much money the wife can spend.

The underlying relationship issue: Power and control about who is going to tell who how much money they can or cannot spend.

Scenario #2



A parent criticizes a child for getting one *C* while ignoring the five *As* the child received on their report card. The child responds by getting all *Ds* on their next report card.

The circumstance: The parent harps on the one *C* the child gets on their report card and does not acknowledge the good work the child did in other areas.

The underlying relationship issue: The child feels unappreciated for his overall effort so the child *gets even* by not trying at all.

Scenario #3



A man belittles a woman for her beliefs about abortion.

The circumstance: Two people have an honest disagreement about their views on abortion.

The underlying relationship issue: The man's intolerance leaves the woman feeling judged and unaccepted.

Scenario #4



A man continually threatens to end his relationship with his partner every time an argument occurs between the two of them. His partner begins to resent this man for refusing to have more of a commitment to the relationship. The partner's resentment repeatedly spills over onto the man, perpetuating the arguing and inevitable threats.

The circumstance: The man's reaction to conflict with his partner.

The underlying relationship issue: The partner's unmet emotional need of being able to feel safe without the threat of the man leaving the relationship anytime an argument breaks out.

Focusing on *both* levels of a conflict is a new way to think about more effectively resolving conflict. Think what that would mean to you. Think for a moment what any of your relationships would be like if you had more time and energy to put into nurturing them rather than furiously trying to plug every leak that springs.

Let your imagination run wild for a moment. What would your life look like if you felt more in control of yourself and the way you resolved issues with the people in your life? In my mind, there's only one thing that gets in your way—not effectively applying the relationship skills that will resolve the inevitable conflicts that arise in your life.

Are you beginning to see why it's so important to be able to distinguish between the two levels that exist in most conflict? As I said before, these relationship issues live beneath the surface of the events in your relationship. They oftentimes go unspoken between you and your partner. Because these issues lay beneath the surface, oftentimes unknown to you and your partner, you'll necessarily create a way for the pain caused by those underlying issues to be expressed. The way that they get expressed is a special code. That code inevitably is the misunderstandings and petty arguments that appear and reappear in your relationships.

For now, think of the underlying relationship issues as the emotional *owwies* of your relationship. Sometimes you know that you're hurting, sometimes not. Sometimes you're aware of what you're hurting about, sometimes not. Whatever is true for you, that pain doesn't sit idly by waiting to be noticed.

Pain is energy. Energy that needs to be discharged. Our goal is to discharge it by learning how to talk about it with our partner rather than acting it out against our partner.

I have a saying, "Those feelings that we don't verbalize, we'll act out." If you choose not to verbalize the pain you're feeling from the underlying relationship issue, you'll inevitably choose to express it in behaviors that tend to spark even more discord between you and your partner. It's those circumstances that perpetuate much of the unresolved problems that undermine the well-being of your relationships.

The way out of the cycle of self-sabotage is the skill I mentioned above, pinpointing the issue by addressing *both* levels of the conflict. This relationship skill is so important that I want to recap the process involved with this skill: 1) recognize that there are *two* levels to most relationship discord; 2) distinguish between the two levels which are the specific *circumstance* that precipitated the discord with your partner and the *underlying relationship issue* that is embedded in the event or circumstance; 3) recognize that you have a choice whether to stay stuck in trying to *fix* the never ending *circumstance* or *resolve* the unexpressed *underlying relationship issue*.

That's the process of pinpointing the issue. The next two chapters of this section will focus more specifically on

the circumstance and the underlying relationship issues. In section seven I will walk you through exactly how to pinpoint the issue. I will also suggest some tools to use once you've made the choice to focus on the relationship issue *as well as* the circumstance. But for now let's conclude with a bit of wisdom my good friend Max once told me, "Steve, you can't do the *boot scoot boogie* with your dance partner until you understand what the fiddler is a fiddlin'."

Separating the Wheat from the Chaff



*The latter part of a wise man's life is taken up in
curing the follies, prejudices, and false opinions he
had contracted in the former.*

-Jonathan Swift

Okay. Here's what we've established so far. Making molehills out of mountains is facilitated by a relationship skill called pinpointing the issue. Hopefully, you're beginning to consider that there are two levels to most conflicts between you and your partner. The two levels? The circumstances at the surface of the conflict and the underlying relationship issues beneath the surface. The goal of pinpointing the issue? Making a distinction between these two levels as you try to resolve your conflicts. The reason to do so? To create an important choice for you and your partner to make. The choice? To focus your conflict resolution efforts solely on *fixing* the circumstances of the discord or to focus an equal amount of attention on *resolving* the underlying relationship issue embedded in the event that precipitated the discord.

If it seems to you that I'm repeating myself, you're right, but for a very good reason. I can't impress upon you how powerful this skill can be for you. I want to make sure that you have an opportunity to give it your most careful consideration. What we're trying to do is develop a new habit. The elements of creating that good habit are repetition and time. The payoff for you is less hurt and confusion as you master the formula for untangling the knots that eventually entangle two people.

Okay? So let's continue by zeroing in on the surface level of any discord—the *circumstance* that precipitates the discord. For example, it could be you repeatedly promise to do some household chores, but you never get

around to doing them. Or your partner continually keeps you waiting, no matter how many times you've told them how angry it makes you feel when they're late. Perhaps you're never able to reach agreement about some aspect of how you raise your children.

In these three examples, there's a circumstance that precipitates some level of discord between you and your partner. In the first example, the circumstance is not doing your chores. In the second example, the circumstance is continually standing your partner up. And in the third example, the circumstance is never agreeing on whether your child should play soccer or learn to play the piano. Very simply, disagreements start with some circumstance that arises from the day-to-day life events between you and your partner.

The thing about the event that triggers any conflict is that it often serves as a smoke screen for all that goes unspoken, yet desperately needs to be focused on, between you and your partner. You certainly know how cloudy and confusing things can get in the heat of the moment. But all that really does is sustain the stalemate. Let's see if the following conflict between Laurie and Jamie makes my point. You can be sure that some variation of this dialogue goes on in millions of homes.

"Jamie, you promised you were going to stop drinking," Laurie said.

"I didn't say I would stop. I said I would drink only under certain conditions. That's what you and I agreed to. At least that's the way I remember it," Jamie said, his voice shaking as he spoke.

"You may be right, but you haven't honored any part of what we agreed to. Not only have you not honored our

agreement, I feel like you're throwing it in my face. I feel like you're belittling me," Laurie shouted back.

"Listen, forget all that noise. You haven't given me one reason to be nice to you. You're constantly on my back. You go through my pockets counting my money. You smell my breath when I come home from work every night. You don't think I know about how you've been calling my friends, checking up on me?"

"You're the one to blame here. You aren't giving me the space I need to find my way out of this. How dare you treat me the way you've been treating me! What right do you have to check up on me the way you have been? That's what has to stop around here. The problem isn't when and how much I drink, the problem is you and your unwillingness to give me any space.

"I can quit drinking anytime I want to. You just aren't willing to give me the credit. You're always riding my back. That's what has to stop around here."

"Jamie, whoa, slow down just one second here. I refuse to keep caving in to your bullying tactics. The issue *is* your drinking, it's not my behavior. I have to sneak around because you won't be honest with me."

By now Jamie's eyes were bulging as he said, "So you admit it. You admit that you've been sneaking around, checking up on me."

"Of course I do, but so what. All of this is beside the point," she responded defensively.

"No, it's precisely the point. I'm going to keep drinking until I decide it's time to stop. There are no other points to be made. And you *will* stop checking up on me or else..." his voice trailed off, waving a menacing finger in the air.

That's usually where I enter the picture with a couple. Trying to help undo the stalemate. The mechanism used to sustain the stalemate, you ask? Quite simply, focusing only on fixing the circumstance without attempting to resolve the underlying relationship issue. And believe me, the stalemate doesn't happen by accident. Most importantly, we have to learn what *our investment* is in maintaining the stalemate.

Did I just say, learn what *our investment* in the stalemate is? Absolutely. Now I'm suggesting something very big here. Do not dismiss it without carefully considering how it might be true.

I'm suggesting it's time to think about things differently than perhaps you have in the past. Think this through with me. Why do you spend so much time and energy trying *only* to fix the circumstance, the precipitant of the conflict? Why do you so willingly continue to invest yourself in a process of resolution that brings you everything *but* resolution? Why do you keep spinning in circles, chasing after some magical solution that doesn't exist?

Here's how I look at things. There's nothing that we do, think, or feel that doesn't bring us some kind of emotional benefit. It's critical that you open yourself up to this point. Everything we do provides us some sort of payoff. Therefore, focusing *only* on the circumstance, doing everything you can to fix a person, a problem, or both, while ignoring the underlying relationship issue, has some kind of emotional benefit, some kind of emotional payoff.

I'm sure you must be thinking that I'm off my rocker. Why, oh why, Steve, would I willingly involve myself in so

much pain and frustration, you ask? Yes, I know how frustrating it is to be caught in a vicious cycle of unresolved conflict, but perhaps it's time to consider whether or not you've eagerly agreed to do the dance.

So, don't dismiss my assertion just yet. Think for a moment, what's so attractive about remaining stuck in the quagmire? Here's one thought for you to chew on: the quagmire certainly can become familiar territory. You probably have your part down pat. You may even know the script by heart. And it leaves much about what needs to be talked about by you and your partner safely tucked away, the bomb remains ticking, but left undetonated for another day. For example...

Stanley and I had met at our favorite watering hole a couple of Sundays ago. We hadn't seen each other in a few months, so he was bringing me up to date on his life. We liked getting together to grouse about our frustrations, play some darts, take in a game on the big screen. While waiting for the Cubs to come on, I asked him how things were going with his wife.

"S.O.S., kiddo. Same ol', same ol', man, nothing changes with us," Stanley said, a look of indifference punctuating his response.

"I can't tell if that's good or bad," I replied.

"Ech, who knows any more. There's something heavy hanging in the air between the two of us. Ever since I shot her down a while back, telling her I didn't want to start a family right now. I told you how she got on that kick of hers again, wanting to have children. She's been, I don't know, remote, someway, somehow, I'm not sure how. She's there but not really there. I can't quite put my finger on it, but it's there, you know what I mean?"

Stanley asked, seemingly searching for his own understanding more than trying to explain the situation to me.

"There's this tension between us. I guess more importantly there isn't any lightness anymore. Sometimes there's nothing at all.

"Take tonight for example, I'll go home, she'll halfheartedly yell at me for being out with you. You know how she hates me being with you. She thinks that we're sitting around, ganging up on her. Then I'll tell her how sorry I am. Then she'll tell me that I better never do it again. Then I'll tell her she's right, it won't happen again. Then she'll give me her look of disgust. Then I'll go off and watch TV. She'll shake her head and ignore me until Thursday. I'll stay out of her way, not wanting to turn this into anything heavy. By Saturday, she'll find some other way I've disappointed her and then start the dance all over again."

One, two, cha, cha, cha. Three, four, cha, cha, cha. They've got the dance down pat. Frozen in time, their relationship is sitting on a powder keg, yet neither of them wants to go near it. They settle for indifference, polite apathy, subtle tension, and ever-increasing distance. The reason why? My friend, I suggest to you one reason and one reason only. Fear!

Isn't that what really needs to be overcome? Our fear of what isn't stated? We're so fearful of having to put on the table things that may make us uncomfortable. So we devise ways of dancing around the underlying relationship issue, over it, under it, through it, behind it. We're afraid our emotions will get out of control, we're afraid we'll be ridiculed or, even worse, ignored. Ultimately, we're afraid of the unknown becoming known.

That's why we stay so focused on merely attempting to fix the problem. It's a known quantity. We know the path backwards and forwards. We come up with ingenious ways to rectify problematic behavior. There's a certain seduction in focusing exclusively on the circumstance of an argument.

Although there are many reasons for that, let me advance one more premise that I believe locks two people in a death grip over the circumstances of their disagreements at the expense of focusing on the underlying relationship issue. The ever tantalizing myth—control. Focusing only on fixing the problem is a way to do the dance—the dance of attempting to control someone's behavior, words, feelings, or thoughts. And therein lies the problem. There's no solution that I know of to an underlying relationship issue that includes your ability to *control* your partner's behavior.

That's why trying to fix the circumstance without resolving the underlying issue is so ineffective. The only solution to fixing the circumstance is *dealing with the underlying issue*. But let me ask you, what seems like a more familiar way to problemsolve for you, attempting to control who your partner is, does, says, thinks, and feels or peeling back the scabs of the underlying relationship issue?

Can you see the mirage that the myth of control creates? It's total misdirection. Take some time to think about this. Let your mind wander with my next question. Think about all the time, all the emotional energy, think about all of *you* that you've invested in the following simple proposition. It sounds something like this, "If I fix the problem, if I fix the person, if I can come up with just the

right way of saying what I have to say, then I won't have to feel this continual pain that the circumstances of my relationship creates for me."

Have you ever taken notice just how ineffective this is? Have you ever noticed that any strategy aimed at fixing the problem without resolving the underlying relationship issues is like squeezing a balloon full of water. All you do is slosh the problem around from one side to the other, but the problem never goes away. Push the problem down there, it pops up again over here. Threaten it away, plead for it to go away, or cajole it away, it makes me no-never-mind, because it will transform itself into a more virulent reincarnation.

The reason by now should be plain. Any attempts at controlling the person or the situation is not dealing with the root of the problem—the underlying relationship issue.

If you read my book *Building Better Bridges*, you know that I devoted a whole chapter to personal freedom and the destructive influence that control exerts on the emotional climate of our relationships. I have a Bridge-Builder's Tip in the chapter that reads, *If you place demands on a person to change, can you see how you will require that person to lie to you?* Please heed this tip as you find yourself trapped in trying to fix the circumstance of an argument rather than resolve the underlying relationship issue.

I want to advance one more reason the circumstance of an argument is a much safer place to focus on rather than the underlying relationship issue. It freezes the relationship in time. Nothing changes. Everything stays the same.

Now I can hear you shouting at me. I can hear your protests. Why would I want this mess to stay the same?

problems that you're dealing with in your life. I understand how confusing it can get for you when things that are so black and white in this book aren't so black and white in your life.

But please be assured that if you take your time with this information, you'll discover what I've discovered over the last ten years. You'll discover what we're building together is not a mere understanding of a self-help technique, but a blueprint for your path to reclaiming your personal power and a means by which you can return a sense of stability to your life.

Where There's Smoke There's Fire



If the core of conflict between two people is denied or suppressed, the relationship itself will become sick, whether it be subtle or obvious, sooner or later, the relationship will always suffer when the core of the conflict goes unacknowledged.

-Stanley Phillips

I hope it's becoming clear that there's a different way to think about the conflict that exists between you and your partner. And as that shift begins to take place within, can you see the possibilities that come with this new way of thinking about the dance that you and your partner do with each other?

Therein lies the key—being open to what's possible for you by simply readjusting your focus from the surface event to the underlying relationship issue. Let me remind you that the skills discussed throughout this book are the means by which you can transform your relationships. However, the most important derivative of mastering these skills, first and foremost, is developing a better understanding of yourself.

Now I hear those gears churning. Why, pray tell, is it so important for me to have a better understanding of myself, you may be thinking? After all, so much of the conflict between me and my partner would be alleviated if my partner would simply act differently. However, if you accept that much of the conflict that exists in your relationship is about the underlying relationship issues rather than the mere circumstance, then it's important that you begin to understand yourself better.

Self-knowledge is the prescription I write for anybody who's seeking to create significant shifts in their relationships. Do you clearly understand what your fears about emotional intimacy are? Do you understand how your emotional discomfort shows up in your relationship? Is that discomfort even acknowledged by you? Does it get

expressed? If it gets expressed, is it verbalized or acted out? Can you see the path I'm suggesting in order to effectively make molehills out of mountains?

Let me first tell you what the path is not. The process of making molehills out of mountains is not making your partner out to be wrong. Blaming and shaming merely fuels the fire rather than puts it out. Are you ready to surrender your unwillingness to take responsibility for your words and deeds? That's a prerequisite for all of this work. If you truly want to learn how to resolve your differences, you no longer get to go through life being an *expert* on everybody but yourself.

Do you get what I mean by being an expert on everybody but yourself? Is there anybody reading this book that doesn't spend an inordinate amount of time *explaining* their partner to their partner? What a wonderful way to pass the time. The only question I have is, are you getting any closer to understanding yourself as you spend most of your time in your partner's head? I have never, ever, not once seen anything good come from one person getting into another person's head. But let me tell you what I have seen work time after time.

Focusing on yourself. Knowing yourself. Knowing how your issues, your *craziness*, gets provoked and ultimately activated in your relationships. Do you know what fears you have about connecting with another human being? Do you know what essential truths about who you are are at the core of the chaos that you create? Do you know enough about who you are to express that to your partner rather than act it out?

You see, we're back to that choice thing again. Making molehills out of mountains is a series of choices.

Choosing to know yourself. Choosing to stay out of your partner's head. Choosing to talk about your fears rather than acting them out. Choosing to focus on the underlying relationship issues rather than the events that precipitate the conflict. I hope I've made a compelling enough case that self-knowledge is the foundation upon which resolving conflict is based. So with that as a premise, let's explore what the underlying relationship issues are and how they uniquely present themselves in your life.

First, here are four themes for the underlying relationship issues you can count on living and breathing beneath the surface of much of the conflict that exists between you and your partner. Those themes are: 1) acceptance; 2) unmet emotional needs; 3) appreciation; 4) power and control. I will speak in more detail about each of these themes in the upcoming sections. For now, let's discuss more broadly what an underlying relationship issue is and why it dwells silently beneath the surface of your relationships.

It's easy to understand why you would prefer to leave the underlying relationship issue hidden, isn't it? Typically, the underlying relationship issue is much more volatile than the circumstance that's being discussed. For example, what would be a safer discussion, why your partner picks a lousy restaurant to go to every Saturday night or why your partner hasn't shown any interest in sex with you in the last twelve months?

Consider this conversation I had with my friend, Max. There's a special beach in the park where everyone goes to exercise their dogs called the *doggie beach*. We take Max's dog, a beautiful blond spaniel, Kaybee, to let her swim in the lake and play with the other dogs. One day as

Kaybee was thrashing around in the water, chasing down an old tennis ball we'd thrown into the lake, Max and I got to talking.

"I really did it this time," Max said in a dejected tone.

"What did you do this time?" I asked Max.

"I stuck my foot in my mouth. I don't think that Teddy will ever forgive me for this one," Max admitted.

"What did you say?" I asked.

Max's voice was coated with remorse. "What did I say, what didn't I say? In fact, that's the whole problem. I said everything but what I wanted to say. But boy, oh boy, what I did say, hoooo, she's never going to let me live this one down."

"Max, I hope you won't be offended if I tell you, I don't know what the hell you're talking about," I said.

As Max began to explain, Kaybee decided to dry herself off on us, shaking her body furiously. Max continued the tale of woe as we towed down.

"Teddy set up an interview for a job in Seattle. When I found out about that, I flipped out. I felt like things were going so well between us. Then I find out about the interview, well I really felt angry, even hurt. It made me feel so unimportant that she would even consider going so far away."

Pleadingly I asked, "Max, of course you told her about how hurt you were? Max, tell me that you told Teddy how unimportant it made you feel that she would even think about moving away. Max look me in the eyes and tell me you told Teddy that you cared, that you didn't want to risk having such a huge separation."

"Welllllll, not exactly," Max said.

“Well, what exactly did you say?” I asked insistently.

“Steve, in my defense I *thought* all those things that you just said, I just didn’t *say* any of those things to Teddy.”

“Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades,” I said with as much support as I could muster.

“Well, I sure detonated one hell of a hand grenade,” Max meekly replied.

“Max, please, I’m begging you, please tell me you didn’t do what you usually do.”

“Well, pretty much so, yea,” Max slyly admitted.

“That would be your seemingly innocuous statements that leave everyone guessing at what you’re upset about, but no one understanding what it is you’re upset about?” I growled at him.

“Oh, that would be,” Max responded, equally exasperated.

“Max, just what is it that you told Teddy?”

“I simply said that if you moved to Seattle, then we would have to change the way we communicate. I may have mentioned something about perhaps using smoke signals, pony express, postcards, or perhaps the space shuttle.”

“And?”

“I don’t remember all that she said, I just remember more of how it was said to me. That’s what always seems to stay with me the longest.”

By now I was practically scolding Max. “Max, how many times do I have to tell you about this little habit of yours. You can’t keep going through life being cute when you have something important to talk over with somebody.”

“I know, Steve, believe me I know. But I just can’t come out and say what I’m feeling. Afterall, what right do I have to feel so strongly about Teddy. She has repeatedly told me not to expect a thing from our relationship. Besides, I couldn’t possibly tell her how important our relationship is to me, afterall, if she doesn’t feel the same way, then where am I?”

“I don’t know, Max, but it doesn’t seem that you could be any worse off than you are now.”

“Ohhhhhh, I never thought of it that way before.”

You know the weird thing was, Max’s dog, Kaybee, looked me right in the eye, winked, and shook her head up and down as if in complete agreement with what I just said.

Yes, who isn’t an expert at making things worse than they already are? Who hasn’t stuck their foot in their mouth because they didn’t want to *go there*? And just where is *go there*? It’s the dreaded V word. Vulnerable.

Who of us doesn’t twist ourselves in knots to avoid feeling vulnerable with another human being? Who hasn’t turned a relationship inside out, upside down, wreaking havoc, stirring things up with only one end in mind. Avoid feeling vulnerable. Avoid appearing vulnerable. Maintain a position of strength at all times.

That’s the kicker, isn’t it? Not wanting to appear weak. Not wanting to give an edge to your partner. Do you equate being vulnerable with being weak, setting yourself up to be hurt or taken advantage of?

What are the things that make you feel most vulnerable with your partner? What are the essential truths that you feel, yet are too frightened to reveal? And the basis of the fear is that you don’t want to feel so

exposed, you don't want to feel so at risk, you don't want to feel so out there.

It's important to take ownership of what those things are. You see, oftentimes, we put so much energy into protecting ourselves, we drain a lot of energy from the relationship itself. Can you understand how important it is to learn how to balance your need for self-protection with your relationship's need to be free of the energy invested in protecting yourself? More importantly, I hope you can see how avoiding expressing what needs to be expressed has its own way of creating problems between you and your partner.

Let's look at another reason you may choose to leave the underlying relationship issue hidden beneath the surface of the circumstance. It's a means by which the relationship doesn't have to grow, become more intimate, and frankly, many times, more scary. If you never discuss the underlying relationship issues, the relationship will stay stuck right where it is, focused on the reoccurring circumstances. Unfulfilling? Likely, but perhaps the familiar is safer than traveling into the unknown.

Consider this example for a moment. You or your partner are abusing drugs and alcohol. Much of your time and energy is invested in cleaning up after the fallout that inevitably accompanies alcohol and drug abuse. However, it might be safer to deal with the chaos created by substance abuse rather than focus only on the growth and development of your relationship and the resultant tensions that accompanies such growth.

I'm reminded of two old friends of mine who in the end couldn't hold things together. I always believed that fear kept interfering with their ability to sustain their

relationship. More importantly, I think their relationship was held hostage to their fears. Ultimately, they went their separate ways, never able to get beyond arguing about how much time Sandy spent at work. This is pretty much how things ended for the two of them.

"I don't understand why you won't admit it," Elly said.

"Admit what?" Sandy asked.

"The truth. The truth about why you spend so much time at work. We go over and over it, and none of it rings true."

"What's not true? My job is demanding. I want to hold up my end of things with you," Sandy patiently explained.

Elly's voice had an edge to it, a weird mixture of hurt, frustration, and hate all rolled into one as she said, "I don't believe a word of it. It feels like you're avoiding me, putting me off. Lately, it feels like you don't even want to be around me."

Sandy had become equally defensive. Both of them had been down this road many times. But today, he was feeling especially boxed in, feeling as if there was nowhere to go with her. "When you keep harping on me the way you do, it sure doesn't make it appealing to come home."

"Don't make this about me. This is about us. This is about your half-baked excuses. This is about whether you're in this relationship or out," Elly pointedly said.

That set Sandy off. That arrow had pierced the heart of the matter, yet he reacted the only way he knew how in order to prevent the truth from coming out—with a great deal of hostility. "In or out! What's there about what I do that would make you even say such a thing?"

You need to spend more time getting your head examined and less time focusing on me! In or out—you've really lost it now!"

Elly had dug in this time, determined to get an answer once and for all. There was no turning back, this lack of involvement had to be resolved once and for all. Unwilling to endure this suspended animation any longer, Elly wanted, needed, was demanding a decision. She deserved more and if it wasn't going to be with Sandy, well, so be it. But the dance was going to stop.

By now Elly was screaming, "No, not this time. You're not going to do it to me again. You're not going to flip the tables on me. I don't have to prove anything to you. I'm tired of avoiding this, all the ways we avoid it. I'm asking you point blank. Are you in or out?"

"I'm not doing this alone by myself anymore. No more presents to smooth things over, no more half-hearted attempts to be around more. No more drama to get you to say that you love me. Are you in or not? Are you out of here, if so when? We don't need to keep wasting each other's lives on this half-assed attempt at a relationship. All I want is the truth."

Sandy was taken aback by Elly's new found determination. It was slowly sinking in just how serious she was. So he considered very carefully what to say next. There was so much at stake, but the fight had drained from his body. All that was left was a look of resignation.

"Alright, if you put it that way, I guess I should say, I don't want to do this anymore," Sandy mumbled.

"Do what?" Elly said fearfully.

"This, us, you and me. I just don't feel safe doing it with you anymore. It doesn't feel right. I guess that's

what I've avoided saying for so long. No, you've been right all along. I'm just too afraid. I don't know how to explain it any better. I don't know what it would look like if I put both feet into the relationship. I don't know how to do it any better than I'm already doing it.

"This is the best I've got, or it's all that I've got, or I don't know, I just don't know. In fairness to you, you're right, I do hide. I hide at work. I hide here at home. There are days when dread just overwhelms me. About what, well you seem to be the expert. But the thought of doing this any differently is just unbearable."

And so it goes. Slowly but surely as the excuses are stripped away, as the circumstances that a person hides behind are lifted, inevitably what crawls out from underneath the surface is some fear, discomfort, or smoldering resentment about the relationship itself. Left undetected, these corrosive elements slowly but surely eat away at the well-being of your relationships. Without focusing on the relationship issues, it must feel like you're doing battle with one arm tied behind your back.

Let's look at one more reason why you may choose to stay paralyzed by the circumstances of your conflicts rather than resolving the underlying relationship issues. Plain ol' being afraid of the consequences of getting honest. Perhaps you fear that if you get honest with your partner, they may emotionally or physically abandon you. Have you ever tried to resolve an issue with somebody and the thanks you got for your efforts was the silent treatment or they just disappeared from your life altogether? How anxious would you be to explore the underlying issues that exist in any other relationships?

How about if we get practical for a moment. Let's take

a break from the theory by practicing for a moment. Take your time with this. You may even need to get some perspective from a friend or family member, but please whoever it is, make sure that they are safe and have only your best interests at heart.

Can you think of a time where you have found yourself in the same disagreement over and over again with your partner? It could be about how you decide where to go on your vacation. It could be how much time you spend on your computer rather than with your partner. It could be how you decide who's going to clean the house. No matter the topic, nothing ever seems to resolve the problem. When you get to this place with your partner, it's my bet that there's an underlying relationship issue that needs to be resolved.

Let's see if we can understand what's percolating beneath the surface. How about switching our focus from all these *ideas*, to the real world. Quite simply, all I want you to do for now is identify below what the *circumstances* may be that you and your partner continually get hung up on. See if you can identify at least three *circumstances* that you and your partner go over time and time again without ever resolving. Go ahead and make a list of those circumstances.

Now, take a look at the list you just made and put a magnifying glass to it. What issues lay beneath the surface? Don't worry if you have a fancy label for them. Our goal right now is to create an awareness that there's more going on than a missed dinner engagement, an inability to agree on what television show to watch, or any other seemingly innocent incident that has an emotional charge to it that's out of proportion to the incident itself.
