

P A R T 3

Acceptance



*You've got to accentuate the positive, eliminate
the negative, latch on to the affirmative.*

-Johnny Mercer

Getting to Know You



*If I accept you where you're at, you'll become
who you are capable of being.*

-Stanley Phillips

"That cinches it," I thought to myself. "Enough is enough," I muttered under my breath as my foot pushed harder on the accelerator.

Karen and I were out for a Sunday evening drive. The top was down, it was a breezy summer evening. This was our time to be with each other, away from all the hustle and bustle that awaited us every Monday. I brought her favorite tapes along. We loved cranking up the stereo as we sang along with our favorite tunes.

However, this Sunday something was different. Karen had been quiet, somewhat withdrawn. I asked on four different occasions if anything was wrong, but she wasn't talking. In fact, she had been that way for at least a week now. Her *flavor of the week* charity dinner—she canceled out on me. That was definitely not like her. Thursday and Friday when I called to say good-night, all I got was the answering machine. My messages went unreturned. Something was definitely up, only she wasn't talking.

But there was no denying this. I turned the volume up as Carly Simon began singing *"I haven't got time for the pain. I haven't the room for the pain. I haven't the need for the pain."* Karen would always, always, sing along with Carly, almost as if the two of them were having their own private celebration about the emotional exorcisms they had undergone. But she was just sitting there, arms crossed against her chest, blankly staring off into the distance.

"Come on Kare', there's gotta be something bothering you. What is it?" I pleaded with her. "You never, ever miss a chance to sing *this* song."

"Yea, well I'm not singing anymore," she sneered at me.

"Whataya mean, you're not singing anymore?" I asked somewhat confused. "You love to sing. How can you just decide not to sing?"

"Let me be more specific then. I'm never, ever going to sing in front of you, Einstein," she said, each word dripping with sarcasm.

"Oh, why are you honoring me as the one person who you'll never, ever sing in front of?"

She turned towards me, glared and said, "Because!"

"Because why?"

"Because of what you said to me last week."

Ah, now the pieces were starting to come together. The canceled dinner. The unreturned phone calls. The silent treatment. I could see I was being punished, but I hadn't a clue as to what for.

"You have an advantage over me. I don't remember *all* that I said to you last week."

"Think hard, buddy. I have no problem remembering. Do you remember anything you said about me 'breaking a stereotype?'"

I could feel my face turn red. I sank a little in the seat as that particular conversation came flooding back to me. But I had a position to maintain here and, by god, I was sticking to it. "Honey, honestly, I don't remember. Let's just forget about it. I'm sure it's water under the bridge by now," I said, feeling somewhat satisfied that I had come up with a solution that would put an end to all of this nonsense.

But that wasn't working, because now she was ready to talk about it. "Listen, Kreskin, all of a sudden your memory doesn't work? I don't buy that. Let's see if I can refresh it for you."

I wasn't expecting her next move, she actually went into her purse and pulled out a piece of paper.

"Does this ring a bell?" she asked as she began to read from the paper. "You said, 'Karen, you've broken a stereotype that I have about all women being able to sing, because you sure can't sing.'" With that said, she balled the paper up and threw it out the window.

I knew I had to think fast. How could I spin this just a little to my advantage? Why with any luck, I might be able to get her to apologize to me for overreacting. "Okay, here goes nothing," I thought to myself.

"What's so bad about that? Up until last week, I believed that all women could sing. Is that so disparaging against you and your sisters? Come on, let's just drop it." I looked out of the corner of my eye to see how that was playing. She wasn't buying it.

"I think you're missing the point, as usual. Why do I always have to spell things out for you? You inferred that I can't sing."

"Okay, time for a tactical switch here," I thought to myself. If I couldn't go around her I was going to go over her. I tried to give her an easy way out, but she was making me do it her way.

"Karen, now that's where you have it all wrong. I didn't infer that you couldn't sing. I'm telling you right now to your face. You *cannot* sing. No *ifs*, *ands*, or *buts* about it. You ain't no Streisand, kid!"

"Ah ha!" she shouted.

"Ah ha, *what?*" I replied. "Is that such a crime to say to you? What's the big deal?"

I had her back-pedaling now, so I thought this was the perfect time to do what I do best, turn the tables on her,

make her out to be the bad guy, show her how I'm the victim, how dare she try and make me wrong for just speaking my mind about how tone-deaf she was.

"You've been punishing me all week because I was kind enough to tell you the truth, how dare you! I'll tell you what, I will graciously accept your apology and we won't talk about this any more." I leaned over to kiss her, but she pulled away as she pushed me back to my side of the car."

"Not so quick, buster. This isn't about you. It's about how your comment made me feel."

"What do you mean *made you feel*? You can't sing! How do you think that makes me feel?"

"Steven, can we get off the singing for a moment? This isn't about my singing. It's about how your insensitive comment hurt my feelings."

"Why are your feelings hurt? I'm right about this. You *cannot*, I repeat, *not*, no how, in any way, sing."

"Forget the G.D. singing! Will you focus on me? Can you quit defending yourself long enough to hear what I'm saying? You hurt my feelings. I felt judged by you. When I feel like you're judging me, it makes it unsafe for me to be around you. I know in my head that you love me, but I feel in my heart that you don't accept me. When I feel like you don't accept me, it makes it hard for me to want to be with you."

"All of that because you can't sing?" I feigned bewilderment.

"Steven, I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt here. You're too smart to think that this is all because you *believe* that I can't sing.

"I need to feel accepted by you. People who love each

other don't judge each other. I feel safest with you when I feel like you're on my side. I don't need to be teased by you, or belittled by you. I need to know that you accept me with all my quirks. I don't want to have to be worrying about every little thing I do and say. Should I always have to question whether you're judging me, that you're going to make fun of me? I need to know that I can just be myself around you without giving you material for your standup routine."

"Ohhh, so *that's why* you've been so angry with me all week."

I knew I had no way out of this. I could see that it was about time for me to punt. Sometimes it's better to retreat in order to live to fight another day. I'm nothing if not a gracious loser. So I did what any man would do when he's backed into a corner with nowhere else to go. I pulled the car over to the side of the road. I gave her a hug, kissed her on the cheek and said, "You are right. I am sorry. It will never happen again."

The look on each of our faces said it best, "Yea right, it will never happen again."

Man. Woman. Child. Adult. Doesn't matter your station in life. Competent. Incompetent. Bright. Not-so bright. Aloof. Sociable. Kind. Self-centered. Self-denying. Underneath all the exteriors a person can don, we're all sensitive, oftentimes frail. What we're sensitive about may vary from person to person. But make no mistake about it, we all desperately want to feel accepted by the people in our lives.

We share together the need to feel accepted. Don't buy into the assertion that there are fundamental differences between people. We are all from planet Earth.

There are fundamental truisms about human nature that apply to each and everyone of us alike. Your ability to create a harmonious relationship is dependent upon embracing one simple truism. Not operating from this space in your heart will handicap your best intentions. Overlooking this simple truism will keep you running round and round in circles with your partner, never getting to the heart of the matter.

This next sentence needs to be underlined, place an asterisk by it, write it fifty times on a blackboard. *We are much more similar than we are different.* I want to repeat that. There are profound implications for this sentence. Do not be seduced by the simplicity of this statement. *We are much more similar than we are different.*

You get it? We're all wired the same. The only difference is that some of us choose to insulate ourselves to a greater or lesser extent from all the ways we hurt, from daring to want and need. Make sense to you? You have your own level of comfort with feeling vulnerable, so you insulate yourself from the discomfort that accompanies feeling vulnerable. That, my friend, is the only difference.

Any of this sound familiar? "I don't care what anybody thinks about me?" "I'm my own person, I don't need you or anyone else." Nay. Nay. Don't believe it about yourself or anybody else.

The need for acceptance bubbles underneath the surface of any interaction you have with another human being. You may feign indifference. Or you may have made acceptance the lord of your existence. Or perhaps you have found some middle ground. But it's there. Getting stepped on. Being titillated. Spreading warmth throughout our being.

You know what it feels like, all that fear when confronted with all the firsts in your life—first day on a new job, a first date, all those first days at school. New worlds, new people, new arenas where you have to make your way. All the questioning, self-doubts. Do I belong here? Will I be liked? Will I be noticed?

You long for a kind word, a knowing nod. Remember those times someone placed a comforting hand on your shoulder? The gentle touch, a thoughtful comment, someone's willingness to go out of their way to acknowledge you and your discomfort. Fear melts away as we feel safe and accepted.

And when we don't feel safe and accepted, there are going to be hurt feelings. Not feeling accepted coats us with a thin film of alienation. Insensitive comments, myopic behavior that insures our well-being at the expense of our partner creates layer and layer of hurt, resentment, and mistrust.

I'd be willing to bet if you took the time to step back from the devices you and your partner use to hurt each other, you would learn a thing or two. If you peel back the layers to your discord, perhaps you'll discover what you and your partner are truly feuding over. The significance of how well you can sing, or dance, or make love? Perhaps that's the circumstance, but I'd be willing to bet that someone is not feeling accepted. Might this be true?

Perhaps there's a place in you that is aching from the accumulation of slights, innuendo, accusations, omissions of recognition, sarcastic observations, and more. Has your need to feel accepted by your partner been frustrated to the point that your hurt has been twisted into anger and resentment?

This is really very simple. No sophisticated psychology is needed. I'm talking about the tenderness of the human condition, the soft underbelly of the hard exteriors we create. When that underbelly is pierced, we hurt and we don't forget—it's just one more incident added to a long list. When our tenderness is honored, we don't forget that either. A little more of who we are is able to come out, delivering kindness to our partner, thereby expanding the presence of love and respect between two people.

I have no fancy techniques to offer you, only encouragement. The solution itself is seemingly easy. Stop focusing on the circumstances. Don't settle for believing that how well somebody sings is at the heart of what is troubling the two of you. Pull back and go deeper. Pull back from the battle. Go to a deeper layer and focus on the underlying hurt you're experiencing.

This is the path to a deeper appreciation of your partner. A deeper appreciation of your partner is the path to a less conflictual relationship. Less conflict needing to be resolved frees up more energy to invest in the well-being of your partner and, ultimately, the nourishment of your relationship. Afterall, isn't that why we all want to learn how to make molehills out of mountains?

Transforming Judgments into Acceptance



*In the sick room, ten cents' worth of
human understanding equals ten dollars
worth of medical science.*

-Martin H. Fischer

Bridge-Builder's Tip



The path to accepting your partner is paved by the efforts you make to understand your partner.

What's at the core of the act of acceptance? Think about this for a moment. Is your partner more likely to want to feel that you understand them or that you're judging them? Understand or judge? What's at the root of either of those two postures?

Judging someone is easy enough to do. You have your own standards for the way a person *should* act, think, or feel. You have your own sense of what's right or wrong. Does your partner measure up to those standards? When your partner doesn't meet those standards, how do you react to that? How do you reconcile the difference between who you believe your partner *should* be and who they *are*? Isn't that really the essence of it?

Many of us try to fit our partner into a box. You know the saying about trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. Often that's what we do to the people in our lives. We don't see them for who they are. We see them for who we want them to be. We don't see the incredible richness that lives within them. We see them as projects in which we can mold them in a manner that makes us more comfortable with who they are.

Does that sound familiar at all? Molding. Shaping.

Cajoling. All in the name of what? Wanting to transform our partner's imperfections? Needing to appease *our* discomfort for what *we* can't tolerate? A little of each perhaps?

But let's look at it this way, at what cost does all of this take place? How does all of the energy you invest in trying to change your partner *help* your partner see the light; how does all of that effort play in your partner's head?

You call it being helpful. Your partner calls it being intrusive, undermining, non-accepting. You call it wanting the best for your partner. Your partner calls it not accepting them for where they're at. You call it taking an interest in your partner's life. Your partner calls it not having faith in their ability to go it alone.

All the subtle digs: a jab here, a barb there. What does the accumulation of all of that noise, all the ways we damn somebody with faint praise, what does it add up to in any relationship?

"How are you being helpful to me?" Jan asked, as tears of frustration welled up in her eyes.

"I don't know. But I don't get how you can doubt my good intentions. All I really am doing is just trying to be helpful," Alan protested.

"How does going behind me, second guessing everything I do, help me in any way, shape, or form?" Jan bitterly wondered aloud.

Alan's face was genuinely bewildered. "I'm not going behind your back. I'm merely offering an alternative for you to think about."

Jan, having lost all her patience, excitedly shouted, "Who asked you for an alternative? I don't need alterna-

tives from you. I need your belief in me. I need your acknowledgment that you believe that I can do this, not your recommendations for how you would do it.

“Don’t you know how it makes me feel like such a nothing every time you stick your nose into my business? Can’t you see how belittling it is to me, to have you pick away at every little thing I do? What do you think I am? A fool? An incompetent?”

By now Jan’s face was crimson red. Her arms were slicing through the air with each point she made. She continued, “You know, sometimes I think *you need* to hold it in your head that I’m somehow not capable, that I’m helpless, that I *need* you. I want you in my life, but not at this expense. I need you, but not the way you have it set up. It makes me feel judged. It makes me feel like the only way you want me is if I’m not me—but rather what you try and shape me to be.”

Isn’t it time for you to better understand how your helpfulness is experienced by your partner? Isn’t it time for you to better understand how the *innocent* comments you make may be heard very differently by somebody else?

I can’t tell you how much discord can be alleviated between you and your partner when you better understand how your best intentions are heard by somebody else. Your willingness to be better sensitized to how your partner is affected by some of the things you do and say will go a long way to helping your partner feel more accepted by you.

Understanding on the other hand is such a different game to play. The players are cast as equals. The nature of the relationship is built upon support and caring rather

than correcting and fixing. You tell me, which energy nurtures your soul—fixing or understanding?

When you take the time to understand your partner, you offer an incredible gift. Do you see that?

How best to communicate this special gift? Understand your partner by *entering their world*, not by *imposing your world* upon them. Make it *safe* for your partner to introduce new pieces of who they are. Don’t *censure* them for what they do and say. These are the baby steps we must take as we build a bridge of understanding. These thousand small acts of kindness and appreciation are what affirms and encourages your partner to *be* who they are.

My best friend Stephanie Phillips knows how good it feels when I understand her. Believe me it’s not always easy for me. You see she’s only three, so it’s hard for me to crack her code all the time. But in the end, she lets me know whether I get it right or not.

“Frischie, Frischie, I ‘frowd up, I ‘frowd up,” Stephie said as she came running to greet me.

“What’s the matter, Steph, don’t you feel well?” I asked as I placed my hand on her forehead.

She didn’t answer, but the tears in her eyes said more than her words ever could.

“Does your tummy hurt?” I asked.

She nodded her head as she gave a little whimper.

“You wanna sit on my lap, Stephie?” I asked.

No words, she just jumped into my lap.

“Steph, you want me to rub your tummy for you?”

She nodded her head as she wiped a tear from her eye.

“How ‘bout I get ya a little Coca Cola™, to settle your stomach?”

Her face brightened as she said, “‘Kay!”

After Stephanie finished the Coca Cola, I layed a pillow down on the couch and held out her blanket. “Steph, you wanna lay down with your blankie?”

She nodded yes, ran over to me, threw her little arms around my neck and planted a big kiss on my cheek.

I thanked her and kissed her back. For me, it doesn’t get any better than that.

I hope you’re beginning to see how acceptance grows wherever seeds of understanding are planted. Acceptance is choked wherever weeds of judgment become overgrown. Having built a case for the importance of understanding, let me give you some concrete tools that will never let you down. These tools will enable you to listen to your partner in a special way; more importantly, you’ll discover how to effectively respond to your partner rather than react to them. The following’s a simple formula to follow—one part attitude, two parts action.

Let’s deal with attitude first—the attitude you project towards your partner. Don’t blow by this question. I want you to think about it for a moment or two. Do you give your partner the space to be who they are? Are there parts of who your partner is that you judge to be less than worthy of your honor and respect?

Don’t fall into your ‘yea but’ shtick. I don’t want to hear how you rationalize it in your head. How ‘it’s for their own good.’ Or ‘I know what’s best.’ A million times I’ve heard how somebody is ‘only trying to be helpful.’

In your being helpful, do you insist that your partner stop being who they are? This is the essential question. Stop being emotional. Stop being frightened. Stop being irrational. Stop being obsessive. Stop being lazy.

Being judgmental, being critical—so many of us have become adept at hiding our judgments in our good intentions, in our well-meaning behavior. But don’t settle for that any longer. I guarantee you that your partner doesn’t.

The time has come to work *with* your partner. What that means for the purposes of this section is to *check it out* with your partner. Ask them how your attitude towards them may imply that they have to stop being who they are. See for yourself how you may be implying in many of your behaviors and comments that your partner is less than, that somehow, someday they need you to show them the way.

Ask them if they experience many of your comments as *just kidding*. Or do they feel the sting of your sarcasm, the harshness of your jokes, the cruelty of your *just being honest*? Is it possible that your partner doesn’t feel accepted by you—and rightly so?

If you truly want things to be different, then it starts with you. It starts with you *getting honest* about yourself as well as what you want for your partner. Are you ready to stop minimizing the aches and pains that your partner expresses to you? Are you ready to let go of the explanations you’ve invented to justify your behavior to yourself and the rest of the world? If you’re ready to get honest about your displaced anger, your veiled attempts at control, your misguided attempts at being helpful, let me introduce you to two action steps that will instantly transform your relationships.

Walking a Mile
in Your Partner's Shoes



*The love of our neighbor in all its fullness
simply means being able to say to him,
“What are you going through?”*

-Simone Weil

Bridge-Builder's Tip



Acceptance grows from understanding how your partner experiences life through their eyes.

The first action step is *empathy*. This one step can do much to alleviate the conflict in any of your relationships. Empathy is a specific relationship skill where you choose to understand your partner by being able to see their world *as they experience it*, without judging or correcting their perceptions. So easy for me to say, so hard for any of us to do. But believe me, there's a huge payoff for your practice and patience.

I'm sure you're thinking to yourself, "What about me, what about how I see the world, what about my best interests?" I promise you, when you make the shift we're discussing, you'll discover how your best interests will be honored in ways that you never dreamt possible.

Your best interests in any relationship relies on one thing and one thing only—being able to communicate to your partner that you understand them. Your partner doesn't want to be argued with, your partner doesn't want to be corrected, your partner doesn't want to be made out to be wrong.

Do you know what your partner wants most out of life? Your partner wants to be *understood* in order that they may feel *accepted* by you. The payoff is tremendous, believe me. You'll minimize conflict, deepen the

bond between you and your partner, and create a freely giving relationship.

What does empathy look like, and more importantly how does it affect your partner? Consider this scenario...

"Bobby, what's the matter? You've been moping around all day." Rhonda asked.

"There's nothing wrong with me, would you quit bugging me," Bobby snapped back.

"Come on, Bobby, can't we at least talk about it?" Rhonda pleaded.

"Talk about what? How you completely embarrassed me in front of my friends?"

"I did what? I embarrassed you in front of your friends!" Rhonda shouted back.

"Yea, you embarrassed me," Bobby said.

"How, pray tell, did I do that?" Rhonda asked as she rolled her eyes.

"You went off on me in front of Tom and Matthew," Bobby said.

"Of course I did. Don't you think I was entitled to my reaction? I'm tired of the three of you laying around here leaving a mess for me to pick up."

"Yea, Rhonda, you always have a great argument ready for me, but that's not the point. You didn't have to do it in front of them. Why couldn't we discuss it later? I've told you time and time again that I don't want you talking to me like that in front of my friends."

"And I've told you time and time again, I don't want your friends over here trashing the house," Rhonda countered.

"Whatever, but believe me, this better be the last time you pull a stunt like that in front of my friends."

What's going on here? Two people are locked in a battle of wits over who's position is more justifiable. The goal of this conversation is to build a case to justify how *wronged* each feels rather than working at understanding each other.

Empathy is an act of understanding—in this case, how a person is affected by another person's actions. Do you see how Rhonda and Bobby violated the spirit of empathy? They put their energy into forcing their own interpretation of their experiences upon each other.

My point is, as you make small shifts in how you discuss things with your partner, there will be dramatic differences in the outcome. The shift: going from being argumentative to empathetic. For instance...

"Bobby, what's the matter? You've been moping around all day." Rhonda asked.

"There's nothing wrong with me, would you quit bugging me," Bobby snapped back.

"Come on, Bobby, can't we at least talk about it?" Rhonda pleaded.

"Talk about what? How you completely embarrassed me in front of my friends?"

"I hadn't realized I embarrassed you, can you tell me how I embarrassed you?" Rhonda asked.

"It's embarrassing to have you come in and keep reminding me to clean up. You're not my mother, you know," Bobby said.

"Yes, I realize that I'm not your mother. What I didn't realize is that I was embarrassing you or treating you like your mother. I can certainly understand how that must anger you.

"But Bobby, is there some way you and I can work

together on keeping the house cleaner? I don't want to embarrass you. I don't want to nag you. But I don't think you realize how hard it is on me to keep doing this by myself."

"No, I guess I don't. You hadn't said anything to me before. What's the matter?" Bobby asked.

"It's not that there's any *one* thing that's wrong. I'm just feeling overwhelmed with a lot of different things right now. You know I like having Tom and Matthew over, but by the time the card game is over, you've got all those beer cans laying around, cigarettes all over the place, and the food just sits. It's just getting to be too much for me."

"Alright, I get your point. I hadn't realized things had gotten so out of hand. I see why you would resent what's been going on lately, how you feel like we're not working together. I know how I feel when it feels like I'm in this all alone. I don't need much imagination to figure out what you're going through now. I'm sorry. I didn't realize it earlier, but thanks for letting me know."

Do you see the difference an empathetic gesture makes? When you work at seeing things through the eyes of your partner, you take defensiveness out of the relationship and replace it with kindness, understanding, and cooperation. Empathy simply is a skill that enables you to build a bridge between what you perceive is going on between you and your partner and what your partner is experiencing.

Empathy is the antidote for one of the most toxic needs we all have—the need to be right. How many of you feel that it's more important to be right first, last, and always. Let me ask you a simple question, has it

been worth it? Does it bring you the things that you claim you want?

Well, if you're ready to surrender the need to be right and make your partner wrong, then you're ready to see your partner's viewpoint of the world without judgment or need for correction. When you're able to do just that, you'll find your partner more open to accepting who you are as well.

I want to propose a formula to you to help you with this relationship skill. It's a four step process to help you become aware of: 1) your position; 2) your partner's position; 3) the impediment to understanding your partner; 4) creating a new understanding of your partner once you have let go of what was getting in the way of understanding your partner.

There are two keys to this formula. The first key is your willingness to see *two sides of any disagreement*. You know that saying about there being three sides to any disagreement: yours, mine, and the truth. At the core of your ability to be empathetic rather than argumentative is your ability to step outside of your own position long enough to consider how your partner is experiencing whatever it is they are experiencing.

The second key is your willingness to *let go*. Invariably in any disagreement, there's something that prevents you from looking at things through the eyes of your partner. There's something that you're holding onto within that's preventing that from taking place.

Some examples of those impediments may be pride, the need to be right, ego, or fear of giving in. But until you check-in with yourself to better understand what's preventing you from understanding your partner's

world, you'll continue to be argumentative rather than empathetic.

For example...

Bruce: I've walked the dog every night for the last three weeks. It's time for you to walk the dog.

Alice: I don't want to. I told you I'm too tired to walk her so late at night.

Bruce: Well, what about me? Don't I deserve a break?

Alice: No, who ever said life's fair. You're always trying to get over on me. It's always somehow, someway unfair to you. But what about me? There's plenty of things I do, that I don't see you doing around here. It's time you started pitching in.

Let me walk you through the formula I just gave you in order to problemsolve this disagreement. Remember the goal is to see both sides of the disagreement in order to create a solution that considers both person's concerns. In seeing both sides of the disagreement, you want to be able to see what impediments you need to let go of in order to be able to create a new way of seeing the disagreement. Ultimately, you want to craft a solution based upon you and your partner's concerns.

Step 1: *Bruce's position.*

Bruce feels like he has been walking the dog too often.

Bruce believes that life should be fair.

Step 2: *Alice's position.*

Alice is too tired at night to walk the dog.

Alice believes that a couple should do everything fifty-fifty.

Step 3: *What needs to be let go of?*

For Bruce: Bruce believes that life should be fair; so he's fighting to even up the score.

For Alice: Alice fears that she'll be taken advantage of if Bruce doesn't do as much as she does.

Step 4: *A new way of thinking about the disagreement.*

Bruce: I can see how hard you work during the day. I'm sorry that you feel as if I'm trying to get over on you. I want you to believe that I'm here to help you more fairly shoulder the load.

Alice: I know it seems like you're doing everything. How about if we make a schedule whereby we switch off doing the different chores around the house?

How about if you give it a try yourself? Think about a point of disagreement that exists between you and your partner. Think about the position you take. Think about the position your partner takes. Do you know what you have to let go of in order to better understand your partner? Have you ever tried to let go of that impediment long enough to better understand your partner?

Do the following. Write down a disagreement you have with your partner.

Write down what your position is that you're trying to impose upon your partner.

Write down what you understand your partner's position to be.

Soothing the Open Wounds



Understanding a person does not mean condoning; it only means that one does not accuse him as if one were God or a judge placed above him.

-Erich Fromm

Bridge-Builder's Tip



Validate rather than discount who your partner is.

The second action step for creating acceptance is *validating*. Validating is the twin brother of empathy. Whereas empathy is understanding your partner by *perceiving* how your partner is affected by their life experiences, validating is *communicating* that understanding or perception to your partner.

The distinction is an important one, otherwise you may be confused by the similarities of empathy and validating. Empathy is nothing more than your willingness to see the world through the eyes of your partner rather than insisting that they see everything your way. Empathy is the process of stepping out of your viewpoint of the world and *perceiving* your partner's viewpoint. Validating is *communicating* that perception to your partner.

There's no greater gift to another person than to validate who they are as a thinking, feeling, caring human being. When I share this sentiment with people, I often times get blank stares. Other times people argue the point with me. I am often asked how can I just sit there and agree with someone when I know they're dead wrong. My response is that the very question that has been asked is the number one symptom of the problem.

If your goal is to create a strong foundation with your

partner built upon acceptance and understanding, you'll find that you need to make a major shift from seeing your partner as right or wrong. Listen carefully to what I'm about to say next. Get the marker out again. Underline this. Think it through carefully. Think about all the ways you may violate the spirit of what I'm about to share with you. Imagine how your relationship might be different if you embraced the spirit of the following:

There's no one, let me repeat, no one on the face of this earth, who's looking to be argued out of what they think or feel.

There's no one who will look kindly on the energy you expend in attempting to prove them wrong. I can't think of one human being who shares a part of themselves, who's hoping that you will, piece by piece, pick apart what they're sharing with you.

The only thing I know that will sustain the trust, love, and affection of another person is validating who they are and how they experience the way life affects them. That doesn't mean rubber stamping everything they say. It means communicating to them how you understand that person and what they're going through.

Let's see if I can make the act of validation come to life for you. Take your time with the following scenario I have created and see how well you can relate to what Ronnie is going through with his mom.

"I don't want to take dance lessons. I don't want to have to embarrass myself in front of everybody else," Ronnie said to his mother.

"Oh Ronnie, will you stop being so dramatic. You're

What could mom have done differently in order to arrive at a different outcome?

Now let's change the dialogue just a bit. Let's see whether the outcome changes or stays the same.

"I don't want to take dance lessons. I don't want to have to embarrass myself in front of everybody else," Ronnie said to his mother.

"Ronnie, what are you so afraid of?" Mom asked.

"I don't know what I'm doing and everyone else does," Ronnie said.

"We all feel afraid when we try something new," Mom agreed.

"Yea, but it's going to be just awful. I know I'm already awful at this. I've tried dancing in my room. I just can't get it right."

"I know how hard it is for you to try something new. Is there anything else that is frightening you about these dance lessons?"

"Well, yea. When we're at school, I know what to do.

I play with the guys and all that, but I won't know how to act at dance school."

Mom gave Ronnie a big hug as she said, "I know just what you mean. I'm not so old that I can't remember how terrified I was when I had to take my first dance lesson. I thought I was never going to be able to live through it."

"I bet you just didn't go, huh Mom?" Ronnie asked with the great hope that this might be his way out, as well.

"Well no, not exactly, sweetheart. My mother asked me what she could do to make things easier for me and we wound up striking a deal."

"A deal?" Ronnie asked, somewhat suspiciously.

"Yea, we made a deal that if I went to the first three lessons and I still didn't like it, that I wouldn't have to go back again."

"Oh, how did that work out?" Ronnie asked, his curiosity aroused.

"The first two weeks were horrible, I'm not going to lie to you. But by the third week, I felt a little more comfortable so I decided to keep going. Two years later, I met Daddy at a dance and the rest, as they say, is history."

"Mom, do you think you and I can make the same kind of deal?"

"Only if you want to, Ronnie," mom said as she leaned over to give him a hug and kiss.

Quite a different outcome, wouldn't you say? Why do you think that happened? Was Mom being sneaky, manipulative, or was something else at play here? Was Mom more effective in the second story or the first story? If so, what made her more effective?

Step #3: Normalize the feelings being expressed rather than minimize them.

“I know how hard it is for you to try something new. Is there anything else that is frightening you about these dance lessons?”

“Well, yea. When we’re at school I know what to do. I play with the guys and all that, but I won’t know how to act at dance school.”

Mom gave Ronnie a big hug as she said, “I know just what you mean. I’m not so old that I can’t remember how terrified I was when I had to take my first dance lesson. I thought I was never going to be able to live through it.”

Step #4: Express to your partner what it is that you understand about the feelings they’re sharing.

“Ronnie, what are you so afraid of?” Mom asked.

“I don’t know what I’m doing and everyone else does,” Ronnie said.

“We all feel afraid when we try something new,” Mom agreed.

Step #5: Express your willingness to support them.

“Mom, do you think you and I can make the same kind of deal?”

“Only if you want to, Ronnie,” Mom said as she leaned over to give him a hug and a kiss.

I hope you take the time to think about the action steps of acceptance. There’s much to be gained from

making the shifts I’ve suggested to you. So many of the wounds that exist between you and your partner can be healed by simply taking the time to understand each other’s point of view. But more than healing the wounds that presently exist, these action steps will do much to enrich the bond of emotional intimacy. After all, what greater gift can you give to yourself and your partner?