

P A R T 6

*P*ower and Control



*It's not whether you win or lose but how
you play the game.*

-Thomas Matthews

*W*hat's All the Fighting About?



*The feeling we have that we deserve to have everything just
the way we want it ends up destroying spontaneity.*

-Linda Weltner

"I don't need no shrink to tell me what the problem is. I understand only too well. What she needs is a good hobby or even to go back to work."

"The problem is your wife isn't busy enough?" I asked, trying to understand his read on the situation.

"That's all it boils down to. She just has too much time on her hands. When she starts to thinking, she starts making herself unhappy."

"Your wife's unhappy because she thinks unhappy thoughts?" I asked.

"Well, now you're making it too simplified. I know that it's more than that. But, honestly, Doc, what's all this mumbo jumbo about 'my needs, my needs?'"

"Your wife's needs are mumbo jumbo?" I asked.

"Now Doc, come on, don't go making me out to be the bad guy here. You're starting to confuse me. What I mean to say is, what's so all fire important about her needs? You never hear me complaining about my emotional needs do you?"

"You question the importance of what your wife wants from you?" I asked.

"You know, Doc, why is it that when you say it, I feel like such a heel? Of course what she wants from me is important, I guess. It's just that, well, you don't know how my wife is. You gotta be firm with her. You can't give in. You gotta hold the line."

"Your marriage is a competitive game like football, where you have to have a strategy for everything?" I asked.

"Now, Doc, I swear you're putting words into my

mouth. I didn't say any such thing. It's just that, if you give her an inch, she'll take a mile. You know what I mean?"

"I'm afraid I don't," I replied.

"Well, listen then. I know exactly what will happen. It starts out with wanting to be hugged. Everytime I see her, she gets this funny look in her eyes. And I know there ain't no just doing it *once*.

"It doesn't start and end with just one hug. Then she wants me to start kissing her when I come home at night. Can't you see what I'm getting at?"

"You don't know how to say 'no' once you say 'yes?'" I guessed.

"Well no, that's not what I mean at all. What I mean is, if it was just the hugging and the kissing, I could put up with that, I suppose. But you know where this all is heading, don't you?"

"I must admit, you're ahead of me on this, why don't you tell me," I replied.

"Look. I could put up with the occasional peck on the cheek. The hug, well, we all have to make compromises. But then the thing that comes next, the thing I hate worse than anything.

"Next, she'll want us to start having talks. Like going for a walk or sitting on the patio after dinner.

"No way. No how. Not in this lifetime.

"I mean I've got a life too, you know. That's what I'm saying to you, Doc. If you don't draw the line in the beginning, she'll just keep taking and taking and taking. And what happens to me in all of this?"

"How will I have time for myself? How will I be able to do the things I want to do, if we start paying so much attention to what she wants all the time?"

“Why can’t she be like me? I ask very little of the world. Hey, life’s tough, but you just gotta learn to be there for yourself. There’s no sense counting on anybody else.”

“You would like it if she just held her breath?” I asked.

“Now, there you go again. You didn’t hear me say that, did you? It’s just, why doesn’t she learn to tough things out? That’s what works best for me.”

I looked at him with a hint of resignation in my eyes and said, “I don’t know. Your solution to just say no seems to me to be a prescription for disaster rather than a means to be involved with your partner.”

Is my friend in the story merely selfish, self-centered, insensitive, and uncaring? Perhaps so, but what value is there in thinking of him that way? If we relate to him only on that basis, we have guaranteed ourselves a neverending struggle based on name calling and justifying one’s behavior.

No, I prefer to think of my friend as merely frightened. Maybe he could express that more clearly, but I think it’s undeniable that beneath all of his insensitivities beats the heart of somebody who’s terrified of what will happen to him anytime he gives in to his wife.

It’s clear that he sees the only way to take care of himself is to dig his heels in, to withhold what his wife wants from him. It’s easy to see the inevitable disaster that comes when the ways he protects himself denies his partner at the same time.

But this is the issue over which much of the conflict is waged in our relationships. *Power and control*. Two of the dirtiest words in any relationship. “You’re so controlling.” “All he wants is to be in control.” It’s like waving a red cape in front of a bull. Bring on power and control and *let the games begin*.

Power and control. *Them are fighting words*. Power and control. These two words can take any aspect of a relationship and escalate conflict to its highest pitched frenzy. Power and control. These energies hide so much of what’s buried beneath the surface of any relationship.

But have you stopped to think about this? Have you stopped to think about the fact that controlling behavior serves to mask something deeper within? Can you see how controlling behavior masks your fears? Does it make sense to you that the vortex created by the battles waged over power and control are merely the means to bury the fears that live beneath the surface of any relationship?

Our fears are many. We need some manner to quell them. Think about my friend in the previous story. Think about what he may be so frightened of. Can you see how frightened he is to allow himself to get close to his wife? Just imagine how frightening it is for him to have someone be vulnerable with him. Do you get the sense that he believes that the only way to insure his autonomy is by resisting? Can you see how his sense of independence becomes threatened by the mere suggestion that he go along with what his wife would like him to do?

If you listen hard enough, it’s easy to hear how overwhelmed he is by his own needs and vulnerabilities. And so he needs a way to disconnect from what he’s feeling. He needs a way to turn down the intensity. He needs a way to insure that he doesn’t have to experience what frightens him so much. Bring on the control—turn up the power.

It saddens me when I watch him stir up chaos in order to deny his own humanness. That’s what he’s really denying. His emotional needs, he being the sustenance for his wife’s needs, his desire to protect his autonomy, his fear

of not being able to influence his life, these are all part of being human. However, these aspects of being human—depending upon somebody else, needing somebody else, working cooperatively with somebody else—are all too often viewed as being an expression of being weak, insecure, and fragile.

So my friend goes through life cut off from much of his humanity. He suffers for it. His partner suffers for it. Ultimately, his relationship suffers for it, as well.

That's what much of what the drama is about. The endless tug-of-wars. The pushing, the pulling. Digging your heels in. Defiance. Entrenched positions. Inflexibility.

What's going on beneath the surface? What self-protective mode are we in when we find ourselves part of an endless arm wrestling match with our partner?

Wanting things our way. Trying to hold on to what we have. Believing the only way to keep what we've got is to never let go. Frightened that if we do let go, we'll suffer forever.

Wanting to have a say in our destiny. Always having to believe we can influence the uninfluenceable. Without question, the drama is important to understand for what it expresses about what's going on beneath the surface.

There's much churning beneath the struggle, beneath the need to control, beneath the need to distance ourselves from our sense of vulnerability. In the next two chapters we'll examine more closely two crucial issues that are the underbelly of much of the surface behaviors associated with power and control. These two issues are the fears provoked by emotional intimacy and the fears provoked by our loss of autonomy as we begin to blend our lives with another person.

Make Up to Break Up



Love is letting go of fear.

-Gerald Jampolsky

Bridge-Builder's Tip



*Love, patience, and kindness soothe the fear
that sabotages your relationships.*

Today, she's my very best friend in the whole wide world. But it didn't just happen—no indeed, we both have the emotional scars to prove that. Anyway, we were getting together for the first time in a couple of years. The funny thing was, it seemed as if it had only been a couple of weeks rather than years.

That's the way it had always been for Carly and me. Carly was part of the gang in high school, but to me, she was more than just a friend. We've always made it a point to do more than just check in from time to time. We make time to be with each other, to reconnect, most importantly to celebrate what our lives have become.

Although today we care very deeply about each other, it wasn't always easy for Carly and me. That took time, patience, and an awful lot of understanding. As we were talking on the ride home from the airport, I couldn't help but think back to the old days when our friendship was more like pulling teeth than anything else.

Things didn't just fall into place all at once for us. We didn't always get it, get what came between us, get what made it hard for her to let me be her friend. No, that

understanding came with a lot of tears, a lot of anger, and sadly a lot of time spent apart.

Thankfully, after awhile, the pieces did begin to fit. But initially, I had no understanding of her, her fears, no understanding of how my wanting to be her friend activated those fears. Looking back, it's easy to see how so much of what went on between us in those early years was her testing me every way she could think of. But back then, all I could understand was there was always drama, conflict; there was always us coming together and pulling apart.

In those days it was open season, everything was tested—the genuineness of my feelings, the loyalty I felt towards her. She tested me by seeing just how unlovable she could make herself, waiting and watching, checking out my reaction. Would I stay or would I go?

Now, don't get me wrong. In the beginning, I flunked more of those tests than I passed. But once I caught on, I was better able to *understand* her fears rather than *react* to her behavior. I began to see how fragile she could become. This enabled me to stop judging how she behaved. Finally, I began to understand how her *expressed* feelings and actions were tools of self-protection rather than weapons of mass destruction. Gratefully, I began to see the choices I could exercise—react or respond, personalize her actions and expressed feelings or put them in their appropriate context.

Eventually, disengaging from Carly's behavior became a little easier for me to do. I began to play this game in my mind—was the conflict we were having *me-based* or *fear-based*. If the argument was *me-based*, I knew there was some action I could take to shift my behavior. If the

argument was *fear-based*, I knew I needed to be patient and accepting of where Carly was at emotionally.

The more I was able to disengage from the swirl of chaos, the better able I could see what her fears were. One thing was very clear to me—Carly was absolutely unwilling to build a friendship with me based upon me meeting her emotional needs.

That may sound odd. Why wouldn't someone want another person to be there for them, to care about them? Why would it be so painful for Carly to let me in? Why would she turn the offer of my unconditional love into a raging battlefield?

Little by little I learned that she had good reasons for doing so. The details of her life aren't as important as the impact those details had on her willingness to create a close relationship with me.

For her, it just made more sense to put her efforts into pushing me away, discouraging my efforts at trying to get close, pulling the plug on our connection when it became too intense. I came to accept that she wasn't rejecting me, she was protecting herself. She was protecting herself from being vulnerable. She was protecting herself from being hurt one more time. Carly was only making her world a safe place for *her* to be.

You see, my efforts at wanting to befriend her merely activated many of the fears she had about human friendship. And at the core of those fears, were her fears about needing another human being. To make a long story short, the early lessons she learned about how safe it was to need another person would move any of us to protect ourselves rather than invite someone into our world.

The shame she felt when she would look to her

parents for love and acceptance only to receive ridicule or anger or even worse than that—indifference.

The confusion she would feel everytime she asked for help, only to be made to feel like she was a burden.

The fear she would feel everytime she saw her mother ridiculed by her father for being human.

The terror that would fill her body every time she saw her father explode at her mother for being *too demanding*.

The trepidation she would feel at not knowing whether her mother was in her gentle persona or if she had arisen in her *terminator* persona on any particular day.

The self-doubt and inadequacy that would fill her when she couldn't come up with an explanation other than *she just wasn't worth* taking the time to be parented, to be guided, to be directed in her life.

No, these were not the lessons that would make anybody conclude that needing another person was a rewarding experience. There was no basis for her to feel safe entrusting anybody with the vulnerable parts of who she was.

And so she did what any of us would do. She controlled. She fought. She pushed away. She tested. She stomped. She kicked. She screamed. She tried to run the show all by herself. Carly would do battle with anybody who dared to get close. She would come and go, but mostly just go.

At the time we initially crossed paths, we did battle more often than not. But as time moved on, we were able to find a different emotional space other than her fear, mistrust, and emotional unavailability to build a relationship that we will both value till the day we die.

From the surface, it looks familiar. Two people trapped in a dance of chaos. The cause is seemingly

noble—wanting to connect, to be close. But invariably, all efforts fall short. Their words say that they want to connect. But their behavior reveals a much more fundamental truth about what’s bubbling beneath the surface. Fear. Trepidation. Uncertainty. Ambivalence.

And so it is that the diversionary tactics begin. The arguments. The times spent apart. The coming together. The pledges that we’ll never be this stupid again. But a day later, a week later, a month later, it’s back in your face again. The same patterns, the same methods of avoidance, the same hurt and sorrow.

For how many of you is this true? How many of you feel like you get swallowed up in a cycle of non-specific fears, undeniable dread, explanations of why you should go your separate ways, explanations you barely believe yourself? For how many of you is the appearance of this dread and discomfort the precursor to arguments, chaos, separating and coming back together again? For how many of you does the uncomfortable feelings, the resultant chaos to distract you from those feelings send you into survival mode?

Do you know what I mean by survival mode? The behaviors may vary but the goal is always the same—to be in control. It may be as obvious as breaking up with your partner or taking a *hiatus* from the relationship. It could be more subtle such as giving your partner the silent treatment. Whatever the means, whatever the style, the goal is undeniably the same—to control access, to limit one’s ability to reach you, to lessen the demands for emotional intimacy that you fear are being placed upon you.

Let’s be clear. The need to protect yourself is your highest calling. No person, no thing will ever be placed

above that need. Let’s also be clear that many battles are needlessly waged in the name of self-protection.

Why are these battles needlessly waged? I hope the answer to that question is obvious to you by now. Because you stay focused on the circumstances without talking about the underlying relationship issue.

Can you see how many of the fears you have about needing another person get transformed into the conflicts you *create* to keep that very person away? Can you see how the inevitable fears we all have about emotional intimacy get masked by the chaos and conflicts that divert our attention from expressing those underlying fears.

No, it’s much safer to moralize about our partner’s controlling behavior than it is to have an honest discussion about the fears that get activated when two people get close to one another. It’s much safer to invest our emotional and intellectual energy into creating solutions to the diversionary conflict we create, than building bridges that are based upon our emotional needs and vulnerabilities.

The chaos we create on the surface masks the struggle waged beneath the surface. We can call our partner names. We can label them as controlling or power hungry. The choice is always there to get sucked into the struggle. You can always escalate the battle with your own assertion of control and power.

But that’s not a solution, it’s a reaction. We all kid ourselves that a reaction will get us what we want. You know the truth by now. In order to get what you want, you have to hitch your wagon to a horse other than the one we call *control*.

The horse I’m referring to has been talked about

**Take It to the Limit
One More Time**



Love creates an 'us' without destroying a 'me.'

-Leo Buscaglia

Bridge-Builder's Tip



Honoring your partner rather than fighting for your self-interests will lessen the conflict in your relationship.

"I want to join this club, but I don't know. There's so much they expect from you."

"Like what?" I asked.

"First off, they have this meeting you have to attend. It's the third Thursday of every month. I'm not going to give up my Thursday night just like that."

"It sounds like it's important for you to have a say in how, when, and where you spend your time," I observed.

"Well, yea, of course it is. What if I want to do something the week they have their meeting? I should have the choice of whether I attend their meeting, shouldn't I?"

"You feel like you're giving up a lot by joining this club?" I asked.

"Well, yea, of course I do. And I haven't told you the half of it. There's more to it. They expect you to join a committee to head a yearly volunteer project."

"That disturbs you?" I asked.

"Well, yea. Why are there so many conditions? Look, I'm paying dues to join this club. Isn't that enough? What are all of these hoops that I have to jump through just to become a member of their club?"

"It sure sounds like you believe you have to give up a

lot to join. What's so great about being a member in the first place?"

"I told you all about that before. It will be great for my career. I'll be able to meet a lot of people who can help me out. You know, you can't get anywhere in this field without somebody who will take an interest in your career. And this is where all the *main players* hang out.

"Besides that, it can't hurt my social life any. There are functions that go on throughout the year. And some of them are pretty impressive to attend."

"Well, it sounds like there's a lot for you to gain by joining. Why's it so hard for you?"

"I just don't like being told what to do and when to do it. I feel like somebody else is controlling my life. And if this is what you have to do just to join, then what's it going to be like a year from now?"

"First, they're taking away my Thursday nights. Then they want to assign me to a committee to work with a bunch of people I don't even know. Then, they have this whole list of rules about how you have to act if you're a member of their club.

"It just seems to me that I should be able to have some say in all of this."

"Well, it sounds like a real dilemma. On the one hand, you stand to gain a lot of visibility for your career. You'll have the opportunity to rub elbows with important people who can support your development. You've been complaining lately about how bored you are with your social life. This sounds like just the shot in the arm you were hoping for. You'll even have the opportunity to do some good work for the community.

"On the other hand, you're digging your heels in

because you don't like other people telling you what to do. You're fearful of how much control this club will exert over your life. You feel like your ability to make decisions is being curtailed. You resent having to do things somebody else's way. Most importantly, you don't want to surrender in any way to somebody else."

"Yea, that's right!"

"I can understand how this decision is so hard for you."

The struggle my friend is experiencing is not unique to him. Relationships challenge us to master the delicate balancing act of maintaining and surrendering parts of our individuality. The art of building relationship-bridges challenges us to cooperatively blend two separate lives into a singular entity that honors the needs of each individual, yet preserves the integrity and well-being of the relationship.

Don't get me wrong. I assure you that last sentence was much easier for me to write than it is for any of us to execute. However, it's the secret to the ongoing work we take on in our relationships.

There's no question that the road gets rocky from time to time. And I'm sure that you can see by now, that when the road gets rocky, there's something important going on beneath the surface of the relationship that isn't getting expressed. However, how many of you focus more on the drama created by the power struggle rather than what the power struggle is masking about the underlying relationship issues? For instance...

While you get caught up in *defending the correctness* of your position, do you lose sight of what the drama is expressing about you and your partner and the emotional needs of both?

While you get caught up in creating a space in your relationship that *protects your individuality*, do you compromise the well-being of your relationship?

While you get caught up in *enforcing your position*, do you totally disconnect from what your underlying fears are?

While you get caught up in *justifying the righteousness* of your cause, do you turn your back on the dignity of your partner?

Power and control is fear driven. The more you want to disconnect from feeling your fear, the more you will mask your fear with controlling behavior. One of the many fears that lives beneath all the drama that power and control creates is the fear of losing our autonomy. For instance, think about this conversation I overheard one night while I was visiting my friend Sylvia at her bar.

I was nursing a Miller as I munched on a bowl of mixed nuts. Sylvia was in the midst of some animated conversation with one of the patrons at the bar. I had one eye on the Bulls game on the big screen TV, but what had really caught my attention was the conversation going on at the table next to me between two gentlemen.

"Then she said, 'I would appreciate it very much if you would trim your mustache. It tickles me when you kiss me.'

"I told her I wouldn't do it. That I would trim my mustache when I was ready to trim my mustache, not when she tells me to. When she asked me why I wouldn't do it, I simply told her, 'Because I can't have you believe I'm going to do something for you everytime you ask me to. I need you to know that when I do something it's because that's what I want to do.'"

His friend nodded his head as he said, "I know what

you mean. I just went through something similar the other night with Laurie.”

He continued, “Laurie had been staying away from me lately. All we seemed to do was argue about how much time we were going to spend together. Well, I figured if she was going to be that way, I would fix her. I knew she called me every night at 9:00 p.m. sharp, so, when she called me one night, I let the answering machine pick up the phone.

“She spent the next three hours trying to get ahold of me but I wouldn’t answer the phone.

“The next day when we did talk to each other, she asked me where I was last night. I told her I decided to go out to a couple of bars. Let me tell you, she was out of her mind with jealousy. She became enraged. She asked me how I could do that to her. Her exact words were ‘How do you expect me to trust you if you’re going to act like this?’”

The man finished his story by telling his friend, “Of course, I showed her. I told her that I didn’t care whether she ever trusted me or not. That seemed to solve it right there!”

Trimming mustaches. Going to bars. Is that the root of what’s going in these guys’ relationships? Or is it more likely that there’s some struggle taking place between them and their partners that they haven’t even begun to talk about? Is it more likely that the power struggles that they’ve created mask the fears that they have about trying to cooperatively solve the problems in their relationships?

Can you guess what they’re frightened of? Frightened that they won’t get their way? Frightened that they won’t get what they want when they want it? Frightened that

they’ll lose some essential part of who they are if they give into their partner’s *demands*? Frightened that if they give in one time, they’ll lose and their partner will win? Frightened if they give in just this one time, they’ll always have to give in?

These are many of the fears that bubble beneath the surface when two people try to blend their lives. It’s only natural to want to cling to our sense of autonomy, our own way of doing things. Yet, it’s this very natural desire to want to hold on to who we are, how we do what we do, that becomes the precipitant for so much of what gets fought over without ever being acknowledged.

There’s no question that the fears need to be honored. They can’t be wished away, talked away, or even threatened away. The best any of us can do is acknowledge that the fears are present. If you can acknowledge to yourself and to your partner what you’re so frightened of, then you can begin to support rather than fight with each other.

You see, that’s the only way you can defuse the situation. Supporting each other. Support means compromise. Support means shifting priorities. Support means balancing the relationship’s needs against the individual needs of each person. Support means being there for each other rather than competing with each other.

That’s the biggest shift that needs to be made. Shifting from seeing your interests as competing to creating shared interests that support the well-being of the relationship. That’s the ultimate art of blending your life with your partner. Creating an environment of cooperation rather than competition.

So let’s take a look at your relationships. Let’s see what shifts need to be made to make your relationship less

