



Program Manual Weeks 5 & 6

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Homework – Week 5

1. Practice mindfulness formally for 45 minutes every day for at least 6 days this week using Sitting Meditation CD and alternating every other day with the Body Scan CD or the Yoga CD.
2. Practice mindful sitting meditation for at least 15-20 minutes on Body Scan and Yoga CD days.
3. Read and reflect upon “Insight Dialogue” article
4. Notice the interactions you have during the week with significant others in your life. Be open to acknowledging patterns and feelings you find yourself in with others.
5. Continue to cultivate your intention to increase your level of awareness during daily activities such as: eating, showering, brushing your teeth, washing dishes, taking out the garbage, reading to the kids. . . and especially during interactions with others.... ***These relationship dances can teach us a lot about ourselves!***

Reflections

☯ Each step is life, each step is joy and peace.
- Thich Nhat Hanh

☯ It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.
- St. Francis of Assisi

☯ When we walk slowly, the world can fully appear. Not only are the creatures not frightened away by our haste or aggression, but the fine detail of fern and flower, or devastation and disruption become visible.
- Joan Halifax



Insight Dialogue

Developed by Gregory Kramer

(Note: This material comes from the website of the Metta Foundation (www.metta.org). It is hoped that the reader will find this brief overview intriguing and will investigate this powerful practice further through contacting with the Metta Foundation (a non-profit organization, offering workshops and trainings on a Dana-basis) or through purchasing and reading Gregory Kramer's books on the subject.)

Insight Dialogue is an interpersonal meditation practice. It brings the mindfulness and tranquility of silent meditation directly into our experience with other people. As humans, we are relational beings; as we begin to wake up, clarity and freedom can illuminate our relationships with others.

Insight Dialogue draws from traditional Buddhist wisdom, but it is not a Buddhist practice in the religious sense. There is nothing about the practice that would preclude people of any faith or belief system from participating. In Insight Dialogue we come face-to-face with core human experiences.

Insight Dialogue is based on the Four Noble Truths. Along with the biological and personal components of suffering, suffering has interpersonal components: separation from people you love, being with people who irritate you, unsatisfied longings. Interpersonal suffering is an important aspect of all suffering. The hungers for pleasure in relationships, to be seen or admired by others, and to hide or escape—these are all causes suffering, which is then sustained by confusion and habit.

Release from interpersonal suffering is possible. We can practice letting go of interpersonal entanglements in the same way we got entangled—interpersonally. Insight Dialogue provides a way to do that: an interpersonal form of practice.

In the Buddhist tradition, the foundations of the path are understood to involve morality, tranquility, and wisdom. The same elements can be traced in other spiritual traditions. If we emphasize these elements we will be building on a time-tested foundation.

Because Insight Dialogue works with our relational lives, it also emphasizes mutuality. Morality, tranquility, and wisdom become especially important in their interpersonal aspects.

An interpersonal practice will have different emphases than a primarily solitary practice. Some of the refined states of stillness encountered in traditional silent meditation will be less prominent. Interpersonal practices involve speaking or interacting with others, leaving behind the silence that is the most obvious feature of traditional meditation.

Morality is the foundation of all spiritual progress. An interpersonal path must be founded on morality. Without the human kindness and respect that underlie morality—and without the ease of a clear conscience—all deeper wisdom remains an idea, another delusional attachment.

The three moral components of Buddhism's eightfold path—right speech, action, and living—address our relational lives. Speaking implies listening; the two together describe relationship. Right action refers to actions in relation to others: refraining from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. Right living refers to making a living in an honest and decent way.

The basics of moral communication are straightforward: abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, and from idle chatter. Speech should also be true, useful, spoken at the proper time, and spoken with loving kindness. Along with treating others the way you yourself would like to be treated, these moral principles are essential to the smooth functioning of any human system. These are also foundational to Insight Dialogue.

Tranquility is another key element of the eightfold path. A mind at ease and a calm heart are essential to seeing things as they actually are. Tension distorts the lens through which we see the world. We view everything from the perspective of our tension: if we are hungry, for example, we have eyes only for food.

Without tranquility, the mind cannot dwell with any experience long enough to know its nature. Without knowing the nature of experience we are unlikely to abandon self-centered fabrications; we cannot be fully compassionate to others or ourselves.

Wisdom—seeing things as they actually are—is the third element of any path to enlightenment. We can see things as they actually are when the mind is calm and alert. The more calm and alert we become, the more clearly we see the nature of the mind and the nature of the world. Interpersonal practice supports this clear seeing by cultivating mindfulness and calm concentration.

Insight Dialogue also involves inquiry. Wisdom is supported by inquiring into the nature of reality and dwelling intimately with teachings that reveal that nature.

Wisdom grows in interpersonal practice by direct experience of interpersonal suffering, hungers, and freedom. Meditators experience their thoughts and emotions as impermanent, stressful, and impersonal. They experience firsthand the ease that arises when the mind ceases its habitual clinging. No intellectual understanding can replace this direct apprehension of stress and freedom. In Insight Dialogue, these insights unfold in mutual rather than solitary practice.

Much of our contact with people—emotional, intellectual, or otherwise—occurs through language. In Insight Dialogue, verbal communication is a primary medium of practice. Language brings into our practice the force of intellect and the associative power of words. Language also reveals limiting beliefs, desires, grasping, and fears. Because Insight Dialogue works directly with language and relationship, it can bring about profound transformation in individuals and groups.

The impact of a meditative practice should be discernable by the wise, reflected visibly in the human decency of the practitioner. Insight Dialogue is an interpersonal practice that seeks to meet these criteria.

Traditional silent meditation has different forms of practice, each guided by different instructions. Insight Dialogue also has meditation guidelines to support meditators as they

change their habitual ways of interacting with others. Each guideline can be used in daily life as a simple reminder to calm down, become aware, and notice and release old habits. In Insight Dialogue practice, the same guidelines work together to point the way toward profound spiritual awakening.

The practice involves discussion and contemplation of profound subject matter—fear, joy, desire, and the inevitability of change, for example. The content of an Insight Dialogue discussion is not the primary focus, however. Becoming aware of how the heart-mind functions are at the core of this practice.

What habits hold us captive? What is left when these habits fall away?

We can pay attention to our bodies and to the ongoing stories we tell ourselves. We can observe our reactive emotions. It is not easy. The mind is very quick. Reactions feel automatic. But as a result of practice, we can calm down. We discover we can become more alert, better able to notice the movements of the body-mind. The Insight Dialogue guidelines support us as we notice these things, release attachments, and relax out of stresses.

The first steps help us calm down and pay attention to whatever we find in the emerging moment. As we move into dialogue, our spoken exchanges are simply a part of what is emerging in the moment. We become aware of the thinking and emotional processes of our body-minds, even while we engage with each other. As we calm down, our sensitivity heightens and our awareness broadens.

(In this article), each guideline is introduced briefly. The guidelines are easiest to understand when they are read in order. Each contains the seed of all the others, but they do build on each other in sequence. If you read these descriptions mindfully, you will gain some impression of the practice. But Insight Dialogue is experiential in nature. It may be helpful to bracket any conclusions about the practice until you have experienced it—ideally, with the support of a trained Insight Dialogue facilitator. Retreats are offered worldwide (see ID Retreat Schedule at: www.metta.org and click on “events”), and local groups are also available in many places.

To pause is to stop some activity temporarily, to let it go.

The body-mind is astonishingly sensitive. Its habit is to grasp at whatever touches it: sights, sounds, touches, smells, tastes, and thoughts. It grasps to understand: What is this? It grasps to hold onto pleasures, to wrestle with pain, and to obsess about fears. Seeing another person, it grasps to hold her or to push her away, to know him or to be known by him, to touch, to fix, or to adjust.

When we Pause we move from grasping to non-grasping, from clinging to non-clinging. This movement is the pivot point to freedom.

Waking up from habit mind is the first step on any path. The first instruction in Insight Dialogue is Pause. Step off the train. Dwell a moment with immediate experience before speaking, or while listening. The pause is mindfulness. It is an interruption of a lifetime of habitual forward pressure. It opens the door to the present moment.

It takes energy to change the momentum of a heavy moving object; it also takes energy to interrupt the habitual push of the reactive mind. The energy needed is called right effort: the intention to calm down and wake up. Just one moment of clarity can open the door to new possibilities.

Strong intention is essential to cultivating greater awareness—but even strong intention needs some way of working with in the habits of the heart-mind. Without the support of a practice, it is difficult to do anything other than what we have always done: live in the trance of conditioned emotions and thoughts.

So we practice. Attending to the breath or to the body pauses the torrent of habit. How is the body, right now? When we get lost in the fabrications of the mind, carried away by emotions, we can pause and become mindful. The body can ground us in mindfulness. Practice and gentle guidance are necessary.

We can observe the pleasant and unpleasant qualities of experience, observe the rising and passing of thoughts and moods—just passing phenomena. We may suddenly notice that we are not, in fact, these phenomena that come and go. Mental phenomena move more quickly than bodily sensations, however; to be aware of them without falling into identification takes agility and practice.

We can Pause before we speak, while we are speaking, or after we are done speaking. The Pause can be long or short according to circumstances. It is not about time; it is about mindfulness. Generally speaking, when the emotion is strong, the pause is long. This is not a rule, however, only starting point. When mindfulness is well established, the pause takes almost no time.

Without pausing and becoming alert and aware, there is no choice, only habit. Habits of speech, like all relational habits, simply pour forth into the moment. Without choice, there is no change. Without change, we remain—and the world remains—enmeshed in identification, loneliness, fear, and wanting.

The Pause may reveal judgments, anger, stress, fear, or longing. Perhaps we are ready to release these painful reactions. But positive reactions, reactions that feel good, can also overtake us: a reaction of excitement perhaps, or enjoying something in a way that takes into our own automatic story—and out of the present. It's as if some emotional motor that had been switched on.

In Insight Dialogue meditation, meditators are invited into a conversation in which we contemplate together the essential truths of our lives. These contemplations can be stimulating and enticing; they can foster emotional reactivity even as they reveal attachments and fears. When the facilitator interrupts these conversations by ringing a bell, the meditators are reminded to step out of reaction and into awareness. The external prompt to Pause supports the practice while meditators get the hang of it.

When we Pause, two things happen. We stop: we stop our automatic speaking and thinking, and we stop the momentum of our conditioned habits. This is an enormous step. Each time we pause, in the moment we pause, we are creating a new habit: the habit of mindfulness. We are training the mind to dwell wakefully in the moment.

As practice deepens, the power of silence grows. In the beginning, the Pause reveals reactivity: our conditioned responses, automatic and un-free. This changes. The Pause is transformative. Eventually, we do not inhabit the stress, the grasping, and the constructions of the overactive mind; rather, we know these things as they stand side by side with mindfulness, wisdom, and the possibility of freedom. A choice opens: constructions and delusion, or mindfulness and wisdom?

The mindful Pause often finds us in the middle of habit-driven thought or emotional reaction. Stirred by the emotional spike of a recent interchange or by the ongoing rush of thought, the body is agitated. If we do not meet these experiences skillfully, we will be flung back into unaware and identified activity. We need further support.

The second instruction is Relax. When we Pause into awareness, we also Relax the body and mind. This meditation instruction reflects tranquility, an important factor on the path to awakening. At first, it is as direct and simple as it sounds. We bring awareness to those parts of the body where we tend to accumulate tension, and allow that tension to relax.

Pause and Relax establish the traditional meditative framework of mindfulness and tranquility. In Pause, we step out of habit and meet the moment afresh. We awaken out of identification with reaction. We become aware of the body, emotions, and thoughts—without clinging. In Relax, we meet our immediate experience with acceptance, receptivity, and kindness.

Whenever we recognize tension, we can choose ease. There is no other practice, really, than this letting go. We only need to choose. Choosing the ease over and over again is the practice. Our formal support for making this choice—for remembering that this choice is available to us—is one simple word: Relax. This guidance is not offered to the body only, nor to the mind only. The body and mind move together, not two but one. When the body relaxes, the mind calms down. When the mind calms down, the body relaxes.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could just tell our bodies to relax, and they would obey? Many headaches and ulcers would vanish; we would be happier, and live longer. But it just doesn't work that way. Tense muscles take a while to release. Adrenaline takes time to be cleared from the blood stream. The reminder to Relax cannot be obeyed instantly, despite our best hopes and intentions. Patience and practice are necessary.

Thoughts and the mental component of emotions also have a kind of momentum; they do not cease their forward push simply because we have become aware of them. The habits of the mind run deep, fast, and with a lifetime of energy; stopping and settling into the moment with ease does not always come easily.

We can meet our disordered thoughts and feelings with acceptance. We need not run away from discomfort, confusion, fear, unhappiness, or judgments. Accept is to the mind as Relax is to the body.

When we notice the signs of tension in the body—a tightness in the belly, or the sinking feeling of sadness—awareness can remain soft and present while the feeling unfolds. The tendency to fly backwards in aversion to the unpleasant sensation is replaced with the conscious reminder to Relax, to accept. In this change, old habits of continuing or amplifying

tension are replaced with new habits of ease and acceptance. In this way, Relax heals what the Pause reveals. Thoughts rise and fall as excitements come and go during interpersonal engagement, but the mind does not identify with these reactions.

When thoughts are met with acceptance, we are free to respond appropriately instead of reacting habitually. This acceptance, when fully ripe and unconditional, is love. This is not emotional love, but the simple lovingkindness of total non-aversion (*adosa*, in Pali). It is the heart-mind that is receptive to experience and activated in natural kindness, or *metta* (the Pali word for lovingkindness that is the namesake of the Metta Foundation).

When thoughts and emotional reactions are met with acceptance, with Relax, with *metta*, they lose their motive power. There is no clinging to the thought or emotion, and no judgment. This simple kindness, to ourselves and others, is the doorway to transformation and freedom.

Now we come to the third interpersonal meditation instruction: Open. With Open, awareness extends to everything around us. Pause and Relax could be instructions for internal individual meditation, but Open invites us to extend this accepting mindfulness beyond the boundaries of our skin to encompass the external world. This extension opens the door to mutuality, and is the basis for interpersonal meditation.

When we extend awareness beyond the skin-encapsulated self, our meditation grows to include other people and our surroundings. We meet other people with the same mindfulness and calm acceptance with which we are learning to meet our internal experience. If we are meditating in dialogue with one other person, we meet this person with wakeful acceptance. If we are meditating with a room full of people, the awareness opens wide to receive the whole. With mindfulness of both the internal and external, we are aware of the ever-changing relational moment.

We can begin to explore Open by becoming aware of the body sitting, just as it is. With a focused inward awareness, we find some place where attention is drawn because of a sensation, perhaps the touch of the body upon the chair or cushion, or a point of discomfort in the hip or knees. By bringing full awareness to that area or point, mindfulness becomes stabilized there. Now, right at that point, we meet this sensation with acceptance. This awareness is very precise, but very kind. We then begin to expand that kindly awareness to the rest of the body, until the entire body is saturated with receptive mindfulness.

Now we simply do not stop there. In Open, we allow awareness to extend beyond the body. We may first notice the expansive quality of the wider sense of hearing. If our eyes were closed, we might open them and notice that the entire room is in our field of awareness. We may notice that the person (or people) in front of us are also in our field of awareness. We are simply and fully present with others. The same kindly, accepting, mindful awareness that was touched by internal phenomena of the body-mind is now touched by the other. In Open, awareness encompasses the external as well as the internal. It is wider, more spacious.

While some traditional meditation practices encourage a wide open awareness, most do not include awareness of the specific humans we are with—they do not open the door to encounter in co-meditation. In Insight Dialogue, we open this door.

With non-clinging, the mind learns to move freely between internal and external experience.

This pliable mind state is important to all meditation practice, but it is especially important in Insight Dialogue. When someone speaks, awareness may open outward in hearing. Emotions or ideas may momentarily pull us into identification and reaction. Aware of our reactivity, we can Pause, stabilizing awareness in the body. Opening again—perhaps as our partner is still speaking—awareness may now include both our body and the other’s voice. In the silence that follows, awareness may turn inward, noticing delicate reverberations of thought. As we practice, we become able to move more easily between internal and external awareness. These inner and outer shifts can be known by mindfulness without grasping and identification. Pleasant or unpleasant, we remain aware—not caught up, but aware.

When something touches awareness, the fundamental experience is one of contact and of consciousness arising from this contact. It makes no difference whether the awareness is of an internal thought or of something external, such as hearing another speak. It is still “me” experiencing this. But right at the point of contact, in the moment of contact, this subject/object relationship vanishes. It is no longer experienced as “me knowing.” The once rigid boundaries of self and other soften; both are known simply as experience.

The open mind is receptive and non-clinging. As self-concern quietly drifts away, opening becomes more complete. In fullness of opening there is no boundary between the internal and external. There is nowhere to go; there is only awareness. The only boundary was the sense of self, which we find is an illusion.

We have established the core of the practice:

🌀 **mindfulness**—Pause;

🌀 **calm acceptance**—Relax;

🌀 **mutuality**—Open.

This is how we meet the moment: awake, loving, and spacious. But what do we do when we find this moment is changing uncontrollably? Or conversely, when the predictable, habit-driven world hardly seems to be changing at all?

The fourth meditation instruction in Insight Dialogue is Trust Emergence. With this instruction we are invited into the numinous but observable impermanence of all experience.

Trust Emergence is rooted in wisdom. That is, it supports seeing things as they are—unstable, and far more complex and fluid than the mundane glance can ever know. The dynamic quality of experience demands a robust practice; it also provides the object of that practice: change itself. Trust Emergence invites us to dive headlong into the tumbling moment by guiding us in relating to each other and to the totality of experience.

Pause-Relax-Open establish the mind state for being fully present in the mutual, emergent moment. In this vibrating and aware moment, we listen and speak. In this vivid state of mind, we communicate. The Insight Dialogue meditation instructions that directly address this are Listen Deeply-Speak the Truth; we will focus first on Listen Deeply.

Listen Deeply opens the senses, heart, and mind to receive the moment fully. To Listen Deeply is to listen with mindfulness, surrendering fully to the unfolding words and presence of our co-meditators. Grounded in clear awareness and sensitive to the speaker's offering, we are a receptive field touched by the words, emotions, and energies of our fellow human beings.

Up to this point, we have been exploring how we can dwell in meditative awareness with others. As we Pause, we can Relax and accept what we find, and Open our awareness to encompass external as well as internal experience. We Trust Emergence, resting in the flux of experience; we meet the delight and the insecurity of change without knowing what the next moment will bring. Listening Deeply to our inner voice and to the voices of others, we come to the precipice of outward action.

Attuned to the moment, we Speak the Truth. Communication inevitably arises in any moment of emergent interpersonal contact. Seeing and being seen yield an emotional interchange, with or without words. Bodily proximity generates a flow of energy between people. It is uniquely powerful, however, to meet each other through the power of language. Whenever we speak, some bit of the heart-mind is revealed; every day, through the mystery of language, we touch each other mind to mind, heart to heart. The guideline Speak the Truth grounds this mutuality in morality and mindfulness.

Keeping in mind the six Insight Dialogue meditation instructions as separate elements provides a strong support for practice. This is especially true at the beginning, when we need the support of particular instructions to counter our abundance of interpersonal habits. It is also true whenever greater energy or clarity is called for.

The individual guidelines are also easier to bring into ordinary daily practice. For example, we can remind ourselves to Relax or to Trust Emergence at any time. When our minds are scattered, or our hearts agitated, a specific, clear focus can help us find the meditative moment. Pause can help us step out of the preoccupations of a frenzied mind, calling up the clarity of prior practice and transforming agitated energy into wakefulness. When emotional attachments arise, a reminder to Relax can help us calm the body and meet pain and grasping with acceptance and love. Some times are better than others for the spaciousness of Open—perhaps our distracted state would only become more diffuse.

Trust Emergence may enable us to ride a wild wave of agitation as a fresh and adaptable foundation for clear awareness. Listen Deeply may open us beyond shrunken patterns of self-concern and receive the words—and the humanity—of family members, friends, and coworkers.

As six individual instructions, the guidelines provide touch points or reminders for integrating practice into our daily living. When we use them, everyday life can become an opportunity for real insight. Insight Dialogue groups sometimes discuss these experiences as a part of their practice time.

Pause—call forth to slow down, to drop ignorance, to see more deeply, and to brighten the mind.

Relax—call forth in the face of stress or challenging truths, and to bring ease to the body-

mind.

Open—call to move out of isolated practice, loops, and selfish patterns, to be out of contraction.

Trust Emergence—call forth for energy, to end doubt, and to ride the moment.

Listen Deeply—call into inquiry, receptivity, and to extend the heart.

Speak the Truth—call forth to end stasis, to enhance generosity and courage, to bring meditative interaction.

Now that you have an understanding of the Insight Dialogue process, you may be interested in looking at ways of furthering or embracing this practice.

The Metta Foundation offers a number of ways to guide you including retreats, online programs and international groups that meet regularly. For more information, please (visit our website) www.metta.org



Homework - Week 6

1. Practice mindfulness formally for 45 minutes every day for 6 days this week using Sitting Meditation CD and alternating every other day with the Body Scan or the Yoga CD.
2. Practice mindful sitting meditation for at least 15-20 minutes a day on Body Scan and Yoga CD days.
3. Read and reflect upon the article by psychologist and sex therapist, David Schnarch about the deeper workings of intimate relationships (also see the link at the end to an optional interview by him)
4. Continue to cultivate your intention to increase your level of awareness during daily activities such as: eating, showering, brushing your teeth, washing dishes, taking out the garbage, reading to the kids as well as awareness of the body and opportunities to practice yoga and cultivate mindfulness during the day.

Reflections

"Wild Geese"

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting-
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Mary Oliver, Dream Work, Grove Atlantic Inc., 1986 & New and Selected Poems, Beacon Press, 1992.



Passionate Marriage: Forever an Oxymoron?

By David Schnarch, Ph. D.

Betty, a designer in a high-powered advertising firm, and Donald, a college professor bucking for tenure, had been married for 15 years. They spent the first 10 minutes in my office invoking the standard litany of our times as an explanation for their lousy sex life--they were both just too busy. Not that this focus precluded blaming each other for their difficulties.

Betty gets home from work so late that we barely see each other anymore, let alone have sex, said Donald resentfully. "We're collaborators in child raising and mortgage paying, but we're hardly lovers anymore. I've taken over a lot of the household chores, but she often doesn't get home until 9 p.m.--and most nights, she says she's just 'too tired' for sex."

Betty sighed in exasperation. "Sometimes I think Donald wants me to leap from the front door to the bedroom and take care of him," she said. "But I'm being swallowed up by a sea of obligations--my boss, the kids, the house, the dog, Donald, everybody wants a big chunk of me. Right now, I feel there's nothing left of me for me, let alone for him. He just doesn't get it that I need more time for myself before I'm interested in sex."

I asked them to be specific about how the stress from their very demanding lives revealed itself in bed--exactly what happened, and in what order, when they had sex. Several moments of awkward silence and a number of false starts ensued before another, much more intimate, level of their marital landscape revealed itself.

Betty looked hard at Donald, then at me. "The fact of the matter is, he doesn't even know how to kiss me!" she said grimly.

How would you know? It's been so long since you let me kiss you! hissed Donald.

When I asked them to describe their foreplay, Betty looked embarrassed and Donald sounded frustrated. "During sex, she turns her face to the side, and I end up kissing her cheek. She won't kiss me on the mouth. I think she just wants to get sex over with as fast as possible. Not that we have much sex." Betty shook her head in distaste. "He always just rams his tongue halfway down my throat--I feel like I can't breathe. Besides, why would I want to kiss him when I can't even talk to him! We don't communicate at all."

Over the years, I've worked with many couples who complain bitterly that the other kisses--or touches, fondles, caresses, strokes--the "wrong" way. I used to take these complaints at face value, trying to help the couple solve their problems through various forms of marital bargaining and forbearance--listen empathically, give a little to get a little, do something for me and I'll do something for you--teach them the finer points of sexual technique and send them home with detailed prescriptions (which they usually didn't follow) until I realized that their sexual dissatisfactions did not stem from ignorance, ineptitude or a "failure to

communicate." On the contrary, "communicating" is exactly what Donald and Betty were already doing very well, only neither much liked the "message" the other was sending. The way this couple kissed each other, indeed their "vocabulary" of foreplay, constituted a very rich and purposeful dialogue, replete with symbolic meanings. Through this finely nuanced, but unmistakable language, both partners expressed their feelings about themselves and each other and negotiated what the entire sexual encounter would be like--the degree and quality of eroticism, connection and intimacy, or their virtual absence.

Donald and Betty had tried marital therapy before, but their therapist had taken the usual approach of dealing with each complaint individually--job demands, parenting responsibilities, housework division and sexual difficulties--as if they were all separate but equal situational problems. Typically, the clinician had tried to help Donald and Betty resolve their difficulties through a skill-building course on compromise, setting priorities, time management and "mirroring" each other for mutual validation, acceptance and, of course, better communication. The net result of all this work was that they felt even worse than before, even more incompetent, inadequate and neurotic, when sex didn't improve.

Knowing that Betty and Donald were most certainly communicating something via their gridlocked sexual styles, I asked them, "Even if you are not talking, what do you think you might actually be 'saying' to each other when you kiss?" After a minute, Donald said resentfully, "She's telling me I'm inadequate, that I'm not a good lover, I can't make her happy and she doesn't love me anyway." Betty defensively countered, "He's saying he wants me to do everything exactly his way and if I don't just cave in, he'll go ahead and do what he likes, whether I like it or not!" I asked her why she was willing to have intercourse at all if she didn't even want to kiss him. "Because he is such a sullen pain in the ass if I don't have sex," Betty replied without hesitation. "Besides, I like having orgasms."

Donald and Betty perfectly illustrated the almost universal, but widely unrecognized, reality that sex does not merely constitute "part" of a relationship, but literally and metaphorically embodies the depth and quality of the couple's entire emotional connection. We think of foreplay as a way couples establish connection, but more often it's a means of establishing disconnection. Betty was a living rebuttal of the common gender stereotype that all women always want more foreplay; she cut it short so they could get sex done with as quickly as possible--and Donald understood. Donald returned the compliment by "telling" Betty he knew she didn't like him much, but he was going to get something out of her anyway--with or without her presence, so to speak.

Clearly, foreplay for this couple was not simply a mechanical technique for arousal, amenable to the engineering, skill-building approach still dictated by popular sex manuals. Nor were they likely to improve sex just by being more "open" with each other, "asking for what they wanted"--another popular remedy in self-help guides and among marital therapists--as if they weren't already "telling" each other what each did and did not want, and what each was or was not willing to give. Instead of trying to spackle over these normal and typical "dysfunctional" sexual patterns with a heavy coat of how-to lessons, I have learned that it makes much more sense to help the couple analyze their behavior, to look for the meaning of what they were already doing before they focused on changing the mechanics.

Rather than "work on their relationship" as if it were some sort of hobby or home-building project, Betty and Donald, like every other couple I have seen, needed to understand that

what they did in bed was a remarkably salient and authentic expression of themselves and their feeling for each other. The nuances of their kissing style may have seemed trivial compared to the screaming fights they had about money or the long days of injured silence, but in fact it was an open window into their deepest human experience--who they were as people, what they really felt about each other, how much intimacy they were willing to risk with each other and how much growing up they still had to do.

As in any elaborate and nuanced language, the small details of sex carry a wealth of meaning, so while Donald and Betty were surprised that I focused on a "little thing" like kissing, rather than the main event--frequency of intercourse, for example--they were startled to find how truly revealing it was, about their personal histories as well as their marriage. I told Betty I thought she had probably come from an intrusive and dominating family that never dealt openly or successfully with anxiety and conflict. "So now, you have a hard time using your mouth to tell Donald not to be so overbearing, rather than turning it away to keep him from getting inside it. You've become very good at taking evasive action to avoid being overwhelmed," I said. "You're right about my family," Betty said softly, "we kids didn't have any privacy or freedom in my family, and we were never allowed to complain openly about anything--just do what we were told, and keep our mouths shut."

Like grains of sand

funneling toward the "narrows" of an hourglass,

marriage forces couples into a vortex

of emotional struggle, where, to grow up,

each must hold on to himself or herself,

in the context of each other.

On the other hand, I said, I imagined Donald had never felt worthwhile in his family's eyes. He had spent a lot of time trying to please his parents without knowing what he was supposed to do, but he got so little response that he never learned how to read other people's cues--he just forged blindly ahead, trying to force his way into people's good graces and prove himself without waiting to see how he was coming across. "Come back here and give me a chance to prove myself!" his behavior screamed. "Are you so used to being out of contact with the people you love that you can successfully ignore how out of sync you are with them?" I asked. To Donald's credit, he didn't dodge the question, though he seemed dazed by the speed with which we'd zoomed in on such a core issue.

Nevertheless, Donald and Betty discovered that their discomfort in describing, in exact detail, what was done by whom, when, how and where, was outweighed by their fascination at what they were finding out about themselves--far more than was remotely possible from a seminar on sex skills. Betty, for example, had suggested that once kissing had stopped and intercourse had started, her sexual life was just fine--after all, she had orgasms and she "liked" them. But when I asked her to describe her experience of rear-entry intercourse --a common practice with this couple--she did not make it sound like a richly sensual, erotic or even particularly pleasant encounter. During the act, she positioned herself on elbows and knees, her torso held tense and rigidly parallel to the mattress while she protectively braced her body for a painful

battering. Instead of moving into each thrust from Donald, she kept moving away from him, as if trying to escape. He, on the other hand, clasped her hips and kept trying to pull her to him, but never got a feeling of solid physical or emotional connection.

In spite of the fact that both were able to reach orgasm--widely considered the only significant measurement of successful sex--Betty and Donald's minute-by-minute description of what they did made it obvious that a lot more was happening than a technically proficient sex act. I told Betty I was glad she had told me these details, which all suggested that she thought it was pretty hopeless trying to work out conflicts with people she loved. "I suspect you've gotten used to swallowing your disappointment and sadness without telling anybody, and just getting along by yourself as best you can," I said. "It sounds very lonely," At that point, much to Donald's shock, Betty burst into tears. I said to Donald that he still seemed resigned to chase after people he loved to get them to love and accept him. "I guess you just don't believe they could possibly love you without being pressured into it. In fact, I think both of you use sex to confirm the negative beliefs you already have about yourselves."

For several seconds Donald looked at his lap, while Betty quietly cried in the next chair. "I suppose we must be pretty screwed up, huh?" Betty snuffled. "Nope," I said. "Much of what's going on between you is not only understandable, it's predictable, normal and even healthy--although it doesn't look or feel that way right now." They were describing the inevitable struggle involved in seeking individual growth and self-development within the context of marriage.

Betty said she used to enjoy sex until she became over-involved with her job, but I suggested that the case was more likely the reverse--that the demands of her job gave her a needed emotional distance from Donald. Her conscious desire to "escape" from Donald stemmed from emotional fusion with him--she found herself invaded by his worries, his anxieties, his insecurities and his needs as if she had contracted a virus from him. "You may feel that you don't have enough inside you to satisfy his needs and still remain a separate, whole person yourself," I said. "Your work is a way of keeping some 'self' for yourself, to prevent being absorbed by him. That's the same reason you turn your head away when he tries to kiss you."

I suggested that Donald's problem was a complementary version of the same thing: in order to forestall the conviction that he had no worthwhile self at all, he felt he had to pressure Betty, or anybody he loved, to demonstrate they loved him--over and over. Donald, of course, did not see that he was as important to Betty as she was to him, but their mutual need for each other was really a function of two fragile and insecure selves shoring each other up.

Like most of us, neither Betty nor Donald was very mature when they married; neither had really learned the grownup ability to soothe their own emotional anxieties or find their own internal equilibrium during the inevitable conflicts and contretemps of marriage. And, like most couples after a few years of marriage, they made up for their own insecurities by demanding that the other provide constant, unconditional acceptance, empathy, reciprocity and validation to help them each sustain a desired self-image. "I'm okay if, but only if, you think I'm okay," they said, in effect, to each other, and worked doubly hard both to please and be pleased, hide and adapt, shuffle and dance, smile and agree. The more time passes, the more frightened either partner is of letting the other know who he or she really is.

This joint back-patting compact works for a while to keep each partner feeling secure, but

eventually the game becomes too exhausting to play. Gradually, partners become less inclined to please each other, more resentful of the cost of continually selling themselves out for ersatz peace and tranquility, less willing to put out or give in. To the extent that neither partner has really grown up and is willing to confront his or her own contribution to this growing impasse, however, would prefer to fight with or avoid the other. It's less frightening to blame our mates than to face ourselves. The ensuing "symptoms"--low sexual desire, sexual boredom, control battles, heavy silences--often take on the coloring of a deathly struggle for selfhood, fought on the implicit assumption that there is only room for one whole self in the marriage. "It's going to be my way or no way, my self or no self!" partners say in effect, in bed and out--leading to a kind of classic standoff.

Far from being signs of a deeply "pathological" marital breakdown, however, as Donald and Betty were convinced, this stalemate is a normal and inevitable process of growth built into every marriage, as well as a golden opportunity. Like grains of sand inexorably funneling toward the "narrows" of an hourglass, marriage predictably forces couples into a vortex of emotional struggle, where each dares to hold onto himself or herself in the context of each other, in order to grow up. At the narrowest, most constricting part of the funnel--where alienation, stagnation, infidelity, separation and divorce typically occur--couples can begin not only to find their individual selves, but in the process acquire a far greater capacity for love, passion and intimacy with each other than they ever thought possible.

At this excruciating point in a marriage, every couple has four options: each partner can try to control the other (Donald's initial ploy, which did not succeed), accommodate even more (Betty had done so to the limits of her tolerance), withdraw physically or emotionally (Betty's job helped her to do this) or learn to soothe his or her own anxiety and not get hijacked by the anxiety of the other. In other words, they could work on growing up, using their marriage as a kind of differentiation fitness center par excellence.

Differentiation is a lifelong process by which we become more uniquely ourselves by maintaining ourselves in relationship with those we love. It allows us to have our cake and eat it too, to experience fully our biologically based drives for both emotional connection and individual self-direction. The more differentiated we are--the stronger our sense of self-definition and the better we can hold ourselves together during conflicts with our partners--the more intimacy we can tolerate with someone we love without fear of losing our sense of who we are as separate beings. This uniquely human balancing act is summed up in the striking paradox of our species, that we are famously willing both to die for others, and to die rather than be controlled by others.

To make a vital contact by feeling and experiencing each other's reality, I suggested that Betty and Donald simply caress each other's hands and faces while attending to what they were doing and feeling.

Of all the many schools of hard experience life has to offer, perhaps none but marriage is so perfectly calibrated to help us differentiate--if we can steel ourselves to take advantage of its rigorous lessons, and not be prematurely defeated by what feels at first like abject failure. Furthermore, a couple's sexual struggle--what I call the sexual crucible--is the most powerful route both to individual maturity and the capacity for intimate relationship, because it evokes people's deepest vulnerabilities and fears, and also taps into their potential for profound love, passion, even spiritual transcendence.

In the typically constricted sexuality of the mid-marriage blues, Betty and Donald's sexual repertoire consisted of "leftovers"--whatever was left over after eliminating every practice that made one or the other nervous or uncomfortable. The less differentiated a couple, the less they can tolerate the anxiety of possibly "offending" one another, the more anxiety they experience during sex and the more inhibited, rigid and inflexible their sexual style becomes: people have sex only up to the limits of their sexual and emotional development. Unsurprisingly, Donald and Betty's sexual routine had become as predictable, repetitious, unadventurous and boring as a weekly hamburger at McDonald's. This is why the standard advice to improve sex by negotiating and compromising is doomed to failure--most normally anxious couples have already long since negotiated and compromised themselves out of any excitement, variety or sexual passion, anyway.

And yet it would have been pointless and counterproductive to march Donald and Betty through a variety of new sexual techniques. Using sex as a vehicle for personal and relational growth is not the same as just doing something new that raises anxieties. Rather, it depends on maintaining a high level of personal connection with someone known and loved during sex-- allowing ourselves to really see and be seen by our partners, feel and be felt, know and be known by them. Most couples have spent years trying not to truly reveal themselves to each other in order to maintain the illusion of complete togetherness, thus effectively smothering any true emotional connection, with predictably disastrous effects on sex.

Donald and Betty were so obsessed with sexual behavior, so caught up in their anxieties about who was doing or failing to do what to whom in bed, that they were not really emotionally or even physically aware of each other when they touched. Like people "air kissing" on social occasions, they were going through the motions while keeping a kind of emotional cordon sanitaire between them. Their sex was more like the parallel play of young children than an adult interaction--except that they each watched the other's "play" with resentment and hurt feelings. Betty complained that Donald touched her too roughly--"He's crude and selfish!" she said, "and just uses me to please himself." Her complaint undercut Donald's sense of self, and he defensively accused her of being a demanding bitch, never satisfied and fundamentally unpleasable--thereby undermining her sense of self.

In order to help them each find a self and each other I had to redirect their gaze away from their obsession with mutually disappointing sexual behavior, and encourage them to "follow the connection"--rediscover or establish some vital physical and emotional link as a first building block to greater intimacy. To consciously "follow the connection," however, requires the full presence and consent of both partners, each purposely slowing down and giving full attention to the other, feeling and experiencing the other's reality. For example, I suggested that Betty and Donald, who couldn't come up with even one way in which they made some sort of vital contact, might simply caress each other's hands and faces while attending to what they were doing and feeling.

The next session, Donald reported that he now understood why Betty felt he was too "rough"; he said the experience made him realize that he usually touched her with about as much care and sensitivity as if he was scouring a frying pan! But slowing down to really become conscious of what he was doing made him experience a sudden jolt of emotional connection with Betty. This awareness was an unnerving sensation for someone who had spent his life performing for other people (including his wife) rather than actually being with them.

Betty, too, was shaken by the jarring reality of their connection. She hadn't liked being touched roughly, but the concentration and attention in Donald's hands as he really felt and got to know her body was deeply disturbing; she found herself suddenly and unexpectedly sobbing with grief and deprivation for the warmth and love she'd missed as a child, and that she had both craved and feared in her marriage. Donald managed to keep his own anxiety in check during Betty's unexpected reaction, holding her hand while she cried her eyes out and gradually calmed down on her own. Later that night, they had the best sex they had experienced in a very long time.

Buoyed by this first success, more hopeful about their future together, they both wanted to know how they could enhance this new and still tentative sense of connection. I suggested they try something called "hugging till relaxed," a powerful method for increasing intimacy that harnesses the language and dynamics of sex without requiring either nudity or sexual contact. Hugging, one of the most ordinary, least threatening gestures of affection and closeness, is also one of the most telling. When they hugged, Betty complained that Donald always leaned on her-- making her stagger backward--while Donald accused Betty of pulling away from him, letting go "too soon," and leaving him "hugging air."

I suggested that Betty and Donald each stand firmly on their own two feet, loosely put their arms around each other, focus on their own individual experience and concentrate on quieting themselves down while in the embrace--neither clutching nor pulling away from or leaning on each other. I never tell clients how long to hug, but few initially can take more than four or five seconds before they experience a kind of emotional "jolt" when the connection threatens to become too intimate for comfort. Once both partners can learn to soothe themselves and maintain their individual equilibrium, shifting their own positions when necessary for comfort, they get a brief, physical experience of intimate connection without fusion, a sense of stability and security without over-dependency.

While practicing hugging until relaxed with Donald, Betty found that as she learned to quiet her own anxiety, she could allow herself to be held longer by Donald without feeling claustrophobic. Just relaxing in the hug also made her realize that she normally carried chronic anxiety like a kind of body armor. As Betty calmed down and began to melt peacefully into the hug, not pulling away from fear that Donald would, literally, invade her space, he noticed his own impulse to break it off before she wanted to. After they had spent several weeks working on hugging till relaxed, they began to feel more centered within themselves when they did it; each no longer anxiously watched for the least little twitch in the other, or wondered what the other was thinking, or worried about doing it "wrong." When they each could settle down in the hug, they discovered that together they eventually would enter a space of great peace and tranquility, deeply connected and in touch with each other but secure in their self.

Soon, they could experience some of the same kind of deep peace during sex, which not only eliminated much of the anxiety, resentment and disappointment they had felt before, but vastly increased the eroticism of the encounter. Now that they knew what they were looking for, they could tell when it was absent. It was as if each had let slip away a hard, tough carapace, and allowed something tender and vulnerable to emerge. Later, in my office, while Betty gently stroked his arm, Donald teared up as he told me about the new sense of quiet but electric connection he felt with her. "I just had no idea what we were missing; she seemed so precious to me that it almost hurt to touch her," he said, his voice thick with emotion.

This leap in personal development didn't simply occur through behavioral desensitization. Sometimes, Betty and Donald got more anxious as their unresolved issues surfaced in their physical embrace. At times, when Betty dared to shift to a more comfortable position, Donald felt she was squirming to avoid him. It was my job to help them see how this reflected the same emotional dynamics present in other aspects of their marriage. Betty was attempting to "hold onto herself" while remaining close to someone she loved, and likewise, Donald was refusing to chase after a loved one to get himself accepted. Insight alone didn't help much; a lot of self-soothing was required. Ultimately, they stopped taking each other's experience and reaction as a reflection on themselves and recognized that two separate realities existed even during their most profound physical union.

Building on their new stockpiles of courage earned in these experiments with each other, I suggested that Donald and Betty consider eyes-open sex, the thought of which leaves many couples aghast. Indeed, Donald's first response to the suggestion was that if he and Betty tried opening their eyes during sex, they wouldn't need birth control because the very thought made him so anxious he could feel his testicles retreating up into his windpipe! But eyes-open sex is a powerful way of revealing the chasm between sensation-focused sex and real intimacy. Most couples close their eyes in order to better tune out their partners so that they can concentrate on their physical feelings; it is a shocking revelation that to reach orgasm--supposedly the most intimate human act--most people cannot tolerate too much intimacy with their partners, so they block the emotional connection and concentration on body parts.

Eyes-open sex is not simply a matter of two pairs of eyeballs staring at each other (indeed, people can hide behind a blank stare), but a way to intensify the mutual awareness and connection begun during foreplay; to really "see" and "be seen" is an extension of feeling and being felt when touching one another. But if allowing oneself to be known by touch is threatening, actually being seen can be positively terrifying. Bravely pursuing eyes-open sex in spite of these misgivings helps couples not only learn to tolerate more intimacy, it increases differentiation--it requires a degree of inner calm and independent selfhood to let somebody see what's inside your head without freaking out. "It scares me," said Betty, speaking many people's experience. "I don't like my body much and I don't like a lot else about myself, and I don't really expect him to, either."

But the experience was also exhilarating. As Donald and Betty progressed from shy, little, peek-a-boo glimpses into each other's faces to long, warm gazes and soft smiles, each found their encounters more deeply moving. Betty slowly realized that whereas before she had wanted to escape from Donald, now she yearned to see all of him, and for him to see all of her. "I felt so vulnerable, as if he could see all my inadequacies, but the way he looked at me and smiled made all that unimportant." Donald gradually relinquished the self-image of a needy loser; he no longer needed to pursue Betty for reassurance and found, to his delight, that she wanted him--a breathtaking experience. "Her eyes are so big and deep, I feel I could dive into them," he said in wonder.

In hugging 'till relaxed, Betty and Donald were to each stand firmly, put their arms around each other, focus on their own individual experience and concentrate on quieting themselves down while in the embrace.

Both began to experience an increasing sense of self-acceptance and personal security. "We're having better sex now than we've ever had in our lives," Betty reported, "And I thought we

were getting to be too old and far too married for exciting sex." Donald agreed. Betty and Donald, like society at large, were confusing genital prime--the peak years of physical reproductive maturity-- with sexual prime--the specifically human capacity for adult eroticism and emotional connection. "Are you better in bed or worse now than you were as an adolescent?" I asked them. "Most people definitely get better as they get older, at least potentially. No 17-year old boy is sufficiently mature to be capable of profound intimacy--he's too preoccupied with proving his manhood; and a young woman is too worried about being 'used' or too hung up about romance and reputation to really experience her own eroticism. Most 50-year-olds, on the other hand, have a much better developed sense of who they are, and more inner resources to bring to sex. You could say that cellulite and sexual potential are highly correlated."

So that's why I have such incredible erotic talents! said Betty.

As far as issues of gender equality are concerned, both men and women become more similar as they age and approach their sexual potential. Men are not as frightened of letting their partners take the lead in making love to them, and they develop far greater capacity and appreciation for emotional connection and tenderness than they had as young men. Women, on the other hand, become more comfortable with their own sexuality, more likely to enjoy sex for its own sake and less inclined to apologize for their eroticism or hide behind the ingenue's mask of modesty. As they age, women feel less obligated to protect their mate's sexual self-esteem at the cost of their own sexual pleasure.

Once a couple's sexual potential has been tapped, partners are no longer afraid to let their fantasies run free with each other. Donald, for example, let Betty know that he dreamed of her tying him up and "ravishing" him sexually--so one day, she bought four long, silk scarves and that night, wearing three inch high heels and a little black lace, she trussed him to the bed and gave him what he asked for, astounding him and surprising herself with her own dramatic flair. Betty had always secretly cherished a fantasy of being a dangerous, sexually powerful femme fatale, but Donald's clingy neediness had dampened her enthusiasm for trying out the dream--also she had been afraid it would make him even more demanding. But now, knowing he was capable of being himself regardless of what she did or did not do, Betty felt much more comfortable expressing her own sense of erotic play.

The Sexual Crucible Approach encourages people to make use of the opportunity offered by marriage to become more married and better married, by becoming more grown-up and better at staking out their own selfhood. But the lessons learned by Betty and Donald, or any couple, extend far beyond sex. The same emotional development that makes for more mature and passionate sexuality also helps couples negotiate the other potential shoals of marriage -- money issues, childrearing questions, career decisions--because differentiation is not confined to sex. In every trouble spot, each partner has the same four options: dominate, submit, withdraw or differentiate. Differentiation does not guarantee that spouses can always have things their own individual way and an unfailingly harmonious marriage besides. Marriage is full of hard, unpleasant choices, including the choice between safety, security and sexual boredom, on the one hand, and challenge, anxiety and sexual passion, on the other.

But spouses who have learned to stand on their own two feet within marriage are not as likely to force their own choices on the other or give in or give up entirely just to keep their anxiety in check and shore up their own frail sense of self. Learning to soothe ourselves in the middle

of a fight with a spouse over, say, the choice of schools for our child or a decision to move, not only helps keep the discussion more rational, but makes us more capable of mutuality, of hearing our partner, of putting his or her agenda on a par with our own. The fight stops being, for example, a struggle between your personal needs and your spouse's personal needs, often regarded by each as my "good idea" and her/his "selfishness," but which is really often my fragile undeveloped self versus his/her equally fragile, undeveloped self. Instead, we can begin to see that the struggle is inside each of us individually, between wanting what we want for ourselves personally, and wanting for our beloved partner what he or she wants for himself or herself. Becoming more differentiated is possibly the most loving thing you can do in your lifetime--for those you love as well as yourself. Someone once said that if you're going to "give yourself" to your partner like a bouquet of flowers, you should at least first arrange the gift!

There is no way this process can be foreshortened into a technical quick-fix, no matter how infatuated our culture is with speed, efficiency and cost containment. Courage, commitment, a willingness to forgo obvious "solutions," tolerating the anxiety of living without a clear, prewritten script, as well as the patience to take the time to grow up are all necessary conditions, not only for a good marriage, but for a good life. At the same time, reducing all marital problems to the fallout from our miserable childhoods or to gender differences not only badly underestimates our own ability to develop far beyond the limitations of our circumstances, but misjudges the inherent power of emotionally committed relationships to bring us (drag us, actually, often kicking and screaming) more deeply and fully into our own being. Marriage is a magnificent system, not only for humanizing us, maturing us and teaching us how to love, but also perhaps for bringing us closer to what is divine in our natures.

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This article was published in the September/October 1997 NETWORKER.