

**Making It Long-Term: Honouring The Grey**

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I'm in love. I have been for 19 years. With myself, with my partner Diana, with nature, with life. I adore our children. I enjoy sharing life with my brother and sister. When I dream about winning the lottery, I think how rich I already am. Not that I'd turn the money down. I just wish everybody could have the inner peace and outer thrill with life that I have. Because lots of people have exclaimed wistfully about the comparative longevity of our relationship, that's what I'm addressing this month.

I can only talk about my experience. What works for me? Sometimes it's useful to define something by looking at its opposite, so I'll talk about what didn't work, first. In my other major relationship, instead of listening to my heart, I got together with my ex because he wanted to. At the moment I finally agreed to his proddings to say "I love you" after six months together, I knew I had committed a huge travesty against myself.

I tried intellectually for 13 years to make him happy. Early on, I deepened my live-by-guilt routine by abandoning my socio-political stance to fit more co-dependently with my ex, whose formula for rational living was atheism and libertarian free enterprise. It was a very black and white way to walk through life, but being the dutiful, conscientious wife, I also felt safe hiding within the stripes of that zebra.

After we split, he leapt aboard the horse of Fundamentalist Christianity. At first perplexed by his switch, I eventually realized that for someone who is too afraid to step into a world of

feelings, it is much safer to hide fanatically within clearly defined boundaries. That means one end of the spectrum or the other. No grey please. Grey is far too confusing and scary, and being scared would mean having to enter the world of feelings.

So when did feelings enter my life? Nine years into our relationship, when I first held our newborn son, the depth of maternal love astounded me. How could I look at his beautiful face so endlessly, play with his perfect, tiny fingers so happily, remain so besotted with every little thing he did or uttered? After three years of parenting, my husband commented that "our marriage was like an old shoe: it was comfortable, but boring". He wanted to play around. That wasn't part of my recipe for love and marriage, or a model I wanted for my son. While working on this, I sought various counsellors' assistance. One day, while journaling, I wrote a whole paragraph consisting of nothing but "It's okay to cry. It's okay to cry. It's okay to cry," as if the act of writing those words would turn a tap for me to actually feel them.

The turning point came when Diana, with whom I'd become friends while cruising together aboard our respective family boats, not only observed what others could plainly see, but had the nerve to comment on my dysfunctional marriage. "It hurts me to see you being treated that way," she said. All of a sudden, I realized that it wasn't just my imagination. As we were parting from one of our sailing cruises, she pressed a piece of folded paper into my palm. In it, she'd astutely jotted ten words: "Always remember that you are

completely loveable and totally worthwhile.” I kept that note in my pocket for the next several months, hauling it out in moments of solitude, as though it were a piece of super-subversive, coded information and I was the spy holding the key. As I turned that key, I found myself peering into a murky mirror of emotions. The reflection of their existence was finally becoming clear enough to grasp.

After experiencing Diana’s aware listening, which enabled me to finally shed those tears I’d only written about before, I realized how much I’d been stuffing my feelings back inside. As she had learned techniques for successfully tapping into and releasing these feelings seven years before we got together, she taught me initially, and then I set up time with people so that I could do the same. We’d take turns, sharing time instead of money, with first one of us giving really clear, listening time, then the other returning the favour. We took care to make sure that we shared time absolutely equally.

The sole purpose was to let go. Letting go could mean laughing, yawning, crying, non-stop ranting or talking, shaking, but always with the ultimate goal of re-assessing our original premise at sharing time’s end, to see if we could think more clearly about it, which we almost always could. If not, we’d just keep on shedding, like the proverbial butterfly emerging from its cocoon. It was a lot of work, but it’s also a family joke that ‘Persistence’ is my middle name. I understood how the energy consumed by stuffing down old emotional crap had so thoroughly crippled my current ability to live life with zest.

That is the essence of what keeps our relationship fresh, loving, thrilling.

We had no idea that we were lesbians until we got together. With four children to co-parent as well, it seemed at first like running in front of a bulldozer, just dealing with daily emotional issues. Knowing it was crucial, we made sure to encourage the other to feel and release immediately. Gradually, the pathways opened wider until the bulldozer receded into the far distance. When working on old, major issues, we’d have get-togethers two or three times a week on an ongoing basis, sometimes with ourselves and sometimes with others. When it was too hard for us to listen to each other’s pain or fears, one or the other of us would freeze up or fall asleep in associative self-defense. That’s when our network of allies came in handy. We’d either call them to share venting time on the phone, or make dates to share longer sessions. In the process, we uncovered a lot about not only how oppression sits on top of the homosexual community and how it works to divide and separate us, but how oppression keeps writers and artists from thriving, and also how parents and children become isolated during crucial growing time.

Early on in our relationship, Diana said that one of the things she really admired about me was “my vulnerability”. I blushed, annoyed with myself for exposing it, as though I’d been running down a street naked. Fortunately, she was relentless in her admiration, and I was persistent in learning my lessons about feelings. Love bloomed as though we were lotus flowers yanked out of frozen tundra and plopped in tropical mud.

In my old paradigm, I’d have run from anger, my own or others. After our first major blow-up, I jumped in our old Volvo and drove from our Gordon Head home to Cadboro Bay beach for a walk.

Eventually I returned, and we shared our fears honestly. Because it felt so good to be understood that deeply, I never felt compelled to run again. Soon after getting a grasp on the health to be gained from actually feeling, I saw anger for what it is: a blanket for fear. Fear of love, fear of isolation, fear of not being good enough, fear of whatever. Diana came from a family that exploded passionately, expressing emotions and the day's events in a roller coaster of competition. I came from a family that repressed feelings, judged anger as immature, and overt passion as either naïve or uncivilized or both. When we honestly shared and let go of our stuff within the safe confines of a loving, attentive, aware listener, the volcano inside her fell almost dormant, while the volcano inside me actually bubbled happily for the first time. Neither volcano felt threatening. Both of us understood the feelings and supported their safe release. Most importantly, we never allowed our volcanoes to erupt: we committed to helping the other to open the vents with the first bubble, or made sure, if we felt incapable of productive support, that we found somebody else in our listening community to provide it. Within the community, there is a vow of confidentiality: nobody ever discusses or refers to anybody else's material.

Upon reflecting on the lead-up to that Cadboro Bay escape, I asked Diana what would help her in moments of pique. She said, "Just hug me and keep me safe until I cry." Next time, I wouldn't let anger get the better of her, just held her firmly yet gently, with absolute love. Soon she stopped struggling and cried, the tears washing away the fear as my love kept shining through her film of self-doubts. From that simple, loving exercise, I also extrapolated a few lessons: how quickly I could safely permit myself to express my

anger also, how loving attention could dissolve the underlying issues, how necessary it is to let them vent in bits instead of big blow-ups, and how consistently love waits on the other side, even if we're momentarily blinded while in the heat of the miniscule moment.

Growing into homosexuality with four kids aged 4, 5, 13 and 16, all of whom had their own passions, agendas, homophobic friends and peer pressures, is certainly a recipe for disaster and a failed relationship. That the recipe failed and our relationship still blooms is mostly due to our awareness of how to release emotions on a regular basis without letting them build up. We own our own stuff, are committed to growth, support each other in our ongoing goals, and have tried to model all of that to our kids. We're thrilled that our three sons have grown into men who are strong enough to cry, and that our daughter has grown into a woman who is strong enough to set clear boundaries. We continue to be the cheering squad for each other, for those in our community, for any who cherish staying in love.

For me, it all started when I made my first courageous step out of my ex's black-and-white life, into the grey misty land of feelings. What a relief to feel the passions of our souls open within each prism of that once-foggy, foggy dew! We've won the lottery that counts the most, and we'll continue to feel it.

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*End-Notes: If anyone is interested in adopting some of our techniques, I'd suggest three things:*

*1) If you don't have time to share equally, go for professional counseling, but insist on a counselor who*

*encourages tears, and honours you as the most capable, intelligent, person able to solve your own problems after being attentively, safely heard.*

*2) Training helps. It's like jogging for the mind, for people healthy enough to set aside their own distress and give equal listening time. Although we originally practised it through a grass-roots organization, called "Re-*

*Evaluation Co-Counselling", they have since moved in what we consider to be a homophobic direction.*

*3) Thus we would recommend only the theory called, more simply, "Co-Counselling". For an over-view of the techniques that worked for us, and a free, downloadable manual:*

*<http://www.shef.ac.uk/personal/c/cci/cciuk/index.html>*