

Fostering the Right Attitude: Know who you are

by Christine Sarno-Doyle

“I urge you to try not to get hung up in the mentality that says, “I hope I don’t lose him (or *her*),” but foster the attitude that says, “He should be appreciative of having me in his life.” I read these words in the midst of a downward emotional spiral, and they grounded me almost immediately.



I was 53 when I read Marie’s words. I was in the eighth year of my relationship with my husband and realized that I had become a shell of the woman I was when I first met him. Amidst all the compromises I had made to keep my relationship, I had compromised myself away.

Looking back by the time I reached forty, I had experienced enough of life to know relationships work best when individuals are authentic. I am always awed by those who are able to discover this treasure early in life. And forty was a turning point for me. My own mother had died at 40, and my first husband had died at age 21. So, reaching 40 brought with it a dramatic realization. There was a tremendous gift in front of me: Time, and I would not waste it.

I had spent an inordinate amount of energy in my young adult life looking for another Mr. Right, and I decided that I would not invest any more time and energy in that endeavor. I took stock of my life: I had raised my son, cultivated a successful career, put myself through college and had recently bought my own home. I concluded my life was grand just as it was. I did not need a man to complete me. Never did, actually. That frame of mind is society’s conditioning that someone is half of something if not in a relationship: an albatross as women we burden and carry with us until we choose enlightenment and lighten the load.

I assessed that I was a strong, intelligent, caring, successful individual. I also knew I could be overly sensitive, quick tempered and judgmental. Sufficed to say, I had a pretty good grasp of who I was, and I clearly remember deducing that I was no slouch and quite a catch. If I were to live the rest of my life alone, I would be just fine. My virtual prayer that included a list of characteristics I wanted in a mate turned simply to, “If I’m meant to share my life with someone, please bring him in. Otherwise help me let go of the need to have a partner and help me to get on with living.” My prayer worked. I got on with living.

My life was full. I had close friends, spare time, and activities I loved. I was growing. The growth spurts were so fast and far-reaching they made me anxious. But I would not be the one to put the brakes on that ride. I was hanging on as tight as I could. It was wondrous.

So, why did a decade later I need Marie’s words to ground me? The answer: All the work I had done discovering and nurturing my sense of self could not have prepared me for the atypical life with a widower who had not let go of his past. The challenges were unprecedented and included grief, guilt and a ghost.

I was no stranger to the emotions associated with grief and guilt. I was keenly aware of the grip they can have on one's psyche. I understood the concept of individual timetables for processing loss especially when it lays dormant and unacknowledged for any length of time. The ghosts remain among the living until we take the time to walk through our grief and finally say good-bye.

So, in knowing all of this, I was more than willing to make allowances for what would under normal circumstances be considered unacceptable. I minimized hurtful behavior and extremely uncomfortable situations.

I lived in a house my husband built with memories of someone else. It is a beautiful house, and he loves it. Anyone would be thrilled to live here, I thought. So, I ignored my desire to have a place of my own, our own.

I didn't want to live with another woman's pictures displayed in a home my husband kept telling me I should think of as mine own. Did it really matter? Maybe they should stay out of respect for his adult children.

I didn't want to live with the few remaining pieces of clothing and knickknacks in the house.

I didn't want to be held hostage on the constant trips his adult children would take down memory lane during what should have been my husband and my own special holidays.

There is no timetable for grief, I know that. So, I empathized and compromised at every turn. I could not have imagined the effect my decisions would have on my emotional and psychological health.

Anytime we set boundaries we chance upsetting others; and because I did not want to upset this new love, I treaded lightly when I expressed my feelings about living in a house that was not my home. I backed down when things got rocky. "*Gee, I hope I don't lose him?*" quietly echoed in my mind. Then, I thought, "No, relationships need to be negotiated. They are two-way streets. He should appreciate my feelings and be *appreciative of having me in his life*. My self-esteem and self-worth were high. Time passed. I attempted boundaries again and again. Each time they were met with resistance, and the thought "*I hope I don't lose him.*" grew louder. "*He should be appreciative of having me in his life.*" grew softer until there was nothing left, but a loud "*I hope I don't lose him.*"

I got my wish. I didn't lose him. I lost myself.

It was years, not months, later when I realized I had compromised myself away. There was nothing left of me. My life was all about him: his family, his house, his work, his adult children, their loss, their memories, their life choices...them, them, them. It wasn't their fault. I was not a victim. *I had volunteered. I had made the decision to compromise my needs. I had made the decision to put all of my energy and emphasis on keeping my relationship. I had stopped cultivating my own life and interests. And now there was nothing left of me. There was no longer any interest in me not even from me. How sad.*

With help from a support group of women who are involved with widowers I was able to make sense of what was happening and incorporate a new way of thinking: I may understand unacceptable behavior but that does not mean it I am bound to accept it. And the definition of unacceptable behavior isn't left to some committee. It is my definition as it applies to my heart and feelings that makes that determination.

Those of us who were taught and grabbed on hook-line-and-sinker to the notion that we need to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of others got a bum rap: our self-worth gets tied up in things that we have no control over. I do think of and consider others, I want to help others; most of us do. It is when we do so at the expense of our own well-being that the price becomes too high. This reality, unfortunately, is not preached as loudly as 'sacrifice'. How do we know when is time to stop taking care of others and take care of ourselves? In answer to that question, I like to quote instructions given by airline stewards before takeoff: Put your mask on first.

Other analogies: we can't give what we don't have; look at energy as currency -we need to invest wisely, otherwise, we will go bankrupt.

In hindsight it would have been easier on me emotionally to assert myself upfront instead of acquiescing at every turn. It would have been easier on my husband as well. The person he got was someone other than who I am. Ultimately, we faced the same issues all over again as I moved from acquiescence to assertiveness. As I moved forward, those fearful words rang in my mind again, "I hope I don't lose him". But now I was making the conscious decision replace fear with faith.

Do you know yourself?

Knowing who you are means you know your strengths and weaknesses, what qualities your character holds. I am a loyal friend sometimes to a fault. I am compassionate, considerate, empathetic, helpful, insightful, strong, and independent. I can also be a bitch. I can be overemotional, neurotic, and overly sensitive - things I need to work on. My character incorporates a loving mother, wife, friend, successful career woman, stylish boomer and playful grandmother. On occasion I can still morph into the Tasmanian devil.

Are you better with math than you are with composition? I am better with words. I've always loved using words, making them flow, interesting, captivating and enlightening. Balancing a checkbook for me is making sure I'm close on the numbers. Do you like country music, jazz, rap? What about vacationing? Where do you like to go? Sports, are you active, or on the sidelines? What type and style of clothing do you like? I love denim jeans and jackets. They now make up the majority of my wardrobe something I wouldn't have dared adorn myself in for management meetings years ago when I filled the role of corporate hopeful. But looking back, I'll bet my confidence, drive, and ability would have gotten me where I wanted to go even in my denim. And, I would have saved some money on the \$200 suits and matching shoes. I know myself well enough to know that my denim can be just as impressive with me in them.

The common denominator in all of my relationships is me. Marie's words really brought that home. How can I expect others to treat me with dignity and respect if I don't treat myself in that manner? And, treating myself with dignity won't always equate to other's seeing my point of view. Being true to my unique self may ultimately lead to losing some people: those who see my life as a means to their own end. More importantly, though it equates to bringing into my life those whom I may share my dreams and my soul.

I remember my husband struggling with his own emotions when I started to reclaim myself in our relationship. We both still struggle, though the road is getting smoother. One night in particular I sensed he was pre-occupied and bothered with something, so I asked him why he seemed so sad. His response, "You're not doing what you are supposed to do." This of course meant that I was not behaving in the manner he had become accustomed; an acquiescent partner. Resting in a good place in my heart, I replied with a warm smile, "Well, I guess you will just have to be sad." I knew he needed time to process this too.

I implore you, foster the right attitude. Don't be a non-entity. Know who you are and take great pride in that person. Set boundaries. Remember, just because you understand why something is unacceptable, doesn't mean you are bound to accept it. There is only a committee of one who is responsible for determining what parameters you need to live by; that one person is you.

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