

Week 23: The Most Important Thing to Look for in a Best Friend

For most couples, my psychotherapy office is a last resort. It takes the deepest courage to make that first phone call to a therapist, and couples often wait until they feel almost hopeless. And I am truly blessed to walk through the valleys with such courageous people. Yet, I must admit, I take a special delight in couples who call *earlier*. On rare occasion, I will get a call from a young couple who is *planning* to marry and would like premarital counseling.

They come into the office and they usually sit next to each other and hold hands and gaze into each other's eyes and sometimes I feel a little awkward—like I've stumbled into their date and should give them some privacy. And quite often, they will say things like “There's *nothing* wrong with him; he's amazing.” Or, “She's absolutely *perfect*.” Or, “We get along all the time—we *never* fight.”

And my alarm bells go off.

Because when I'm looking for the building blocks of a lifelong partnership or friendship or companionship of any kind, I'm not looking for two perfect people. (Mainly because two perfect people don't *exist*—we're all a mess of one kind or another.) No, I'm looking for two people who *know* their brokenness, who *know* they fall short of the best ways to love, and who want to get better at it—one day at a time, year after year, decade upon decade. Because if a person doesn't want to grow and change, no amount of convincing is going to make them.

For instance, in the original form of couples therapy, the intervention included a “caring activities contract.” It was a bit of a disaster. Essentially, spouses listed the ways they wanted their partner to change, signed a contract committing the other to doing so, and then each spouse kept a running tally of how often they were holding up their end of the bargain. The caring activities contract often led to *greater* conflict, and therapists no longer use it. Because the truth is, as spouses, we are ultimately and utterly powerless over our partners. If our partner truly does not want to change, there is fundamentally nothing we can do to *make* them change. In fact, our very efforts to coerce change will further entrench our loved ones in their existing behaviors.

In any loving relationship—*you control you*. No one else. Which means the people we choose to belong to had better be eternally interested in taking a look at their *own* issues, increasingly willing to be vulnerable about their *own* brokenness, and absolutely determined to figure out what it means to love more deeply and purely.

I remember the night my wife told me her story.

We had known each other for only three weeks, and through the quiet hours of the night she told me about her journey—it was marked by resilience and tenacity and determination. She had plenty of reasons to be angry, but instead she was investing her energy into learning how to love. By the time the sun rose, something new had risen in *me*—I didn't know what it was then, but I *did* know I wasn't going to let this woman go. Only recently have I realized what rose up in me that night:

I'm attracted to people who like to fight—not with other people, but with themselves.

I want people in my life who know they are broken and have decided every day is another opportunity to redeem it. People who fight with themselves first—not in a shaming, self-destructive way, but in a resilient, grace-filled effort to be transformed into a more loving person.

May we be patient, as we wait for that quiet night when someone reveals to us a heart of brokenness, and a heart of grace and sacrifice and love. Let's choose to be with people who are perfectly aware they *aren't* perfect, and who want to get better with every rising sun.

And, just as importantly, let's become someone like that too.