

Week 32: Becoming Students of the People We Belong To

I don't know how I learned anything in my first semester of graduate school.

The program was stellar and my professors were excellent, but I met my wife that autumn, and I quickly became a student of *her* first, and *psychology* second. I fell in love and it made every red-turning leaf radiant with the slanting sun and every dry-brown leaf crackle underfoot like a ballad. Our classes were small and usually held at a round table with students facing each other. I would spend hours of class time sneaking glances at her, noticing the way her jaw flexed when she was thinking, and the constellation of freckles on her cheek. I listened to her laugh, and I felt like I found a home inside of it.

I became a student of her before all other things.

The years have piled up, though. Many autumns have come and gone. Time numbs and life distracts, doesn't it? Kids and work and bills to pay and errands to run and television to watch and pride and lingering hurt and unfinished fights. We trade in attentive gazes for critical comments. We trade an available ear for a quick fix. We trade an open mind for close-ended questions. As another autumn approaches, I have to wonder, "Have I ceased to be a student of my wife?"

Most relationships don't need an addition of ideas—they need a subtraction of distractions. Instead of learning new things to *do*, we must rediscover how to simply *be*. Because when you strip away all the fixing and doing and perfecting, you are left with only your people and their messiness and their beauty, and your fragile ability to attend to them.

Most people don't need to become students of relationships in general—they need to become students of each other again. They need to learn to hold their people in awareness, without fixing or changing or criticizing or commenting. They need to simply behold the people they love—all the quiet beauty, the lovely vulnerability, the fears and the tears, the hurt and the frustration, and all the desperate attempts to feel worthy.

Most people don't need to learn the science of communication—they need to learn the art of attention. Because, in the end, good communication is far less about implementing a new *skill*, and far more about the willingness to be *still*. It's the art of gazing upon the people we love, and allowing them to teach us about who they are.

Fourteen years after I met my wife, we flew to Hawaii for a psychology conference. A nine-hour flight through the night. As we cruised over the Pacific and my wife slept like she was staying in a five-star hotel, I slowly ran out of things to keep me occupied. Eventually, I put away all of my screens and distractions and I

turned to look at her. Her freckles constellated like the stars we were flying through. Her shoulders rising and falling with each breath. I just watched.

And I felt like a student again.

Jon Kabat-Zin writes, “Anything and everything can become our teacher of the moment, reminding us of the possibility of being fully present: the gentle caress of air on our skin, the play of light, the look on someone’s face, a passing contraction in the body, a fleeting thought in the mind. Anything. Everything. If it is met in awareness.”³

He’s talking about mindfulness and meditation—the act of attending to one thing in such a way that our awareness of the thing expands and we become fully anchored in the present moment and fully available to the object of our attention. What if we met our people in awareness again? What if, once again, we became students of the ones we love? What if our people—our friends and lovers and companions and partners and spouses and children and family members—became the meditation of our lives?

Relationships can grow stale and stuck. Perhaps that’s just the way life goes and the way love ages. But maybe, just maybe, we’re all dancing on the precipice of a deep, enduring love and we simply don’t know how to fall back into the chasm. Maybe we fall into love again by learning how to *pay attention* again—by giving up all of our judgment and assessment and critique and meeting our people in the field of *awareness*, instead of upon the field of *battle*.

I think we’ll find ourselves in *love* again when we choose to be in *school* again. When we choose to become students of the people we love, fully attentive, ready to learn their every nuance, and cherishing who they are rather than what we would make them into.

When it comes to love, the *fixing* is in this kind *joining*: people made students once again.

³ Kabat-Zinn, Jon. *Mindfulness for Beginners: Reclaiming the Present Moment—and Your Life*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2012.