Arleen Maiorano, 11/23/2016

The Importance of an Apology:

In my work with couples, and in my own relationship, I find myself amazed both at the ease with which an apology can mediate a difficult relational moment and put it to rest, but also at the great difficulty one member of a dyad may have at summoning up that powerful tool and offering it to the other. This is because—depending upon your point of view—an apology is either a heartfelt recognition of the justified hurt the other is experiencing, or an indictment and criticism, completely unreasonable and undeserved, which must be defended against at any cost. By definition, an apology recognizes that one member of a dyad has done something that has hurt the other member, possibly unintentionally or reactively. Both members are often triggered in this same moment, one feeling unfairly accused or not appreciated for their overall good intention; the other feeling unseen by their partner’s difficulty in recognizing their hurt feeling. In both cases, what is often triggered is a childhood feeling of being unfairly criticized; or, conversely, of being ignored and invalidated.

Harville Hendrix, the founder of Imago Relationship Therapy, once asked an important question: would you rather be right, or be in a relationship? In those moments when it is difficult for one partner to apologize for hurting the other, and for the other partner to let go of their absolute entitlement to an apology, the answer is that both partners would rather be right. It is our human instinct to fight for what we feel we deserve, or to defend ourselves against a perceived wrong. But the work of being in a relationship is often to do the opposite, to see the others’ point of view, even if it doesn’t make sense to us, and to validate the other’s perception even if it doesn’t feel justified. It is their perception after all, and to be curious about it opens a bridge toward a healing connection. In crossing this bridge, we enter into what Martin Buber calls the I/thou or the “between,” the sacred space that is created by two individuals as they attempt to look at or experience the world through the others’ eyes.

And yes, this communication, and this foregoing of the need to be right, must go both ways. In this difficult moment, each partner must try to see the world from the other’s point of view. The request, often the demand, for an apology can trigger the "guilty" partner’s childhood feeling of being unfairly blamed and criticized, of never having been good enough, and can challenge their firmly embedded identity as a good person, perhaps a perfect person, an identity that may have been formed in opposition to the critical, blaming parent; the impulse is to defend oneself at all costs. Similarly, not receiving an apology that feels well deserved can trigger the "wounded" partner’s childhood feeling that a critical parent never fully acknowledged the injustice and unfairness of their hurtful behavior; the impulse is to insist on getting the validation that is justly deserved, so as to finally feel met, instead of feeling impotent and completely alone.

As you can see, it is difficult to negotiate this important moment. Both parties are hurt, often by the instantaneous, co-created reaction to the other. The moment is charged, a perfect storm. Awareness of this difficulty can help both parties negotiate this moment over time, if each becomes aware of the pattern that consistently emerges, and if each becomes aware of the small child that is simultaneously being triggered in both partners, each feeling wronged, each feeling misunderstood and alone, each needing the other to reach out and meet in the “between.”Top of Form

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