Couples Curse Words, or The Road to Nowhere

In my work with couples, I half-jokingly--but 100% seriously--tell them that there are five relationship curse words:

You, Should, Always, Never & But.

If we start a statement with “You” it soon becomes apparent that it is difficult to say “you” without it being followed by should, always, or never. This always gets us into trouble, because we are pointing a finger, we are blaming the other, and we are setting the foundation for a negative interchange: *You* *should* have remembered it was my birthday; *You always* forget to clean the dishes; *You* *never* put away your clothes. You with a pointed finger always invites a defense response: Who are *You* to criticize *Me*! *You* forgot I had to work late; *You* never turn off the lights; *You* are always picking on me, and I can’t stand *You*. We are then on what I call the Road to Nowhere.

Imagine the response if we say instead: It’s my birthday, let’s find a time to celebrate; let’s wash the dishes together; you know it drives me crazy, so please indulge me and pick up your clothes.

Of course, without the pointed finger, you is a wonderful word: You are so special to me; You are the light of my life; You are my best friend, and I appreciate every day I have with you. The more we use it that way, the better; if only it were so easy!

“But” causes a special and powerful problem, because it is often used to negate an apology: Ok, you’re right, I’m sorry that I forgot to clean the dishes, *but* I did them yesterday, and you’re always picking on everything I do. We can see where that’s going. If an apology is genuine, no

“but” is necessary, and no “but” is allowed.

It’s so important, but so difficult, to speak with vulnerable language that creates curiosity and empathy, rather than critical language that creates defensiveness. “I need” or “I feel” makes us vulnerable, like an innocent child with outstretched and open arms. We take the risk that our partner might not be open to hearing us, but the potential benefit of that risk is closeness and connection. “You are” allows us to feel safe, like an angry child with crisscrossed arms, but the probable outcome of that perceived safety is alienation and resentment.

Feeling able to support ourselves to be vulnerable is part of life’s journey, and we are all on the journey together.