

NEURO-SEMANTICS

ABOUT

RESPONSIBILITY TO/ FOR

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CUTTING THE LINE BETWEEN RESPONSIBILITY FOR/TO

How to Maintain Your Sanity while Enriching your Relationships

There is a *line* that you need to draw. It is not an actual line, not a visible line, not a line that you can feel. It is a conceptual line. And when you learn to establish this line—your relationships will be a whole lot more sane and healthy.

If you want to drive yourself crazy in a short time, chase others away, convince everybody in your social world that they have the right to dump on you, and/or hold others responsible for your messes (and thereby really mess up your relationships), then *fail to draw the line between responsibility to/for*. And then refuse to let anyone else draw it. Fail to do this and you can invite disaster into your life.

Conversely, when you learn to *cut this line* in relating to others, you make sanity easier for yourself and for others. It also enables you to think and talk *straight* with others, to have the ability to *level with them* about what you think, feel, and want. It thereby empowers you to *model* a way of relating that is transparent and open. In doing this, you take a significant step toward human authenticity. How does that sound? Do you find yourself interested in that?

But first, a *Caveat Emptor*. When you *draw this line* you will find that it represents **not** an easy skill nor a "nice" one. Yet, over the long run, it functions as a most *kind, assertive, and loving response*. It represents the most loving thing to do when relating to others. Over time, drawing this *to/for line* regarding **responses** reduces conflict, creates a peaceful harmony, and productively enables all people to speak in a straight and authentic way.

I first wrote on this skill in a communication skill book, *Speak Up, Speak Clear, Speak Kind* (1987). I there packaged it in terms of a communication skill. **Responsibility To/For** allows you to establish good boundaries between persons, determine who relates to whom regarding what responses, and to level with each other in an assertively kind way. distinguishing between responsibility to/for, as a mechanism for communicating, enables you to discern where the responsibility for any given behavior lies. By doing that, you can cut through the communication messes created by blame, fault-finding, and guilt-inducing messages.

I also utilized this thinking-speaking skill in several other works that I wrote over the years. In

dealing with conflicts in interpersonal relationships--this skill plays an absolutely crucial role. In monographs that I wrote, "*Coping with Criticism*" and "*How to Effectively Master Rejection and Failure*" ("When things Don't Go the Way You Want Them to") I appealed to the **responsibility to/for line** as a clarification principle. Later in the series in the *Metamorphosis* journal on "Becoming Resourceful," I applied this skill in *Establishing Good Boundaries*.

Additionally, this skill provides a powerful understanding about responses, responsibility, accountability, relationships, etc. It served in my counseling practice as a basic therapeutic intervention. In therapy, this one simply, yet profound skill can sometimes fully satisfy straightening out relationship messes, correcting unsanity that manifests itself in accusations, blame, counter-blame, etc., and provided a reality-testing tool for moving one's patterns of relating into a healthy and sane mode.

DE-MYSTIFYING THE FUZZY WORD "RESPONSIBILITY"

Words only *work* when they provide us clear and obvious referents so that we "know what the other person means." Yet some words do not assist in such clarity. In fact, all abstract words that do not have clear and immediate see-hear-feel components function more to confuse than to clarify. Why? Because we cannot empirically test any non-sensory based word. Such words comprise abstract concepts—conceptualizations. They reference, not things, but ideas—mental abstracts or constructs. Such occurs with this word--"*responsibility*."

Linguistically such big, vague, fuzzy words are *nominalizations*. A nominalization looks like a noun, sounds like a noun, we treat it as a noun, but actually, instead of speaking about "a person, place, or thing" (something you could see, hear or feel), they refer to *ideas, understandings, concepts*—non-things that one cannot see, hear or feel.

What then do we mean when we use the word *responsibility*? To what do we refer? **Not to a thing.** It does not reference anything in the world outside of your skin. It rather references your *understanding* about the human ability (or power) to make a response (in mind, language, body, etc.) in relation to another person, thing, idea, etc. Hidden then within this word is the verb denoting an action, event, or process—a verb that someone nominalized (turned into a noun).

Within *responsibility* are two verbs: *respond* or *response* and the verb *able* as in "able to do something." As such, responsibility provides us a most telling word. It refers to your *ability to respond* to something. What a concept! It stands in opposition to the idea that you do not respond, you merely react. Or that you do not respond—other forces "make" you act.

When you have the power or ability to make a response (i.e. to think, to feel, to speak, to do), then you literally become *response-able*. Responsibility describes the our most basic of human freedoms and powers. When you can do nothing in response to something, you have lost the power to respond.

Now when it comes to people and relating to people, you can always count on people *responding*. People forever respond. And as they do, they express the ultimate gift of a free will. You do not come pre-programmed in your responses as animals come pre-programmed in their "instincts." You truly have the potential ability to choose. You can make many responses to the stimuli you confront everyday. And no one can rob you of this power! You can *think* they can. You can release the

power, not use it, not develop it, not protect it, but no one can rob you of it.

One Word Down— Two Little Ones To Go

When it comes to your responses, two little prepositions govern two very different ideas around which you think about how you respond. You can own and claim and make responses **for** something and you can own and assume responses **to** something.

Responsibility for establishes **personal accountability**. You are responsible **for** the responses you make. You are not responsible for responses that you do not have the power to produce. Point out what someone says, thinks, feels, or does and you cannot be responsible for that. The other's thoughts, emotions, and actions are not generated from you, you did not create them. So you are not accountable for them.

Responsibility to establishes, creates, and defines **relationships**. To experience any relationship, you have to make a response *to* another person. If there's no response—there's no relationship. Yet whatever responses you make *to* another person, *those responses* shape, form, mold, define and determine the kind and quality of relationship you co-create with that person.

A Non-Biblical Word

How surprised would you feel to realize that the word *responsibility* does **not** occur in the Bible? Check it out. *Responsibility* represents a modern word and not a biblical term. Grab a King James version of the Bible and you will search in vain for that word. It does not occur a single time in its pages! Now isn't that strange?

If, on the other hand, you have a New English Bible (NEB), you will find it three times. Where the KJV follows the Hebrew and Greek in these texts, the metaphors therein suggest *the essential idea inherent in "response-ability."* For instance, when the ancient Hebrews said:

"Your blood be upon your own head" they thereby conveyed the idea of someone standing as personally accountable for an action. (Acts 5:24)

In another passage, the Greek word *koinonei* which refers to "living together with"—in the sense of participating, acting together with another, and hence the idea of "sharing" i.e. responding *to* and *with* another person (I Tim. 5:22).

On the emotional level, responsibility often feels like a *care* or burden for another person (II Cor. 11:28). Hence the NEB translated "burden" as responsibility—in this instance, a relationship *to* another person. So the *idea* of responsibility is there, but not the word.

*What does **Responsibility To/For** Mean?*

Essentially this phrase refers to *separating and distinguishing between these different kinds of responses*. It involves asking:

"Do I make this response or does someone else?"

"From what source did this response arise?"

"Have I agreed to give this response *to* this person or not?"

The difference then between response-ability *to and for* boils down to the difference between your

powers for acting and relation in two different dimensions: accountability and relationship. What would you say to the person who claims, or takes, responsibility that does not belong to him? Do they not thereby *aggress* into the other's territory? Yes. Even when they do it because they want to "be nice and helpful," still they demonstrate aggressing behavior into someone else's response area. And ultimately that can train the other to become un-responsible or ir-responsible.

What would you say to the person who will not take or claim responsibility for the things that rightly belong to them (i.e. their thoughts, feelings, speech, and behavior)? Do they not behaving in a *passive withdrawing style* from the area of their accountability?

Here then we have described two choices at opposite ends on a continuum regarding responsibility. And most of us tend to favor one end or the other of the continuum. Those who violate the *to/for line* by taking on far too much responsibility become **over-responsible persons**. Those who violate it by taking on too little responsibility become **under-responsible persons**. Which side of the continuum do you tend toward? The response pattern you tend to favor also tends to *characterize your very identity* in that it forms and molds your character and personality for good or ill. (This is Meta-Program #55 in *Figuring Out People*, 1997/ 2005).

I have noticed that in systems of families, businesses, companies, churches, and relationships *these dynamics complement each other*. **Caretakers** (i.e., over-responsible people) seem to naturally attract **care-receivers** (i.e., under-responsible people). Those who think that love means "having someone to rescue them, to pick up the pieces, to bring up the rear," etc. attract (consciously or unconsciously) those who think love means "taking on the responsibilities of others, rescuing them from their own self-created disasters, intruding, etc.

How can you determine what your responsibility consists of and how it differs from what belongs to others? Where does our responsibility begin and where does it end? Where does the responsibility of others begin and end? These crucial questions effect the way we emote, how we relate, how we interpret life's happenings, and our happiness and misery, and our very sanity (or lack of it).

DEFINING "RESPONSIBILITY FOR"

Responsibility *for* establishes personal *accountability*. Since "responsibility" literally refers to our *ability-to-respond* (or response-ability), if you have the ability to respond, then you have the power to act, to exercise influence, and to control things within that realm. This establishes your **responsibility for**.

To express this more specifically: you stand responsible **for** yourself and what occurs within you and your realm of response. That represents our special and unique area of control. You stand responsible *for* your thoughts (beliefs, understandings, values, etc.) your emotions (feelings, moods, states), your words (language, speech, speaking patterns, communications), and for your behaviors (actions, reactions, commitments, etc.). Generally speaking, *your "responsibility for" ends at your nose*.

When you do not own and assume responsibility for *what goes on inside* you in these areas, what happens? Do you not attempt to get someone else to take on such responsibilities? Do you not tend

to blame, accuse, and hold others responsible "for" how you feel and what you do? To do such begins craziness.

Since this shows up in linguistic patterns. There are *linguistic markers* that can cue you when a person uses an under-responsible map of the world. She will say, "You *make* me so angry ..." The other may have provided *a trigger* that provoked the person to think angry thoughts, which, in turn, created their own anger feelings. But the angry thoughts-and-feelings belong to the person who experiences them. If that person shifts his response to another, that person will only victimize him. That then begins the process of becoming overly dependent on the stimuli in one's environment to manage one's emotions. Then you begin to believe, talk, and act *as if* the world, others, events, etc. bear ultimate responsibility for things. Yet when you do so, you make your thoughts-emotions, and responses *dependent* on things beyond your skin. That's not a wise move!

DEFINING "RESPONSIBILITY TO"

Responsibility *to* differs from responsibility *for* in that rather than establishing accountability, it establishes *relationships*. A relationships essentially functions as a "responsibility to" process. This means it consists of, and can be defined in terms of *the set of responses or interactions* that the two persons exchange. How does she relate to him? What responses does he give to her? When you specify these exchanges which they give to each other, you describe in behavioral terms (see-hear-feel terms) their "relationship." Relating to another person necessitates assume responsibility *toward* that person.

This explains why relationships are always and inevitably *conditional*. They are conditional upon the specific responses and kinds of responses exchanged between two persons. When they exchanges gentle, kind, thoughtful, and loving behaviors, they have a loving relationship. When they exchange sarcastic, hurtful, ugly, insulting, abusive behaviors, they have a hurtful and dysfunctional relationship.

The *kind* of relationship we sustain to another entirely depends on the specific agreements, commitments, arrangements and negotiations that we set up with that person. Think about any relationship you sustain with another. What responses do you give *to* that person? What responses can you count on receiving *from* that person? When you identify these sets of exchanges, you specify the way and kind of relating you do with each other. If it works then the exchanges you make with the other fulfills both person's needs and satisfies expectations. If the relating does not work, then one or both of the persons feels dissatisfied with the pattern of responses exchanged.

We may also characterize relationships in terms of dependent, independent or interdependent. Children sustain *a dependent relationship* to their parents. At first they enter life as totally dependent. Yet within a few months, the child begins to become less and less dependent. They develop arm and leg power to move food and things. Then they develop mobility. With every power they develop, they become less dependent. Throughout childhood they have various developmental tasks to accomplish that enable them to become more and more independent.

By the teens years, they become young adults who have much more power and independence, and begin to sustain an ever-growing *independent relationship* to their parents. Due to their place in the developmental stages of individualizing— separating from parents and becoming separate persons,

this causes all kinds of headaches for all involved. For the teenager, they live in a limbo time. In some ways they have become independent, can stand on their own two feet, and have developed many adult powers. Yet in other ways they continue to depend on their parents and cannot fully enter into the adult world. This constant shifting between these states makes for emotional instability with resultant mood-swings.

Couples, on the other hand, have an *inter-dependent relationship*. Theirs involves one of mutually reciprocal responsibilities. If the relationship functions in a healthy way, then they base their exchanges on mutual respect, a belief in the equality of each other as unconditionally valuable. Now they can develop a willingness to equally engage in dialogue, conversation, and negotiation about how to meet each other's needs. To the extent that these factors do not exist in their interactions, the they will not relate in a healthy way.

What complicates matters more involves the fact that once we become *independent* adults, we continue to re-enter additional and new *dependent* relations with various persons at various times of their lives. When you contract with an employer "to" become an employee, to arrive at eight every day and to stay until five and to produce according to the job description, then you become *dependent* on him or the company for employment. He becomes "an authority figure" to you inasmuch as he "authors" your salary. The relation that follows does not involve friends sharing, but an employer-employee relationship about some business.

DRAWING THE LINE BETWEEN TO AND FOR

- *How do you draw this line between responsibility to and for?*
- How can you determine where your responsibility *for* yourself begins and ends, and where another's responsibility begins and ends?

To draw this line we have to *mentally discern the distinctions between responses*. This then allows you to communicate in language and in behavior the line that separates two concepts—two phenomena, accountability and relationship. Now the line between these two kinds of responses or responsibilities does not exist literally. It exists *mentally or conceptually*. Learning to cut that line, in healthy and appropriate ways often separates sanity and unsanity (and in some extreme cases, insanity).

First, ask yourself, "What does my responsibility consist of? What comprises their response-ability? Whose problem does this belong to? Does this lie within my control or theirs?" Can I do anything about this or not? Can they respond? To what extent does some of it lie with me and some of it lie with the other? Such questions help us to become clear in mind about the nature of the response under consideration.

Then, once you have clarity about the matter, *draw the line* by asserting to yourself and them that this particular response or behavior falls into either your area or theirs. Drawing the line then occurs via communication within the relationship. Do it by disclosing in your interactions with the other.

CONSEQUENCES IF YOU DON'T DRAW THE LINE

If you sense that *the line between responsibility to/for* involves some subtlety and complication that makes it difficult to draw, you have sensed rightly. And yet we must draw it if we want emotional

health and good relations. If you don't draw it accurately and sharply, you inevitably invite some very undesirable consequences upon yourself and your relationships such as the following:

1) *Power and control games.*

When you take responsibility *for* another person's thoughts and emotions you inevitably tend to control their thinking, emoting and behaving. Why? Because you feel responsible. And if you stand responsible for what they feel, belief, think, etc., then you will also stand accountable. This motivates "power" plays, manipulation, and various control behaviors. And as that occurs, authentic intimacy becomes contaminated.

2) *High Levels of stress and anxiety.*

After all, if you feel responsible *for* the thoughts, feelings, behaviors of others, then you lose peace of mind over what others think, feel, and do. Failing to draw this line prevents you from defusing yourself from the problems and "craziness" outside of yourself.

Rather than doing good boundary work, you will tend to put up psychological "suction cups" and proceed to suck into yourself the problems, emotional distresses, pains, heartaches, etc. of others. You could even suck in their tensions and guilts. By doing this you make yourself stressed and miserable. I used to meet people every week in therapy who have highly developed this misery formula and who thereby become emotional cripples.

3) *Possessiveness and neurotic love.*

Failing to cut this line invites the *possessiveness* that characterizes forms of neurotic love. When you start taking responsibility *for* others, you begin operating from the presupposition that somehow you *own* them. Old patriarchal kind of ideas then arise from this:

"Because you have become my wife, you *are* mine." "Because you have become my husband, I own you so you have to do what I want." "Because we gave you birth (or adopted you), you must think of yourself as 'ours.'" "Therefore you must do what I want you to do, think and feel!"

This leads to neurotic love. The one who loves possessively actually doesn't love authentically. Why not? Because possessive loving does not care or focus on the welfare of the other, but seeks primarily to secure his or her own insecurities. The person who loves possessively *does not love authentically*. "Love is not possessive..." (I Cor. 13:4-8). The possessive lover, in spite of how real, intense or fervent their feelings, does not so much care about the other. He seeks to totally possess the object of the love to resolve his own problems.

4) *Unsanity and inaccuracy.*

You invite insane ideas and feelings into your life when you fail to distinguish between responsibility *to* and *for*. Think back to the last time you said something like, "You make me so angry." That accusation indicates a failure to assume responsibility for your emotions, values, and speech. It indicates a major flaw in reasoning. And that kind of blaming, accusing, and judging will sabotage intimacy.

The key to emotional liberation and wholeness lies in realizing that you, and you only, create

every emotion and emotional response you ever experience. Others and events can *trigger* our emotions, but only we create our emotions and we do so by our thought processes (conscious and unconscious). This is a neurological fact. Why? Because before you can *experience an emotion* you have to process some information in your nervous system and brain. So replace every "You *make* me feel" statement, with "I am feeling this or that emotion *in response to* your word, behavior or gesture." It is a much more sane way of talking.

VALUE EXPECTATION

Values Inherent in the Responsibility To/For Skill

First, the ability to emotionally distance yourself from pain.

Drawing this line will help you gain psychological distance for yourself from a lot of problems and distress. It helps you to not overwhelm yourself with problems that do not truly belong to you. When information comes at me that I may easily construe as "criticism" and respond with *hurt* to, I can now distance myself from it. I can say to myself, "I do not stand responsible for his words. His words belong to him. Where do they come from? Why do they come at this time? Do they represent anything accurate or not?"

This empowers me to think with a clear head instead of taking offense and getting caught up in emotional reactions. In this way you can avoid personalizing. You don't immediately believe whatever you hear or disbelieve it, for that matter. You can just perceive that something as another's belief, and allow her to stand responsible for what she says and does. You are only responsible for your own responses.

Second, the skill of holding others accountable in a healthy and appropriate way.

Drawing this line enables you to hold people accountable. When someone gossips, simply ask, "Can I tell Roger what you now say to me about him?" "Have you told him these things yet?" "Why do you feel so concerned about telling me these things?"

Hold yourself and others accountable *for* the responses that come. This helps everybody to live up to their highest values. It straightens out interactions by preventing people from triangling. This enables everybody to level in a way much more respectful and kind. It makes communication safer and more reality oriented.

Third, the ability to express yourself kindly while maintaining a firmness to your own convictions.

To draw this line necessitates that you learn to confront with both kindness and firmness. If someone doesn't coming through with a promise, don't jump on him. Don't not get all emotional. Simply inquire, "I thought you agreed that you would take out the garbage. Do I have that right or not? Perhaps I misunderstood something?" Or, "If I'm haven't misperceived things, did you not say that you would no longer yell at me, but that you would sit down and talk things out? Do you no longer willing to do that? Or, perhaps you just feel so stressed-out that you need some time out?" This allows you to let people save face while you simultaneously confront. Confronting no longer has to feel that you have to get mean or cold. It simply means that you care that much!

Drawing this line empowers you to build and rebuild trust between people. Trust between people means *taking another at his or her word*. It functions as simply as that—as profoundly as that. What happens when someone will not take you at your word when you explain what you truly feel, think, or want? What happens when they tell you what you "really" feel, think, or want? It erodes trust.

Trust functions by *trusting another as response-able for his or her own responses*. Trust therefore means that cutting out the mind-reading and taking each other at one's word. Drawing the Responsibility To/For Line enables you to hold yourself and others accountable to the person's word. This does not always function as a "nice" skill, but it does kindly protect relationships.

Summary: *How Do You Draw the Line?*

Determine the areas and boundaries of the various responses that you have under consideration. Ask, "What response can I make? What response can I make *to* this other person? What response can they make and have they promised to make to me? To what extent does the response lie in my area of control and/or in their area of control?"

Then communicate your understandings. Draw the line by asserting to yourself and to them that this particular response or behavior belongs to you or them. Draw this line by speaking in a straightforward way.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RESPONSIBILITY TO/FOR LINE

What questions may have arisen in your mind about this? After I first began using Responsibility To/For as a communication model and therapy intervention, numerous people raised various questions about it. Here are some of the key questions that seemed pertinent to a clear understanding and acceptance of this skill.

Can a person be firm while tender, or kindly tough?

When you draw the responsibility to/for line, you will find that it often surfaces strong emotions in you. It raises big questions about your emotions, your behaviors, your relationships. It often raises questions about the value or necessity of directness, assertiveness, openness, vulnerability, etc.

Gauge yourself. How do you feel about leveling and making yourself transparent to others? What emotions arise in you when you think about approaching someone face to face to firmly, yet caringly, draw the boundary line between you in terms of responsibilities? Do you avoid such confrontations like the plague? Do you get fearful and worried about how the other will think, feel or respond? Do you feel apprehensive about the other's approval or disapproval? Do you feel that you have to control the end result? Do you care too much about them making the "right" decision or right response?

Assertively own your own thoughts, feelings, wants, etc. and directly confront the other. Asking about thoughts, emotions, wants, etc. can evoke fears and apprehensions in some people. Many simply have not seen or experienced healthy models of such open and

transparency. They have not seen good respectful conflict resolution skills in action.

Examine yourself. Do you feel safe to do such? Does it seem considerate, thoughtful, loving, caring, tender, etc. to draw boundary lines? Does this firm, yet tough, approach seem mean or cruel? Can you imagine yourself doing it with a sense of gentle concern.

Do you tend to care too much? People gifted with the capacity to sympathize tend toward this extreme. Such persons can send their consciousness out to others and identify with them, and feel their feelings, and quickly connect or understand their emotional world. This is a great gift yet it can become a great curse—unless you keep it in check. When this gift of caring gets out of hand, you care too much. You can become obsessed with helping others. Then you "have to" rush in and caretaker. Eventually you may find yourself coming across in controlling and possessive ways, then you are in a co-dependent relationship.

Such caring and helping can backfire. The Proverbist wrote:

"A man of great wrath will pay the penalty; for if you deliver him, you will only have to do it again" (Proverbs 19:19) One translation reads: "...you only make it worse."

Sometimes the kindest thing in the world consists of letting another fully experience the consequences of their dysfunctional state and let them suffer the consequences for doing so. Then you let the consequences teach them. Craig Larson (1988) says that "assistance can go too far. It does some people more harm than good. He alluded to some scriptures and then proposed several questions to ask oneself to determine if our helping truly helps.

"Am I concerned more about myself or them?"

"Can I live with myself being thought by the other as 'mean,' 'not nice,' 'unkind,' etc.?"

"How long have they been in need?" Long term dependency suggests a willingness to remain in that state.

"How bold are they?" Responsible people are often reluctant to ask for help whereas the over-dependent become real 'demanders.'

"How persistent are they?" When an over-dependent person becomes chronic, he also knows how to keep badgering until he gets what he wants.

"Do they blame others or offer excuses?" Responsible people own up to their own mistakes.

Several dynamics indicate when "giving is not loving." You are not loving if your giving reinforces someone's weakness and keeps the person dependent. Nor do you truly love if you indulge another's childishness (they act disrespectful, ungrateful, and whining). You do not show love if you enable some dysfunction (irresponsibility, laziness, wrong doing, burning-out, etc.).

The real question is: "How can we wean them in a redemptive way" that protects their dignity while challenging them to become more responsible? The answer lies in validating your concern without enabling their bad habits. Verbally affirm and outline what you will do, and decline giving assistance when they fail to follow through. This teaches them to become responsible. In some situations, don't knock out all the props at once, but progressively

decrease them. Focus on answers with them rather than rehearsing the problem. Learn to not treat ongoing needs as emergencies even if the person packages it as such.

Is Love conditional or unconditional? What about relationships?

The phrase *unconditional love* can be misused. Should you love unconditionally? Yes! Should you approach and offer your love without conditions? Yes. God offers his love without conditions. He loves due to his nature to love—he sends his rain on the good and on the bad. Do the same. *Offer* your love to all people without conditions. Shift your thinking, believing, and valuing so that you begin to truly desire and want them to prosper, to do well, and to succeed.

Does this automatically mean that you *have relationship* with all people? Of course not! It only means that you have made yourself available. It means you have made yourself open. It suggests you have the personal strength for vulnerability. But it does not create relationship, the other has not yet responded. What if they do not return love? What if they never return your good will, friendship, and good faith? Then what? *Then there exists no relationship.*

Giving love and offering friendship describes one thing; entering covenant relationship and/or experiencing friendship describes a very different thing. If a person receives and accepts your love (respect, intentions of being close, warm feelings), and shows a willingness to become mutually responsible *to each other* then you have "a relationship." Relating entails conditions. Relationship means agreeing to become *responsible to each other.*

Here's another significant difference. Whereas love not depend upon behaviors, a relationship does. You can love the unlovable and the obnoxious and do so unconditionally. Conversely, if you reject my good will, if you violate the vows of our covenant, if you will not receive or return my love, relationship becomes impossible.

Here's the key: *It takes two persons to relate.* Relationship involves at least two people who agree to relate. We can't force relationship. No matter how much you want to relate to, and with, another, you cannot impose it upon the one who will have none of it. Relationship inevitably operates conditionally. In marriage we express these conditions in the giving and receiving of the vows. Couples say to one another, "I will honor and esteem you, I will cherish you, I will forsake all others and be yours and yours alone. For better or worse, for richer or poorer, you can count on me."

The intimacy a couple attains will, to a great extent, depend on each learning the relational skills and investing the time and trouble to *make good their covenant vows.* If a couple attains the covenant intimacy which they chart out with their vows, then it means that they effectively held each other accountable to their words and goals, and that they did the work of relating in meeting each others' needs.

A myth that ruins many relationships is the idea that's expressed in the demand, "You ought to accept me just as I am." "If you really loved me, if you loved me unconditionally, you would not try to change me." That's just wrong. Actually *love changes people.* To receive

love is to receive influence from the other. If I refuse to open myself up to your influences, how can I say I love you?

Relationships *work* in the sense that each person works at learning how to meet the other's needs. They work at learning how to love the other. This presupposes conditions. After all, we are *conditional beings*. Our life, health, mental sanity, emotional fulfillment, etc. all must meet certain conditions. When we do not meet these needs, we get empty. And when people get empty, they feel desperate. And eventually, they either leave, ruin the relationship through arguing, judging, blaming, etc. or they put to death a vital part of their personality.

Can Love be confrontative and still be love?

One of the gifts of relationship consists of *confrontation*. A truly close and intimate relationship eventually becomes sufficiently deep and tough enough to enable each to confront the other. Relationships as conditional phenomena do not just happen. They need nurturing and cherishing to keep them alive, vital, growing, deep, and respectful. Each person must be willing and able to hold the other accountable. To impose no conditions; to let anything and everything go; to let the other get by with anything, does not indicate authentic caring love, but the lack of it. Each must develop the ability to "speak the truth in love."

Consider how Jesus balanced unconditional love with conditional demands. When he once encountered the young man who wanted to become his disciple, he sensed that something held him back. He sensed that the young man had not yet become ready. Something signaled him that the young man's commitment needed challenged in some way to become fuller and richer. Too many other loves inhibited him. So the confrontation:

"And Jesus looking upon him loved him) and said to him, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow me.'" (Mark 10:21).

Here's unconditional love *and* conditional relationship. He loved him *enough* to tell him the truth. Because his love for wealth hindered him, "loving him," Jesus challenged him. Does that seem very loving? He loved him enough to speak the truth and to hold him responsible. This *tough love* sometimes does not feel "nice." It feels tough, hard, and uncaring. When the young man walked away, *Jesus let him go!* He didn't lower his standards, he didn't say he would make a new deal. He let him walk away. And this was someone he loved! Love here showed itself kind, but not "nice" in a caretaking way.

It does not reinforce dysfunctional behavior of others. It does not teach them to over-value their needs to the discounting of the needs of others. It does not reinforce a person's tendency to live as if the world should revolve around them. As you draw the line between responsibility to/for your love becomes tough enough to confront your loved ones kindly. If you authentically love your child, you let that child know the facts of how school works, the hard reality of running in front of a car, etc. You love enough to confront in the presence of danger. Painful intervention sometimes proves just how much you truly do care. This underscores how neurotic sensitivity can void real love and generate unauthentic relationships.

Can Love be Tough Enough to let consequences Fly?

Loving intimacy does not always release another from consequences. As much as it might hurt us, authentic love has enough strength to help those with whom we relate to face reality. When love degenerates into sentimentality, it ceases to function lovingly.

Do you go into "mothering" and "fathering" roles with people (spouses, relatives, work partners) and try to save people from the consequences of their thoughts and actions? You may do so with the best of motives—to show your care, but your actions may create more harm than good. "Saving" people from facing and coping with reality *cripples* people and teaches them to become *irresponsible*.

Marie came for counseling because she felt herself under a lot of tension, stress, frustration, and depression. She wanted to deal with these feelings. She reported that her 27 year old son had "made" her feel horrible, her 13 year old daughter had severe behavioral problems at school, and a neighborhood child who now lived in her house and had started to talk and act in very disrespectful ways to her. To begin to trim down the stressors, I inquired:

"Have you considered kicking the disrespectful neighbor kid out?"

Marie: "Well, where would he go?"

"Is that really the question you should be asking? Are you responsible for his choices?"

Marie: "I don't know."

"Do you really *not know*, or are you evading my question?"

Underlying these stress-overload factors in her life concerned a lifestyle pattern in Marie. Over the years, she had "taught" her kids and everybody else in her life (by her behaviors and typical ways of responding) that if they didn't come through with their responsibilities—she would! She had taken responsibility for her children to such an extent, and for so long a time, that they now held her accountable for their behavior. Now this described their habitual of living in the world, the way they navigate through life. And they had come to truly believe that the source and cause of their problems laid with her. So no wonder they spent lots of time blaming her! And the crazy thing in her map of the world—she accepted all of this at face value. She believed that nonsense too! So I said:

"I think the whole system has gone berserk! You have taken on burdens and responsibilities that do not belong to you—they are not your problems, emotions, and stresses, but theirs. This over-responsibility pattern lies at the heart of these problems. You must now take responsibility to change that! Are you ready to do that?"

Marie had enough awareness to recognize that whatever anybody told her about someone else's problems, she assumed responsibility *for* them. Yet her old mental map continued to filter her hearing. Surprised, she said:

"I thought you would help me solve my thirteen year old's problem, and her boyfriend's problem."

"And feed the problem so it would grow even more? Why would I want to undermine you or them in that way?"

More shock and stunned surprise (my intent).

"You have over-done your gift, Marie. God has given you the gift of caring and with it you can rescue, feel for others, but how you have coped has not become so overloaded that it has become your problem. You have become stressed out, have you not? You have gotten out of coping power, have you not? So the solution at this point in time is to *let go*. The solution is to *cut the responsibility to/for line* and let these others assume their God-given responsibilities. You do want them to become adult and mature and responsible persons, don't you?"

Her thirteen year old had run away. Why? She had had enough of her mother's controlling and rescuing. She had to get away from it. Her own developmental needs for independence and autonomy raged inside and found no acceptance by mom. So she ran away as a way of getting some space from mom so that she could learn to individualize. When we take other's responsibilities from them without contracting with them to do that, we injury their development.

Love is not designed to save a person from the consequences of his or her behavior. Each of us have to face the consequences of our thoughts and actions. Doing so enables one to learn how to use, and not misuse, one's freedom. It's the reality principle: "As you sow, so shall you reap" (Gal. 6:7-8).

Is Our Love Tough Enough to Not Be Possessive?

James Dobson (1988) devoted an entire chapter to this question in *Parenting is not for Cowards*. Apparently a lot of parents have become addicted to taking-care of their adult "children" and rescuing them. They can't cut the apron strings and push them out of the nest like a mother eagle does with her little ones. They have mentally mapped that their adult children as fragile. Consequently, a great many adult children have learned to become under-responsible. And they know how to keep hooking mom or dad's sense of guilt (pseudo-guilt) and pushing their buttons.

Yet, when a person becomes an "adult," that person is no longer a child. They no longer need taken care of. To do so weakens their inner capacities. It dis-empowers them. They need adult responsibilities and problems. They need some of the pain from which their parents protect. Such "protection" actually smothers their capacities for maturing.

Cutting the umbilical cord means letting them go, releasing them to their own lives, and not evaluating their responses as something for which they must feel accountable. This may represent a very tough choice. Yet love will do it. Even if you need to set the person's things out on the street, provide them the opportunity to assume responsibility for themselves. Sometimes this becomes the first time in life that they have to reach down within themselves and tap their own resources, wisdom, and energies. Also expect, at first, for them to respond with pouting, shouting, tantrums, etc. But if you love them enough to release them, to let them assume their adult responsibilities, they will eventually thank you.

The world doesn't "owe" the young adult anything no matter how much he rages against the heavens and demands that he gets his way. Yet the universe still does not owe him! Let

your love show itself tough enough to not let the over-protecting get worse. Love that person enough to let them face the real world now. Clarify your mind with regard to the responsibility to/or issues. Then confront the parasite as you believe in their God-given potential for becoming response-able.

Can I Really Believe that People Can Assume Freedom of Will?

When someone needs and wants rescued, and says so, that describes one thing. In such a case, the person recognizes a limitation or needs and straightforwardly asks for help. But when go on a "project" to rescue people, to save them, to take care of them—this becomes an entirely different matter. This underscores the importance of allowing people to have their problems and not hooking up with their irresponsibilities.

Cutting the responsibility to/for line enables you to distinguish between authentically helping, caring, and bearing burdens and between enabling and supporting a dysfunctional lifestyle. True enough, the Bible encourages us to bear each others burdens out of love (Gal. 6:2). Simultaneously, it encourages us to move toward the goal with that person so that he or she can become individually responsible for themselves (Gal. 6:5).

The reason caring and rescuing can become addictive behavior consists of the fact that they presuppose a "superior" type of role. Does this not give you a sense of power, importance, and indispensability? And people justify it, "I just like feeling needed." On the other side, allowing someone to carry your burden and enjoying the *ir*responsibility can also become addictive. Other personality types enjoy getting off the hook as others support them in escaping their burdens.

Is it Nice to Say No and to Refuse Requests?

Refusing requests for help can become a powerful "guilt trip" for people who tend to violate the Responsibility For/To line. If you tend to take on too much responsibility, you probably have a hard time saying no to requests, especially reasonable requests. Over-responsible persons tend to become so moral that they often end up in help-professions (look who's talking!). If they then get caught up in the "Nice Syndrome" they may find it near impossible to say no.

Does saying *No* seems mean, cruel, uncaring, unthoughtful, and unchristian. Sometimes it can come across as that. Yet sometimes it represents the kindest, most loving, and thoughtful thing to do. Our objective, after all, should not become just to bear the burdens of others, but to help them move on to becoming a fully functioning and responsible persons. That sometimes means letting them endure some distress, some pain, some discomfort is sometimes the most loving thing.

Summary

Are you now ready to make the vital distinction between responsibility to/for? Are you ready to *think this way*? Are you ready to *speak this way*? You can, and as you do, you will then find yourself empowered with a sanity producing distinction that will straighten out most of your relational problems. Rather than making you a cold or uncaring person, this skill will empower you so that you can take full and complete control over those areas wherein you can

make a response. It turns back over to you those areas wherein you can act.

Then, as you become more empowered, more resourceful, more living out of your own center of values and beliefs, you can effectively take action to influence the people and events of your life in a way that you will find healthy and appropriate. This will enable you to become more loving since it will empower you to become more effective in helping.

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