

COUPLE THERAPY WITH DAN WILE – November 20, 2012

Brief description: Fighting and withdrawing are inevitable in a couple relationship, but partners can become increasingly skillful in reducing their frequency, duration, and damage, and even turning them into opportunities. In couple therapy, I speak for partners, translating their fighting or withdrawing into intimate conversations.

Longer description: The quality of life in a relationship depends on the couple's ability to cope with their inevitable periods of fighting (quietly or loudly) and withdrawing (not talking about what mainly concerns them). Couples typically come to a therapy session in the midst of one of these two states. In either case, I move next to one of you and speak as if I were that person talking to the other. If you are fighting, I attempt to translate your angry and defensive comments into confiding ones. If you are withdrawing—that is, not talking about your feelings—I speculate about what these feelings might be and ask if my guess is correct. My goal is to turn fights or withdrawal into intimate conversations—to turn what is endangering the relationship into a means for deepening it.

Longer description yet:

- In addition to whatever specific issues you both are struggling with (money, sex, children, inlaws), there is generally the added and often more significant problem of how you talk—or don't talk—about these issues: you fight or withdraw.
- *Fighting* is a deadlocked exchange in which each partner feels too unheard to listen, too misunderstood to be understanding, and too stung by what the other just said to do anything other than sting back.
- *Withdrawing* is a devitalized exchange in which partners don't talk about what most concerns them and may not talk much at all.
- *Intimacy*, the alternative to fighting and withdrawing, occurs when partners confide to each other the main things on their minds—what's "alive" for them at the moment, to use Marshall Rosenberg's term—in a way that works out, that is, that leaves each feeling closer rather than hurt, angry, defensive, or distant.
- Intimacy, this alternative to fighting and withdrawing, can be created by the way partners recover from fighting or withdrawing, that is, by means of a *recovery conversation* in which, unlike the fight or withdrawal, you confide feelings, make acknowledgments, reach out to the other, and look at things from the other's point of view.
- In such a conversation, you create a meta-level, a bird's eye view, a perch, a helicopter look at the traffic, a vantage point above the fray, a *platform*. You operate as joint troubleshooters talking in a dispassionate, compassionate, and intimate way *about* your fighting, withdrawing, and lack of intimacy. You develop a shared picture of your relationship—how it is special as well as its trouble spots.
- Every couple has its own set of unsolvable problems that they grapple with throughout the relationship. Creating a platform—operating as joint troubleshooters—is the premier way to deal with such problems. Operating as troubleshooters, you commiserate over your unsolvable problems and put them in perspective.
- In couple therapy, I translate the partners' fights and withdrawals into conversations. I show them how to construct a platform from which to hold recovery conversations that enable them to turn problems into occasions for intimacy—to turn what is endangering the relationship into a means for deepening it.