How to be a Learner: Connecting to our most vulnerable and authentic self.

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With all the importance being emphasized regarding "relationship skills" in order to construct vibrant and resonant teams, it often goes underemphasized that the most important relationship we have is the one we have with ourselves.[8] This is the relationship that influences our relationships with others.

We learn from our early caregivers how to regulate our emotions. When our caregivers see us authentically in the present moment and address our needs with understanding and kindness, we experience a sense of security and safety. In these early relationships we look to others to help us regulate our emotions and as we gradually internalize this capacity to see, understand and honor our own relationship needs with compassion, we grow our ability to self-regulate. However, even as we develop the capacity for self-awareness and self-soothing, we never out-grow the need for supportive and secure relationships with others to help us regulate our emotions, especially during times of stress.[1, 4, 6]

The science of relationships (interpersonal neurobiology) suggests that one of three basic things happen in a relationship.

1) We *turn towards*, and the person in the relationship feels seen, understood and secure/soothed in the warmth, stability and belonging of the relationship. Turning towards invites authenticity and generates trust without the fear of judgment, criticism or shame and also without the fear of abandonment or loss of belonging. John Gottman describes this as a *friend* relationship[2, 3] and Dan Wile characterizes this as creating a cycle of *empathy*.[9] We learn this ability to *turn towards* from our relationship with our primary caregivers.[6] When we feel truly seen, understood and soothed as children then we cultivate an internalized capacity to regulate our emotions and explore our beliefs with curiosity. We extend this Curiosity, Openness, Acceptance and Loving-kindness not only to ourselves but to others we encounter as we seek to manage the demands of our lives. Dan Siegel describes it as practicing COAL. In addition, we are primed to extend this nonjudgmental, curious and loving openness to others. If there are parts of me that you don't understand or that seem in opposition to your perspectives and beliefs, then we explore together with curiosity and suggestions for growth and continued connection. Worthiness is not attached to performance or to subjugating aspects of self in order to fit-in or to meet expectations.

2) We *turn against,* and the person in the relationship feels judged, criticized and possibly shamed for not meeting expectations. Gottman has described this as an *enemy* relationship and Dan Wile suggests that it creates an *adversarial* cycle. The message is that the person (whether ourself or another) is defective and unworthy of belonging unless they change to fit-in with expectations. As with turning towards, turning against is often learned through our relationship with our primary caregivers. When we grow up feeling judged, criticized, shamed and even

being punished if we fail to perform or achieve perfection, we are at risk for both internalizing this loud critical voice as well as for extending it to others. There is a loss of curiosity and exploration in order to understand and join with compassion. The relationship, whether with others or with ourselves, ceases to be one of soothing (emotional regulation) and understanding. A consequence of this is that it accelerates fear and anxiety from the worry that I will not be "good enough" if I can't achieve perfection or meet expectations. It is difficult to grow, change and reach our potential when in the dysregulating grip of fear and anxiety related to our worthiness.

3) We *turn away*, and the person in the relationship feels alone and abandoned. Gottman describes this as a *stranger* relationship and Dan Wile characterizes it as creating a cycle of *withdrawal*. The message is that it is not safe to see others or even one's self in their (our) entirety. There is often a false belief that accompanies the turning away that if we don't look at the parts of others or ourselves we judge as inferior or unworthy of love, they won't exist and won't need to be acknowledged or processed. Even though we may exile these parts, they're still there. Turning away may evolve when we learn in our relationship with our primary caregivers that relationships are not important, messy, take too much energy and cannot provide the feeling of belonging and acceptance that is more likely to be attached to accomplishment and performance. Unlike turning towards or turning against, where relationships have energy (regulated or dysregulated), turning away creates a false sense of emotional regulation as we disengage from needs (ours or those of others) and the valuing of the relationship and its importance. A consequence of this is loss of the ability to be intimate and genuine with oneself or with others. In highly stressful medical fields, like surgery, this can contribute to depersonalization (inability to have a relationship with self or with others) and result in the syndrome of burnout.

Research on human attachment (what we learned about security and trust associated with relationships from our early primary care givers) suggests that what we experienced in these earliest relationships *between* ourselves and important others ultimately manifests in our relationships *within* our self. Expanding on terminology introduced by Stan Tatkin,[7] those who turn away from themselves and others become *islands*—at risk for depersonalization (disconnecting from their feeling self as they treat themselves or others more like a machine or an object since relationships are not seen as an important source of understanding and soothing. For islands, tasks, achievement and reaching goals supersede relationships and connecting). Those who turn against themselves and others become like *waves*—desiring relationships, often idealizing what the relationship can provide, and then receding from their "shore" when that idealized relationship "disappoints" due to the imperfection that is inherent in all humans. Both of these relationship styles can predispose us to struggle, dissatisfaction and burnout. In essence, islands manage their emotions by trying not to have them and waves manage their emotions by hoping others will make everything OK, and then blaming them when they can't. Then there are those who turn towards themselves and others—*anchored* with compassion and forgiveness for themselves and others as they find the courage to see and accept what is present without judgment, to learn, to love, and to accept struggle in themselves

and others. Research would suggest our relationship style characterizes how we lead, work and survive or thrive during times of challenge.[5]

Take a moment to reflect on your preferred approach to relationships—particularly the one with yourself. Do you prefer being an island (relationships are secondary to achievement), a wave (relationships are desired and I tend to put that person on a pedestal, but am often left feeling disappointed in them, or myself, when they (or I) fail to be perfect), or have you learned to be an anchor (relationships take work, forgiveness, courage and compassion and are an important part of your life)?

Ed Tronick, a professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts, has spent a career studying mother/child attachment and the child's need to experience attunement with the mother in order to be emotionally regulated. As you reflect on your preferred approach to relationships, watch the video on YouTube in the link below. Watch it from the perspective of you as a parent connecting to your own vulnerable inner child, who needs your nurturance, connection and protection in order to feel seen, soothed, safe and secure. Notice how the little child in the vignette becomes dysregulated when the mother looks away. Imagine how it would feel, if in addition to looking away, she also became a source of criticism or anger. Next notice how easily the relationship is repaired when the mother once again engages and connects to her child with kindness and love.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSqjW9I1IcQ

Take a few centering and calming breaths. Send yourself a message of gratitude for being present to yourself through this activity. How might you begin to see, notice, nurture and soothe your vulnerable inside self? Just notice what it feels like to show-up for yourself in this way. If you notice any judgments (turning against) or wishes to turn away, just be with those experiences as well. Be a witness to them in with Curiosity, Openness, Acceptance and Loving-kindness.

As I (RMU) reflect on my own experience with training in surgery, which includes my professional "parents" or "caregivers," I now recognize all of the patterns described above. I was exposed to the harsh and often demeaning criticisms of those whose relationship style with me (even though they likely cared about my being successful and not disappointing them) emerged from their likely lack of compassion for themselves, so how could they have compassion for me, as a learner? I experienced them as adversaries as they turned against me. I recognized in myself a tendency to withdraw from those who could not see me as an ardent, but flawed, learner who wished for compassion, understanding and gentle guidance. When what I yearned for was not available, and not having learned the skills to repair the relationship and construct the type of nurturing that I wanted, it was simply easier to avoid relationships altogether and "soldier on." Fortunately, there were a few who treated me with what felt like genuine nurturing and caring. I never felt judged by them, even when I failed or struggled. As I

reflect back now on those few individuals, I realize that they were the ones who were most influential, not just because of what they taught me, but because of how they taught me and what it felt like to be a learner in their presence. I struggled for years with my own astonishment that they didn't see me as a failure or as someone who might never achieve competence, but instead extended to me an unconditional acceptance and love for that part of me that we both knew genuinely cared—that part of me that was courageous enough to show up and take a chance on failure as an essential part of succeeding, and that really hoped to learn and someday be "good enough." Given the choice of how I now want to treat myself (and others), the answer is easy, but the practice (particularly for those of us who know a lot about criticism, blame and ultimately shame) is hard. If you struggle like I did (and still do at times) I recommend coaching (or therapy), a generous dose of self-compassion, and turning towards yourself with kindness, forgiveness, and love.

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