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### Dreams in Conflict

Most of us do not give a lot of thought to what we want from a romantic relationship until we are deep into it. Anthropologists and psychodynamic therapists point out this is natural and exactly how the process is meant to work. We are conscious of factors like physical attraction, being able to really talk to this person, feeling understood, admiring their work ethic, spontaneity or sense of humor. Subconsciously, we have desires *and* fears about relationships that are both realized in the partner we choose. This is why a person who needs order to feel safe may choose someone who is unstructured and lives in the moment, or why a person needing personal space marries someone needing a great deal of togetherness.

The person we choose may be our most perfect match, causing us to grow and stretch while simultaneously triggering our deepest longings of unmet needs. At the same time, we would likely experience similar joys and frustrations with any other partner, because we are such complex beings that one way or another, we will trigger and be triggered by whoever we choose for a companion. Last month, I had the opportunity to attend a conference conducted by Drs. John and Julie Gottman, highly respected couples therapists and researchers on why relationships succeed or fail. One often-cited statistic from their research is that nearly 70% of all conflicts that couples have are about perpetual issues that will never be completely resolved. What makes these conflicts unsolvable, even by the most successful of couples?

Perpetual conflicts can be seen to represent dreams in conflict. There will be some issue in your relationship where each of you holds a position representing dreams and values you have for your life, that you cannot give up without giving up your own sense of integrity, and that cannot be “solved” without either you or your partner losing something important in the process. It’s relatively easy to get in touch with why an issue is so important to you. A person who has always had to “do” and accomplish tasks in their life might be quite insistent on needing time just to “be.” Someone who had a chaotic and abusive childhood might be unyielding on needing control and order. Another person who has lived a lonely or regimented life might be unwilling to live without a great deal of fun and spontaneity. Understanding the story behind your partner’s position tends to be more difficult. When we feel that giving in on our needs is too great a loss, it is common to become angry at our partner for being so uncaring, so stubborn, so selfish. The real skill comes in uncovering and understanding the dreams, longings and needs that lie behind our partner’s position. The Gottmans highlight that every couple will have perpetual conflicts (and “dreams within the conflict”)—Unsuccessful couples stay “gridlocked,” caught in a game of win-or-lose where neither partner can afford to give in. Successful couples move to a place of “dialogue,” where they understand the conflict and the needs behind each person’s position; they create a series of compromises and small steps that honor each person’s dream. They find a balance.

Finding and keeping the balance can be a life-long effort. At the foundation of this process is building a strong friendship. When you view your partner as your friend, you truly want to understand them and don’t want to crush their dreams. Your partner should feel the same toward you. Don’t give up on yourself. Continue to advocate for your own needs—let your partner know you and what you long for in life and in love. Don’t ask your partner to give up on himself or herself either. Strive to have a relationship where you both aim to make each other’s dreams come true.

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