

“Lessons in Love”  
By Kim D. Wilson  
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos  
February 5, 2017

I’ve been married three times. The way I look at it, I’ve had a lot of opportunities to learn about love. The first time, I was 20. I was married for 7 years. The second time, I was 29. I was married for 25 years. The third time –well, it’s been a year and a half, and so far, so good! I’m so grateful to have found the love of my life, and Gene and I marvel every day at how good a relationship can be when both partners understand what it takes to keep it good.

I’ve also counseled dozens, maybe hundreds of couples before they were married, and I talk to them about what makes and sustains a good relationship. And, throughout my life, I’ve had the privilege of knowing countless loving people.

So I have learned a lot about love.

I’d like to share with you this morning three essential lessons I’ve learned over the years about how to be a good partner in a relationship. And I don’t mean just romantic relationships –I’m including our relationships with other family members and friends, too.

Here’s the first one. It has to do with being right. I LOVE being right! But here’s the thing: **Being Right is the Booby Prize**. This was so disappointing when I first realized it. But, if I was going to have healthy relationships, I had to admit, I was going to have to back off my need to be right. Because I realized that when I won an argument, what did I really win? Besides the fact that I get to be right, there is no prize for winning a disagreement. I get nothing. It doesn’t do anything positive for the relationship, doesn’t nurture it, doesn’t bring me closer to the other person. Besides the little pat on the back I can give myself, all I get is...nothing. That’s why it’s called the booby prize.

Susan Page, in her book, How One of you can Bring the Two of You Together, is the one who came up with the booby prize idea. She explores this attachment to being right. She says that when we have a complaint about the other person,

often we ARE right. Maybe the other person IS being uncooperative and difficult, and our complaints are completely legitimate. We have every right to be upset, angry, exasperated... We have the satisfaction of being on the right side, that we're the reasonable one in the relationship. And our friends agree and completely support us.

The problem with being right about the way you analyze your problem, says Susan Page, is that that's all you get. "That's it... You don't get to solve the problem. You don't get to be closer to [the other person]. You don't get to reduce the conflict in your relationship. You don't get to stop feeling so angry. You don't get the changes you long for."

Being right, she says, "Is a dead end. Life just stops there. Nothing else happens."

There's another problem with the booby prize. Being right doesn't leave much room for the possibility that there might be a completely different way of understanding a situation. But if we can start to let go of our iron grip on our self-righteousness, we might open ourselves to another perspective.

There was a couple, I'll call them Sylvia and Kevin. They had a good relationship and were happy together except for one thing: money. Kevin kept very tight reins on the finances. He did all the banking and paid all the bills. They agreed that for any purchases over a certain amount, they would discuss it beforehand. The issue was that whenever he wanted to buy something, she said, "Sure –that's fine!" But when she wanted to buy, he would always give her a hard time and try to talk her out of it.

Sylvia tried to get Kevin to see how unfair he was being. She finally gave up and figured that he was just unreasonable and selfish about money. Then one day, she was discussing her frustration with a new friend and the friend said, "Maybe he isn't just selfish and unreasonable. Maybe he's scared." Suddenly, Sylvia could see beyond Kevin's seeming unreasonableness.

Of course he's scared, she realized. His whole family was extremely anxious about money, and he probably felt out of control and anxious whenever Sylvia wanted to spend money. Once she let go of being right, the two of them could begin to talk about the real issues and better understand each other.

Being right distances us from the one we love. It puts a wall between us. If we can soften our stance and find a place of compassion for that loved one, maybe imagining them as a frightened child trying to cope with the world, just trying to see a situation from a different perspective, it allows us to break down the wall and create an opening for closeness, for building the relationship. If being right is the booby prize, letting go of being right lets us “go for the gold” in our relationship. (Susan Page)

The second lesson is, **An expectation is a premeditated resentment.** What happens when we expect something and it doesn't happen? It's usually a let down. A gay married couple, James and Arturo, had a lot going for them. But James had a lot of resentment toward Arturo. He would ask Arturo to do something, like, “Can you pick up my dry cleaning on the way home?” Arturo would say “yes,” but then he'd come home empty-handed, saying he forgot. James would then get angry and resentful.

Is it reasonable to expect someone to do what they say they will do? Yes. In theory. But is it reasonable when that person's track record is pretty poor in that department? You can expect it all you want. But in this case, an expectation is a pre-meditated resentment. You just set yourself up!

What James eventually figured out was that if it was HIS dry-cleaning, HE would pick it up. He found that if he accepted that his husband, Arturo, was not perfect in the follow-through department, he wasn't angry anymore. It's just the way Arturo is. He stopped expecting something that, chances are, was not going to happen. James liked having his dry-cleaning picked up as soon as it was ready. So James began taking care of himself, focusing on doing it his way, because he liked it that way, and not because he resented Arturo for not doing it for him. (You know, “Fine! I'll do it myself then!”) He was not going to change Arturo, but he could change the way he handled the situation. No more false expectations? No more premeditated resentment.

And the third lesson is, **Be a Compliment Detective.** By this I mean, look for ways to express your appreciation for the person you love. Every day. Find little ways every single day to compliment them. It should be a genuine compliment, and it should be specific. You could tell your son or daughter, “I think you're just great.”

But it often means even more if you say something like, “I love the way you kept your cool even though that girl was rude to you.”

Thank them for the small things they do. And I have to say that Gene has been a great role model for me in this regard. If I unload the dishwasher, or straighten up the living room, or make the bed –any little thing, Gene will say, “Thank you for doing that.” And so I look for those little things to thank Gene for, too!

Thank them for the big things they do, too. Show your gratitude. Sometimes you have to look hard. That’s why I say you need to be a detective. Get creative. But appreciate, appreciate, appreciate. We can never overdo it. Everyone likes to feel appreciated. Expressing compliments and showing appreciation feed and nurture a relationship with someone you care about. It creates a positive feeling in the other person and it also makes us feel good. When we feel those good feelings, we also feel closer to each other. (SHOW BUMPER STICKER)

So, those are the three lessons in love I wanted to share with you today. **Being Right is the Booby Prize, An Expectation is a Premeditated Resentment, and Be a Compliment Detective.**

Life is short. Every loving relationship we have is precious, not a thing to be taken for granted. A good relationship with another human being can be one of the most sacred experiences we have. And, there are depressing things going on in the world that we should not turn our backs on. But, ultimately, it’s who we are and how we love that give life meaning. So let’s be sure not to turn our backs on love. May we give up being right, give up our expectations and look for the gold in all our relationships with the people we love. May it be so.