

Web-Based Radio Show

Series on Learning Differences, Learning Challenges, and Learning Strengths:


Principles to Live By: Basic Truths About Life, Relationships, Children, and Families - Counterbalancing Relationships – Part 3 of 4

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Good morning. This is Dr. Greenspan and welcome to our web-based radio show. As you know, for those who have been listening, we're doing a series on Principles to Live By – the principles to guide relationships between parents and children, between any two adults having a relationship, or even between children having a relationship. These are very general principles, extracted from our understanding of human development. Today we'll have a segment that's a very important one – as you can hear, my voice is a little raspy because I've just gotten over a case of laryngitis – so this will be a very important segment, but a little briefer than usual.

The focus for today's topic is counter balance, and let's underline the word "counterbalance." So today we'll talk about counter balance in relationships – a simple phrase with an obvious meaning and profound implications. Often in relationships, instead of counterbalancing we intensify or exaggerate a pattern in the other person rather than trying to balance it with a pattern of our own. Often we do this in our selection of relationship partners. For example, many first loves in the teen years or early adult years are not with a person who balances us or who can counter balance or who can complement our lives, but with someone who is similar to us. Often, if it's an opposite sex partner, that person is a mirror image of ourselves – someone who is quite like we are, but perhaps a better version – a more beautiful, more handsome, more talented, or stronger version. Or the person can represent a weaker version of ourselves if we want to be the dominant one but, often, it's a person who's very similar to ourselves. Then, in some respects we live vicariously through that person – we want them to do what we want and we want them to be everything that we don't want to be,




which may sound negative. We play them off ourselves, off some different images or *imagoes* that we have. This is particularly worse when we do this through our children and we live through our children. For example, our child is going to be the athlete we never were or better than we were or equal to us or not as good as we were. He's going to go to the college we didn't go to, or the college we did go to, but whatever it is – it's not important whether he's exactly like us or better than us or worse than us – living through him is not respecting the independence of the separate person and it's not looking for complementarity or for counter balance. It's playing off some need of our own, however complex that need may be.

In a moment I'll share with you why the counter balancing approach and the complementarity approach is far, far healthier in relationships. But first I'm going to give some examples of these typical patterns. As I mentioned, typically first relationships between young adults, that are serious in terms of intimacy, often have this quality found in the following example.


Ted was searching for many years for just the right young lady with whom he could settle down. He was known as a “player,” and was very active socially and was skillful in the bar scene and in the party scene, as well as in meeting young ladies. The young ladies enjoyed him because he was charismatic and funny and had an air of confidence about him. He finally thought he found his “perfect partner,” as he described her – a young woman named Nathalie. She, interestingly, like him, was tall and slender and athletic, and as he described her as having the “perfect personality.” She was bright and she had an interesting job – she actually worked as a political consultant in a consulting firm. He was working on Capitol Hill at that time – for a congressman with a promising career – and they shared a lot in common, including their political interests. She, too, in her way, was popular with young men, and was also very skillful with small talk and enjoyed many of the same books and movies and current events as Ted. So he thought he found the perfect person, as did she. They started dating, first casually, and then regularly, and then they decided to move in together as a prelude to getting married.

It was when they were living together that Ted got his first glimpse of the fact that life might not be quite the “Shangri-la” that he had envisioned. They both turned out to leave dishes in the sink; neither of them, it turned out, enjoyed cleaning; and they had struggles over who would do the shopping. These were little things, it would seem, but tensions were beginning to arise, nonetheless. Ted found that coming home in the



evenings, tired and exhausted, was a big difference from having a couple of drinks and going out on a date. When he came home, he wasn't always interested in being funny or amorous, but Nathalie sometimes was, and she would get angry quickly and sometimes would go into a fit of jealousy, thinking he was having an affair with someone at work and that was causing him not to be amorous with her. Ted was known to be very jealous, himself, but he had no cause, at least early in the relationship. These tension points escalated further when Ted found that he just wanted to unwind and share his tale of woe from the day. The congressman he worked for was on a committee that was investigating a very important public issue having to do with government spending and he was under a lot of pressure and tension and working long hours – nothing personally challenging in the deep sense, but the work situation was just exhausting. So he just wanted to unwind and “vent,” but he noticed that Nathalie wanted to do the same, so they ended up competing over who would listen to whom, in a way – not overtly – but each one wanted to talk and neither one was terribly empathetic to the other nor a very good listener. Both were good talkers and both liked to tell stories. When they entertained people, which was frequently, Ted noticed they competed for the limelight – each one wanted to shine. He would find himself feeling resentful of Nathalie and not feel taken care of or nourished or “put on a pedestal,” as he explained when he got into therapy around this issue.

As part of these tensions, they decided to get married because they were living together and had got used to each other and because, on paper, they were each other's perfect match. Ted had decided that these “minor tensions” were just part of any relationship and he was never going to find someone of her caliber – after all, she was his mirror image and Nathalie may have felt something similar, but she didn't come to see me and didn't talk to me about it so we don't have any insight into her. In any case, they married and tried to settle down and decided to have a child, but they hadn't really discussed who would stay at home or for how long; who would get up during the night, etc. In a sense, they didn't discuss who was going to do the hard part of raising the child. They did look into daycare and got a nurse right after the baby was born to help out but, needless to say – without going into excruciating detail – all these issues became points of contention between the two of them. Nathalie didn't want to give up her career; Ted didn't want to curtail his. They went through a series of nannies, none of whom turned out to be very good. Their baby, a wonderful and beautiful little girl named Jennifer, turned out to be a very good crier, a poor sleeper, and not a very good eater. She also had lots of gas so that she required lots of extra care in those early months, which they




both tried to share as best as possible, but each wanted the other to do more and both were feeling very, very resentful.

Ted also found that when Nathalie's career started slipping, because she was exhausted and taking a lot of time off because little Jennifer was going to the pediatrician a great deal, that he was feeling threatened. She was no longer the "star" of her office, which he kind of counted on her to be because, after all, she was just a mirror image of him. So he experienced it as a personal assault and he wasn't able to empathize with her or help her readjust her career plans so she could be the kind of mom she wanted to be.

As this escalated, they began fighting and arguing more, enjoying each the other less, and their intimacy went down to almost zero. Nathalie was trying to keep up a full-time work schedule and was exhausted as was Ted. I began seeing Ted when he came to therapy, disillusioned, wondering whether he should stay married and wondering whether Nathalie was the right person for him. What was clear was that Nathalie didn't complement him, didn't counter balance him, but was very similar to him. I present this as an example. I was able to recommend couples therapy, but couples therapy didn't help them sufficiently and eventually they did get divorced and shared custody of Jennifer. Later on, both found partners who complemented them better.


A counterpoint to this example is that of another couple. The man in this couple, Michael, was less popular than Ted and more of an average sort of soul – not a super star at the bars or the party scene or at work – but he had an interesting job where he worked as a researcher in a research consulting firm doing background work for a political action committee; he was very talented and good at what he did. He met a sweet woman who worked as a dental hygienist in the office where he went for dental care; she was very sweet and very nurturing. He, himself, had had a somewhat aloof mom, but a very nurturing dad and he had real trouble socializing – he was a little shy. The woman he met was much warmer – not gregarious – but much more comfortable with people. She had nurtured her father, who had been ill, ever since she'd been a teenager so she basically enjoyed taking care of him and these two people found a very complementary relationship where she was a little warmer and more nurturing and a little more comfortable socially, and he was a little shyer. She took care of him a little bit. He was intellectually a little more curious and she enjoyed learning about the world from him and they fit like "two peas in a pod," with a lot of complementarity, a lot of counter balancing. When he would be upset or discouraged, she would try to cheer him



up. When he would be overly confident or overly ambitious, she could try to slow him down and vice versa. When she was feeling insecure because she didn't know as much about politics or history or the world as he did, he would provide some of the missing facts and he was very reassuring about all her great talents and skills, which were considerable. When they had children they had no trouble doing a good job in their roles. She had wanted to work half-time for a long time and to take care of their child and Michael enjoyed cooking, so he did a lot of the shopping and cooking and made the special meals – Mom did routine things. Without going into excruciating detail, they had a much more successful marriage and a much happier life. While they might not have been as comfortable with each other at the beginning of their relationship, as Nathalie and Ted were, they turned out to have a much more successful intimate relationship, as well. I got to learn about them through a challenge Michael was running into at work where his boss encouraged him to get some brief counseling.

Now it's also telling what happened with each of their children to show how important complementarity or counter balancing or counter regulation is in a parent-child relationship. When Jennifer, Ted and Nathalie's child, was upset, both Ted and Nathalie got upset, too, and they became tense. They would intensify her tantrums and her crying. So when she was nine months old and irritable, her parents' voices became irritable, too, and Ted and Nathalie's patterns became intrusive, rather than soothing. They would try to rock Jennifer too vigorously or rub her back in a way that wasn't comforting, and their tone of voice was tense, which only accentuated her tantrum.

On the other hand, when Martin, Michael and his very nurturing wife's little baby, got upset, they would be very calming and soothing, and they would both counter regulate and counter balance. When Martin was crying at a fast rate, his parents' pace and vocal rhythm slowed down. They might say something like, "Oooh. It'll be okay, sweetheart," and they rocked him very soothingly in a slow rhythm. Their voices calmed and soothed him and their rocking calmed and soothed him. As they interacted with him, they slowed down their rhythm whenever he got going too fast. When he was sluggish or a little apathetic, they sped up the rhythm and energized him. So when he was looking kind of tired and when he was just kind of sitting there, not interested in anything, they found an interesting toy or jack-in-the box or a doll that they just picked up and they said, "Oh look at this! Wow!" They'd wave it in front of his eyes until his eyes lit up and he reached for it, and then they'd give him a big smile. Then they'd hide their hands and play a little game with him and they'd try to activate him. In other



words, they would counter regulate or counter balance him. When he was down, they were a little more up; when he was too irritable or too up, they would soothe him in a pleasant way and slow him down a bit. So, their little guy developed a very even mood and was very well regulated, whereas Jennifer, on the other hand, became more irritable and moodier and became a very moody child, prone to tantrums and irritabilities throughout her early years. Actually, as she got a little older, she required therapy for it.

So we see that this ability to counter regulate or counter balance or provide complementarity is important not only in adult relationships, but also and especially in parent-child relationships.

Ted, unfortunately, continued his pattern and tried to live through his little girl. He had been a very good athlete and, therefore – although she was musically inclined and inclined to be a creative writer and was talented in terms of her reading – he kept pushing her toward sports so she could fulfill his dream of being the Olympic-quality athlete that he never was. He had her pursue tennis and gymnastics and all kinds of activities that she wasn't terribly interested in, but she did them "to please Daddy." On the other hand, Michael's little boy turned out to be interested in sports, although neither of his parents were athletic. They didn't terribly enjoy going to soccer games, except to see their little guy play, but they were able to support his interests and Dad even volunteered to coach the team one year when the regular coach, who was the dad of another child – a friend – wasn't able to do it. So they stretched to pay attention to what their little guy was interested in. A very different pattern and, as you can imagine, their little guy grew up much more confident, whereas Jennifer grew up feeling very, very insecure that nothing she did would ever be right.

So here we see two very different patterns and two very different families. One of them starts out much more successfully at the beginning, but they didn't have the complementarity and they didn't have the counter regulation or counter balance. The key here is counter balance, finding complementarity, and not trying to live out some piece of your life or your dreams through the other person, whether it involves a child-parent relationship or a relationship between two adults.

Next time we will take up another principle. Thank you very much for joining us today.