

Web-Based Radio Show

Principles to Live by I:


More Essential Truths of Successful Relationships

Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D.

May 23, 2007


Good morning and welcome to our web-based radio show. Today we're going to pick up on the theme that we addressed a while back when we talked about principles to live by or principles that make for more successful relationships and these could be called the "essential truths" of successful relationships. We've had lots of questions about these principles and some of you have asked for a little more elaboration on a few of them. As you recall, we talked about the basic principles, which were always to do more and expect more. If you do more and expect more you'll always give first and nurture, and then you have a right to expect more from the other person, but don't count and don't reverse the sequence. It also means, as we've talked about, really understanding the other person – understanding what they experience. We also talked about bringing out the best in the other person, which also requires understanding the other person and how they're functioning and "cooking." To bring out the best in the other person means tuning into their agenda and helping them feel secure, and they'll always come back and help you, whether it's your child or spouse or a good friend or a dating relationship.

Now among those that some of you wanted more comments on included the principle that it's not always about you (we'll come back to that one); another one had to do with living life in the gray zone; and another one is how to bring a reflective attitude toward your relationships. There are a few others, as well. I'm going to start off with talking a little bit about the principle that it's not always about you – that's a hard one for most people. We all tend to feel things deeply, so if someone's a little cool or aloof it's natural that we're going to feel rejected or feel that person doesn't like us or doesn't care about us. It's hard to imagine, sometimes, that they just may be exhausted or they may be preoccupied or they may have gotten up on the wrong side of the bed or they may have other things on their mind and that they really need to be nurtured and taken care of. Rather than feeling rejected yourself, maybe they're feeling rejected just



from some other sector of their life – not about you – and you need to reach out to them, but you’re feeling too hurt and you’ve taken it personally. How do we not take things personally and give the benefit of the doubt to the other person?

A cute story that comes to mind involves a young couple that was really getting along and getting into the middle phases of a serious dating relationship where they had been seeing each other for about three or four months and they were seeing each other three or four times a week. The very nice young man – very responsible – had just come away from a very busy business trip and hadn’t text messaged his young lady when he was coming in. She was looking forward to seeing him as soon as he got in, which was natural because she missed him and he missed her, too. But he was exhausted and stressed out from the business trip, which hadn’t gone quite as well as he’d hoped for; also on the way back his car didn’t function properly and he got delayed and almost didn’t get back in. So when she texted him a few times, she didn’t get a text back, which was very unusual and she was feeling a combination of worry, but also anger, like, “He’s not thinking about me” and she was deeply hurt. Finally, she got a text message hours later that it was a terrible week and the car had a mishap on the way back and he was exhausted, but he was still on the road. She wished him good luck, but he didn’t then let her know that he’d arrived safely; apparently he’d gone home and went to sleep. The next day she texted him an angry message that he was being inconsiderate, not letting her know that he’d arrived safely, etc., etc. He didn’t respond at all during the day and finally she got concerned and feeling even more rejected and feeling that maybe she’d gone too far with her angry text message. She texted him back but still didn’t hear from him; finally, he did respond to her with a message saying, “Inconsiderate, huh? I’ve had the most terrible week of my life. I was exhausted. I just went right to sleep and am still exhausted today. Sorry if I worried you.” So he was clearly overwhelmed and needed to be nurtured and taken care of, and he was in no mood to nurture someone else. So here we have two people, and both were feeling overwhelmed. Our young lady was feeling rejected and feeling that if he’d loved her enough he would’ve told her he’d arrived safely and he’d have been thinking of her, not of himself. He was overwhelmed with work and probably miffed at her for not being more empathetic and wanting to be taken care of rather than nurturing him. She went over unannounced to his place and made amends that evening and they got back into a good rhythm with each other, but she’d learned an important lesson – that this was not about her, this was about him, and that he was having a very, very difficult time and he was overwhelmed and that it’s not always about her and that she wasn’t being rejected. He was just overloaded and




overwhelmed. He was actually, overall, a considerate person who texted quite a bit and was usually very responsive.

The most difficult time for all of us is when we're feeling insecure and the other person's feeling overwhelmed, and then each one interprets it in a personal way. That's where marriages and relationships get into hot water. Somebody has to step up to the plate and realize it's not about them, it's about the other person, and take care of the other person's needs. When I talked to this person – the young lady – about it, she said, "Well, I'm always the one reaching out. I'm always the one expected to give. I'm always the one expected to be mature." This thing got into another principle that relates to this one, which is that we all carry baggage, we all have issues, we're all going to misperceive. That's just part of being human. If you try your very best not to make it about you, to always give the other person the benefit of the doubt, to make it about them and assume that they're going through something tough and reach out all the time, you're probably still going to create an equal relationship in the sense of balancing things. In other words, we all have baggage we're unaware of and even though we think we're doing all the good stuff in the relationship, it's usually pretty even.

So if we try our hardest and we always reach out we'll probably even the score and we'll probably not be making a 90-10 ratio, where we're the "nice" one and they're the "mean" one. So the lesson to be learned is do the very best you can. Always remind yourself it's not about you. Give the other person the benefit of the doubt. If you do that and they, over time, are unable to show any empathy or warmth or caring about you, ever, then it may not be the right person, but at least you've created fertile soil; you haven't made it about you, you haven't created an artificial situation where you're creating conflict and then you never know. This way you're not making it about yourself. You're nurturing and tuning into their needs, following our basic principle of bringing out the best in the other and doing more before you expect more, and then you'll find out what the true nature of the other person is, rather than creating an artificial drama.


It's hard not to get into it when someone presses our buttons. This relates to our third principle, which is we all have our own issues or buttons or, as I call them, our "castles" that we create. We're all going to create our castles and we want to know our castles – it's very important to know your own castles, but don't live in them. That's the key. Know your castles, but don't live in them. So let's underline that one. In other words, know your issues, know your buttons, know your sensitivities – none of us is



brought up perfectly and being human is to be imperfect. Always try the best you can to recognize your castles but not to live in them, which means it's not about you.

Continuing the theme we've been discussing today, we're going to be talking about two more principles to live by or truths of successful relationships, ones that we get lots of questions about and these pertain, again, to all relationships: with children and with other adults, including spouses and good friends, etc. One of the truths we talked about was we were talking about being able to recognize when it's some issue of your own and you're making it about you and it's really not about you. So, earlier we talked about it's not about you even when it feels like it is, sometimes. For example, we talked about the young lady who felt rejected even when it was just that her boyfriend was tired or overwhelmed or overloaded at work. We mentioned there that you should know your castles in the sky, but don't live in them. We're going to really underline that as a separate principle, a separate truth, because it's so important. We all have castles in the sky – those are our issues, our buttons, the things we bring with us from childhood. Being human means to be emotional and without these personal signatures we wouldn't be human, so to try to be without these is to be a machine and that's even worse because then you lack feeling and empathy and caring and love and compassion. So this goes along with the turf, just like if there's an "up," there's got to be a "down," so, too, if there's going to be compassion and love and empathy there's got to be some hot buttons we all have. So the principle here is to know your castles. You can even enjoy your castles. You can even fantasize about them – about how nice it would be to live in your castle, but don't live in your castles. In other words, your castles are from your childhood and you've built them for good reason.


One person, for example, who comes to mind is a young man who, every time he caught any hint of lack of immediate love or compassion from a young lady, would withdraw and become more aloof and play, as he put it, "hard to get." He would justify this by saying, "It's the only way to get a girl to come after you or to like you; otherwise, they won't." But this was really a castle he had built from childhood to protect himself because his father was very busy and preoccupied and a workaholic, and this little boy was constantly feeling rejected in his overtures to his daddy. So at a very tender age, when he was two to four, and he was eager he would run up to his daddy when his daddy came home from work and wanted his daddy to play with him, but his daddy frequently would go to the bills or the computer and give him a quick brush-off. There might be a quick little hug and kiss, but nothing substantial in terms of real play and real



time together. Mother protected Daddy by saying, “Oh, Daddy’s busy” and the implication, that this man later put together, was that “Daddy had more important things than me on his mind.” So this little boy began anticipating these hurt feelings when Daddy walked in the door and would give Daddy the cold shoulder and once in a while – but only rarely – would Daddy come after him, on the weekends when he had more time, and woo him a little bit. From this he built up the expectation that if you play “hard to get” then people will come after you, but really most of the time it just meant that he didn’t have much of a relationship with his father because he didn’t break through Daddy’s defenses or Daddy’s preoccupation with work and computers and things and Daddy was too caught up in his own world to reach out to this little boy who wanted him very much. This little boy then began applying this principle to life – this was his “castle.” So he lived in his castle and continued to believe it was true – that the only way of coping was to play hard to get and to become aloof before others hurt your feelings.


Well, needless to say, he had some success on the “bar scene,” where he developed a good sense of humor. He was lucky that he was a very attractive young man and successful at work, and so young ladies were interested in him, but he always would act aloof and indifferent. So the girls he was successful with were usually young ladies who were very insecure, themselves, who were used to being somewhat not really cared for in a true and deep way by young men, and who had a lot of one-nighters or two-nighters or quick relationships. He would think something was starting with someone he thought was physically attractive and had a nice personality, but once he found out that they didn’t have much to back it up and there wasn’t much there in terms of substance, he became very frustrated. I got to know him in therapy because he came in to find out why, after being so successful with young ladies on these one- or two-nighters, he couldn’t meet somebody who would be able to have a more substantive and deep relationship with him, or someone he wanted to have that kind of relationship with – why he wasn’t meeting the right kind of young lady, so to speak. It was clear that he was only attracting those who were very insecure, themselves, and felt validated by going after a man who wasn’t giving them very much, and this didn’t turn out to be the kind of woman that he really wanted and needed.

He was fortunate in having a mother who was a very compassionate and loving and caring person who gave him a model of the kind of relationship he wanted to have. His mother was also a very intelligent woman who could share many interests and he




wasn't getting that in the relationships he was finding through the "bar scene." The goal for him was to recognize his castle, recognize his childhood issue, recognize how much comfort it gave him to live there and to create a strong fence around it by maintaining the belief that only by being aloof could you attract anyone. Giving that up was not easy for him, and trying to woo a young lady that required a little more – someone who wasn't going to come after him – and looking in places other than in the bars, like in some graduate courses he was taking and in some shared interests he had (he was actually quite a good musician), he saw he could meet some lovely young ladies in different groups he participated in. In other words, he had opportunities to meet people who were capable of more, but these women didn't respond to his aloof and hard-to-get style. They were looking for someone who would reach out to them and who would show some interest and show some real empathy and show some compassion, and he had a hard time doing that. As he got to know his castle, he was able to accept the notion that castles are there to be known, and even admired, for serving us well when we're growing up. You can even fantasize about them and enjoy movies with them or novels where a character lives in these castles, but you cannot live in them. Slowly he decided to step out of his castle, as he became more and more aware of his feelings around his father and why he had constructed the castle in the first place. As he stepped out of his castle he gradually began having at least some-term relationships with young ladies who were the kind of people he was a little more interested in and who could share his interests with him. Eventually he met somebody with whom he got very serious and now, a number of years later, he has a happy and successful marriage and three children. He still finds himself very tempted to jump into his castle when his children are rejecting him or they want to play with their friends rather than him, and when his wife is busy with her extended family, but he keeps checking himself and reminding himself that the castle is there for good protection, that he might retreat to it momentarily now and then just for some safe haven, but that he "should only allow myself a few minutes in it and not live it." As he's reminded himself of this important axiom, he's maintained his successful marriage and, also, I should add, maintained some deeper friendships with his friends and deeper relationships at work with all people, since he's not living in his castle. He's been more compassionate, more empathetic, and is much more available to his children than his own daddy was to him, and he enjoys his two little boys and one little girl and has a very different relationship with each of them.

So the lesson here is know your castles, but don't live in your castles. Another example is of a middle-aged woman who was always avoiding hard projects at work



because she was afraid, deep down, that she couldn't do them but her castle – what she would rationalize – was, “Why stretch? My main goal in life is my children and my husband and my family life and I'm only doing this to make some extra money to supplement what my husband's making. I don't care that much about work and I don't want to get that involved in work life because I have more important and better things to do.” So she avoided tough projects, avoided advancement, and avoided having a real sense of accomplishment at work. Her castle was really a protective castle. There were good reasons from her background, also. Her mother was very competitive with her and any time she “messed up” her mother would really almost laugh at her expense or make fun of her or imply that she was overstepping her bounds. So the notion of overstepping her bounds was associated with the humiliation of trying something difficult, trying something hard. To avoid the feelings that she had with her competitive mother, she lived in the castle of self-protectiveness, never trying anything hard, never trying anything challenging, and this robbed her of important social self-esteem. She needed to learn not to live in this castle, and it especially affected her relationship with her husband because any time difficult conflicts came up or emotions or difficult choices came up, she deferred to him and even deferred to her children, as they became teenagers. She was seen in the family as a person who just didn't have strong opinions or strong ideas about anything, someone who just went along and was treated a little bit like a “dish rag,” as she put it. So she didn't have a lot of self-esteem in the family, either, and as a consequence, she also began wondering if her husband was losing interest in her because she wasn't as exiting or interesting a person as she could be. I never met the husband, so I don't know if he was or wasn't, but it was hurting her relationship with her children and her husband, at least from her point of view, as she was becoming a little more depressed in those relationships because she was living in this protective castle she had created.

As she began to identify her castle, identify her issues, she was able to decide not to live in it, to step out of it, to be brave, to try some new things at work and at home. She expected humiliation and sometimes she didn't succeed and felt humiliated but, to her surprise, no one laughed at her like her mom did. The drama didn't repeat itself, so the dangers outside the castle weren't as big as she thought they were from childhood, and she was slowly able to become more assertive and take on more challenges and have more positive social self-esteem. Most importantly it helped her relationships with her children and her husband as she became more of an equal in those relationships and they found her more interesting and they looked at her



differently – at least she felt they did – and from her narrative I think she was accurately portraying what was going on.

So the lesson here is, again, everyone has castles in the sky. Everyone has issues. Over time you get to identify them and you can ask yourself some rhetorical questions to help you identify them. Ask yourself, “What feelings am I most comfortable with in life? Sadness? Happiness? Being assertive? Curious? Creative? What feelings am I most uncomfortable with? Rejection, anger, etc.? As you identify them, you can make a list and actually write them down – your most comfortable feelings and least comfortable feelings; what you’re most worried about in relationships; what you look forward to in relationships, etc. As you make these lists, you’ll begin seeing a pattern emerge. Well, what do I look for in relationships? Full acceptance, admiration, avoiding any hint of rejection. What feelings am I comfortable with? Love, admiration, acceptance. What feelings am I uncomfortable with? Rejection, humiliation, sadness. As you identify your list you can ask, “Well, how do I protect myself from these things I’m uncomfortable with?” Those are your castles. Life is a large drama with all feelings and all components of relationships in them. If we protect ourselves from half of it or a quarter or it or a third of it, that’s our castle. It’s not that we want to expose ourselves to unnecessary pain or be masochistic or look for a person who will reject us just because we’re rejection sensitive; quite to the contrary, often hiding in our castles we wind up creating relationships with people who reject us or hurt us. But we want to become comfortable with those feelings and then we want to find a relationship that is a healthy relationship that is positive, where we can tolerate disappointment and sadness and even conflict and anger from time to time. So the best way to identify our castles is to identify those parts of relationships we enjoy; those we’re comfortable or uncomfortable with; those feelings we’re comfortable and uncomfortable with; and then see how we protect ourselves. Our protective devices are our castles and the more we know about them, the less likely we are to live in them.

Now there’s an additional principle I wanted to touch on today, and we’ll talk about it a little bit more next time, and it comes back to this point: People are more different than we think they are. We always assume people are like us, that they have our profile, but, in fact, others are not quite like us; others are quite different from us, often, and by assuming they’re like us we tend to interpret their behavior just from our own lens, not from their point of view. Next time we’ll go into this principle in more depth. Thank you for joining us.

