

Web-Based Radio Show

Principles to Live by II:


More Essential Truths of Successful Relationships

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Good morning and thank you for joining us. As you recall, we've been talking about some essential truths of relationships or different principles to live by. Last time we touched on a very important one of these principles – that it's not always about you – and one of the sub-principles of this was that when figuring out *why* it's not always about you, you had to know your “castles in the sky” and that you could be familiar with these castles, but you couldn't live in them. I wanted to make that a separate principle because it's such an important one. We all have castles in the sky. These are patterns we bring with us from our childhood. You may have always wanted to be the center of attention and get more praise in your family and felt, perhaps, down deep that you weren't appreciated enough, and so you made yourself into a king or queen or princess, or always sought center stage and always wanted to be admired. This may, again, be related to deep feelings of insecurity or competition or rivalry with siblings, or a whole host of different reasons for different families. It's important to know this about ourselves and they play out in our adult lives when we're not fully appreciated, for a variety of reasons: We may feel terribly betrayed or terribly depressed or terribly sad because we hold the same standards through our adult lives as we did when we were children and thought as a child does and we carry that way of thinking forward. Well, that's our castle. Let's take that as an example of our castle in the sky. Well, we need to know it. We can even enjoy fantasizing or pretending about it or thinking about it, but as an adult if we choose to live in it we're going to make our life very complex and make relationships very difficult because others won't expect us, as adults, to be living in our castles because they're trying not to live in their castles, even though many do. So the theme is know your castles in the sky, but don't live in them.


Another shining example is of a young man who, as a child, won the praise of his parents and also dealt with his own aggressive feelings toward his twin sister by always being “the responsible one” and the duty bound one. Responsibility reigned supreme



for this young man. He hid his angry feelings by being responsible and duty bound, won the praise of his parents, and often was favored over his sibling by being duty bound. When he married as an adult, and he was a successful accountant and did his job well – and being duty bound served him well – he took this castle with him and chose to live in it, so duty prevailed but as a consequence he was always on call 24/7 for his own family to do things, much to the chagrin of his wife. He couldn't relax with her, either in physical intimacy or in just going out and enjoying a walk in the park or going to a movie, or truly empathizing with her when she had concerns – truly listening – because he always wanted to know, “What should I do? I have to make things better.” In this sense, he felt he had to do something to make it better, even when it involved things that just required listening and empathy or relaxed pleasure. Even in physical intimacy he always wanted to know what was the thing he needed to do. He quizzed his wife on how he could “make it better” for her, rather than relaxing and enjoying it. She had the feeling she was with a machine or an automaton and eventually they got into couples therapy because she felt there was no empathy and no physical intimacy of a relaxed nature. She felt, also, that he wasn't enjoying his children or playing with them in a relaxed way.


Well, in the couples work he discovered that he built this castle as a child and now he was living in the castle. Also, he learned that not only was he living in his castle, but he was also getting a false sense of “I'm a good person” by living in it. He discovered that this was a castle that was very confining and didn't allow him the full experience of his whole life. Even at work it robbed him from tackling difficult and challenging problems that required creativity because he always wanted to know the rules. If there were no rules for a particular accounting problem and he had to come up with something innovative, he couldn't do it, so he wasn't getting advanced like he wanted to in his accounting work. At home he was getting a D-minus from his wife, and his children, while they loved their daddy, preferred playing with Mommy because Daddy was always trying to “teach” them something. Needless to say, it took a while for him to learn not to live in his castle, to realize that this was a castle he built for a good reason, but that he couldn't live in it.

Another example is that of Jane, who was easily humiliated as a child because she was overweight and kids made fun of her. Even in her own family her mother was always making offhanded comments about how thin her two older sisters were and why couldn't she be like them, etc., so she was very sensitive to humiliation. Even though she




grew out of her being overweight and was a very attractive young lady and very intelligent, she was very sensitive to being humiliated and any wrong glance, any offhanded comment, or any humor at her expense – like when her girlfriends would tease her about mismatching her colors in an outfit she was wearing – she would feel mortified and humiliated and get very angry at them and literally have a childhood tantrum. She was living in this childhood castle of humiliation that she had experienced and that had been somewhat constructed for her at the hand of her mother, but her over sensitivity and her continuing this castle were getting in her way as an adult. It was good for her to know about this and as she learned about it she became more sensitive to other people’s feelings of being humiliated and learned how to be empathetic and protective of other people’s feelings; that was the positive value this had for her. But she needed to come to grips with the fact that this was a childhood castle, a castle in the sky, and that it’s best not to live in it. It’s best to be aware of it for some positive gain, but not to make a home out of it. As she became more aware of her castle she learned to do that – not make a home out of it – and she was able, then, not to be so reactive to little slights or humor at her expense, and to appreciate it for what it was, which helped her relationships with her girlfriends as well as, eventually, a serious boyfriend that she had.

This next principle we want to cover is that people are more different from you than you think. We all seem to look at others through our own lenses. We think we look at people objectively, like so-and-so has red hair and a smiling face and a gleam in her eyes and so-and-so has a serious look and is very methodical and organized. We can describe the surface characteristics of people and things – it’s a red apple, it’s round and looks good to eat – but beyond these surface characteristics we tend to see things based not just on objective characteristics, but on the basis of our own body of experience. How does that apple taste? Well, that has to do with how apples have tasted to us for many, many years. How does that smiling redheaded, twinkling-eyed person appeal to us? Well, that’s the way we experience a smiling, joyful person. How does the serious, methodical person appeal to us? Our feelings and our emotions are just as important in how we see the world as is the seemingly “objective” way we describe things. In fact, if we look back to the way we gave meanings to a word like “mom” or “dad” it was through experience. Everybody’s Mom and Dad was different and we all have a different definition of that term. We know what the textbook says – someone who “reared” you, who was your parent – but beyond that, whether it means play and



kindness and protectiveness or embarrassment and control and humiliation or a mixture of the two, depends on your personal experiences.

So, we all see the world through our own lenses and if we're human there can be no other way – that's the way it should be and that's the way it has to be because to be a human being is to have emotional experiences in the world, to get to know the world, and then to see the world through our eyes, through our lenses. Where we run into difficulty is when we assume that others are similar to ourselves. We assume that other people do things for the same reasons we do them. So, for example, there was a young man who liked to play hard to get and felt that women were attracted to him because he always play hard to get with those women and then they would come to him. He was excellent at the bar scene and working with women who were steered that way. When a woman was playing hard to get he assumed she was just trying to entice him, rather than she was just not interested in him. When a woman was coming on strong he assumed she was very insecure, rather than being just sincere and straightforward about her feelings. This was because that was how he would have operated – if he were very anxious, he might come on too strong; if he was feeling good he would play hard to get. There was a particular relationship that he was very interested in with a young lady that he met at a professional meeting that he had attended. She was very straightforward and indicated her interest in getting together with him and having dinner and getting to know him better, and he assumed she was just very, very insecure and so he discounted her because she was too insecure for him – she wasn't the kind of person who he would really enjoy being with. He then kept having second thoughts about this, thinking, "Gee, she was awfully nice," and he kept hearing good things about her through mutual friends and he wondered whether his perceptions would accurate or that he'd been seeing the world through his lenses. He then discovered through friends – when she started dating a good friend of his – that she was a wonderful person and he was very, very sorry he hadn't taken advantage of the opportunity to date her, himself. She was warm and engaging and straightforward and all the things one would want in a "friend" and in a relationship. He learned an important lesson from that – that people are different, more different than we think, and you can't perceive people through your own lenses, but you have to know the other person. Just like you know yourself and you need to know your castles, you also need to know other people and their castles and appreciate that they may be doing things for entirely different reasons than you would do them. When he got to know her better, as the girlfriend of his good friend, he found that she was straightforward because she was very mature and she had



gotten over playing “adolescent games,” as she put it. I wish there were a happy ending to the story, but he learned through pain and the next thing she married his friend and they have three children and are living happily, but he no longer assumes that people are similar to him and he learned an important life lesson, which is helping him do better in his relationships.

So, this is one example. You can probably think of many other examples where people are more different than you think. That’s all we’ll do for today and we’ll resume next time. Thank you very much.