

Some Down-to-Earth Suggestions for Keeping Your Relationship Alive

by Hal Stone, Ph.D. & Sidra Stone, Ph.D.



The following is an abridged version of an excerpt from our latest book, The Fireside Chats with Hal & Sidra Stone.

The Fireside Chats is a record of a four-day gathering during which we informally talked about our professional—and personal—lives. This particular section is about relationship. The senior facilitators at this gathering—who already knew about our work with Bonding Patterns—had asked us to speak more personally about what we did to enhance our own relationship and this is a portion of what we shared with them ...

Hal: We were thinking about yesterday's conversation and the question of really what do we actually do in our relationship that makes it work? We talked some about more general things and then decided to sit down and pay attention to the things that we actually do; the things we take for granted.

Suggestion #1: Respect Each Other

Sidra: But right now, why don't we start with some of the thoughts Hal and I had last night

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about relationship maintenance. I stopped to look at the things we do, and as we were talking, we realized that some of them are actually very Victorian. They seem old fashioned, but they're part of what we grew up with. One of the basic things, one of the bedrocks that we have in our relationship and have always had, is a certain amount of respect for each other. We deeply respect each other as human beings. We realize we have an awful lot of very big differences, very big, but there's that basic respect for one another and we don't go beyond that. We don't talk to each other disrespectfully. If even a sharp tone comes in, we'll stop that with each other right away.

We also monitor ourselves, checking that there's no sense of denigration or mockery, no belittling of the other person. Even if we're sharing something we're angry about, completely disagree with, or we feel passionately about, we're mindful of where it comes from. It doesn't come from above, or a place of superiority. It comes from an "I don't like this" or "I don't agree with that" or "I don't feel good about that." Or, it might come from, "I'm sorry, but you see it this way and I see it that way." But the exchange is always equal. We hold each other as respectful equals.

Hal: I just want to add that the ability to do that wasn't there in the beginning. Well, it was there on a theoretical level, but we had to go through some nasty times before it was an inherent part of our relationship like it is now.

I remember early in our relationship, after we had married, when we got into more negative bonding patterns. *(Smiles)* I don't know if any of you ever noticed that; how you seem to get into more negative bonding patterns after you get married. Of course, maybe it was unique to us. We might have been the only ones that

happened to. Anyhow, sometimes I had this really strong Judgmental Father in me, who took the form of my older brother. It felt like he was talking at times, not me. I could feel him talking for me, as an introject in me.

One time, after we'd been married only about three weeks, we were sitting in the living room and he, the part of me that's my like my older brother, started to go after Sidra. And she did something that's still with me today. I mention this because that's why the respect thing works. If you don't have the boundary, the respect isn't possible. What Sidra did was to just stop me. She looked at me and quietly said, "Don't ever do that again!"

Now, I'm not saying I never was judgmental again, but she drew the line. She absolutely drew the line with that one sentence. I've done the same thing with her. If her Matriarch starts to come out in some really nasty way, I will also draw a line. So, fundamental respect in a relationship springs from both people having enough respect for themselves that they don't allow disrespect.

Sidra: Yes, you have to make it absolutely clear that you won't take it. It's up to you. And you need to know when the other person is crossing a line. It's important to recognize when the tone, or the self that's speaking in it, changes.

Hal: It's amazing, really. We've seen couples that have done years and years and years of other kinds of work on their relationship. But the disrespectful things they still say to each other are astounding.

Sidra: It's not just the content, either. It's really not the content at all. It's that arrogant, superior position from which you put the other person down. Neither of us will take it from the other person and neither of us comes from that place

most of the time. There's simply a basic respect that we maintain, if we're not in a self. I feel that's incredibly important, because what gets communicated in that disrespectful energy really goes in. It really sinks in and it stays there.

It can be as simple as, "Would you please put the spoon on the outside of the knife when you set the table, instead of on the inside?" or something like that. It's simple, but if it's said in a cruel or demeaning way, the arrogance and judgment put the other person down. Come to think of it, contempt is the word for it. If there's an attitude of disdain or contempt in any relationship, I think it's very hard for the relationship to survive.

Suggestion # 2: Showing Respect by Dressing for Each Other as You Would for Someone Else

Hal: The second thing we want to bring up is connected to respect. It's on a slightly different plane, but here it is. I make sure that I dress for Sidra. What I'm getting at is that we live in the country and many times no one is around. Sandy is with us during the week, but I'm aware that I'm with a woman and I dress for that. Even if I don't do it every single day, I keep it in mind. I don't just stay in my bathrobe all day every day when there's nobody else around.

Sidra: And vice versa.

Hal: And vice versa ... and if she doesn't, I will bring it to her attention. I won't accept her dropping into the level of dress you so often see in the country. It's not acceptable to me and it isn't for Sidra either.

Sidra: At first it was sort of tempting to let things slide. But I think it's a sign of respect, an

honoring of each other to dress appropriately. It's not just that we get dressed up to go out. Sometimes I think of it as the difference between being married and having an affair. You wouldn't think of meeting the guy you're having an affair with, looking like you just rolled out of bed in your old sweats. In the end, it keeps us from getting too familiar.

Hal: What Sidra just said is the key. It's very easy to get too familiar in a relationship and that's one of the expressions of a positive bonding pattern. You'll see as we go along, that a number of the points we make have to do with keeping appropriate boundaries; trying to find the right level of familiarity.

Suggestion # 3: "Do No Harm"

Sidra: The next point also seems related to watching for that quality of disdain we mentioned before. It's a "do no harm" clause in relationship. There's attention to a basic rule that you don't say anything with the intent of hurting the other person. We don't set out to attack and draw blood. We never go after each other's soft spots even if we're furious. Again, that would be something that goes in very deeply. It breaks the vessel.

Hal: I want to just add that you can only manage these things, this awareness, after you've done a considerable amount of work. I'm thinking about a couple new to all this, who are just killing each other in negative bonding patterns. They could be listening to all this and it will pass right over their heads. They don't have any choice because they're trapped in the bonding pattern. This murderous, killing energy comes into relationship when you feel trapped. You feel like you have to go after somebody. But when you aren't trapped, you don't have to kill anybody.

Sidra: And in the moment, they would say: “But, I didn’t do anything!” or “But, I was just joking!” We can be completely unaware of what we’re doing. It’s just the energies—the tone—that accompany the words.

Suggestion #4: Privacy

Hal: So, number four. This has long been a thought of mine, and it’s this: I think it’s a very poor idea for two people in a relationship to use the same toilet at the same time. It’s extraordinarily common, of course, to share a bathroom and people often pride themselves on, not being falsely modest. I’ve never really understood that, but I believe that it breeds the kind of familiarity that’s exactly counter-productive to finding the right balance between people.

Sidra: ... and creating intimacy.

Hal: Intimacy, yes. Many people, maybe more sophisticated people, would see this is an intimate act. I don’t see it that way. Rather, I see it as an overly familiar act and I think it just cements the positive bonding pattern. So I wanted to mention that.

Suggestion #5: Don’t Be Too Shy— or Just Forget—to Say Nice Things to Each Other.

Sidra: Another thing is that it’s easy to lose saying that you love each other, or saying ‘thank you’, or saying ‘please’. It’s just as easy to forget to say something when you feel quietly appreciative of the other person. It’s so easy to just go do the dishes, or go back to your email. In our relationship, we both stop and do that. I’m not talking about doing it automatically, particularly if you don’t feel it at the moment and you’re just saying it to quiet the other person.

That’s not good. But just to pick up those little impulses and act on them by saying it. “I’m so glad to have you here.” or “It’s nice having breakfast together,” as an acknowledgement of the relationship. It goes a long way. And it feels good.

Hal: ... Or, “Thank you very much for that delicious fish dinner!”

Sidra: I love it when you say that. It makes me want to go back and cook some more! (*laughs at self*)

Hal: But generally one only says those things when one is connected at a certain level; when your vulnerability, your energy is in the right place. I’d bet there were long periods of time when I didn’t do that, because I was more up in my head, more busy and not connected into that place.

Sidra: Actually, you’ve been good about that. You’ve always been good about that.

Hal: Perhaps as things go, I’ve always done pretty well with it; but I feel like somehow as I get older, I do it more often and I really feel it. Now sometimes a therapist will tell people, as a technique: “I want you to go home and I want you to practice this.”

Sidra: Yes. “Practice saying nice things to each other.” Yes. That’s okay. But most of the time when you do that just because you’re supposed to, you’re actually cementing the positive bonding pattern. When you do it from the feeling, catching the feeling in your awareness, you just getting used to saying things like that.

We always think about expressing the negative stuff to clear the air. But expressing the positives is just as important. People don’t talk about that and it feels a little embarrassing, or at least strange, at first, to say something nice to

someone you've been with for thirty-five years. I really learned that early on with you. It wasn't a natural thing for me and it required going past a reticence or shyness I didn't realize I had.

Hal: Exactly! That's exactly it.

Sidra: Yes, it's very different when it comes from that superficial place.

Suggestion #6: Sharing Vulnerability

Sidra: Okay. Something we did talk about yesterday is expressing our vulnerabilities. This really makes such a difference. For instance, you wake up in the morning and you've had a bad dream or a tough night or you're worried about something, or just not feeling well. Or maybe there's something you have to do that day you're feeling awkward about, or you're just having a 'bad hair day'. For reasons from the sublime to the ridiculous, you're not feeling aligned and it's good to just feel free to express it.

First of all, this freedom promotes intimacy. But secondly, it gets you away from having to handle it by yourself. It's not like putting it in somebody else's lap to take care of; but it's saying: "This is what I feel like today. I don't know why, but I got up on the wrong side of the bed. I feel cruddy and I hope I can pull it together today." Not saying anything at all forces you into some kind of gear that protects your vulnerability in a different way. You get harder working, more cerebral, more responsible and certainly less connected. You have to go into whatever self it is that powers through and past that vulnerability.

I'm not saying you should dissolve into a puddle of vulnerability. What I mean is that we simply say to each other, "I don't feel that great today" or "I may need a little extra support around this", rather than just pushing past it. Whatever it is that we're vulnerable about, like

Hal was saying about being afraid for a while when it got dark, or I suddenly felt worried about money, or the water, or thinking nobody loves me ... or whatever it is that just comes up, we share that with each other.

Hal: My vulnerability opened up the most strongly together with my anxiety the summer that our water system went down. It took two months to put that together and I began to realize the experience of that level of stress when you're older, is a very different thing than when you're younger. It's like night and day. So I started to learn about the absolute necessity of saying it out loud. It wasn't enough to keep it within myself or to write in my journal. Forget it! I had to share it. I'm not saying that's bad, but the sharing of it with another person out loud is very, very important. It's just a new way of living in the world. People haven't done that before. They're used to keeping things more to themselves.

Sidra: Again, it's one of those things that's a little bit embarrassing. It's hard to say "I'm scared I will oversleep and miss the plane tomorrow" or whatever it is, but once when you didn't share that, you went into a very tight Responsible Father who carried an energy of "I'm going to take care of this and I don't need you."

Hal: (*Nodding*) Yes, that's exactly what would happen.

Sidra: Then I would go into an Offended or Hurt Daughter self, thinking, "I thought that our relationship was working perfectly well. Now, all of a sudden, it feels like you're pushing me out." It would be an opening into a very bad negative bonding pattern: Controlling Father to Rebel Daughter; and on the other side, the wonderful Judgmental Mother to a Guilty Son. We just don't need that. So, what we discovered

eventually was that the sharing of vulnerability was the thing that really made it work.

Suggestion #7: Respectful Disagreement

Hal: And—speaking of negative bonding patterns—there’s something else, going back to this business of respect. Sometimes when you work through a negative bonding pattern, you don’t end up with the problem necessarily solved. In other words, people have differences and that’s the way life is. Now all we can offer to a married couple, or any relationship, is a road map to get out of the negative interaction you’ve fallen into.

For example, we have a big tree by our road. Well, we have a lot of big trees, but the one in the corner, one of the main branches has grown up over the parking area and it drops a lot of stuff on cars that park under it. So I would like to get it cut back. Now, Sidra has a very strong feeling for the aesthetic of that tree. It’s a very spectacular tree.

Sidra: It’s gorgeous!

Hal: I don’t know what kind it is.

Sidra: It’s a live oak and you just don’t see them on the coast. It’s beautiful.

Hal: Yes. It has a beautiful configuration and she really doesn’t want to cut it. But I pushed a little bit and she said that she’d consider a little bit of trimming, that would take only a little bit off. Then I would push a little more and I could feel the part of me that wanted to go into the negative bonding pattern but that didn’t happen. So we are where we are about the tree. *(Hal adopts a dramatically reasonable tone with a mischievous grin.)* I have made it clear to her that I don’t think it is a good idea to allow a tree to do that to you ... to invade your space in that way. I’ve also pointed out that every time a person parks a car there, they shouldn’t have to

have a lot of tree junk dropped on it; especially at certain times of the year. I’ve said that just doesn’t make sense to me. And then Sidra says “Well ...

Sidra: Well, they can just park someplace else! *(Laughing)* Or, just park under the tree and complain! How’s that for holding both sides of the truth?

Hal: So, there you see a lot of ways to do this. I’m respectful of her feeling about it and she’s respectful of my feeling about it; but nothing has changed in terms of the basic issue.

Suggestion #8: Veto Power

Sidra: Yes, and this leads us to another aspect of our relationship, which is that we each have veto power. If one or the other of us feels really, really, strongly about something, we may go along with it or nix it. Like with the tree, it has been a ‘no’. No cutting of the tree. We’ve cut a lot of other trees. But this one is somehow special to me.

Conversely, I didn’t think we needed a third well, but we dug one, because Hal felt very strongly that we needed a third well. He wanted to be sure of the water supply and so we went ahead with it. So if one or the other of us feels very passionately, either pro or con, we will often yield to the other person.

Hal: But there is always the right of veto. If somebody says absolutely no, then we don’t go with it. We’ve seen too much of what happens with that.

Sidra: That’s a good question. I think you can feel the difference. This is where that basic respect comes in. If Hal shares his vulnerability with me about something, the way I can keep it from turning into a positive bonding pattern is that I don’t try to take care of it right away. I’m really just there with it, almost as though he was

a client at that moment. There's a certain amount of impersonal energy in this; where this isn't my problem, but not in that sort of defensive, overdone boundary way of saying, "Well, this is his issue!", because of course, it's an issue for both of us. But—and this is important—it's not mine to fix. As soon as I find myself thinking I have to do something about it, I'm on the wrong track, I'm becoming my Responsible Mother self.

This makes me think again about sharing our vulnerability. If I bring up my vulnerability, I will often say: "I feel vulnerable or worried about this. It's really not up to you to take care of it. I just want you to know that I don't feel good about it." Or I will ask for Hal's input on something I'm feeling vulnerable about; something he might give me a hand with. But that's different from throwing myself on his mercy. It's really about trying to stay mindful about 'playing your own instrument'.

Hal: I would add one more element. If you're vulnerable about something at those times when we're deeper into our feelings, and you essentially allow the Personal Self System to express the vulnerability, it's going to come out in a particular way. It tends to lead the other person into Good Parent, to take care of it. Of course, they could also beat you up because they're sick and tired of hearing it; they could go either way.

But if you express that same vulnerability, such as, "I'm very jealous when we're out and you flirt the way you do," and you express that through an Aware Ego Process, that means that you have personal energy on one side and impersonal on the other. You're on the impersonal continuum. If you were to go farther on that continuum, you meet Ms. Genghis Khan. So, that kind of raw nature energy and/or impersonal energy is over here, and the personal over here, with all the vulnerability. Then when

you make the communication, it makes all the difference in the world, because you're in touch with both.

Sidra: So, you see it can come from either side, the handling of vulnerability. Hal could express his vulnerability and I could refuse to be pulled in. Or I could express mine and he could refuse to be pulled in. Or one person can carry both sides; like, "I feel vulnerable about this. You don't have to fix it. I just need to share it."

Hal: So, in short, the more personal you are, the greater the pull to the positive bonding pattern.

Sidra: It's really what a lot of us, particularly women, have been trained to do; at least some generations were. You didn't even have to say the words. You just threw the 'I need help energies' out. That's really good for changing tires, or when workmen are around the house. I'm not going to knock it. (*Smiles.*) Pull for a positive bonding pattern whenever you have a workman around who's a little bit identified with his macho self. It can really work to your advantage. Of course, if you do that in a primary relationship, you pay for it later. We don't recommend it! I remember I had to learn that. I wasn't accustomed to someone who would become as emotionally responsible as you. And you accepted marvelous emotional responsibility. Hal's Good Daddy was just something wonderful to curl up into. But I had to learn that if I took the candy now, I would pay for it later.

Hal: That's right. So, let's see. Where are we?

Suggestion #9: Sharing Dreams

Hal: I think we mentioned the importance of sharing dreams. I want to be clear about this. Dreams always bring up new content in the relationship: bonding patterns, disowned selves, all kinds of things. The main thing to keep in

mind is that when the dream brings up another person in a negative way, very often people take that to mean that that is really a negative person. But what the unconscious is doing is balancing out wherever you are.

I've had a lot of experience with dreams. (*Hal winks.*) You might know that about me. I love them and think I'm very good at working with them, and with my own dreams as well. But you have no idea how often I wake up in the morning and say to Sidra that I had a dream, and I don't have a clue what it means. I just don't have a clue! Then she laughs and she says, "blah, blah, blah," and I say, "Oh! Of course."

Just a few mornings ago my Primary Self picked up this dream and this really negative guy was the main figure in the dream. And he was just such a negative character! I told it to Sidra ... It felt like such a terrible nightmare and I was telling her and, suddenly, I got it. I said, "Oh my God! This is fantastic what he is doing!"

Sidra: We need each other in that way.

Hal: It's not that uncommon that a couple will have differing relationships to their dream life. When that happens, I would make a couple of suggestions. First of all, you have to have respect for someone whose connection to their dreams is different than yours. The fact that some people don't work with their dreams is okay. But if it's your passion and you're interested, there are a couple of things you can do.

Keep two dream journals, or one dream journal and make two entries. Write down your dreams and write down your partner's dreams and actually get their associations if they're willing to give them. That way, if they dream about John Smith, you know who John Smith is to them. That's one possibility. Literally record their dreams as well as your own, and just watch

the process.

The second thing you might do is to develop a 'pole' for yourself. In other words, create one or more places where you can deal with your dreams. You can call up some friends or colleagues and have a weekly dream group on the phone every other week or so. You should create more than one place for yourself to deal with your dreams, just as you create a pole for your medical problems: your thyroid physician, your general internist, your alternative medicine person. You can create poles for your psychic life as well, a place to attend to your soul. A lot more people than ever before are now interested in their dream life.

Sidra: It is a tough thing in relationship when that's such an important thing to you and the other person's not really on board. As I said, for me at first, there was real value in just being able to tell him. Also, you (*to Hal*) heard that it was as far as I could go at the time.

Hal: Of course, if the other person feels pressure from you to share their dreams ... well, I can pretty well write out that scenario. It's likely to go badly in a hurry. But if you wait, and invite, honoring the timing of the unconscious ... things go better.

Sidra: And if you wait long enough, the next step might be, "Aren't you going to ask me anything about my dream?" Just remember, though, everybody is different and we all do things differently. Don't force it.

Hal: But if you make up your mind that you want more contact around dreams, and your partner's not on the same page as you, then create that contact elsewhere. You can set up something like this group, or a contact on the phone. There are a bunch of different

telephone dream groups out there and they're being used by a lot of people, for different reasons: time, distance, expense.

Suggestion #10: Keep Connected (or Energetically Linked)

Sidra: I think the next thing we attend to is looking for linkage and energetic connection and admitting when you don't have it, admitting it to yourself. This was a big one for me to get used to because I liked to think we had linkage, even when we didn't. I would just go into a certain level of denial about that. So, what I'm talking about is when you have the feeling that you really lost touch with the other person, energetically. You just have to know it and admit it to yourself, and to the other person, if possible. It's easy to say something like: "I miss you", or "I'd love to feel closer to you" ... something like that. (*looking at Hal*) Actually you were always better at saying that than I was. Again, it's about tuning your own instrument, feeling into when you're lonesome and disconnected. Of course, one can't always do something about it in the moment, but it's about coping to that, and bringing it up. Sometimes it's just not a "connected" time. When that happens, if you have enough impersonal energy developed, you can even say that. You can say things like: "You know, we're not feeling very close right now, but I miss you." or, "Let's set the intent to get a little closer as soon as we can." Naturally, I'm talking about a relationship in which both of you are into the idea of linkage or energetic connection. Then it comes down to the ability of really knowing when the connection is there and when it's not there.

Hal: The hardest time is getting out of a negative bonding pattern. You get into these things and it's a rupture, like a fracture of the vessel for a

period of time. And, it's not possible, for me ...

Sidra: ... Or me ...

Hal: ... To immediately come back into linkage. I just can't do it. And, if I'm clear at those times, I just say, "Look, you know I love you. But the fact is we just aren't together right now. We just have to be patient about it and not make a big deal about it." Those are my good days. (*Laughs*)

Hal: On my bad days... Well, not so much. But, I have to say one of the nice things about living longer is the understanding that these things shall all pass, truly.

Sidra: (*Nodding in agreement*) By now, you've just been through it enough times.

Hal: It's shocking, over time, to see how much gets handled. (*He pauses and then continues*) It's one of the fundamental ways we feed each other. It's essential. I'm an energetic junkie and I just absolutely have to have that.

Sidra: We've always said that whatever it is we're doing, we feel better when we're linked energetically, no matter what it is. But naturally, there are simply times when we need to be separate for a time, into our own energies.

Hal: Something that's interesting here is that when you're younger, the linkage issue is often settled by sex. If you've had one of those separation periods, very often sexuality will come in and you come together physically. That will very often just bring you together energetically for a period of time. Of course, sometimes it doesn't work and you come together and feel like you've been eating dried straw, just to make the other person feel good.

But then, as you get older, the sexuality isn't there in the same way. So, the linkage itself becomes increasingly important. The older you get, the more you have to be able

to attend to this in a psychological way because you can't draw on the physical in the same way at all.

Suggestion #11: Rest Into Each Other — Don't Abdicate

Sidra: To move to another point entirely, it's wonderful to be able to turn to each other for help with something that they do better than you do or where they have more clarity about an issue. It's hard to do but we try to 'rest into' each other rather than abdicate responsibility. There's a clear difference between "What's your hit on this?" and turning the decision over to the other person.

We've also always understood that there are differences in our strengths. There are simply some things one of us does better than the other, and we'll rest into the other person on it. For instance, I'll take care of the books, but Hal watches over them and looks at reports. So it's not a question of me being one hundred percent responsible. Then when there's some kind of vulnerability that comes up, or some kind of glitch, he's been in on the trip all along. That's very important.

Hal: It's really important — even in straight counseling of clients. This is a very important differentiation. What happens in a lot of relationships is that they turn the thing over to the partner.

Sidra: And then one of them carries no responsibility at all. I know lots of women who won't sign a check or even look at the checkbook, or take the car in to be fixed. "Oh, the car, that's his. I don't know. It's making a funny sound, so I turn the radio up louder. That's his province." Stuff like that!

Hal: I think this takes us to the whole subject

of entrapment. Entrapment is simply a word that describes what happens when a particular self in us has been in charge for too long and it's gotten too big. We always feel trapped. The moment you start to feel trapped, underneath it negativity starts to come in, if you're lucky. I mean that. If you're lucky, you get negative about things and then you have to deal with it in some way. Whether you scream your head off or whether you do it consciously, the fact is an issue is created around the situation. If you get trapped long enough, in enough issues, and you don't feel the anger and the resentment, then you get sick.

Sidra: You get sick, or suddenly you find yourself in bed with somebody else. Then you wake up and wonder, "How did this happen? It wasn't in my plans!"

Hal: Well, that's exactly how it happens. So, the money thing is very important because I couldn't in a million years do what she does in terms of the handling of our money. Sidra's definitely in charge. But approximately once a month, I have all the reports in front of me, I can see everything that she's done, and we go over everything. So I'm absolutely a part of it.

Sidra: And, we discuss any big decisions.

Hal: And, whatever I handle works the same way for her. I handle a lot of detail work now, but back in the old days, I handled all the calls that came in for workshops and trainings. I organized all that and then we'd sit down at a certain point and have a business meeting.

Suggestion #12: Business Meetings

We've talked about this in our books and tapes, and no matter how troublesome it is, those business meetings are absolutely essential. A lot of times it alleviates so much anxiety. I've

discovered, for example, that when that part of Sidra feels anxious about how much has to be done, and pushes her into that place of overwork, I look at her and say, “What’s my part?”

Sidra: I like that.

Hal: And, my part of it is that if I were more proactive and required that the business meeting... Well, it wouldn’t all be on her plate in that way.

Sidra: Right, because I have a gatherer, a sort of hunter/gatherer self, that gathers everything up and heaps it on a big plate in front of me.

Hal: A life like ours has just an enormous amount of detail; and although I can’t take care of the money in the way that she does, there’s a lot I can take care of. So, whenever we have a business meeting, I can always see the thousand-pounder that sits at the desk, stuck to it like glue until I speak up, reminding it that I’m a partner in this. It immediately loses weight and becomes properly proportionate. What I do to get her attention is I’ll complain ...

Sidra: (*Laughing*) Right away the eighteen-wheeler turns into a pick-up truck.

Hal: (*Keeping his train of thought*) I’ll say something like, “You’re not partnering with me,” but I’m not demanding the meeting. I don’t say, “We’re going to have a business meeting in a half hour. Period!” That kind of proactive thing forces it. But that’s where I’m weaker in the face of her strength. Of course, the vulnerable child in me sees her working at the desk, keeping us safe. So he really isn’t so anxious to intervene because everything gets done, even though he pays a price in linkage.

Sidra: (*Smiling, knowingly.*) Yes, he’s okay with that for a little bit.

Suggestion #13: Accountability

Hal: As a man, I see that was my weakness in my other marriage. I never had the sense of my responsibility. But in this marriage I’ve found that in myself. I know that no matter how deeply she’s caught, it’s partly to do with me. That’s a huge, huge understanding. If you can get to that understanding, it saves so much trouble. It always has to do with you!

Sidra: It goes back to accountability. It requires going back to your own instrument and figuring out where it’s out of tune.

Hal: And not assigning fault.

Sidra: (*She laughs wistfully.*) Yes, that’s such a terribly hard thing to give up; being able to blame everybody else, nailing the other person to the wall to help him see the error of his ways. So hard to give up ...

Basically, what we’re saying is it’s a fifty/fifty thing, a dance. It’s finding a way to do your half. It doesn’t mean that there aren’t things that will just totally disrupt a relationship, like addictions, for one example. You can be as accountable as you want and if you’re dealing with somebody who’s deeply addicted to something, there’s a limit to what you can do.

But in general, it’s being aware and feeling into the idea, “This has happened before with a very different person. What did I do?” I consider myself a very feeling, connected person most of the time and when I get the feedback that I’m not connected, and I get that from more than one place, I try to identify in myself, literally, what is the psycho-physiological state I’m in that corresponds to this feedback? What am I feeling physically? What are the thoughts going on in my head? How does the other person look to me? Where are my feelings being, say, misunderstood?

Where am I trying hard and it's not working?

When Hal tells me, "You're at the desk and you're not relating," or "You feel like a Mack truck," I know what that feeling is and I'm accountable. The feeling (when I'm caught) is: "Here I am. I've got all this work to do. He's just pestering me." Now I know that's the sound of my Mack truck. I have to go there in myself to recognize it."

Hal: That's right. You know, I've talked a lot about my impersonal energy. There was a time when an awful lot of people criticized me for being too impersonal ... a lot of people. That went on for many years. Now, if you had asked me during that time, "Hal, how do you feel about accountability?" I would have said, "I'm all for it."

Sidra: "I'm totally accountable." (*Smiles*)

Hal: Have you ever heard anybody in this work say they're not on the side of accountability? Of course not! So, why is it that I believed in accountability but I couldn't provide it? I couldn't do it because I was locked into a Primary Self System that feels that accountability is good, but it's a one hundred percent impersonal Primary Self that feels that way. So, from that place, I don't have linkage to you. I can't appreciate your feelings because from the perspective of that Primary Self, I don't have that much appreciation for feelings. Theoretically I do. They're okay. But, they're more for girls than for guys. (*Hal winks.*) It's a whole way of being and living in the world. Fortunately I've got a sense of humor, so I cover over a lot of stuff and from this place, I can also enjoy people, right? But I'm really not connected in terms of vulnerability.

So, when you would say to me, "Hal, you really are just too impersonal," I thought: "You should separate from your personal self and get

more into your impersonal self. Then you'd have some appreciation for my impersonal and that wouldn't be a problem for you!" At the time, that basically was my philosophy. I was fine. Sidra was just unavailable. So, I had to do a basic unhooking, which took me a long time. But once that unhooking was done, suddenly it all became very clear and I realized a lot of people were hurt by me.

I can imagine other scenarios though. Even if someone had said, "Hal, you're really too impersonal. I just can't reach you," or something like that, they also didn't know how to approach me. And, by "didn't know how" I mean, they just didn't know what to say. For example, if someone had come to me with "You know, Hal, I really have to tell you that I feel very vulnerable around you. I don't know which hand to put forward or what to do," or "I feel like an idiot. I don't know what's going on, but it's such an unpleasant feeling when I approach you." If people had approached me that way, I think I would have gotten it faster. But, we were all just learning how to do vulnerability then, and these were new things.

Sidra: Yes, let's see. When it comes to accountability, sometimes it's just the simplest things in a relationship, the positive bonding pattern in particular, that makes us go beyond our own needs. One of the things we've to learn to do and we've often helped each other with, is to rest when we're tired, and eat when we're hungry. It seems so simple, but if you don't do it, you can really louse up a relationship. You just become a bear to live with. Whatever your basic needs are, they have to be met. Lots of discomfort, and many unpleasant fights can be avoided by taking a nap, or finding a snack. So, when irritability comes up in you, it's a good idea to check in and see what needs to be taken care

of on a very basic level.

This is also accountability for yourself. Taking care of the basics for yourself is just so easily overlooked. We forget when we haven't eaten and we don't realize when we're tired. Certain selves are really clueless about that; like my Mack truck and my eighteen-wheeler. They have no sense about vulnerabilities like that.

Hal: So, we've learned to help each other with that.

Suggestion #14: Holding the Narrative of the Relationship

Sidra: Okay. There was one other, what we'd call a theme in relationship, that we've held for each other and that I think is quite beautiful. That's holding the narrative or the story of the relationship, and reminding each other of it. It's so easy to get lost in your day-to-day activities that you can lose this very easily.

I feel it's important in a relationship to hold the story, to remind each other of it, and, particularly in tough times, to hold all of it. Sometimes, the relationship isn't going to continue anyway. But I think we have to preserve the narrative, hold it and give it the magic that it deserves. We should never really lose that for ourselves or for the other person ... never really to let go of it. And, when you're in a primary relationship, it's good to remember it as much as possible ... well ... not compulsively, like every morning we have to go over everything. But don't lose touch with it, because it holds the magic for you.

Hal: So, tomorrow we'll be talking a little bit about death and dying, a topic of some interest as we move along in age. And we'll touch some of the ways in which the integration of this spiritual element has worked for us ...

There's more about relationships—and many other topics—in The Fireside Chats with Hal and Sidra Stone

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