The School of Life: Relationships

Contents

14
Artificial Conversations

Conversation is commonly held to lie at the heart of a thriving partnership. But our culture often has a skewed picture of what this might involve. We tend to adopt a Romantic attitude, which holds that partners ideally understand one another intuitively and see good conversation as free-flowing and spontaneous. It would feel cold and stilted to introduce rules, to resort to a manual or to take a class on 'how to speak to your partner'.

But the fact is, it is very normal to struggle in this area. We often end up sitting in glum silence, skirt round tricky things or get into rows when difficult issues are at stake. A particularly poignant sign of the trouble we have with talking in relationships is the tendency to sulk. At heart, sulking combines intense anger with an intense desire not to communicate what one is angry about: one both desperately wants to be understood and yet is utterly committed to not explaining oneself plainly. It happens a lot, and it's telling us that, far from being easy and natural, good discussion in a relationship can be very hard to manage.

Good communication means the capacity to give another person an accurate picture of what is happening in our emotional and psychological lives – and in particular, the capacity to describe our very darkest, trickiest and most awkward sides in such a way that

others can understand and even sympathise with us. The good communicator has the skill to take their beloved, in a timely, reassuring and gentle way, without melodrama or fury, into some of the trickiest areas of their personality and warn them of what is there (like a tour guide to a disaster zone), explaining what is problematic in such a way that the beloved will not be terrified, can come to understand, can be prepared and may perhaps forgive and accept.

We're not naturally skilled at these kinds of conversations because there is so much inside of us that we can't face up to, feel ashamed of or can't quite understand – and we are therefore in no position to present our depths sanely to an observer whose affections we want to maintain. Perhaps you have completely wasted the day on the internet. Or you are feeling sexually restless and drawn to someone else. Or you are in a vortex of envy for a colleague who seems to be getting everything right at work. Or you're feeling overwhelmed by regret and self-hatred for some silly decisions you took last year (because you crave applause). Or maybe it's a terror of the future that has rendered you mute: everything is going to go wrong. It's over. You had one life – and you blew it. There are things inside of us that are simply so awful, and therefore so undigested, that we cannot – day to day – lay them out before our partners in a way that they can grasp them calmly and generously.

It is no insult to a relationship to realise that there's a shortfall of mutual eloquence and that this will

probably require some level of artificiality. Our need for assistance is often especially acute around anger, desires that seem strange and the need for reassurance (which tends to arise when one feels one doesn't especially deserve it). We should not feel that we are failures, dull-witted, unimaginative or unsophisticated if we recognise a need to learn how to talk to our partners with premeditation and conscious purpose. We are simply emerging from a Romantic prejudice against doing so.

An artificial conversation can sound like quite a strange idea. But what it involves is deliberately setting an agenda and putting a few useful moves and rules into practice.

Over dinner with a partner, we might – for example – work our way gradually yet systematically through a list of difficult but important questions that we'd otherwise likely shelve or not find our way to:

– What would you most like to be complimented on in the relationship?

– Where do you think you're especially good as a person?

– Which of your flaws do you want to be treated more generously?

– What would you tell your younger self about love?

– What do you think I get wrong about you?

– What is one incident you'd like me to apologise for?

– Can I ask you to apologise for an incident too?

– How have I let you down?

– What would you want to change about me?

– If I was magically offered a chance to change something about you, what do you guess it would be?

– If you could write an instruction manual for yourself in bed, what would you put in it? (Both take a piece of paper and write down three new things you would like to try around sex. Then exchange drafts.)

Another thing we can do with a partner is to finish these sentence stems about our feelings towards one another – the idea is to finish them very fast without thinking too hard. What emerges isn't of course a final statement. But it helps to get awkward material into the light of day, so that it can be examined properly.

I resent …

I am puzzled by …

I am hurt by …

I regret …

I am afraid that …

I am frustrated by …

I am happier when …

I want …

I appreciate …

I hope …

I would so like you to understand …

Part of the artifice here is to agree in advance not to be offended by what the other says, though some of what comes up is bound to be at the very least disconcerting. The idea is to set up an occasion on which for once it is possible to look carefully at genuinely awkward aspects of what's going on in the couple. The helpful background assumption is that we can't have a close relationship

without there being a lot of sore spots on both sides. We're not (for a bit) going to be angry with one another. We're going to try to get to know what's happening.

We might also try out an exercise of fleshing out some sequences:

When I am anxious in our relationship, I tend to … You tend to respond by …, which makes me …

When we argue, on the surface I show …, but inside I feel …

The more I …, the more you …, and then the more I …

We're trying to identify repeated sequences of emotions, not to validate or condemn them but to understand. The premise of this artificial conversation is that (for the duration of the conversation) no one is held to blame. We're just learning to notice some problems with how we interact.

Relationships founder on our inability to make ourselves known, forgiven and accepted for who we are. We shouldn't work with the assumption that if we have a row over these questions, the opportunity has been wasted. We need to be able to say certain painful things in order to recover an ability to be affectionate and trusting. That is all part of the particular wisdom and task of regularly having more artificial, structured and uncensored conversations.

15
Crushes

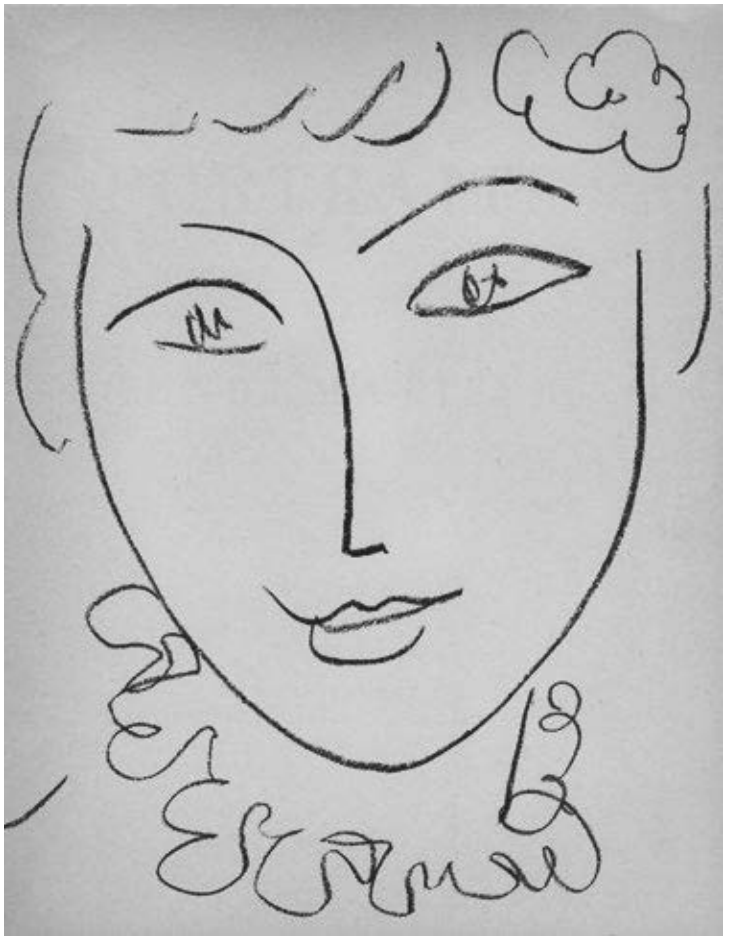
You are introduced to someone at a conference. They look nice and you have a brief chat about the theme of the keynote speaker. But already, partly because of their beautiful suit and a lilt in their accent, you have reached an overwhelming conclusion. Or, you sit down in the carriage, and there, diagonally opposite you, is someone you cannot stop looking at for the rest of a journey across miles of darkening countryside. You know nothing concrete about them. You are going only by what their appearance suggests. You note that they have slipped a finger into a book, that their nails are bitten raw, that they have a thin leather strap around their left wrist and that they are squinting a touch short-sightedly at the map above the door. And that is enough to convince you. Another day, coming out of the supermarket, amidst a throng of people, you catch sight of a face for no longer than eight seconds and yet, here too, you feel the same overwhelming certainty – and, subsequently, a bittersweet sadness at their disappearance in the anonymous crowd.

Crushes: they happen to some people often and to almost everyone sometimes. Airports, trains, streets, conferences – the dynamics of modern life are forever throwing us into fleeting contact with strangers, from among whom we pick out a few examples who seem to us not merely interesting, but, more powerfully, the

solution to our lives. Oddly, the idea of a 'crush' sits at the heart of our era's conception of love. Crushes can be funny or silly or barely last the weekend. They may seem trivial. But crushes deserve great attention because they reveal clearly and in miniature the three essential psychological elements from which our Romantic vision has been constructed. The central mechanism of love is the highly reactive union of restricted awareness of what the other person is really like, little opportunity to find out more, and immense optimism.

The crush reveals how willing we are to allow details to suggest a whole. We allow the arch of someone's eyebrow to suggest a personality. We take the way a person puts more weight on their right leg as they stand listening to a colleague as an indication of a witty independence of mind. Or their way of lowering their head seems proof of a complex shyness and sensitivity. From only a few cues, you anticipate years of happiness, buoyed by profound mutual sympathy. They will fully grasp that you love your mother even though you don't get on well with her; that you are hard-working, even though you appear to be distracted; that you are hurt rather than angry. The parts of your character that confuse and puzzle others will at last find a soothing, wise, complex soulmate.

When we invent an entire personality on the basis of a few small hints, we are doing something amazing, but not that rare. We are deploying around an actual person a natural inclination to fill in the gaps, as we instinctively do with sketches of the human face.



Henri Matisse, *La Pompadour*, 1951

This doesn't strike us as a grotesque portrayal of a person who actually has no nostrils, no contours to their face and a nose joined to an eyebrow. We hardly notice, because we invent the missing parts ourselves. We instinctively build out from minimal cues. We ourselves are artists of expansion – although we don't give ourselves proper credit for our instinctive creativity.

The cynical voice wants to declare that these enthusiastic imaginings at the conference or on the train, in the street or in the supermarket, are just delusional; that we simply project a false, completely imaginary idea of identity onto an innocent stranger. But this is too sweeping. We may be right. The wry posture may really belong to someone with a great line in scepticism; the head tilter may be unusually generous to the foibles of others. The error of the crush is subtler; it lies in how easily we move from spotting a range of genuinely fine traits of character to settling on a recklessly naive romantic conclusion: that the other across the train aisle or pavement constitutes a complete answer to our inner emotional needs.

The primary error of the crush lies in overlooking a central fact about people in general, not merely this or that example, but the species as a whole: that everyone has something very substantially wrong with them once their characters are fully known, something so wrong as to make an eventual mockery of the unlimited rapture unleashed by the crush. We can't yet know what the problems will be, but we can and should be certain that

they are there, lurking somewhere behind the facade, waiting for time to unfurl them.

How can one be so sure? Because the facts of life have deformed all of our natures. No one among us has come through unscathed. There is too much to fear: mortality, loss, dependency, abandonment, ruin, humiliation, subjection. We are, all of us, desperately fragile, ill-equipped to meet with the challenges to our mental integrity: we are short of the needed insight, composure, energy and mental bravery. We haven't been presented with good role models; unavoidably, our parents were far from perfect. We are easily irked; we become angry instead of explaining our concern; we nag instead of teaching; we don't carefully examine our worries; we misunderstand ourselves and create flattering excuses for our failings. Under pressure, we become loudly assertive or unduly timid; needy or cold; controlling or evasive. These are the normal troubles of being human. We don't know in advance the exact details of another person's fragilities and inner disturbances, but we can be sure they will be there. In time, everyone will be seen to be radically unideal and will turn out to be very tricky to share a life with.

We don't have to know someone in any way before knowing this about them. Naturally, their particular way of being flawed (very annoying) will not be visually apparent and may be concealed for quite long periods. If we only encounter another person in a fairly limited range of situations (a train journey, rather than when they are

trying to get a toddler into a car seat; a conference, rather than 87 minutes into a shopping trip with their elderly father), we may, for a very long time indeed (especially if we are left alone to convert our enthusiasm into an obsession because they don't call us back or are playing it with distance), have the pleasure of believing we have landed upon an angel.

Maturity doesn't suggest we give up on crushes. Merely that we definitively give up on the founding Romantic idea upon which the Western understanding of relationships and marriage has been based for the past 250 years: that a perfect being exists who can solve all our needs and satisfy our yearnings. There is no one on earth who will not, on a soberingly regular basis, drive us to rage, desperation, hysteria and, at points, a longing to run away or even die. And we will put them through comparable melodrama. It doesn't lie within our realm of possibility to be properly fulfilled or satisfyingly understood. We are not creatures designed for long-lasting cheer. Therefore, the choice of a partner is never one between contentment and grief; it is only ever a matter of choosing between pervasive misery and everyday unhappiness.

We should enjoy our crushes. A crush teaches us about qualities we admire and need to have more of in our lives. The person on the train really does have an extremely beguiling air of self-deprecation in their eyes. The person glimpsed by the fresh fruit counter really does promise to be a gentle and excellent parent. But these

characters will, just as importantly, also be sure to ruin our lives in key ways, as all those we love will.

A caustic view of crushes shouldn't depress us, merely relieve the excessive imaginative pressure that our Romantic culture places upon long-term relationships. The failure of one particular partner to be the ideal other is not – we should always understand – an argument against them; it is by no means a sign that the relationship deserves to fail or be upgraded. We all, necessarily, without being damned, end up with that figure of our nightmares: 'the wrong person'.

Romantic pessimism simply takes it for granted that one person should not be asked to be everything to another. With this truth accepted, we can look for ways to accommodate ourselves as gently and as kindly as we can to the awkward realities of life beside another fallen creature. A mature understanding of the madness of crushes turns out to be a wise backdrop to the tensions of long-term love.