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Negotiation and Communication

It is not, I think, seriously in dispute that negotiation and communication are central to love between equals. That is not just because problems arise in love-relationships which have to be settled by negotiating and communicating, but – in a way more importantly – because negotiation and communication are forms of sharing the self, which is what constitutes love. They are important, and should be enjoyable, in their own right: not only as instruments for sorting out difficulties. Whether A and B actually enjoy talking to each other, discussing things with each other, and negotiating with each other is one of the best tests of whether they love each other. For in this process they share their minds, just as they share themselves physically in bed.

Yet it is also common knowledge that communication and negotiation between A and B often go badly wrong. At first sight this may seem strange: it ought, after all, to be easy for them simply to sit down together and talk things out in a friendly (and hopefully loving) way. What have they got to lose? What do they hope to gain by not doing this? Why does it seem to one or both of them easier to bully, or take offence, or withdraw from each other? I think this can only be understood if we take firm hold of the point that what happens in negotiation and communication is a mirror or microcosm of the relationship as a whole. That is the point which I shall try to clarify in what follows.

‘Communication’ and ‘negotiation’ are very general and abstract terms; and I hope the reader will not feel patronised if I spell things out, perhaps rather laboriously, by practical examples. He/she should not feel patronised, because I want not just to put the relevant points in a ‘practical’ way, but also, more importantly, to show
that I am trying to talk about something which is really very simple – in a sense, there is only one point that underlies the whole business. So imagine that A and B have some kind of relationship (never mind just what, for the time being), and A says to B, ‘Could you possibly find time to sew on some of my buttons/help me to put up the curtains/give me a lift to the shops/look after the kids this morning?’ (or whatever: more or less any example will do). Now let us see how B may react.

B may say such things as (1) ‘OK, give me half a minute and I’ll do it’, or ‘I can’t manage it just now, but will tomorrow do?’, or ‘Sorry, but that’s just not my sort of thing, is there anything else I can do for you instead?’ Or B may say (2) ‘Oh, lord, not sewing on buttons again!’ , or ‘How can you expect me to look after the kids when you’re always down at the pub?’ , or ‘Very well, then, dash it, give me all your sewing and I’ll do the lot immediately, will that keep you happy?’ Notice here the crucial difference between (1) and (2). The difference is not whether B actually sews on the buttons (helps to put up the curtains, etc.) or not. The crucial difference is how B responds to A’s request. In (1) B feels safe with A and responds in a friendly and secure sort of way; in (2) B feels somehow under attack, and is unable to deal with A’s request (again, whether or not B actually does what A wants) in that way. In (1) B is gracious, unflustered, unthreatened, and what B says opens the door, as it were, for any further communication or negotiation that might be necessary. In (2) B is somehow worried, ungracious, awkward or insecure about it, so that A may well think and perhaps say, ‘Well, if that represents some sort of psychological problem to you, never mind, I’ll do it myself.’

It is clear that what is at stake here is, yet again, not whether the buttons get sewn on or the curtains put up: it is rather something general about the relationship between A and B. But sewing the buttons on may become, as it were, symbolic. And then A may make the mistake of thinking, ‘Well, dash it, if she won’t even sew on my buttons, then she can’t care very much for me or for what I want’, or B the mistake of thinking, ‘Surely if he loved me, at least he’d help with the curtains’. The reason why this is a mistake is that what A and B actually do for each other has in itself nothing much to do with the quality of their relationship. Thus A and B may not care at all about buttons or curtains or anything else ‘practical’ – they can get somebody else to fix them, or else just not bother. But what they have to care about, if they want a relationship