



Conversations  
That  
Matter



CENTRE FOR DIALOGUE  
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

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Is the answer to a successful relationship found in your ability to surrender to love?

If it is, wow, that requires a lot of trust. Now obviously we're willing to try because we're driven to couple up. Yet connecting is extremely difficult.

According to relationship guru Maya Kollman, loving somebody, really loving somebody, and surrendering to love forces us to face our deepest fears, which are, they'll leave me, or they'll die. Kollman says that love, that connection is the key to our very survival as individuals.

She says we're really good at finding the partner who can fulfill us and help us actualize who we are. Living with those same people, however, isn't necessarily easy. Kollman points out, this is where a respectful and appropriate communication strategy is required. A strategy, she insists, exists.

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We invited Imago relationship specialist Maya Kollman to join us for a conversation that matters about a deep, meaningful, and loving communication model for couples.

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- Welcome.

- Thank you very much.

- Okay, I'm gonna jump right into this. Why are relationships so terribly difficult?

- Well, I think partly they are difficult because we're in a, you grow up and you're supposed to have a self, right? You can't really function in the world without a self.

- Yeah, but identifying who that self is is a long and challenging process.

- Right, but the wonder of a relationship is that, and the reason it feels hard, is that we are then faced with another self. And we can only really survive as human beings in connection and you can't hang on to yourself and say, This is the truth, this is the way it is.

- Mmhmm.

- And honor another person's. So you have to begin this process of resolving yourself in the presence of another person. And being able to tolerate that there are two realities and that it really doesn't mean anything bad if the person you love thinks about things differently. I also think that we have this crazy idea in the Western world about how life should be, and that somehow success is feeling good all the time. If you don't feel good on the inside, if you feel upset or sad, there's either something wrong with you, your relationship, your life, and so we don't know how to manage the inevitable conflict in a relationship, which actually has a lot to teach us. Instead we push against it, we rail against it, we break the connection, and so it's really, it's a great living, loving somebody, really loving somebody and surrendering to love really does force us to face our deepest fears, which is that we'll be left, that somebody will die. It's the best teacher we have, but it's very scary.

- As you're giving me that explanation, I'm going, Okay, well hang on, I wanna go back and revisit that, that, that, that, and that. But when you came full circle there, I'm going, Okay, but you're also telling me that I have to trust that I can surrender a part of myself to someone else. And maybe that's what we wanna do, we wanna be able to collapse that space that exists between us, but oh my gosh is it ever a scary thing.

- It's the scariest thing. If we had been raised, let me back up. If we had been raised in a way

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that relationship was safe, that the best thing to do when you're in distress of any kind is go toward relationship, and that requires really attuned parents who really give that experience to the child, if we had had that, it would be the most natural thing to surrender to another person. Because it doesn't mean we disappear because they've made space for us, it means that we actually can collapse into that person, get the comfort we need or the connection we need and then pull back and be back into ourselves. And that dance between being in a self and in being in connection is the most important thing we need to learn to live a really good life.

- So we frequently hear people say, Well, he completes me, or She's my better half, as though that is the natural state to go to. Are we not driven to want to be there, but getting there appears to be a rather bumpy road?

- Yeah, so unless you have the perfect or good enough childhood, it will be a bumpy road.

- Who has the perfect childhood?

- Nobody that I've ever met. I always say, All five couples, and most of us haven't met them. So yeah, it's very bumpy because we're wired as human beings, our brain is wired for connection. In fact, we can't survive without it. So we are really caught because we want it, we need it, but if we've had the experience that it's dangerous, once romantic love is over and we don't have those chemicals anymore to help us, we have that--

- Those all important chemicals.

- Yes, we have that ambivalence about, Well, I really need you, I wanna be close to you, but frankly you're not safe, I can't be close to you. So this is this constant back and forth. I always say when people come into my office that they do want something different. They really wanna feel connected. They don't wanna cause each other damage and they don't wanna feel hurt. However, they are, the familiar that they're used to, that they think will keep them safe, is also there and it's very, very strong. So I wanna have something different, but frankly, I can't trust enough that I can let go of my defenses to make something different. 'Cause you can't have a connection unless you're willing to open your heart.

- So we gotta hang on for just a second while we take a quick commercial break, we'll be right back.

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- So how do we go around finding that mate that is going to allow us to do that and discover elements of ourselves that we're probably yearning to understand, consciously or

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unconsciously.

- Right.

- Are we better at selecting the people that we need than we think we are, or is it just a random act of coincidence?

- It's nature, nature wants human beings to be full functional and up and able to take care of this planet.

- Mmhmm.

- And we're really not doing a very good job, and we haven't for a long, long time. This is a bit of a mystical way of looking at it, but nature wants to get us in the place where we can grow into who we've always been meant to be. I believe that when we're born, we're born in a very incomplete body. We have a soul print that has already formed. And the world needs that soul print.

- Mmhmm.

- It needs us to be part of it. And our parents aren't so good at helping that dependent body grow into itself so that it can express that soul print. So nature puts us, and we're very helpless as children, so nature blinds us with the power of romantic love and we will only be drawn to people who can recreate for us some of the nightmare of our childhood, and some of the good stuff, so that we can face those challenges again. But this time, with a different outcome in partnership and as an adult. I know people sometimes hear this and think, This is the worst news I've ever heard. I thought I picked this person consciously. No, you didn't, it was a completely unconscious process. If you think about it, think about all the people you rejected on your way to this one person.

- Mmhmm.

- Now, it doesn't mean there's only one person, but you will be drawn to someone who can recreate some of those experiences, so you can face them and get through them to healing and growth.

- So you instinctively know, nature's at work, that you're picking somebody who's gonna help you complete that journey of self actualization.

- Absolutely, yes, but you have no idea--

- Really, so it's not sex? Well that may be part of it.

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- The stronger the chemistry, the more likely this person is the person who can create for you this challenge. And we think our partner's there to meet our needs, but no, no, no, they're there to shine a beacon on the places where we're incomplete and help us move into that completeness. Now clearly, in order to do it, you gotta have some tools and some help to do it. But it actually isn't, it sounds impossible, but it's not.

- Mmhmm.

- You have to face the fact that it's a lifelong journey to learn to surrender to love.

- But you're saying it's a daunting journey.

- It is a daunting journey, it's the hardest thing you'll ever do in your life, but as far as I'm concerned, it's the only thing that's worth doing and without it, we can't live a good life.

- You talked about the fact that they'll bring out the dark side in your or the holes in your being that need to be repaired or filled.

- Right.

- Will that, with it, just by its very nature bring all sorts of conflict and control issues and a wide variety of things--

- Absolutely.

- How do we start to address that? First of all, you're not even conscious of it, how do you become aware of it? And then once you are, then how do you move forward?

- Well, I can tell you a little about my story, which is that until I understood that the power struggle was a natural outgrowth of romantic love and that it was supposed to happen, it was really difficult. I fell deeply in love with Barbara and I thought I'd be happy for the rest of my life because I had all those wonderful chemicals racing through my body, and that it would be very different than any of the other relationships that had failed. And then when we hit the power struggle, I was devastated 'cause I thought, Wait a minute, this is supposed to be different. And then I heard Dr. Hendricks speak about the power struggle and how it is the perfect place for you to be to complete yourself, and that there's a pathway, there're things you can do, it's not hopeless, and that the power struggle is only so painful because we don't know how to get back into connection. We just sit there in this miserable place and keep rupturing and rupturing and rupturing, and then we just eventually, a lot of people just give up.

- This is our second break, we'll be back in a moment.

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- Is the power struggle really about who is gonna be the dominant partner in the relationship?

- Not so much dominant, but it's who's gonna exist. See, if you grow up in a family where there was threat if you didn't comply to the way that family behaved and there was one reality, and you start recognizing, as the chemicals wear off, that you live with a different person with different ideas and a different way of looking at the world, the two of you are gonna fight like hell to be either, you and I are one and I'm the one, or you and I are one and you're the one. So I might collapse, but that means if I collapse, it's not gonna make you very happy--

- Are those the only two options? Wouldn't a third option be, well, you and I are in this together, but we--

- Wouldn't that be nice? But no, unfortunately we don't go there unless we have had--

- I want to go there.

- I know, well I can tell you how. I can tell you how, and that's the thing that's been, and by the way, I get kind anxious, not anxious, but I get kind of concerned that people think this is the light and the way. I want them to know I'm a Jew and I can't be a missionary, but I know having done this in my own relationship and having helped thousands of couples, that if you commit to this, if you do this, it will be the hardship thing you ever do, but it has enormously positive outcomes. And more importantly, the world needs us to do this because it's bigger than just couples.

- So is the antecedent to this Imago therapy?

- The Imago therapy, the ideas of the Imago therapy, which by the way, if I might say, are an integration of a whole lot of other therapies, but has been put together in a beautiful package. And it's not just a theory, it has a particular way of talking and listening that helps you begin to tolerate the fact that you live with another person. Not only tolerate them--

- Aren't you supposed to love em, not just tolerate them?

- Yeah, well, eventually. But it's tolerating that experience inside yourself that the person you live with is different and that that's not a bad thing, that that's a wonder, that's a gift. Because you can learn so much and you can see the world through two different sets of eyes, as opposed to your own limited view. But we have to have a way to slow down the way we

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interact so that we can really begin to tolerate. 'Cause it's never about the other person.

- No, it's visceral.

- Exactly, we need to learn to live in this body and tolerate difficult feelings without attacking ourselves or somebody else, and that's part, and what this process does, which I love because it slows me down and interrupts conversational bad habits that I'm very good at. It helps me to be still and really see who Barbara is without my interpretation, my analysis, my projections. She's a very, very interesting person, very different from me, but if I'm committed to her having to be just like me in order for us to feel safe, I lose so much.

- Clearly the Imago method is more than a two or three minute description, but give us a two or three minute description of that, 'cause I want you to be able to also talk a little bit about what is the process that allows you to create that receptive communication environment.

- Right, okay.

- So you can actually do those things where you learn and grow and develop together.

- Well I can give you a one sentence description.

- Okay.

- And that is that Imago theory is that you will, that committed love relationships are the most efficient way to finish unfinished childhood business and grow up into who you're supposed to be, and contribute to the world in a way that the world needs you. So in other words, become less self absorbed and more, you said something earlier about impact and be aware of your impact on the world so you can use it well instead of destructively. So that's, if I were to say it very simply, it's the most efficient, committed love relationships are the most efficient way to finish unfinished childhood business and grow up into yourself.

- So you can actually say to your partner, You complete me.

- Yes.

- And mean it.

- Yes.

- And feel it.

- Yes, that you are the person that can help me grow into myself, and I can be that for you.

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- Third and final break, we'll be right back.

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- Starting point, finish point, rough road in between.

- Yes.

- What is the process--

- Well first of all--

- That can help us to maybe smooth that out a little bit.

- It's quite remarkable, really. If I could just first, I'll talk at two different directions. One is, the process is called the intentional dialogue or the Imago dialogue, whatever you wanna call it. I like the word intentional because--

- You're speaking with purpose.

- You're speaking with purpose.

- Yeah.

- You're being aware of your impact. You know what you wanna create with this person and you're consciously saying, How do I need to behave to make this connection happen? I can't just say anything to you.

- Mmhmm.

- I have to think, what would help you come close to me so we can have the interaction that I long for? So this intentional dialogue, it seems quite rote in the beginning because it's so different than how we interact.

- Mmhmm.

- But it's really important to remember we can't really become intentional unless we slow down, like I'm looking at you right now and I'm aware of you because I'm slowing down my speech. If I'm going 90 miles an hour, I can't see you. I'm completely caught in my own conversation.

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- Mmhmm.

- So slowing things down allows couples to actually encounter one another. In fact, it's really difficult to say awful things to a person when you're looking into their eyes.

- Mmhmm.

- Usually we fight in the car or you're upstairs, I'm downstairs. So to really be able to stop and look and see how my words and facial expressions impact you. Because of course, the truth is, when you are in a relationship with someone who's your committed partner, their opinion of you, your opinion of them, the way you feel about them is enormously impactful.

- So start by looking at one another.

- Yes, and it's eye to eye, me to me, heart to heart. We say it's assuming the position.

- So you're literally across--

- Without a table.

- Without a table, okay.

- Yeah, and at a distance that works for you. Now, eye contact is kind of an interesting thing. You have to allow, for some people to be able to regulate themselves, they have to look away, which is fine. It's not about staring, it's about encountering. And then this person who speaks, must speak in order for it to really work from a self reflective place. We use the word we're looking for that vulnerability is the place where people really connect. But often the word vulnerable really freaks people out because it seems like it's weakness and I don't, you know. But self reflection is easier.

- Right, well didn't Carl Rogers tell us that that which is most intensely personal is that which is most universal.

- Absolutely, and most connecting.

- Yeah, we all feel these things.

- Right.

- Yeah.

- So self reflection means I talk about me, I slow down, I don't attack you, I talk about my own reactivity, and I say, wow, what is this about in me so that I can become transparent in you

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and you can understand why I respond to you the way I do? That's the sender position. The person who's listening, it's literally like you put yourself over here, like I love to listen now because it's the only time I lose my mind, which means it's the only time, it's like meditation, it's like my mind is quite 'cause I'm focused on you and I'm making the space for you to exist without my interpretations or analysis, without my projections. In a sense, when we're babies, our parents mirror us into existence, if they're good.

- Mmhmm.

- Which means they put themselves aside, they forget about what they need and they focus on what does this baby need? When does it need to eat? 'Cause it can't tell us. And so unfortunately, we aren't mirrored into existence the way we should be, we're kind of half integrated. And so when you mirror your partner, you are helping that person become themselves.

- Mmhmm.

- Without being interfered with. Now clearly, the process doesn't work if you're blaming, shaming, and criticizing each other. That's not the point, you have to be willing to move into looking at what's going on with you when you're talking, and the other person has to be willing, and I think in the beginning, willing to be still. And I think in the beginning, it's really helpful to have a witness.

- So, you're saying that you really need to be present. The witness helps you to make sure you stay on track. But then how do you acknowledge to somebody that they have been heard? Because I think that this is fundamentally important.

- Yeah.

- I tell you things, but you don't hear me.

- Right, I've had experiences with couples coming in, feeling like they've never been heard. And after one session, and this is rare, I will grant you, but saying, bursting into tears and saying, That's the first time I ever felt heard. And all the person did was mirror it and summarize it. Now there are two other parts of this dialogue, which are validation empathy.

- Mmhmm.

- And they're very important too because it's really in the validation that I digest what you said and say, You really make sense, it makes sense that A in your mind equals B, equals C. Doesn't mean agreement.

- Mmhmm.

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- It means, I can sit here and hold onto me and see that you have a different way of looking at the world, and they're not nuts.

- So when I watched you demonstrate this on stage the other night

- yeah.

- There was, you shared something, and then from your partner coming back was, So what I heard you say was. And what I found very interesting at the end of that was, Did I get that right?

- Exactly.

- So confirmation.

- Yes.

- And then the follow on was, and is there--

- Is there more?

- Is there more. So you really give somebody the opportunity to actually be, to share, and to know that they're being heard.

- Exactly, I wanna tell you a funny story, which is that I was at a party once and I was exhausted, and I didn't wanna, I just couldn't talk about myself. I just listened that way to everybody at the party. And the feedback that the hostess got about me was I was such an interesting person. Because people are so desperate to just be heard.

- Right.

- And they didn't know anything about me, but the fact that I was willing to really hear them.

- Wasn't it a song by Glen Campbell, Everybody's Talkin' At Me?

- Yeah.

- I can't hear them.

- Yeah, yes. ♪ Everybody's talkin' at me. ♪ Yes, I remember that song.

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- Unfortunately, we're out of time, which antithetical to what we're talking about.

- Yeah.

- But at least this gives people an idea of what is possible, what might be a very useful instrument of communication that they can employ.

- Yes.

- Thank you very much for doing this.

- Thank you very much.