

## Reflections on Marriage while Painting the House

Last summer my wife, Linda, and I were painting our house. It was hot, taxing work, but it needed to be done and we had more time available than we had extra money to pay someone else to do it, so we completed the job ourselves. In the process, I was enlightened, like I'd been going to school. I believe this qualifies as an honest to goodness "growth experience."

I've learned about myself that once I start something, I tend to be fairly obsessive about finishing it. I want to start early and work late, even when I'm tired. I tend to push myself to the point of working on sheer willpower, causing me to do a job that's not up to my usual standards and making me a pain to be around. One of my challenges is to recognize when I've reached the point of being tired and quit, even if I'm in the middle of something and it doesn't feel "right" to stop. Actually, the more I'm taking time to recognize how tired I am, the easier it's becoming to stop.

There's another area where the fallout from my tendency toward obsession affects my relationship with Linda. When I'm pushing to finish a job, I have an unspoken expectation that she should do the same. At some level that until now hasn't even been conscious, I have expected her to adopt my tendency to push this painting job through to the end. This hurts her, me and us.

It hurts her because she senses my pushiness and feels its manipulative power. The message she receives is, "You should work the way I work." But she doesn't. And she's healthy enough to comment on what she feels, then give the rest back to me.

It hurts me because I tend to hold resentments about what she's not doing. I focus on how I'm being cheated because I'm doing more than she is. If I don't listen to myself and stop before I feel like I'm giving too much, I begin to put "you owe me"s into my account. This resentment puts a wedge between us.

It hurts us because I begin to focus on what I'm not getting. "Why isn't she doing what I want?" "Why doesn't she want this as badly as I do?" If I become critical of her, my positive sense of "us" is depleted. I feel more angry than satisfied when we go out together to paint.

Linda and I have totally different approaches to our job of painting. To illustrate, one Saturday Linda and I painted for about four hours before taking a break for lunch. When we walked into the kitchen, the differences in our styles of painting were strikingly obvious in our physical appearance. I had paint all over me--in my hair, on my glasses, on my shirt and shorts and even on my knees. I'm careful not to get the paint on the house in places it's not supposed to be, but I'm not too careful with whether or not I get it on myself. Linda, on the other hand, didn't even look like she needed to wash up before we ate. She had no paint on her anywhere, not even on her hands. Her appearance reflects the careful way she puts the paint on the house.

The challenge for me is to recognize that this difference isn't bad. I've learned that two people can have entirely different approaches to painting and that can be good or bad depending upon how those two people respond to their differences. I don't have to paint like Linda, nor she like me. In the end the job will be done well by both of us.

Another area of growth for me has been to realize that in the past I equated performance with loveability. In my mind there was a rule which said, "I can't possibly love someone who paints like you do" down there somewhere in my subconscious. This thinking made performance the criterion for my extending love to my spouse. This isn't love and it isn't healthy.

When you really stop to think about it, such a mind set is truly foolish. It puts arbitrary conditions on our relationship. The truth is that being critical of or uncomfortable with the way

another person does anything has nothing to do with love. Such a shallow criterion for sharing love will at least limit a relationship and at worst will kill it.

What's more important: the way someone paints or the way I feel about her? I can criticize or refuse to accept difference, or I can celebrate the difference as a way of reflecting what I like about our relationship. The slow, careful way Linda paints is much the same way that she treats me in our marriage. I like that slow touch when she holds my hand. I enjoy her gentle touch when she is talking with me. Why can't I enjoy that gentle touch when she paints?

Yes, I've learned a lot from our painting experience. Now I want to do my best to remember those lessons. I'm convinced that keeping these things in mind will enhance my own mental health and deepen the closeness of my marriage.

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