



THE POWER *of*
Real
LOVE

How Real Love has changed real lives

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The Power of Real Love

Chapter Five

A Couple at the Edge The Psychologist and the Screamer

Diane and Sean

When I first met Diane and her husband, Sean, they were about to separate. They fought almost constantly, there was no affection whatever in the relationship, and the tension was sucking the life out of both of them. They had been to a long line of marriage and individual counselors, and all that effort had only made their marriage worse. “The counseling sessions were angry and volatile,” Diane said. “Sometimes on the way home from the counselor it would get so bad that Sean would scream ‘That’s it! I’ve had it! Stop the car and let me out!’ It was like complete insanity. Our counselors couldn’t believe that we were still together.”

They had also been involved in a number of self-help programs, even certifying as leaders in a couple of them. Nothing was working, and they were desperate.

Both Diane and Sean were very bright and had earned doctorate degrees in their respective fields. And they had applied themselves diligently to improving their relationship, so after all their efforts and with all those abilities they were especially frustrated that they had utterly failed to improve their situation.

The first time I spoke with them, there was enough anger in the room to start a small war. If anger were darkness, those two would have extinguished all the lights of the city in which they lived. They really had tried to do the right things for a long time, but their efforts had degenerated into little more than mutual blaming.

“No matter what I do,” Sean said, “it’s never good enough. She has some critical, controlling comment to make about every damned thing I ever do or say.”

“You’re angry *all* the time,” she quickly responded. “How could I possibly stand by without saying anything while you vent your rage on me and the kids all day.”

That pretty much summarized their interactions, so it's easy to see why they were in a state of continual conflict. What people need more than anything else is to feel loved, but look at the real meaning of what Sean and Diane were saying to each other:

- Each time Diane criticized Sean, all he could hear were the words *I don't love you*.
- When Sean said, "She always has some critical comment to make about every damned thing I do," he was attacking her, and she could hear him say only *I don't love you*.
- When Diane said, "You're angry all the time," she was attacking Sean, and again he heard *I don't love you*.
- Every time Sean became angry at Diane, he was primarily concerned about himself—about what *he* wasn't getting or about what was happening to *him*—and on those occasions, Diane couldn't possibly feel his unconditional concern for her. Once again, she heard *I don't love you*.

Almost every time these two spoke to each other, the essence of the message was *I don't love you*, and no one was recognizing that. The marriage counselors were analyzing their pasts, teaching them how to exchange Imitation Love more effectively, and so on, but they were not addressing Diane's and Sean's greatest need—the need for Real Love.

I listened to them talk for only a few minutes before I said, "Oh, this is so *not* complicated. You're going to love how simple this will be to solve."

They both looked at me with a combination of skepticism ("After all the counseling and self-help work we've done, you dare to tell us that this is simple?") and hope ("Oh please, let this be the answer.").

I continued. "You've been trying to solve the problems in your marriage without the one ingredient you need most—both for your individual happiness and for the health of your relationship." I explained to them what Real Love was and how they could find it and share it with one another.

"At this point," I said, "you're both way too stupid to be working on your marriage." They both looked stunned for a moment and then burst into laughter. Intuitively they knew that what I was saying was true. "You simply don't have the tools you need to love each other," I continued. "You've been beating yourselves to death trying to give each other what you don't have—and trying to get from the other what he or she doesn't have—and all you've gotten for your efforts is exhausted and frustrated. You keep trying to squeeze blood from a turnip. You keep trying to milk the bull. Quit it. Instead of demanding Real Love from one another, you need to concentrate on getting it from people who actually have it to give. Making sense so far?"

A look of complete relief passed across their faces as they nodded, so I described how they could find Real Love individually. They could

- attend Real Love groups that were functioning in their area.
- call wise men and women living in their area, tell the truth about themselves, and create opportunities to feel accepted and loved.
- hire a Real Love Professional coach, who would help them accelerate the process of finding Real Love for a few months.
- participate in conference calls every day.
- read Real Love books, listen to Real Love CDs, and watch Real Love videos.
- attend Real Love seminars.

Now let's look at how Diane and Sean came to this place in their lives and observe what they did to implement the principles of Real Love.

DIANE—THE LOST CHILDHOOD

Diane's mother was a school teacher and her father a worker in a warehouse. She had one sibling, a sister eight years her senior.

I asked Diane to describe her mother, and she responded, "I remember my mom correcting papers at night on the bed, and I remember feeling like the school kids were more important than me."

I asked whether her mother spent much time with her, and she said, "Oh yes, lots," but when I asked her to describe what her mother did with her, there was a very long pause. She really couldn't think of anything. Finally, she said, "Well, she did spend time with me watching television while she corrected papers." There was another long pause. "I know when I was a baby and a toddler . . . well, here's the trip wire for me. My mom does know how to be with children as a school teacher, and sometimes I watch her with my children . . . but with me . . . I don't know."

"What did she do with you?" I asked.

"We went on family vacations. We loved the beach. We had a great time. We had a lot of family activities with extended family, like family reunions. That had a big impact on my life. There were all these cousins, and they were married and had children, and it was kind of like from early on I knew I wanted to get married and have children—just like them. When I was in high school and on the swim team my dad always came to all the swim meets."

Notice that when asked about activities with her mother, the best she could do was talk about correcting papers, family vacations, family reunions, and swim meets attended by her father. It was as though she had lost her childhood with her mother. That is never a good sign. We tend to shove into our subconscious the memories that are painful, so when someone has no memories, that means the memories are painful ones.

As I gently persisted in my attempts to help Diane recall any interactions with her mother, she said, “If I hurt myself as a child, I have a very clear memory that my mom would blame me, not nurture me. She would say something like, ‘Oh, that’s because you were moving too fast, or you weren’t careful, or something like that.’ It was never nurturing or kind. She didn’t just trying to find what I needed.”

Diane simply could not recall any childhood experiences with her mother that were associated with warm and loving feelings. “So how is your relationship with her now?” I asked.

“Now she’s in her eighties and lives not too far from us in her own apartment, and I drop by pretty often to bring her some fruit or other food or to help her out—this and that. There’s kind of like this . . . oh, I don’t know, she’s always fussing about ‘Go home. Don’t bother with me. Go home and take care of your family.’ Or she’ll say ‘How much do I owe you for that?’ Or ‘Go be with Sean.’ It’s like I can never just sit there and be with her. She can’t just take what I’m offering and be relaxed. I feel like I could take a sledge hammer to glass for the way my mom makes herself so small.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked. “What do you mean by her ‘making herself small?’”

“I’ll give you an example. When she was in the hospital not long ago, she didn’t ask for anything she needed, so when they didn’t give her one of the medications she was supposed to get, she said nothing. That meant *I* had to come down and make a fuss before she got what she needed. When she doesn’t ask for what she needs, she makes herself smaller. It goes back even to when I was born, she tells the story about how they had wheeled her into this room and I was just about to be born, and at the nurses station they were playing a radio and couldn’t hear her. She didn’t want to raise her voice or anything to get their attention—heaven forbid she should bother anybody—so when they finally came in, there was a big panic. ‘Oh no! This baby is coming!’ they said.”

“So when she’s like that,” Diane continued, “it’s a big stress on me. By the time we got home with her from the hospital, I was ready to scream. She wants peace at all costs. When I was a child, she used to say it to me—and now she says it to my kids—‘Don’t cry. You don’t need to cry. I like it when you’re smiling.’ It’s all about her peace. She wants the people around her to be at peace, because if they’re upset, she becomes too upset to handle it.”

“I was depressed as a teenager, and I’ve struggled with depression my whole life. I had a weight problem in high school. In my twenties, a doctor suggested medication, but my mother’s solutions for depression were like this: ‘Go take a walk. You need to get out more.’ Her message was, ‘Just do something to make it go away, so I won’t be uncomfortable.’ Even now she’ll ask me, ‘Are you going swimming today? It would be good for you.’ It’s like she’s still managing my life.”

I asked Diane, “So your mother has always wanted things to be calm and peaceful for *herself*, because she just couldn’t handle the confusion and stress, right?”

“Yes.”

“And she valued her own peace more than paying attention to what you were trying to tell her about what you needed.”

“Yes, I guess that’s right. No, actually, I *know* that’s right.”

“And even when it came to her own well-being, she wanted everyone else to figure out what she wanted, so she wouldn’t have to outright *ask* for what she wanted. If she actually had to ask, you see, she might have to hear someone tell her *no*. She made everyone around her do the work of not only pleasing her but also figuring out what she wanted.”

“I’d never thought about that, but yes, that’s what she’s done. We were always having to figure out what she wanted, because she wouldn’t say.”

“And that’s why Sean’s behavior is so irritating to you. That’s exactly what *he* does.”

“Oh my gosh! That is totally what I’ve bought into with Sean! Completely! Exactly! They both do the same thing.”

“Sean is always angry,” I said, “because you’re not giving him what he wants, right? That’s the only reason people are ever angry.”

“Yes, I guess that’s right.”

“And yet you never quite know what he wants, because he doesn’t *tell* you. So he’s lazy (because he doesn’t tell you what he needs) and irresponsible (because he makes you responsible for figuring it out). He’s doing the same thing your mother has done, and *that* is why you get so angry at what he does, because he’s repeating a pattern that has bothered you from childhood. In defense of both Sean and your mother, neither of them has *known* what they’ve needed, so they couldn’t possibly have told you.”

“I can’t believe nobody has ever seen this before.”

“Oh, there’s more. You’ve had to satisfy your mother’s needs and your husband’s needs, and you’ve discovered that that’s nearly impossible. So what you’ve done instead is to at least try to avoid doing anything that would overtly irritate them. Remember how you said that your mother’s goal was peace at all costs?”

“Yes.”

“That has become *your* goal too. You’ll do almost anything to keep the peace, and in the process you’ve pretty much lost who you are as a person. You don’t even know, and you’re passing that trait on to your own children.”

“I’m feeling so much anger over how my life has gone and over what my mother has taught me. I mean, I’m talking *deep rage*. Deep rage. I just want to shake her and say ‘*Can’t you ask for what you want or need??!*’ And Sean has always been like her. He gets irritated, and I feel like I have to scramble to fix it for him or all hell will break loose. And that feeling that I had to be responsible for his feelings had to come from somewhere. It had to come from playing out the same scenes with my mother.”

“The way you interacted with your mother made you completely unprepared for a healthy relationship. You never saw one, so you were naturally attracted to someone who behaved in a way familiar to you—in this case, someone who behaved like your mother. You were prepared to function only in a relationship that was sick, and that’s what you’ve got. There’s no blaming to be done here—not of you or anyone else. You did the best you could with what you had.”

Diane’s father died several years ago, and she remembers him as being outgoing and personable. “I put him on a pedestal,” she said. “He was the kind of dad that if I were sick I knew he would drive in the car eight hours to come get me from college. He was the dad that would do anything for me. He would change my oil, take care of my car, come to my swim meets, and even think of what my friends needed.”

“My parents divorced when I was a newborn, because my dad was having an affair with a nineteen-year-old. But then my parents remarried when I was about four, and he continued to have affairs. They kept that a secret from me until I was like thirty-five years old, and one day my mom told me this big secret that I didn’t know but absolutely everybody else in the family knew. That had quite a big impact on me. The whole web of forty cousins knew this secret, but I never did!”

“My parents got along pretty well,” Diane said. “My mom tells me that sometimes my dad would get mean with her, and my mom would call him on it, and then he’d be nicer.”

This story didn’t make much sense. She described parents who “got along pretty well,” and yet her father had repeated affairs and was sometimes mean to her mother. After a few more questions, Diane said, “The whole time I lived at home, there was this subterranean discord, a nagging tension that ate away at everything. Mostly I remember that my mom just chipped away at my dad: chip, chip, chip, bit by bit attacking him and making him feel smaller.”

“I remember one time he washed the dishes—and he wasn’t a man that washed the dishes often—and my mom came in and criticized everything he did. That really hurt me. I don’t remember her doing that to me. After I learned about their divorce and remarriage, she told me that he was mean to her sexually but she remarried him because she wanted me to have a father.

That didn't seem like a kind thing to share with me. I don't remember that my father ever said anything unkind about my mother."

"My parents' barbing back and forth at each other really bothered me, so much that when I was in my twenties I sometimes had to go to the mental health center. I couldn't handle it. It drove me into a depressed and frightened state. I sided with my dad, probably because I saw him as the victim in their interactions. Even though I wasn't the object of those constant little attacks, they had a terrible effect on me. I don't know why."

"Sure you do," I said. "Why would it bother you to hear your mother attack your father all the time?"

"Because I wanted to defend him?"

"Oh, maybe a little bit, but children aren't usually that generous, especially when they haven't been unconditionally loved themselves. They're far too interested in their own emptiness to have a primary interest in defending someone else. The answer is simpler than that. When your mother was attacking your father—and when he was either attacking her in return or withdrawing from her or having affairs behind her back—they were interested in *themselves*, not you. While they were self-absorbed like that, you knew there couldn't possibly be any Real Love available for *you*. In that loveless environment, you were hopelessly alone and miserable, the worst conditions of all."

"It's like I finally understand my entire life."

The pattern here was obvious. Diane had a painful childhood, but in her mind she created memories that were more tolerable. Hence her saying that she spent "lots" of time with her mother—when she didn't—and that her parents "got along pretty well," when in truth their relationship gave every indication of being far less than loving. We really do not like to live with painful memories.

DIANE—RELATIONSHIPS

Diane didn't marry until she was in her early thirties, and prior to that she had quite a number of relationships. They usually began on the basis of sex, flourished for a brief time, and then she moved on to the next man. "Knowing what I know now about Real Love," she said, "I can see that in each case I was enjoying the rush of Imitation Love from a new source. Then the feeling would wear off, and I'd move on to the next rush, the next new excitement."

"By the time I met Sean," she said, "I was really tired of jumping through all the hoops with men and trying to be what they wanted me to be. So with Sean I decided to just be myself. But I still fell into the same old pattern of trading Imitation Love, mostly with sex, because that was all I knew. And then, early in our marriage, I realized that I'd been fooled just like I had

been many times before. Before we got married, for example, Sean used to stroke my face and be all romantic, but that disappeared in a hurry. And I was left wondering, *How come you don't do that anymore?* Our relationship was an Imitation Love classic.”

“Early in the marriage,” Diane continued, “he quit wanting to have sex with me, and I’d ask him what was going on. His response was that I was too critical of him all the time, and now I can see that that was true. It’s really gone steadily downhill in the fifteen years that we’ve been married. We just don’t know how to be close. We only know how to do distance and tension.”

“When I initiate sex, for example, he doesn’t say anything, nothing, ever. Nada. Or about anything, for that matter. I used to show Sean my scrapbooks, pictures of the kids, and the man would just say nothing. Nothing! It’s almost like inhuman. Not ‘good job, bad job, screw you, I can tell you put a lot of work into that. Just nothing,’ and that’s really how it is living with him. He doesn’t know how to be genuinely intimate with me.”

“He stopped hugging me, and when I asked about it, he said, ‘Well, when I hugged you I was getting like sexual feelings, and since that’s not going anywhere, I just stopped hugging you.’ Can you believe that? Not the first clue what intimacy is.”

DIANE—PARENTING

With the relationship skills Diane was taught by her parents, it’s not difficult to imagine how she performed as a parent. She controlled her children, blamed them, and yelled at them. The atmosphere in the house was not pleasant.

I spoke to one of Diane’s daughters, and she said, “My mom could be really scary when she was mad. She would yell, and it wasn’t a lot of fun to be around her. It didn’t take much to make her blow up, and then she’d be like yelling her head off.”

Understandably, the children then fought with each other and yelled at their parents. “They didn’t hesitate to scream at us,” Diane said, “or even call us stupid. When my youngest got irritated, he would say ‘I hate you.’ I succeeded in raising some pretty angry children.”

“Amazingly,” Diane said, “before I studied Real Love, I actually thought I was a great mother. Here I was yelling at my children all the time, with a house full of angry kids, and I thought I was a great mother. How could I think that? Because my friends told me I was a good mother. I was certainly as good a parent as any of them were. And I went to all the school meetings, read all the right books, prepared nothing but healthy meals, and spent a lot of time with my children. When they were babies, I did everything right: natural child birth, breast feeding, carried them everywhere with me, the whole deal. There was nothing I wanted more than to love these children and make them happy, and everybody thought I was the model mother.”

“But even before Real Love I somehow knew that something was wrong. I was trying as

hard as I could, but the results spoke for themselves. It was obvious they simply weren't happy. I could see it in their faces and hear it in their voices. Finally, one day I prayed that I might be able to learn to love unconditionally, and shortly after that I found Real Love."

SEAN—THE CONFUSING CHILDHOOD

Sean's father was a physician who worked eighty hours a week. He was always gone, but Sean said, "He was always calming and never spanked us or anything like that. That was my mom's job. I could tell at one level that they really loved us and cared for us, but on the other hand my dad could be very compulsive with us, and there were times when my mom would just explode in these emotional rages that turned physical, where she spanked us with these spoons. There was this very scary place, wondering when Mom was going to explode again."

"So how was it," I asked, "that you knew they 'really loved you,' as you put it?"

"Because we had a nice house, nice clothes, went to private schools, always had cars. I went skiing every winter."

"So they took care of you physically, right?"

"Yes."

"What happened when you made mistakes?"

"When I screwed up with my mother, she reacted by yelling, hitting and screaming. My dad was around so little, I never had much of a chance to screw up around him."

"When you behaved well, how did you feel?"

"They approved of me. They liked me."

"When you screwed up, how did you *feel*? Did you feel like they approved of you? Did you feel like they liked you? Loved you?"

There was a long pause. "No, I really didn't." Another long pause. "And that really does explain why I felt so awful every time my mother blew up, or even when my father got that *look* on his face. It wasn't the yelling or even the hitting that made me feel bad. It was the feeling I had—deep inside—that they didn't love me, at least not unconditionally, which was the only way that counted for anything. Of course that was just a feeling. In those days I could never have put it into words. I didn't know how."

Sean's mother controlled everything he did: what he said, how he dressed, how he spent his free time, and so on. I asked him to describe a single event that illustrated this, and he said,

“When I was in the second grade, my parents had this big thing about wearing ‘good shoes.’ So I was the only dorky boy in the whole school who had to wear dress shoes to school. Fortunately, I kept a pair of tennis shoes at school for gym class, so I could switch shoes every day.”

“One Friday,” he continued, “she picked me up from school and I had forgotten to switch back to my dress shoes. I *knew* I was screwed, so I sat clear on the other side of the car trying to make my feet invisible. But she knew what I was doing, so she said, ‘Show me your feet.’ When she saw those tennis shoes, she backhanded me repeatedly, slapped me, hit my legs, and screamed at me because I forgot to change my shoes. It was terrifying.”

“We did a lot of work around the house and the yard,” Sean said. “I hated that. It would be the Fourth of July, and we’d be out there trimming 1200 feet of evergreen bushes or edging or whatever. I hated that growing up. One summer it was my job to paint the entire frame house—3600 square feet—and I was only twelve. I remember that every window had thirty-six panes. It took forever.”

His parents apparently had a different opinion about how much work the children should do, because Sean’s sister once told him a story about a time before he was born, when she overheard their father saying to their mother, “Sally, they’re only four, six, and eight years old. They’re just kids. You can’t expect them to do all of that.”

When the children didn’t fulfill their responsibilities, Sean’s mother could erupt quite suddenly and violently. “She had us working like dogs in the house,” Sean said, “and heaven help us if we screwed up. When I was four, I was suddenly awakened one night by the lights being turned on in my bedroom. My mother was screaming and dragging her arm across the top of the dresser my brother and I shared, sweeping everything onto the floor. Then she pulled out every drawer and dumped the clothes on the floor, screaming, ‘By @#%&, when I tell you to clean your room, you’re going to do it the right way. @#%&*@ it, get this mess picked up and do it the right way right now. All this woke us out of a dead sleep. It was pretty shocking. I remember wondering how she could care about us if she acted like that.’” That event was not unique.

Sean’s mother was confusing for him. On the one hand, she screamed and yelled and hit him, and yet she traveled all over town to make sure he went to the best possible school. She also took him to hundreds of soccer practices and games over a period of many years. The relationship between Sean’s parents was also very tense, with lots of yelling and screaming, and that created a lot of tension for the kids.

Sean’s memories of his father are few. “My dad was Mr. Anal Compulsive Doctor Dude. The biggest memory I have of him was him telling me to go lock the door every night, and then he followed behind me and double checked to make sure I’d done it right. I don’t ever remember him sitting and just talking with me. There was a point in my education where I was having a hard time reading, so my mother told him he needed to read with me more. That didn’t turn into much, only that I sat in his lap once and read out of this one western book while he fell asleep.

Not a lot of warm memories, but not a lot of terrible ones either.”

SEAN—SCHOOL AND RELATIONSHIPS

The only place Sean had any confidence was in sports, where he demonstrated a natural athletic ability. He started playing soccer in the second grade, and by the end of high school he was the star of both his soccer and lacrosse teams. He got a lot of praise for that, and it made him popular with both the guys and the girls. So his early school experience was great: He was athletic, popular, good-looking, and very confident.

In fact, he said, “In elementary school I was the leader of this big gang of kids, and when we played games, I made the rules. In this one game if people made a mistake, the penalty was that I kicked them in the groin. I kicked one girl who was my friend, and she ran off crying to the teacher. I never got in trouble, but I remember thinking, *This is so wrong to be hurting people like this*, and at that point I lost the taste for bossing people around. I think I was really getting a feeling of power from pushing people around and from being adored by them, like my mother got from bossing me around. But I didn’t like using people like that.”

I always had a girl friend in the fifth and sixth grades. I didn’t date a lot in high school, mostly because it was a smaller private school. I did my fair share of pot smoking and beer drinking, but I didn’t have sex until my senior year.

Academically, school was never easy for Sean. He was a slow reader and not the smartest kid in the class. He had to study harder and longer than everybody else, and even then his grades were not spectacular. On one occasion in the ninth grade he was particularly disturbed to get an F in a class, accompanied by a note from the teacher stating that he had nonetheless tried his very best. “How discouraging is that?” Sean said. “Here I’d done my very best, and it wasn’t even enough to pass.”

Sean went to college at a state school, because he didn’t have the grades for anything better. In college he had a great time, joining a fraternity early on and eventually becoming president. “I had a very close association with men during that time,” he said. “It was a very positive experience.”

In college he was socially and sexually active. “I never wanted to just *use* women for sex, though,” he said. “I was looking for a more emotionally meaningful attachment. I was looking for a real *partner*, but nothing ever lasted for more than six months. I was attracted to women who were sexually attractive, but sex was never enough to make a real relationship. I just didn’t know what a real relationship was.”

In college, Sean initially majored in engineering, a subject suggested by his mother, but at the end of his senior year he realized there were three classes in his major that he would never pass, so he dropped out of school and went to work for a year. He went back to school, changed

his major to psychology, and graduated in three more difficult semesters. In college, Sean also raced bikes and worked in a local bike shop. He got a real sense of confidence and satisfaction from racing.

SEAN—MARRIAGE AND GRADUATE SCHOOL

After college, Sean worked as a research assistant for three years. “Those were good years,” he said, “just hanging out, not a lot of dating. In fact, socially I was getting pretty withdrawn. There was one stretch for a year that I didn’t date at all—didn’t even get laid. But I did have a great group of friends, and we often went on mountain biking trips.”

He applied for graduate school and was discouraged that he was accepted to none of the twenty schools where he made application. During the application process, though, he met Diane, and he was attracted to her because she was good-looking, smart, and had many similar interests. They were engaged a year later.

Sean was finally accepted into a master’s graduate program a thousand miles away, so he left to begin his academic work there, leaving Diane behind for a year. After that year they were married, and it was at that point that Sean began to see some of the traits that would cause them problems in the years to come. “Everything had to be perfect for the wedding,” he said. “Diane was trying to make absolutely everybody happy, and in the process she was just wiggling out and making my life hell. It was more stress than I could take. If I’d had greater courage at the time, I would have called it off, because I thought, *If this is how we’re starting off—If this is what marriage is like—count me out.* Later on the limousine driver told my sister that he’d never seen a more stressed out couple than we were. That’s how we started. The honeymoon was stressful, too, and I think the stress never stopped from there.”

“I should have recognized some of these signs before we married,” he said. “If I made her wait or inconvenienced her, she acted like I had committed a crime. If her needs weren’t being met, she wanted everything to stop.”

“Let me tell you a story to show you the kind of problems we had early on. I had to find us an apartment before she moved out, so I found a place perfect for our budget, and it was the same distance from where I was working on my degree and where she was working on hers. So I was pretty proud of what I’d found, but it turned out that moving for her was some big traumatic event, and I was somehow supposed to figure that out. So she arrived at this new home that I was all proud of and started in with criticisms of this and that about the place.”

“I blew up. ‘Well, @#%& you! This is the best place I could find. You should have seen some of the places I turned down. Maybe next time you should handle this and try to do better yourself.’ At the time, I thought *she* was being completely unreasonable, but now I see that I wasn’t listening to her at all, and as a result she felt like I didn’t care about her.”

Diane became pregnant almost immediately, so right off they were burdened with the

stresses of pregnancy, debt, little income, and a heavy graduate school academic load for both of them. So it seemed as though they experienced pressure from the planning of their marriage on. “There were *no* happy, relaxed times,” Sean said. “The pressure never let up. We’ve never had an idyllic, ‘ain’t this wonderful’ bit of time in our entire marriage.”

“She could get pretty angry,” he said, “at me or anybody else. Once we were on a walk together, and this lady was backing down her driveway. Diane got it into her head that this lady was trying to run her over, so she was freaking out and screaming at the woman. The woman got out of her car, and I thought we were going to have a fist fight right there. When the woman drove off, Diane blew up at *me*, and she kept it up until we got home, where she threw the rolled-up Sunday paper—at least fifty pounds—right at my head. She could be pretty scary.”

They went to their first marriage counselor the first year they were married. The counseling went poorly and didn’t last long.

REAL LOVE

After fifteen years of marriage, one of their many marriage counselors suggested that they read the book *Real Love*. They attended a Real Love seminar, and Diane began attending Real Love groups, where she told the truth about herself. “In the past,” she said, “I had almost always told the truth about *my husband*—about all *his* mistakes—instead of being honest about me, and that had never gotten me anywhere. Finally, I was doing something different, and more important, I was doing something that worked.”

“I told people who I really was,” she continued. “I told them that I was lost and alone. I told them that I’d been a critical, difficult, and witchy wife, as well as a controlling and angry mother. I admitted that I didn’t have the first idea how to love people unconditionally or how to be in a loving relationship. At first I couldn’t believe how difficult it was to say these things—it was like walking naked in public—but it became easier and easier because of the reactions of the people I was talking to.”

“The people in the Real Love groups simply accepted me. They helped me see *why* I had been in pain for so long, and why I had behaved in such unproductive ways. I just didn’t have enough Real Love in my life. And as they loved me, as they accepted me for who I really was, I found that bit by bit—it was a gradual thing, it didn’t happen all at once—the pain in my life became less. At first I hardly noticed it, but over a period of months I just noticed that I was less angry. When you’re loved, you don’t need to be angry, you know?”

“There’s an amazing natural power to Real Love. It just naturally does its work without your thinking about it. I began to lose my anger at Sean. It still hasn’t gone entirely, but wow, is it less.”

Sean didn’t begin the process of telling the truth about himself quite as quickly or

enthusiastically as Diane, but he did begin. In fact, he organized his own Real Love group and invited men he knew to attend.

MARRIAGE AFTER REAL LOVE

Let's examine an experience I had with Sean and Diane that demonstrates how this couple made at least one step forward in Real Love in their marriage. It's typical of many of the steps they've taken, and it represents the growth of thousands of other couples as they've applied these principles. In this example there is also some demonstration of their growth as parents.

Diane called to describe a situation in their family. She had been in charge of the kids' allowances, but she'd never done a good job of either giving it to them on time or of seeing to it that they put part of it aside for a savings account, something that she and Sean had agreed was important. Each time she failed in these duties, Sean complained and became irritated at Diane, and they both hated those arguments. So Sean took over the entire responsibility, and things went more smoothly for a while.

A couple of times in a row, however, Diane had allowed their youngest child, Cody, to spend money on items that Sean thought were frivolous. Sean had been keeping Cody's wallet in Sean's closet to prevent such spending, but Cody had taken money out anyway. When Sean came home and found Cody's wallet empty, he hit the ceiling. He blew up at his son and his wife, and the whole family was on edge for days as Dad steamed.

I called Sean, who described the situation in exactly the same way Diane had. That alone was remarkable, actually, because without Real Love two spouses usually describe an event quite differently, each eager to be right and defend his or her point of view. "It's not much fun being angry, is it?" I asked.

"No, it's not," Sean said, "but I don't know how to talk to Diane about this."

"If you'd like, I could offer some suggestions. Entirely up to you."

"I'd like that. What I'm doing now sure isn't working."

"There are really two parts here, the problem with the kids and the one with Diane. First, the kids. What do you want most for them?"

"To be happy."

"Of course you do. You'd also like them to be responsible, wouldn't you?"

"That would be great."

“When you *control* them, when you *tell* Cody exactly what he *has* to do with his money, for example, and when you keep his wallet in *your* closet, is he learning to be *responsible*, or is he just learning to obey your every command?”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way. I’m not really teaching him to be responsible this way, am I?”

“No, but there’s no need to feel guilty about it. Who ever taught you how to be responsible, and who taught you to be a loving father? Now about the second thing you want for him: With the way you’re handling the allowance now, is he happy?”

“No.”

“So you’re failing in both of your goals as a father, right?”

“True.”

“So let’s try something different. No sense doing the same old thing. I have no need whatever to control *you*, either, so I’ll give you some suggestions only if you wish.”

“I do. I really don’t know what to do here.”

“What children need is to be loved and taught, not controlled. You can pretty much bet that if you’re controlling them, you’re doing it wrong. And I’m sure that sometimes you wonder whether you *are* controlling them. You’ve been controlling them so long that it’s second nature to you. You don’t know another way. So use this as a sign: If you’re angry, you probably are controlling them.”

“That’s a pretty valuable thing for me to remember.”

“So how can you love and teach Cody here? First, go home and say, ‘Cody, I’ve been doing this thing with the money all wrong. In fact, I’ve been stupid. *Your* allowance is *yours*, so I need to let you manage it and learn your own lessons from doing that. You also need to learn the concept of saving, though, so let me suggest this. Here on the table are one hundred pennies. If you got a hundred pennies for your allowance every week, how many of those would you be willing to put into savings?’ Then have him set aside the portion of those hundred pennies that he thinks he could save. It might be ten pennies. It might be fifteen or twenty, or it might be none.”

“Whatever he chooses,” I continued, “is the percent of his allowance that he agrees to put into savings, so then each week you separate out that percent of his allowance for savings, and each week you ask him if he’s willing to actually *put* that into savings. That way he’s learning how to save, and it’s always *his* choice to make. You’re not forcing him to do anything. Then you let him spend the remainder of his allowance however he wants. It’s *his*, and he’ll learn about money management only if he makes his own decisions—including his own mistakes. He

learns nothing if he's just following your orders."

"Wow, that's a lot different than the way I was raised, but I think that will work. It feels right."

"Now, your wife. What do you want for her?"

"Same as for the kids. I want her to be happy. And I want her to feel loved by me too."

"So, how's it working with the way you're doing it now?"

"It sucks."

"And it does because when you get angry at her, she's hearing you say *I don't love you*. You're also trying to control her, as you do with the kids. It's what your mother did with you."

"Ouch."

"There's no reason to feel ashamed. It's just what you *learned*, in this case at your mother's knee. And the solution is so easy. So now you go home and say, 'Diane, I've been a horse's butt. I was angry at you when I should have been loving and supportive. I've been doing the same thing with the kids.'"

"That's going to be tough."

"I can see how it would look scary. I remember the stories of your mother cutting you to pieces when you made mistakes. When you were only four, she tore your room up in the middle of the night to punish you for not cleaning your room right, so it's understandable that you'd still be afraid of people being angry at you for being wrong. But telling the truth about your mistakes is also the only way to create opportunities to feel loved, and it's the only way to tell Diane that you're not blaming her."

A few days later I spoke with both of them on the phone:

Greg: Diane, how did it go when Sean talked to you about the kids and managing their money?

Diane: He told me that he had attacked me and that he was wrong.

Greg: How did you respond?

Diane: I said that it must have been difficult for him to say that, and I reached out and touched his hand.

Greg: How did you feel toward him?

Diane: Much closer. In fact, that night we went to sleep holding hands, and I can't remember the last time we did that. For days afterward he seemed more peaceful too. All that tension about the allowance was just *gone*.

Greg: Do you see *how* it was a big deal that he was able to tell you that he was wrong?

Diane: Yeah. He wasn't blaming me anymore.

Greg: Yes, but there's another part that's even more important, more beautiful. When he told you that he was wrong, he was telling you that he *trusted* you to hear the truth about himself. In the past you have tended to criticize what he did. And he has a long history of being criticized when he was wrong. So his admitting to you that he was wrong is a pretty big deal.

Diane: Oh, now I get it. It is much bigger than I realized. It's really positive. I hear it now.

Greg: You know his mother. Goodness, if he made a mistake, she cut his head off. And then you came along and for most of your marriage you did pretty much the same thing. So it didn't take him long to decide that he wouldn't share anything with you. It was too dangerous. Then you wondered why he wasn't intimate with you emotionally. That's no great mystery now, is it? So his admitting a mistake the other night and holding your hand while you went to sleep is no small thing. It's big for both of you. Now Sean is also more likely to share the truth with you the next time.

Sean: I felt a real excitement, like I can do this.

Greg: Diane, did you hear the word he just used? *Excitement!* Excitement about who?

Diane: Himself

Greg: Kind of. But he's excited to do this with *you*.

Diane: (pause)

Greg: Do you hear that now?

Diane: Okay, now I do. I missed it.

Greg: Soak it in, sweetie!

Diane: I'm opening the pores!

Greg: Because this is big stuff! And unless it's pointed out to us, we often miss it. This wasn't an exciting moment he had with *me!* It was with *you!* He was excited that he shared who he was

with you, and that you accepted him. With that positive experience, now he's more likely to tell the truth about himself the next time, and the next time you are also more likely to be accepting, because you recognize what a big thing it is.

Diane: I get it now.

Greg: This doesn't mean you won't screw up the next time, but when you see what's working, you can more easily repeat it. Now, how did the conversation with the kids go, the one about allowances?

Diane: Today Cody told me that Sean told him that he (Sean) had a big fat mouth, and he was going to leave his hands off how Cody spent his allowance. Cody was laughing and saying, "Yeah, I've never heard Poppy talk like that before."

Greg: That's kind of amazing, for a child to go from resentful to laughing in the space of a few hours. Not bad.

Diane: Yeah, its pretty big. Cody used to feel so angry about being controlled, but today we went somewhere, and Cody obviously had a wonderful time getting some little thing at a store. He looked so light. There was no trace of anger in him. It was fun to watch.

In a recent e-mail Diane said, "I can't remember Sean ever being so nice. I keep waiting for him to get irritated—like he usually does—but he doesn't. Yikes. It's so cool. Something came up at dinner last night. One of the kids was making a mistake, and one of the other kids—with more than a little pleasure—said, 'Somebody is about to get in trouble,' but Sean said, in a funny way, 'Oh, I think I'll just keep my fat mouth shut.' I tell you, this man—*my* husband—is really feeling loved. It's wonderful, and now he's sharing that love with the rest of us. We're loving it."

PARENTING AFTER REAL LOVE

"Maybe the best way I can show you the power of Real Love in my life," said Diane, "is to describe the changes in my children since I've learned something about how to love them. I used to feel frustrated and irritated at them, but now I feel like I'm on cruise control with them. It's peaceful, like no stress. More than peace, really—joy. I'm so relaxed and thrilled to have the time with my kids and happy that we can all just be ourselves and hang out together. I haven't worked it out to where I can do that as well with Sean, but I'm working on it."

"The kids tell me they're much happier than they were before I learned how to love them. My ten-year-old used to be one angry child, but now she'll actually walk up to me and say, 'Hey, you seem kind of empty.' Can you believe that? Now, I'm not suggesting that I let her take care of me emotionally. I'm just saying that it's amazing that she feels loved enough that she can even be *aware* of someone else's needs. That would never have happened before. This is a child who until very recently spent all her time putting up this high wall to keep Sean and me out, yet

beating on it with her fists to remind us that she was there. But now I can sit with her, and she'll relax and go to a level of deep honesty with me. She's blossoming in ways we never could have imagined."

"My other daughter, thirteen, has also come out in a beautiful way. She's happier and less withdrawn. She enjoys being around me now, where before she avoided me in a quiet way. I asked her if she saw anything different in me now, and she said, 'You know, you used to be very scary sometimes with your anger. Remember that time I lost the needle on the floor? Scary. You don't do that anymore at all.'"

I talked to this daughter myself, and she said, "Now Mom doesn't get cranky that much anymore, and she hasn't yelled in a really long time. I like it. It's been a lot happier around here." It was clear that this teenager felt loved by her mother.

Summarizing her new experiences as a parent, Diane said, "There is such an overall increase of peace in the house. It's like a miracle."

DISCUSSION

I have now seen many couples go from a place of utter despair to a condition of great hope and growth, as Sean and Diane have illustrated for us here. Almost all of those couples have at some point expressed to me a sentiment like this: "We are so discouraged. We have tried everything and worked at this for so long." No matter how long and hard we apply incorrect principles, however, we'll never change our lives in the positive ways we desire.

You may feel discouraged in your own relationships, but all the time and effort that you've spent before Real Love really doesn't count for much, if anything. Until we introduce into our relationships the one element essential to health and success, all the other efforts we make are guaranteed to be fruitless.

We also see in the cases of Sean and Diane that everyone learns about Real Love in his or her own way. For some time, Sean didn't have much of an interest in Real Love. In most couples, one partner shows more enthusiasm in the beginning than the other. In fact, it's often the case that one partner shows no interest at all for some time. When one person is absolutely committed to being truthful and to learning to be loving, however, the other person will begin to feel the changes in the vast majority of cases, and that creates a strong motivation for the second partner to become interested in learning more about Real Love.

Implementing the principles of Real Love is also a lifelong process. Sean and Diane learn more about loving each other every day. They will continue to learn, and there is great joy in the learning.

The Power of Real Love

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