

Elusive Unconditional Love

By David Cluff

“I just want someone who will love and accept me for who I am” is generally an idealistic aspiration that many bring to relationship. The ideal reflects a deep desire to be loved unconditionally however the experience of relationship, despite sometimes promising beginnings, tends towards conditionality with eventual tension and conflict. As poet David Whyte said “You will always trespass upon your friend's sensibilities at one time or another, or your spouse's¹”. There is good reason why unconditional love remains elusive for many. Generally, a person maintains an image of self that seeks and often requires validation in relationships. That is, a person has a level of dependency on others in relational settings to reinforce their sense of self. Relationship is comfortable as long as the sense of self is reflected back. With two people seeking to have their view of selves validated, at some point there will be a collision of sensibilities. Consider the following encounter:

Jack: My boss was on my back today...nothing I did was good enough and I had to redo everything 10 times!

Jill: What was his problem (rhetorical)

Jack: I know right. You know that email I send out every week to our customers?

Jill: I think so

Jack: He decides he wants it changed but doesn't say what he wants changed other than it needed to sound more positive

Jill: What do you mean more positive?

Jack: Something about passive language. It's never been a problem before!

Jill: I covered that in a course last year. It's amazing how different active language can make the reader feel

Jack: Oh great (defensively), now you're on his side

Jill: No! (frustrated) I was just saying (interrupted)

Jack: (angrily) I have to put up with this all day at work and now at home too!

Jack's sense of self took a hit from his boss. Everything was fine at work until he was challenged. The offense Jack took highlights that:

- He brought layers of meaning into the boss's instruction/correction
- His sense of self is insecure

Jack's offense then led him to seek repair from his humiliation by gaining support from a trustworthy source. Jill may normally be that source, however, the subject matter connected her with experience and understanding. Jill's assertion reoffended Jack and left him defensive, as it wasn't the sympathetic support he was after. Perhaps, the difference for Jack in a more intimate relational setting is he takes more license to vent with his partner than he normally would with his boss at work. To extend the relational exchange:

¹ David Whyte., 10 Questions That Have No Right To Go Away

Jill: What is it with you? You never care about anything I say!

Jack: So it's all about you now!

Jill: It's never about me, it's always you, you, poor you!

Jack: I've had it

Jill has taken offense about not being heard. Her image of self, bares some relationship to the other hearing and/or valuing what she has to say. Both Jack and Jill have escalated to conflict in what started as a seemingly innocuous work related experience. Their exchange was impaired by defensive and reactive relational patterning. Why did they escalate so fast? In this case, the following came to be understood:

Jack had a demanding and aggressive father who was quick to identify fault in him when he was growing up. His childhood strategy was to offset the humiliations from his father's disapproval by seeking comfort from his mother and if she wasn't available (physically and/or emotionally) with his pet dog or retreat alone into his room and ruminate. Jack developed a core belief that he wasn't ever good enough. Despite the negative responses from his father, Jack never stopped his quest for his approval. Jack carried an "internal working model²" of his 'father attachment' as well as his younger "humiliated" self who was fearfully powerless to externally stand up to his father in childhood. In the workplace, Jack unconsciously placed his father attachment needs onto his boss (his authority figure). When his boss challenged an aspect of his work, Jack felt humiliated with the same intensity his younger self did over the years with his father's disapprovals. His strategies to prove that he was good enough in career had momentarily lapsed. He then subdued his reaction internally (mental jousting and bargaining in lieu of confronting his boss as it was with his father) and moved to seek support from his intimate partner Jill – in this case, the mother substitute.

Jill was the middle born child who always thought she was invisible. Her parents, in Jill's experience, showed great favour to her older brother and his achievements, while her younger sister was physically impaired which demanded additional and necessary care. Jill learnt that caring for her younger sister was one way to bring herself closer to connection with her parents while in her early teens, she adopted strategies to exceed her older brother academically. Despite her efforts, Jill seemed to subjectively miss the mark with her parent's attention and affection. Jack's reaction nullified and devalued her contribution to Jack's dilemma. Once again, the feelings associated with being invisible, including the despair of potentially losing connection, came to the surface and she consequently vented on Jack.

The escalation had very little to do with the presenting subject of the quality of Jack's customer emails. If the script between the couple was to be parodied and take on a more accurate context it may sound more like this:

Jack: My boss failed to be my idealised father figure and did what dad always did – told me that I wasn't good enough

Jill: I'm on your side, tell me more

² Holmes (1995). John Bowlby and Attachment Theory

Jack: Thank goodness you are. You are filling the role of mum and giving the nurture and support I need. I'll invite you into more of the story now that I feel supported...

Jill: The subject matter is of interest to me, I think your boss might have a point

Jack: I all of a sudden feel unsupported like I did when my father disapproved of me and my mother was absent. I need to recover you to a place of supporting me, so I'm escalating for fear of being disconnected from you as my mother attachment figure, rendering me feeling alone and rejected

Jill: Now you're representing all the hurt I felt as a child and taking on my parent's role in never listening to and valuing me. I am feeling disconnected and fear I will be insignificant to you as my idealised parent representation. More to the point, I'm scared I cannot recover this position and I have few options available, so I'm escalating to the next level

Jack: I am feeling the hurt I did as a child, like you're rejecting me so I'm going to try and shut you down and pull away because of the pain you are making me feel right now

Jill: I'll give this one last try and vent the anger I felt towards my siblings for taking my connection with mum and dad away from me – it's always about you

Jack: Too much discomfort to tolerate. I'm out to take control of the disconnection process and ruminate alone

Jack and Jill's family of origin relational patterns exaggerated through the conflict escalation and rupture process. Their attachment needs from childhood had moved into their work and intimate relationships. While Jack needed validation that he was capable, competent and enough, Jill sought to be seen, listened to and valued. Once discomfort arose, they moved to conditionality with each other. Neither could release their attachment need, or "hold onto themselves"³ and yet demanded in a way for the other do so for them. They needed, unconsciously, each other to represent the idealised family of origin caregiver. Both wanted to be loved unconditionally, as they longed for in childhood, however sought to obtain that through what Susan Johnson calls "destructive dependency"⁴.

To 'fast forward' their internal journeys and pathways of self-awareness and importantly self-compassion, the relational exchange takes on a very different experience:

Jack: I noticed I had a strong reaction to my boss's critique of my customer email today

Jill: What was your reaction?

Jack: I noticed myself get angry and caught in rumination like I did when dad got on my case as a kid

Jill: How did you deal with that?

Jack: It still hurts a bit, but I kept assuring myself that I was ok and to stay with the feeling

Jill: I can see that was hard for you.

Likewise if Jill still encountered the initial dialogue from Jack:

Jill: I covered that in a course last year. It's amazing how different active language can make the reader feel

³ David Schnarch (2003). *The Secrets of a Passionate Marriage*.

⁴ Susan M. Johnson (2019). *Attachment Theory in Practice*.

Jack: Oh great, now you're on his side

Jill: I noticed I just felt shut out, like I don't matter

Jack: It feels like your siding with the boss against me

Jill: That's how you feel however that isn't true for me. The feeling I have is older than you and not your responsibility....

Identifying, owning and if possible, naming feelings takes the responsibility away from those in relational settings from taking on other's needs. In the latter dialogues, the relational setting falls more into unconditionality because they demand nothing from the other to reinforce their sense of selves, rather they receive the triggered feelings as invitations to reflect, introspect and grow. The path to integration is always hidden in plain sight. The best clue to our fragmentation are the triggers that invoke our reactivity and defensiveness.