

# How to Expand Our Relationships

Personal Perspective: A segue to a better world.

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*"The wonderful thing about minds, about their dazzling variousness of them, is what different things can bloom in them from the same seed." — Maria Popova*

*"All living relationships are in process of change, of expansion, and must perpetually be building themselves new forms." — Anne Morrow Lindbergh*

Over the years, I've considered how relationships define, drive, and affirm our sense of self and how we are all interdependent. Many profound insights arise within these interactions. They offer valuable gems waiting to bloom and be heard collaboratively—our subconscious processes information at a million-to-one ratio compared to our conscious state. Just about everything we have ever seen or heard is accessible. Thus, many resources and seeds of wisdom are waiting to germinate and create mutuality and common ground.



All the Grouchos

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I've written about sustaining, forgiving, being creative, and celebrating the possibilities available within relationships. We gather fantastic insight when we improvise, learn, and evolve in their complexity. It starts with accepting that it takes two to know one. Yet, we still struggle to fully understand and use the gifts of our relationships to help expand our perspective and dissolve polarization, which creates profound differences in our larger society.

Improving relationships starts with our daily encounters. Suppose we agree to use win-win volleys, like being on a ping-pong table, in our interpersonal interactions. If you spike the ball, you and whoever you communicate with loses. However, with an agreed-upon communication volley, individual differences will blend mutually between you and another. This fosters a context to resolve previous differences collaboratively. As Soren Kierkegaard believed, *"The same relationship can acquire significance again in another way. All things, no doubt, will return, but in another way."*

### **Case Example**

As a family therapist and a problem-solving facilitator, whether in group settings or couples therapy, I have found that there is unending discord when there are unresolved differences. They manifest in many versions, subtle and vicious, with exponential escalation of attacks or one side being submissive and/or manipulated. A classic example is from a couple who have been together for twenty-five years and came to me to resolve their never-ending arguments. They expressed a commitment to improving their relationship. However, there was very little equity in their decision-making and division of labor. When they articulated their views on how they communicated, each agreed that they would argue and reprimand each other regarding their different views, especially parenting, expenses, and decision-making.

They had no problem enacting their choreography. It was similar to the arms race, with each increasing their attacks. I startled them when I turned the lights on and off. Being Italian, I usually have an item of food in my knapsack. I placed a banana on the floor between them. I then asked them to give me ten different contexts of their past encounters with a banana and then, using a win-win communication volley, discuss what each was hearing. To their surprise, they described their different approaches and deep-rooted family influences involving their interactions around a banana in narrative detail. I even learned new ways to bake and add bananas to sandwiches or dip them in various sauces.

There was much laughter, but most interesting was their repetitive descriptions of what was hidden and not previously heard and statements such as, "I never knew that about you." What followed, and I have witnessed this many times from other items I would use

in my office, was the change and empathy that emerged and the *"I now get why we have our problem."*

They began to discuss how they could alter their communication style as a collaborator with their children and other aspects of their lives. Change doesn't always happen quickly, but once it is understood how problems were maintained, this moment of ongoing mutual learning offered a segue to the beginning of many new avenues to create harmony.

Below are prompts I have expanded on, some new ones and others from previous articles I wrote designed to bring out what may have been hidden in your relationships. Discuss them with a significant other, a friend or in small groups. You can also create ones from your personal experiences:

### **1) Think of ways to collaborate with others.**

In most instances, we are weighted down with content. There are bills and schedules, tasks to complete, etc. What does putting things in context offer that helps you better understand and maintain optimal relationships? How can you step out of the box and create new situations? Consider Maria Popovo's quote about planting seeds or new contexts to explore and learn from each other. How would this be manifested from your point of view?

### **2) Imagine you are volleying with one another in a critical moment of communication.**

What would you need to do to keep the conversation going in a way that creates a win-win moment? In communication, we have options like paraphrasing, listening, pausing, and agreeing to disagree. Describe how you can maintain collaboration. In what ways can you pause and adjust an interchange with another? Can you think of strategies to keep sharing a topic without developing conflictual situations? How can you diffuse adversarial dialogue?

### **3) Think about a situation when you felt good while conversing.**

What were some of the causes that hindered collaboration in your relationships? How did you feel, see, touch, or smell, metaphorically or poetically, when there were good

vibrations in an interactive situation or experience? What were the outcomes of these situations, and could they be duplicates? How are you not able to sustain a win-win communication volley? In what ways did your family of origin influence your present communication style?

#### **4) How can you create an improvisational context that supports collaboration?**

What barriers would you encounter, and how can you avoid them? What is your sense of improvisation regarding collaboration? Can different perspectives find common ground when stepping out of the box, communication-wise, with others? How can you alter and differentiate from your past communication style and keep your integrity?

#### **5) How can you step above content to create a more holistic view of your surroundings?**

Using a thought or story about “what is continuing,” discuss the many contexts, such as family, school, work, media, economics, etc., and how they are interdependent. In what ways would a child, parent, or grandparent move through these contexts, and how would that influence the different contexts?

#### **6) What would it sound like if our relationships were a song?**

Imagine your story as a dance. What kind of dance would it be?

What would it look like if you could create magic in your relationships?

What would be an unspoken truth you wish to share within your relationships?

Describe a relational moment that felt worthwhile and profound while interacting with another. If your song was turned into a book, how would you describe your relational experiences, and what would be the title?

### **Conclusions and Takeaways**

The journey toward improving and expanding relationships offers a sustainable path to a more extensive definition of intimacy. Improving and reconciling relationships amidst our prevalent anger and polarization can produce a sense of harmony that can be contagious. Intimacy is a close emotional connection supported by relationships

intricately tied to effective communication. Understanding our interconnectedness involves recognizing that true intimacy flourishes in collaborative, interdependent communication that facilitates synchronizing our biological rhythms in and out of awareness.

*"Isn't it often in our most intimate relations that we come to realize that our identity, all identity, is combinatorial?" — Forrest Gander*