

Be Open to Learning

By Marlene and Bob Neufeld

Willingness to learn from each moment – as opposed to defending ourselves by stonewalling, explaining, justifying, withdrawing, blaming – is much more important than factors like IQ, family background, race or degrees. The great advantage of openness-to-learning is that you're in charge of it at all times: it's always within your control to shift out of defensiveness into genuine curiosity. (Drs. Gay & Kathlyn Hendricks, www.hendricks.com, 2003)

Our Experience

We are reminded daily of the importance of being open to learning. An opportunity to learn recently presented itself while we were cooking together. Bob stepped out to buy some ingredients while Marlene continued cooking. When Bob returned from the grocery store, Marlene questioned something he had purchased. Bob responded with defensiveness. He interpreted what she was saying as an attack. Initially he wanted to make his point. He tried to explain how Marlene was misperceiving the situation. Inwardly, he was justifying why he bought the product. He was getting edgy and snappy. He wanted to argue with her and make her wrong.

Then he caught himself and chose to get open to learning. He got curious and asked himself, *What's this really about?* He started thinking out loud and making new associations about the issue. By stopping and being curious and wondering, he noticed two conflicting voices in his head. One was saying: *I'm wrong. I bought the wrong product. I'm bad. I've messed up. I should have stayed home and helped with the cooking: Marlene's done most of it now.* The other voice was arguing with that one, saying: *No, I'm not wrong. Marlene's wrong. I bought this product especially because she likes it: I bought it for her. She is so ungrateful.* He began to play with these and they began to lose their grip on him. Soon neither of them seemed as serious as before.

Bob was able to take healthy responsibility for his own inner dialogue, play with it, and create a new result. He told Marlene, *One of the reasons I am having such a hard time is that I have this huge inner conflict going on about my own worth.* As soon as he acknowledged this, the whole issue got so light that he was laughing.

For most people the second voice is the one that takes precedence. They rarely realize that they have taken what their partner said or did and made themselves wrong. Then they have a defensive reaction to their own inner dialogue and argue with their partner. They are really arguing against their own inner critic.

The Experience of Others

Recently, our clients, whom we'll call Joyce and Brad, had a big breakthrough when Brad realized that his inner voice was telling him that he was bad whenever Joyce had an emotional reaction. He would get very defensive and attack, raise his voice in righteous

indignation, or create an uproar and leave the room. Once he realized that her emotional reaction didn't necessarily mean he was bad or wrong, he could listen with curiosity and even appreciation.

We frequently ask our clients if they want to be *right* or *happy*. When we are open to learning we can choose happiness over someone being right and someone else being wrong, because it isn't about that. Being open to learning is about our willingness to tolerate "discomfort for growth" (a concept that David Schnarch talks about in *The Secrets of a Passionate Marriage*).

Couples are often caught in trying to compromise, keep the peace, stop their partner from being upset, avoiding their own inner emotional turmoil, unwilling to see their own limitations. Most people say *Love me, live within my limitations [...] want what I want, don't want what I don't want, never ask me to stretch* (Schnarch). Instead, we encourage people to stretch themselves, go towards their discomfort, feel their anxiety and make new choices to learn something about themselves and their relationship.

Marlene & Bob Neufeld practice body-centered Coaching and Psychotherapy. They are a couple who help couples learn life-changing skills and create closer, more loving relationships with one another. To learn more, see www.marleneandbob.com or call 613-594-9248 to arrange a complimentary 1-hour introductory session.