

Jeff Garson
Radical Decency Reflection #10
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Romantic Love: Making What's Good Better

The last Reflection described how Radical Decency's integrated approach pushes us to explore decency in relationships with people with whom we are less intimate, including strangers and adversaries. In this Reflection I discuss decency at the other end of the spectrum – in our intimate romantic partnerships.

A powerful theme in my work with couples is their propensity to be triggered into fight/flight/freeze states. Because our intimate partners are so important to us, they are also a prime source of danger. So when we feel a withdrawal of our partner's affection or support, real or imagined, we are easily triggered.

As humans, we are capable of all three states – fight, flight, and freeze. But in the typical case, each partner defaults to a characteristic reactive strategy. Some are instinctual fighters. They yell, or resort to sarcasm and dismissive judgment. Others go silent, either explicitly or under the guise of "everything is fine." The common denominator is annihilation. There is only one valid position – mine. The goal is to either bludgeon your partner's position into oblivion (fight), or to render him, and it, irrelevant through complete disconnection (freeze or flight).

This reaction is not, by itself, disturbing. We are biologically wired to go into these states when we sense danger. But its frequency is exacerbated by the culture's predominant values. We celebrate winning and its tools – unwavering confidence in our opinions; single minded pursuit of our goals; a fierce and tireless competitive spirit. Inevitably, these qualities infect our intimate relationships as well.

Another unfortunate effect of these mainstream priorities is that the teaching of intimacy skills is marginalized. At school, learning communication tools and information in discrete areas (history, mathematics, etc.) is mandatory. Also widely available is detailed instruction in competitive sports. But there are no courses or extracurricular programs about how to be a more effective intimate partner – even though most of us organize our lives around such a relationship.

In seeking to be a more effective partner, it is important to know that fight/flight/freeze reactions are fast, powerful, and highly infectious – mild reactive behavior in one partner triggering counter-reactivity in the other, triggering further reactivity in the first partner, and so on. Just like that, an ugly fight ensues, more times than not over something "stupid."

Knowing how these reactive states work, we can make different and better choices. Instead of talking about what triggered the fight – whether the keys should be hung on the hook; whether your partner is back seat driving – we can focus on why each partner is

triggered and how to minimize the episode's duration and effect. In Reflection 3, *Why Can't You Do the Dishes*, I discuss how such a conversation might look.

Notice, however, that the skills discussed in that Reflection only come into play when things have already broken down. Equally important – and less discussed – is the work that can be done when things are going smoothly. Effective work in the good times means fewer ruptures in the relationship and, therefore, less need for repair work. It also improves the day by day loving, creating a more nourishing relationship. Finally, in doing this work with our intimate partner, we are cultivating skills that are applicable in all of our intimate relationships.

Set forth below is just one example of how this work can be done. Note that it assumes a relationship where trust is intact; that is, where each partner has an abiding belief that the other is deeply invested not only in her own well being, but in his as well.

Steady attention to these guidelines will make us more effective lovers and support us in being a more positive, generative force in all our intimate relationships:

1. Ask for what you want;
2. Model what you hope to receive;
3. Be grateful for what you are offered in return.

Step one is to ask for what we want. In doing so, we are providing our partner with a vivid roadmap for loving us; failing to do it, we deprive them of that guidance. And since effectively loving our partner is one of life's greatest joys, providing this roadmap is one of our core responsibilities as a committed lover.

For people on the flight or freeze side of the reactivity equation, this can be a difficult stretch. They usually think that putting their needs second is a virtue and asking for what they want is selfish. Neither is true.

Note that asking and demanding are very different things. If the goal is to be the best possible lover, demands never work. With trust in place, however, we already know that our partners are eager to love us; to respond positively to our requests subject only to their core needs. So demands are not only unhelpful, they are also unnecessary.

This “always ask, never demand” guideline is very challenging for fighters (like me). When we are reactive, we demand agreement. And even when they try to rein in this tendency, the music of our “ask” can be so forceful that, to partner who is a freezer or a flighter, it can feel like a demand. Often, a fighter will need to reassure his partner that “no” is a perfectly acceptable response.

The second prong of the guidelines may seem complicated, but it isn't. What we want most of all from our intimate partner is to be seen for who we are and, being seen, to be fully embraced. So, modeling what we hope to receive means that and nothing more.

However, we always need to remember the powerful physiology of fight/flight/freeze. So, no matter how carefully phrased, our “ask” will still at times trigger our partner’s wound. Then, our loving request will likely be ignored, diminished, or attacked. Needless to say, if the roles were reversed (and they will be!), we would want our reactive response to an “ask” to be accepted with understanding and equanimity.

So our job is to avoid the easy trap of telling our partner she shouldn’t be reactive to our request – since, after all, we worked so hard to be express it in a conscious and loving way. Equally, we need to avoid pointing out how she didn’t do what she was supposed to do under the guidelines. Instead, trusting our partner’s love – and remembering how hard the work is – we need to maintain a loving presence, without editorial comment. In other words, prong 2: Model what we hope to receive.

This third prong of the guidelines requires us to remember how much we are loved and how motivated this person is to love us. If his response falls short of our fantasy we need to see that as an indication of difference, and not indifference.

Cultivating gratefulness for what we receive in return, we open ourselves up to the possibility that our partner’s response is better even better than our fantasy. Why? Because, coming out of his unique and different sensibility, it may well offer a kind of comfort and love that – before we became intimate with this person – was literally beyond our capacity to imagine.

Growing up we instinctually let certain behaviors and sensibilities atrophy in order to fit in and survive in our families of origin. Romantic love is nature’s way of bringing us together with someone who is more gifted in these neglected areas; someone who, by their very nature, offers a roadmap for our healing and growth. So left brained thinkers find more intuitive, sensing partners and vice versa.

With this in mind, being alive to the possibility that we do not understand the gifts being offered by our partner seems especially important. Gratefulness for what we receive is precisely the habit of mind that allows us to dwell in this possibility and, over time, to more fully understand his or her special gifts.

But even in the absence of this dynamic, we still need to remember that our partners’ are a package deal; that their limitations are also an expression of who they are. Loving them means not just appreciating the many things they can do, but also accepting with equanimity the ways in which they fall short.

As this example illustrates, inattentiveness to decency – present in our relationships with strangers – extends to our intimate relationships as well. Hopefully, the approaches discussed in this Reflection and the last one also illustrates how, attending to decency in every interaction, we are immeasurably nourished.