

Power Struggles in Couples



by Mariana Radu

HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

Once upon a time a prince meets a princess, they marry and they live happily ever after...

This is not quite what we experience every day in our couple relationships. What we experience are disappointments, disenchantments, perceived or real betrayals, lack of loyalty, dishonesty and bitter struggles for control. What might be a surprise at first sight is that power struggles are very common. We often do not see when power struggle has emerged. However one can safely affirm that there are no relationships where no power struggles take place. Once a power struggle has emerged, it can only end with win-win situation or a loose-loose situation. If one one wins, both will ultimately loose because the initial loser will feel resentment, bitterness and will be up for the next round of the power struggle ultimately sabotaging the relationship.

Lets take the example of Tom and Jane, a couple in their first year of relationship. They come to the therapist because of a terrible fight they are not able to end and that threatens their relationship. Tom had told Jane that he is not longer emotionally involved with his ex-girlfriend. Jane experienced in her previous couple relationship betrayal. Her ex-boyfriend was involved throughout the relationship with another woman and Jane eventually found out. She has a history of been lied to and betrayed by her former partners. Honesty and sincerity are very important to her and she might see a trace of betrayal or dishonesty in every gesture of the current partner, regardless of the circumstances. She reacts jealously and goes on and on for hours and days about a particular gesture or conversation with the ex-girlfriend, demanding total honesty.

"I see that your ex is still important to you, therefore you are still emotionally involved and not honest to me" is her main theme. What she "sees" is what she is programmed to see through the lenses of her life experience. Since her life experience has taught her that life can bring very painful experiences of betrayal, she is likely to look through the lenses of the past and see traces

of betrayal everywhere.

Tom defends himself and says "This is not true. I have told you, I am not emotionally involved with my ex and you are misinterpreting my gestures/ words."

Where to go from here? When we look at it trying to understand the power struggle, we see how the two of them try to position themselves.

SHE WINS, HE LOOSES

Let us take Jane's position. The basic assumption, the underlying, implicit message in her words is: "I am honest, sincere and open and I have proof that you are dishonest because you have lied to me as to your feelings towards your ex-girlfriend. **I am morally superior**" A perfect maneuver to take over the power in the couple. If Tom agrees with this interpretation, he takes the role of the liar and the cheater, and implicitly accepts that he is morally inferior. He is the faulty one and she is the one who's right. He loses and she wins.

HE WINS, SHE LOOSES

If we look at Tom's position, we see how he counteracts: "No, it's not true. You are imagining things and are totally irrational. You are crazy. I've told you there is nothing between my ex and me. Why are you accusing me of things I have not done/said"

The translation of this in terms of a power struggle would be "I'm rational and logical and you are irrational and crazy. **I am intellectually superior**". If Jane accepts this interpretation, she is forced in the role of the crazy irrational woman and every other demand or request she'll make in the future will be demolished with this argument. He wins, she loses.

Two very possible scenarios are played every day by many couples. Replace the ex girlfriend with money or sex or recognition or time and we will have covered the most frequent motives for a conflict in couples.

What happens if one of them wins? The loser will feel inferior, hurt and resentful and will start to sabotage the relationship. Of course this dynamic is unconscious and none of them will be able to explain the toxic atmosphere of the relationship. Suddenly it's not fun anymore.

What's the way out of this dilemma? How to get out of a power struggle without losing or winning?

CHECKMATE OR MAYBE NOT?

The solution is simple, however not easy to implement. "Cooperate and be supportive". This attitude carries the implicit addendum "Avoid

being a competitor of your partner". If the two partners are aware of what they are trying to achieve, namely power over the other one by making the partner feel inferior, they might reconsider their positions and modify their goals. They might want to cooperate and to articulate their basic needs instead of making the other feel inferior.

What means to cooperate and to be supportive? It might be that Tom and Jane choose to regularly expressing positive thoughts and feelings about the other, about his/her social skills, intellectual curiosity, warmth, loyalty, courage or willingness to self-disclosure. There is no point being stingy with compliments. It can never be too much. It might mean that Tom and Jane choose to take the other's concerns and problems seriously, regardless of how insignificant and silly (if not outright stupid or outrageous) they might find them. It might also mean that they choose to make the extra effort to meet the other one in his needs, rather than put him/her down for having those needs.

Jane might say something along these lines: "I have been very hurt in the past. It is my wound and I acknowledge that it has nothing to do with you. I hope, however, that you'll want to help me get over it and regain trust in relationships. Honesty and fidelity are enormously important to me. I might see ghosts of ex partners in every corner and I need you to reassure me of your love and commitment every step of the way. You can do that by letting me know where you are every day, by calling me every day and by telling me every day that you love me and that I am important to you."

Tom might say something like: "I have been emotionally involved with my ex but that is a thing of the past. I might not have lots of practice in being open and expressing freely my feeling, however I do my best. I am not used with emotional outbursts, but I am deeply moved that I mean so much to you. I might not always succeed in reassuring you, however I'll try every day. I am very rational and sometimes afraid of what it seems to me irrational in your behavior. However this is my limitation and my fear of emotions and has nothing to do with you. "

I would like here to cite one of Nietzsche's aphorisms "Some cannot loosen their own chains yet can nonetheless redeem their friends". None of us might be able to heal his own wounds and free himself of the ghosts of the past. Nonetheless one might heal the wounds of the ones he loves, and that is the great promise of love.

Understanding that basic fact about human nature might lead to ceasefire and, why not, to cooperation and mutual support in the couple. Acceptance of other as he/she is, without judgment, **might be the first step on a long journey together. And maybe, just maybe "happily ever after" happens not only in fairytales.**

Bibliography

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