

When Holes Collide - Why Relationships Fail and How They Can Be Made More Whole

Part IV

William Penzer, Ph.D.

(954)475-1371 x301

www.williampenzerphd.com

www.stopglop.com

With marriages crashing, engagements abruptly cancelled and couples living together struggling, one can't help but wonder what is wrong. Unfulfilling, conflict-laden, acrimonious relationships seem more the norm than the exception. Lackluster, distanced and numbing interactions seem to have replaced exciting, close and passionate connections from earlier years. These disconnects and their multiple corollaries have become generic. They exist across all racial groups, types of coupling, geography, religious and socioeconomic groups. Despite the good intentions, sincere commitments and "love boat" feelings, too many relationships capsize, drowning their participants in turbulent emotional seas.

When we ask why and ponder the problem, there are many, perhaps too many, answers. Consider the following:

- Acceptability! Divorce was unthinkable in the 50's, unacceptable in the 60's, and more and more normative in the 70's and beyond. Cultural changes play a large role in defining our beliefs, values, norms and expectations.
- Multiple cultural shifts. Let's start with civil rights, then womens' rights and go right on through to a far more open society whose social IQ and conscience has been raised to levels that might, at times, make us wish for the good ole "Sounds of Silence" days. Though equality has yet to be reached, the "rights" movements began a shift in perspective that has fed into divorce rates.
- Knowledge, information, awareness and all kinds of therapy opportunities commingle with a stronger than ever sense of entitlement to life, liberty and the pursuit of

happiness. No matter what the costs, we have become a “me” focused society. We moved from a “made your bed so lay in it” to a change the sheets and move on mentality. Some will even sleep on no sheets, if need be. This correlates with a disposable mind set that enables us to throw away that which is broken, outdated and otherwise not enhancing. It is all part of a techno revolution where you’re only as good as your most recent platform.

- Somewhere in all of these shifts must be added a combo factor that includes increased mobility, financial freedom for many and the resulting breakdown of family ties. When everyone lived in the same neighborhood there was a stronger familial connection and support net. With family spread all over, thanks to the magic of air travel and a general lack of rootedness, it is easier to divide than conquer the problems. Take away the financial factors and the divorce rate might easily jump to 75%+.
- Some problems are just not conquerable for reasons that relate directly to the length and depth of the holes, individually and/or collectively. Good as I may be as a shrink, I am not God. Everyone isn’t fixable, much as we who are dedicated to the cause hate to admit that. Oftentimes, when my efforts ultimately end in divorce, it is because he/she just can’t take anymore. “Enough is enough!” is the battle cry or just plain cry that leads to the lawyers instead of the therapist.
- Glopful potentials in all zones have gone wildly out of control. This provides the basis for divorcing the “drinker”, “drug addict”, “cheater”, “gambler”, “abuser”, etc. Who can argue with such hurtful habits? Who can encourage a “stay the course” philosophy, when the course is so destructive and the “cure” so elusive?

As if these weren’t serious enough, there is yet another, seemingly immutable force with which we must reckon. It is the ultimate result when two wounded warriors meet, date and fall in LOVE. This, I’m afraid, is often

the beginning of the end.

When Miss A meets Mr. Z

It is a well known belief that opposites attract. In and of itself this is not automatically a disaster. There is potential strength in diversity. There is the opportunity to blend differences in ways that add balance. Her silliness can offset his seriousness. His libido can push past her inhibitions. Her willingness to take calculated risks can push him past his more conservative leanings. Her interest in photography and his in square dancing can make for a blend of intro-extroversion which spices things up. Differences offer the possibility of moving from a monochromatic to a more colorful life.

For a minority of couples all of the above actually happens. They live and love in a rainbow of diversity, drawing on a full spectrum provided by each partner's unique and opposite contribution. Sadly, for the majority of couples, their partner's differences range from a "pain in the butt" to a "freakin' disaster." "I'm not going square-dancing"...or the equivalent is heard from house to house. So he goes here and she goes there and never the twain shall meet. Instead of a rainbow, we just have a rainstorm of loneliness, resentment and unfulfillment.

Even when s/he stretches and goes wherever with the other to do whatever s/he favors, it's a mess. The uninterested party is bored, at best pretending, at worst making it obvious that s/he is not having any fun at all. They probably fight about it on the way home and never go square-dancing or whatever again. The irony of all this is that the very forces that made the other person interesting, appealing and better than the other guys or gals, turns out to be one of the forces that contributes to the relationship tanking.

A recent conversation with an attorney who specializes in divorce caused me to think about the "opposites attract" belief. She simply said, "Elephants don't marry giraffes." At first I didn't know what she meant. I had never heard that expression before. So I pondered it for a while and asked others for their ideas as well.

I have concluded that people are often attracted to people who have different ways of dealing with the very same issues. A simplistic way of saying that is they each have similar or analogous experiences that dug their holes, but very different coping mechanisms and ways of compensating. Another way of saying this in more clinical terms is that many partners share

similar pathologies, but different protective mechanisms of defense. In keeping with the elephant marrying elephant model, people partner with people with similar vulnerabilities, but very different coping styles. Consider the following examples:

He and she both have huge holes of insecurity and feelings of anxiety stemming from growing up in dysfunctional, distorted and demeaning families. His compensation is intellectual and accomplishment and hers is material and image building. Or his is to deny anxiety in counter phobic ways, while hers is to suffer from panic disorder. Or, his is to earn a lot of money and hers is to over focus on their children. Or, he is obsessive about every detail, while she behaves in ways that make messes of one kind or another. Or s/he is quick to guilt and s/he is quick to anger.

These are simple contrasts to illustrate the point. In reality, it requires a multivariable analysis that often defies clear and concise description. Certainly, I am not saying every couple is mismatched in this way. I am saying that for those who ultimately divorce, the very forces that brought them together ultimately pave the way to their undoing. It is the next issue we will consider that brings it about. Once time has had a chance to dilute love potion #9, the blinders come off as the monster in the closet from your youth winds up in your adult bed.

When Miss A and Mr. Z shift

People who marry buy into an image that the other person projects. Their implicit belief is that all will remain stable and similar forever. When you think about it, it is a pretty silly, but common and necessary belief. Without it, no partnership could ever be cemented. Often something changes after the ceremony. Sometimes it is an immediate change and other times the shift is as gradual as a small leak in a swimming pool that empties it over months or more. In some situations, no change occurs for quite a while and then almost overnight the pool level drops many inches. Examples abound. Here are ten:

- S/he no longer wants to work anymore.
- S/he has lost his/her previously high libido.
- S/he decides wine, pot, pain pills, etc. are a necessary part of everyday life.

- S/he changes religion or decides to go from atheist to orthodox.
- S/he goes from frugal to frivolous.
- S/he wants to swing, go to sex clubs, indulge in internet sex, etc.
- S/he goes from calm, cool and collected to a raging bull.
- S/he no longer wants to socialize or go places anymore.
- S/he is an abusive or uninvolved parent which wasn't observable or predictable during courtship.
- S/he wants to do something positive, but seemingly inappropriate or impractical (i.e. Go to med school, live in an ashram, enlist in the military, etc.).

As you enter into a relationship and decide to make a lifetime commitment, you assume a stable and predictable future. You believe what you see is what we will get. You become angry, frustrated, disillusioned and ultimately divorced when you thought you were buying a dark blue couch, which morphed into a pink one, with unattractive blue polka dots. Obviously, replacing a couch is far easier than replacing a mate. The problem is even bigger when the comfortable couch becomes a bed of nails.

Clearly, all people in love are naïve in their perceptions and assumptions. Science has even identified some love chemistry that contributes to this one dimensional perspective. Perhaps this is all necessary for coupling to occur. Without it we might all walk off in a huff shouting, "I don't," instead of "I do, ". Paradoxically, what was once cute and endearing is now unattractive and annoying at best and abusive at worst. What once made him/her so desirable has now transformed into an ugly, if not despicable, trait. Most unfortunately, the path from love to hate can be a relatively short one. The other side of the divorce coin is that too many stay stuck on this path for too long. It can be a hell if you do, hell if you don't state of being.

Strangely enough, I write all this in my backyard on a sunny Sunday morning in April, listening to a couple across the canal screaming and shouting at each other. It is all played out in a foreign language, so I cannot report on the details. I can, however, tell you they have lived there together for more than ten years and have filled many a morning with the sounds of

war. I do not know them or the details, but they are not unlike many people who wander back and forth between the gardens of love and the desert of hate, never quite finding a sustained peace. Like the early morning calm of a Baghdad street unpredictably exploding into destruction, so many relationships live in that dangerous, unpredictable and hurtful red zone.

At the end of the day, 50% of marriages end in divorce, another 20-30% deserve to but, for practical issues, family values or codependency, they tough it out and stay together. On a good day, perhaps 20-30% offer some degree of enhancing rewards and loving partnership, 5% are fortunate in having fabulous relationships. (These numbers are made up, but I believe them to be reasonably accurate).

If you are in the latter two groups and aren't newlyweds, feel proud. If you are in the middle group either get to work or get it over with or both, in that order. My new t-shirt slogan for couples in these groups is, "Different or Done." If you are in the already divorced category, watch out and read on. It can happen again. It often does.

"Why is it like this?" we might ask. Because Miss A and Mr. Z all have holes in their self. Holes combine and often collide for the same confusing, but no less compelling reasons. (Please read parts I, II and III of this series on williampenzerphd.com., for a more complete understanding of the hole in your self idea.) Let me note in passing that, though I speak to married couples, all I have said and will say applies equally to gay relationships and, even in many instances, to business partnerships and close friendships. All couplings are difficult due to the holes in our self. All that last healthfully are prideworthy, given the odds against that happening. The paradox is that for many, the people to whom they are drawn can feel so right, but can ultimately be so wrong.

The Role of Our Holes

Our holes in our self guide our choices for better and for worse. They work in concert with our healthier inner parts. Together they determine our educational, career, geographic and social choices. The holes may very well be silent influences of which we are unaware, but they are no less influential. In fact, I could argue that because they are invisible, they are more powerful than we know.

I am fully convinced that my holes and my healthy parts guided me to overachieve and obtain a Ph.D., become a psychologist, reject and then accept the realm of clinical work, choose a life partner, move to Florida, raise a family, work hard and sustain my marriage. My holes have been solely responsible for my panic and anxiety period, yo-yoing weight, foolish choices and times I behaved less than lovingly to someone I cared very much about. Holes feed selfishness, shortsightedness, unassertiveness, fear and many other unhelpful characteristics. Our holes in our self begin in childhood, continue being dug throughout our lives, create our wounded warrior within and bring out a childlike pattern in adulthood that oozes with narcissism, self-interest and poor choices.

Predictably, our child/teen parts rant and rage, fill themselves with hurtful substances, behave selfishly and uncaringly, get wounded easily, overreact hysterically, worry constantly, etc. Our little boy and our little girl lose perspective and behave very differently from our best of intentions and from the way our healthy adult operates. The same things that sabotage us as individuals do so in our relationships. I venture to say that just about all fights couples have resemble a sandbox squabble between two five year olds fighting over a shovel; ok, maybe ten year olds fighting for the shotgun seat in the family car; no, perhaps fifteen year olds bickering over what program to watch or whose video game it is. Maybe all of the above. No maybe about it!

As individuals, our goal is to lose weight, exercise more, stop our glop of choice, be more balanced, take time to enjoy, etc. What blocks us from these seemingly simple ideals? Our holes and the impulse driven, self-defeating, live for the moment child/teen within. That force has most people stymied and blocked from their goals. While the ideal seems easy enough to achieve, the path toward it is so very hard to walk. It is truly the road less traveled because our kid parts undermine our best of adult based intentions.

The same is true in relationships. Indeed, it is a tougher, bumpier path because we are dealing with two sets of holes and two child/teen parts. We have two wounded warriors to contend with who fit together in the best and worst of ways. This is directly tied to the “same holes-different cover ups and compensations” idea. Over the years I have quipped that at any given time if I could rearrange the couples I was helping and put Mr. A with Mrs. A, Mrs. Z with Mr. Z , happiness and harmony would prevail.

For example, Mr. A-Z wants more intimacy, but Mrs. A- Z tends to be cold and distant. Mrs. Z-A wants more intimacy, but Mr. Z-A tends to be cold and distant. By switching partners we've got that problem solved. But, before we start the swapping process, let's realize that Mr. A-Z and Mrs. Z-A have other zones where their holes collide. This is why remarriages can easily go astray as well.

It is sad to realize that, though we thought we chose a person who would best fill our hole, we unwittingly picked a partner who actually digs our hole deeper and vice-versa. That we are unconsciously drawn to that type of person is very hard to understand. It flies in the face of our inherent belief that we make healthy adult choices in our best interest, especially when picking a life partner. Yet, it stands to reason that the same "holey" alliances that block our pursuit of healthy personal goals interfere with our healthy choice of a mate.

A Short Discourse on Why We Pick a Partner Who Ultimately Hits Us Where it Hurts

Our holes create wounds that make us need the opposite of what created the hole. The following is a list of feelings created by a variety of situations that cut holes into our otherwise healthy self:

- Feeling inadequate compared to others based upon distorted inner and outer standards and thereby feeling unlovable, unacceptable, inferior and unworthy of love
- Anticipating loss or abandonment based upon previous experiences
- Not being able to trust in self or others
- Feeling frustrated, shy, self-conscious
- Feeling the ever present need to impress others with personal qualities, success, a certain image, etc.
- Feelings of anger, anguish and sensitivity
- Needing to feel a sense of control over one's environment and significant others

The image we project in our life experiences covers over these wounds. We hide our holes filled with these sensitive feelings from view. No one says on a date, writes on a college application or discusses in a job

interview that they feel inadequate and inferior, don't trust anyone, etc. For one, they would fail in their efforts. More importantly, many of those hole based feelings are covered over by the defense mechanisms Freud identified (i.e., denial, rationalization, projection, etc.) that allows people to go beyond their holes and associated wounds and function. Remember, I didn't know I was a wounded warrior until my anxiety and panic broke loose. I was confident, positive and calm until I was confronted with my feelings of inadequacy, at which point my temporary supports collapsed and my hole oozed emotional blood like a deep puncture wound. I believe most people are similarly armored to avoid confronting those feelings and their demoralizing potentials until things go array. Let's return to the issue of picking and living with a life partner.

So Miss A makes Mr. Z feel great and vice-versa. Their love is a warm and powerful healing salve and fills their holes so well. But there is something about Miss A's underlying nature that is vaguely reminiscent of Mr. Z's family - especially the part that wounded him and vice-versa. This time, however, the person with analogous potentials is warm, attentive, affirming and engaged. This time it all feels good, safe and healing. Miss A is soothing Mr. Z's hurts and vice-versa. S/he is finally feeling the priority and specialness he/she never felt before. If we could freeze frame this scene for life, the divorce rate would drop to zero.

What happens is that, over time, the image Mr. Z and Miss A project in courtship wears down as they become Mr. and Mrs. A-Z. They may still project that image to the world, which is why others think they are "the perfect couple," but changes have occurred. In a "We always hurt the one we love" way, the force that reminded Mr. Z of his family moves from soothing to irritating to hole digging. Now the subtleties that Miss A and Mr. Z sensed reminiscent of her/his family are unleashed and s/he are similarly hurt-again.

Over time, warm, loving images fade, multiple agitators develop, triggers trip land mined territories and the holes are activated anew. Mrs. A-Z's little girl and Mr. A-Z's little boy are dancing to a destructive and divorce bound rhythm. Mr. and Mrs. A-Z take turns being parent and child, while their healthier and stronger adults lose their influence. As the "kids" battle on, glopful habits intensify, resentments multiply and both feel they have been let down, just like they felt when they were younger. The generic feeling is "Yet another person who was supposed to love me makes me feel inferior, abused, abandoned and otherwise unworthy of their love." What

starts as a salve becomes the salt that simultaneously irritates pre-existing wounds, while adding new ones to the mix.

In The Beginning

“I Love You” is arguably one of the most powerfully positive phrases in any language. It sounds even better in French and Italian, but it works just fine in Polish, Russian or English. In any language, it helps heal holes. With those words come soft and soothing actions. Hugs and kisses and much more add to the salve. So does the attention and priority that goes along with all that affection. As a result you feel like the prince and princess you have always wanted to be. Love, in its early stages, wears a “frogs and toads no more” t-shirt. In this mode you finally feel loved and lovable - especially by a person who, on some level, shares subtle similarities to your family. It all just feels so damn good - at first.

In the Middle or Before

We all know that love changes over time. Those changes parallel the natural changes we experience as people. These are not the changes that are important to our understanding of why people form holely alliances that do not stand the test of time.

The changes that we have to focus on are those shifts, gradual or otherwise, that cause people’s masks to lower and then completely come off. We are not all exactly the kind, caring and compassionate people we present ourselves as being during the courtship phase of our relationships. Furthermore, and this is critical, we tend to choose partners who annoy, irritate and otherwise upset us the most. This hard to understand, seemingly paradoxical “coincidence” is no coincidence. It is just a peculiar fact of life and loving. It is what helps bring relationships down. As if by a hidden force, we are drawn to those who appear to have the potential to undo our early wounds. There, right there, lies the basis for the undoing of the relationship.

When the proverbial honeymoon is over, Mrs. A-Z’s spending habits, critical comments, belief systems, nightly rituals, communications or non-communications, accusations, temper flare-ups, lack of protectiveness etc., etc., etc. tick Mr. A-Z off and vice-versa. The vice-versa is very important. His responses to her responses tick Mrs. A-Z off as well. Now we have two angry, frustrated, unfulfilled, and unhappy people stuck in a perpetual emotion machine.

Next comes withdrawal, sulking, punishments, retaliation, avoidance, anger, name-calling and various games of dodge ball. At some point there is reconciliation and a temporary and shaky peace that resembles the ongoing and ever-present situation between Israel and Palestine. In both instances, wide gaps of behavioral and attitudinal differences prevent a proverbial meeting of their minds. Small things irritate the system causing distancing and a variety of disconnects. In this mode your holes are deepened and it starts to feel a lot like old times. The very pains you experienced with your family who were supposed to love you are recreated with the new person who is supposed to love you. Down you go as terrorist-like bombs keep exploding and the relationship keeps imploding.

In this personalized war zone, words and names start flying like pelicans. Like them, these exchanges swoop from on high, dive head first into the holes in your head, and bite you hard where it hurts the most. All the love, affection, attention and priority have turned into yet another bait and switch moment in your life. When that love finally dies, warm feelings toward your partner are replaced by numbness. You drown from the very holes that were once so filled by this very same person. This irony has been the subject of books and plays since Shakespeare. In that regard, look what happened to Adam and Eve. He “yesdeared” her once too often and the rest is history - from the Garden of Eden to Paradise Lost.

In The End

Even in the friendliest divorce, the original feelings of love have disappeared. You may love him or her in a “don’t want anything to happen to him/her” way or you may wish the bitch/bastard leprosy, but that which once soothed and healed now makes your skin crawl physically and emotionally. Indeed, all the accumulated feelings over the time line of your life congeal, so s/he receives a combo platter of negative feelings, some of which s/he deserves and some of which are unrelated except by association to each party’s history.

Once again, the feelings are symmetrical. Both parties needed different partners and both were blind-sided by the distortion of love-based perceptions. They thought they were on a Street Car Named Desire and suddenly found themselves on a Street Car Named Denial. Most people will acknowledge that signs and signals of what was to come were there early on. They were minimalist and easy to ignore. Love juice helps to do that and

many people realize they have made a mistake, after it is too late. The question remains what, if anything, those who feel that way can do to avoid divorce? The rest of this article will look at that very issue.

Partner Heal Thyself!

In the simplest of terms we can't reasonably or realistically expect another person to fill our hole. Love is the icing another person might put on after we have baked a cake. It remains our responsibility to bake a reasonably formed, whole round cake so the icing will stick. If our cake is half-baked, malformed or otherwise riddled with holes, no amount of delicious frosting will stay in place for very long.

If single people worked on themselves and their holes first, I believe healthier partner choices would be made. Realistically, that is not likely to happen unless other symptoms or problems are happening or there has been a major relationship trauma already. The likelihood is that partners will come for counseling on the edge of divorce, after glop has made a mess or they are living amidst major upheaval and unhappiness. Bottom line is that their individual holes are colliding in a vicious cycle of multiple hurts and pains. "He did, she said, I thought, we don't, I'll take the blame for..." conversations lead quickly to that conclusion, except in a few cases where one person's glopfulness has been the source of the other person's enablement. Even then, enabling comes typically from the hole in the person doing that. Almost always, it is holes colliding in some hurtful fashion that bring couples to the brink of disaster and divorce. It takes two to Tango and two to Tangle!

At the center of this issue lies the frequently asked question, "Can people heal, change and modify their behavior enough to make a serious difference?" Conversely, are people all doomed and damned to live lives according to the painful programming of their holes? In classic psychobabble, I am tempted to just say "YES!", for I have seen both sides of this issue. Many people never grow or change and stay stuck in their ways. Others pursue personal development and growth with dedication and devotion, conquer their glops of choice, overcome their anxiety, depression, temper or whatever and change the course of their individual and partnership lives. In which category you fall is for you to know and decide. Only the latter group is likely to go from hole to more whole as individuals and as couples.

The likelihood is that those who do not divorce typically do not live with the chronic toxicity of those who do. Divorce occurs because pain is frequent and predictable, with no end in sight. Holes running wild ensure that every calm will be followed by yet another storm.

Divorce also occurs when a rocky or otherwise unfulfilling relationship spawns glopfulness. S/he gets caught in some hurtful moment and is outed in a very destructive way. Typically, the glopful behavior is a symptom of the unfulfilling nature of the relationship, but none the less destructive to the relationship. It is an explanation, not an excuse! Many a marriage teetering on the edge has been tanked when he or she individually goes over the edge. For some, however, that becomes a wake-up call and rallying point to fix the relationship and move it from hurtful to healthy.

Surely, there are many other divorce scenarios as well. No article, book or encyclopedia could identify all of the routes that take couples from the penthouse of love to the outhouse of hurt. However, I believe that the complex human chemistry when people fall in love temporarily fills each other's holes and then unwittingly and unintentionally digs them deeper. This underlies many of the problems couples encounter.

Becoming More Whole

My preferred mode of helping couples by coaching and coaxing them toward health is one that rotates across individual and couple needs. One week Mrs. A-Z comes, one week Mr. A-Z comes, and one week Mr. and Mrs. A-Z come visit together. Though controversial, because I must dance the high wire of confidentiality and objectivity, the results typically justify the means. That I am a graceful tightrope walker helps.

I have found that it is harder to help a couple become more whole by working solely with that couple. I am aware that other practitioners disagree. Individual holes feeding into relationship holes need individual understanding and attention. Individual holes need individual healing. That is not likely to occur when two people sit together. This is especially so when the two people feel hurt, falsely accused, betrayed and otherwise abused, neglected and maligned. This is not the proper setting for examining the origins of one's hole or their being filled with healthier material.

Undoubtedly, there are many things people can do to fill their holes to either avoid divorce or prevent yet another hurtful relationship. Everything discussed in Part III “Filling Your Hole with Health,” will help individuals and couples to grow and go forward. Undoubtedly, there are many other healthy hole fillers as well. I have observed many positive results coming from secular or spiritual based weekend couple retreats and encounters designed to strengthen communications and teach helpful tools to resolve conflicts and enhance mutual understanding.

At the end of the day, I believe individuals and couples can grow. I am convinced they can observe themselves, introspect, gain insight, modify hurtful contributions, heal and move to healthier places that actually resemble where they began together. Individuals can also find points of compromise that more closely satisfy each other’s needs. My colleagues and I have helped many couples grow individually and collectively to overcome their hurtful histories, put away their hurtful antics with each other and learn appropriate behaviors to resolve conflicts, show love and be helpful, cooperative partners again.

I believe that communication channels that have long been closed can be opened, affections long absent can return, compassion long diluted by selfishness can be revived and intimacies long forced or abandoned can be reignited. I believe that minds can heal, holes can be better filled, hurtful habits broken and couples can be reunited in far more fulfilling and validating adult to adult partnerships.

With these potentials in mind I encourage you to engage in some healing and hole filling therapeutic process, the sooner the better. You and your mate need to be equally committed, proactive and painfully honest. Give it your very best shots. If it works, walk off arm in arm into the sunset together. If it doesn’t, know you tried your best, let it go and don’t look back except to learn from this experience so as to not repeat it when next you pick a partner.

What If I Am Wrong?

Though I am adapting it to a hole in the self model, the idea of people coupling for complex psychodynamic reasons is not unique to me. For example, read Harville Hendrix “Getting the Love You Want,” for a more complete presentation. But, what if we are all making more of this than it deserves? What if it is not so complicated? Let us consider a simpler

formulation.

Armed with the goal of making a good and positive impression, people engage from an adult to adult perspective. In the beginning people bring kindness, compassion, sensitivity, support, understanding and affirmation to the dating table. Love is, after all, a cornucopia of those experiences. Those are the feelings that start the juices of love flowing. It is a flavorful diet shake that tastes delicious. To be silly for a second, let's say that early in the dating process Mr. Z called Miss. A "a stupid, selfish bitch". In response, she said, "You are nothing but an ignorant, mama's boy asshole, loser". Assuming this wasn't the result of an off moment or never to be repeated drunken episode, the likelihood of an engagement or further commitment is low to none. Who would form a partnership based on those hurtful expressions? No one sane or sensible, that is for sure. There would never be a Mr. and Mrs. A-Z.

What happens is that over time a variety of conditions can stimulate less than loving communications. From the adult to adult respectful position of courtship comes the parent to child or child to child rants of a partnership that has lost its foundation. What pushes people to depart from their adult position varies, but here are some obvious catalysts:

- Fatigue
- Stress
- Illness/PMS
- Anger
- Needs to feel in control
- Sensitivities of all kinds
- Demeaning statements and attacks
- Feeling slighted or disrespected
- Jealousies/other distrust
- Alcohol or drugs
- False pride
- Failure

It is in this context that partners, even those who love each other, can say the most hurtful things. This is why many a partner will say, "S/he can push my buttons more than anyone else in my entire life".

The scene usually starts with the couple is in a parent to child mode.

Typically, this deteriorates into a child to child battle. Two angry, wounded kids can do a lot of psychic damage in the very same zones where damage was already done. Holes were dug by denigrations from family members. They are dug deeper when partners go into that mode of destructive communications.

For example, Mr. A-Z comes home from an exhausting and stressful business trip. He failed to make the sale. His wife finds a receipt from a strip club in his pocket when she takes his suit to the cleaners the next day and some suspicious lipstick like stains on his shirt. Here is their communication:

She: Have a fun time at the strip club in Baltimore?

He: It's all part of the job. It wasn't my idea. I'd rather have watched a movie and gone to bed early.

She: How many drinks did you have that night?

He: Just a couple.

She: Enough for you to get lipstick stains on your shirt. Were you getting a lap dance, you pervert?

He: No and the stains were from dinner.

(Watch how it turns from parent to child to child to child)

He: Why are you being such a bitch? It was a lousy trip.

She: Because you're out having fun with bimbos while I'm told not to spend any money. I take care of the kids and house and you go play around.

He: I didn't play around and, from the looks of things, you didn't take very good care of the house. This place looks like a pigsty.

She: Well, if you don't like it, you clean it. I'm sure the hos in the strip club don't get a good housekeeping seal of approval.

He: All you do is complain. You're just like your mother.

She: And you're just like your father - a no good drunk and skirt chasing bastard.

(And here it comes)

He: Well, if you gave it to me more than once a month...

She: (interrupting) You wouldn't know what to do with it. Maybe you'll make enough money next month to afford your prescription

He: Fuck you!

And so it goes. Her hole hits his and his hits hers and it's all pretty ugly, hurtful and demeaning. Often, each party tends to hit below the belt.

Love protects you from sinking to such low levels. Finding and reclaiming your love enables you to stay in the adult mode and prevent such explosive interactions. Here's a simple replay with both staying in their adult self, based on trust, respect and love:

She: How was your trip?

He: Awful. Wined and dined the schmuck and he still didn't buy a thing. Sorry I had to do the strip club bit. I'm not doing that anymore.

She: I hate that you go there - it feels cheap.

He: I'm really sorry. You know you're the only woman for me. I missed you and love you.

She: I love you too, but what about the stains on your shirt?

He: Pasta sauce from dinner. I wouldn't let one of those bimbos come near me. You're the only woman I let near (he gets up and hugs her tight).

I bet you like the second scene better - much better. Good. It seems so simple, but our holes can make it so complicated. Come from love and you can make it happen for you and your partner. Just stay in your adult, like you did when you courted and decided to become partners. Stay in your adult just as you do with just about every other person in your life-even those who are pretty unimportant. Don't allow yourself to sink to child based levels or rise to holier than thou, parental postures. Keep it simple. Keep it loving. Keep it going forever. Here is another example:

She: You look like your best friend died. What's wrong?

He: I'm just stressed. Thanks for asking.

(so far so good)

He: The credit card bill came today.

She: So, it comes every month. What's the issue?

(here comes parent to child)

He: What's the issue? (sounding sarcastic) The issue is that you spent

twice the amount we agreed to. That's the issue!

She It was an expensive month. The kids needed stuff and we had the dentist and...

He: (interrupting)...Did you buy the \$300 shoes for the kids or the dentist?

She: They were on sale and

He:...(interrupting) But is still cost 300 bucks for a stupid pair of shoes. My mother buys shoes at T J Maxx for \$30.

She: Then maybe you should live with your mother, because I'm not her and never going to be her.

He: Damned right about that. Look at the state of this house. Maybe if you weren't so busy shopping I wouldn't have to iron my own shirts.

She: You iron them because no one can do them right, Mr. Perfectionist. I tried. The cleaners tried. The maid tried. Only Mama can do them right.

He: And that's another thing. Why are you pissing away 100 bucks a week on a maid for the house to look like shit.

(watch it turn child to child vicious)

She: Nothing is good enough for you. Why don't you just divorce me?

He: Cause we can't afford it, bitch.

She: Then why don't you get a job that pays you better? Everybody we know makes more than you.

He: I work my ass off for this family and you piss it away faster that I can make it. My mother was right. You are a loser.

She: I'm a loser? Your mother is a back stabbing bitch and you're a mama's boy and you're the loser. I shoulda married Tim. He made me happy, became a successful lawyer and satisfied me, which is more that I can say for you, little man.

He: Don't talk to me about satisfaction. Talk to my hand. I scored more in high school than I do now.

She: No doubt with girls who drank too much. What sober woman would want you?

He: Fuck you.

She: Fuck You, Fuck you, Fuck you...ASSHOLE!!!

Enough already! Let's see how love and an adult to adult approach can avoid digging holes and hurting each other in abusive ways:

She: You look like your best friend died. What's wrong?

He: I'm just stressed. Thanks for asking.

He: The credit card bill came today.

She: Oh, shit. I meant to talk to you about the bill. I know I went way over our plan. I'm really sorry. We had some unexpected expenses and I am going to return the shoes.

He: That's helpful. I appreciate that. But we were more than double our goal of no more than \$2000 a month. What can we do about that?

She: Well now that the bill is here I will go over it line by line tomorrow, see where the fat is and figure out where I can shrink it for the future.

He: Great. Let's go over it together after the kids go to sleep and work on it as partners.

She: Wonderful. I like that approach. Thanks for wanting to help me figure this out.

He: By the way, if you really want the shoes, keep them. It won't break us and you're worth it.

She: I love you so much.

He: I love you too (hugs and kisses). Maybe we will work on the bill tomorrow night. I have a better plan.

She: Let's get the kids to sleep. I like your plan, too.....

Do people really talk like that, you must wonder. Who cares? The point is you and your partner can, if you just come from love, just as you once did. It's really very simple. It's just not easy.

In this version of the problem you are focusing on retrieving the qualities you once used to make a good impression during courtship. In fact, you don't really have to retrieve them because you use them every day in your dealings with others. You just need to redirect them toward the most important person in your life—your partner.

Please note that it is not always a battleground of nastinesses. There are many unhealthy relationships where there is not fighting whatsoever. There is, however, silence, distance, avoidance and low/no meaningful communications. Though that may be better than a battle, it still is not a loving, adult to adult partnership.

The ultimate truth is that whichever explanation you accept—holes

colliding or masks dropping—the remedy is much the same. However, my bias is toward the former explanation. If it was truly the latter, it would be easier for couples to fix themselves and automatically stay or return to adult positions of love and kindness. It is not rocket science to avoid “Fuck You” scenes and stay in “I Love You” territories. It is holes, I believe, that drag us down in the child based positions of negativity and hurtfulness. Holes leave deeply felt sensitivities that your mate can easily trigger, while you in return trigger theirs.

Perhaps, in the final analysis, our holes and our masks slipping combine to tank our relationships too often. Perhaps it is time for you and your partner to reassert and reclaim your love and revitalize your partnership.

LOVE IS...

I am concerned that my frequent criticism of self-help writings can be leveled at this article. I spent much time delineating the problems and too little time helping people solve them. My defense is that there are no easily articulated cures. So many of the issues are very difficult to describe, let alone comprehend, let alone resolve. If I could “cure” you with my written words, why would you need to spend precious time and hard earned money for my or my colleague’s spoken words? The latter, obviously are tailored to fit your specific needs. My written word is generic and may or may not have anything to do with your specific situation. Many worthwhile books exist that can be helpful. But nothing substitutes for hands on, heads up, face-to-face work with a talented counselor.

So allow me to conclude with a brief description of love, as I have come to understand it. I hope it will be helpful in assessing your present relationship and setting some goals to enhance it. Love is a verb. It is an active process of complex and integrated feelings that helps people to relinquish their own needs for the good of the partner and partnership. In the ideal it is reciprocal, so that each person in the partnership feels fulfilled in some equitable proportion. Partnerly love is the opposite of self-love. Narcissism and partnership do not make good bedfellows. Love demands a willingness and ability to heal child based wounds, so that “we” and “us” are the calculus of love together. Love is often blocked by narcissism and false pride. These are two sides of the same worthless coin.

Love is about loyalty and trust, as both form the support that people

with holes need to feel safe. Just as professions have ethical codes, so can partnerships. Violations are an outgrowth of unfulfillment and rip the fabric of the relationship. Often, sustaining love requires that we let go of painfilled events in the past to make room for positive ones in the future. If only we could love our partners with the same integrity, devotion and forgiveness which we typically show to our children, partnerships could work well and serve the best interests of all parties. If only we could work at love the way we work at work, things could be so different.

Love is simply caring enough to be present in an active, supportive and sensitive way. Love is Shel Silverstein's "The Giving Tree" so that we can consistently show our partners caringness, so they in turn can show it back. In that sense, love is an investment which can yield valuable dividends. Yet, love can also be inconsistent and at times require a leap of faith. It is not always reciprocal, but needs to be sufficiently so to justify your investment. It can't always be a one way street.

Love is being "all in" in the Texas Holdem game of life, even if the cards we are holding aren't very good. Love is one of the most beautiful, frustrating, delicious, confusing, healing feelings in the universe. We all need it, almost all of us deserve it, yet relatively few receive it in a sustained fashion. Love, like democracy, seems simple in principle, but ever so complex in day to day life.

For all of these reasons love needs and deserves protection. Above all else, I hope my words will encourage you to find it in your lifetime. Obviously, it would be preferable with your present partner, but if that is not possible, then someday with a future partner. Despite the many obstacles, love is as available as air, equally inexpensive and most definitely needed for healthy survival and personal fulfillment.

Remember the three nevers that I believe define the path to personal and relationship growth in all zones:

- Never devalue you. Fix that which you need to modify. Appreciate all that makes you special. Affirm your worth daily. Work on your confidence and esteem to get them to appropriate levels. Love yourself as well as your partner. Fill your own holes with healthy.
- Never stop pursuing your goals. Try to contain glopful distractions.

Persevere. Start over. Never give up. Never!

- Never let go of your dreams. They may be a ways away, but, if realistic, are attainable in your lifetime. Nurture them, move steadily toward them, have a plan to achieve them and go for it at the appropriate moment. Our dreams are the guide that helps us navigate the choppy waters of our lives. Stay with them forever! Achieve them eventually. Finally, enjoy the outcome as well as your efforts to get there.