

Salty People Have the Best Relationships

J . S T E P H E N M U S E

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

Matthew 5:13

The poet e.e. cummings wrote, *To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight, and never stop fighting.* Guilt can be a guide in this struggle if it serves the truth or a stumbling block when it serves to remove our salt. Understanding the difference is important.

Grace-full Beginnings

When Gretchen first came for a counseling consultation, she wasn't sleeping and she'd lost ten pounds over the last few months. *I feel a little guilty being here. I'm not an abused spouse. He's never hit me, but I feel like I've lost myself. I don't know who I am anymore. I don't know if I love my husband or not. I'm so confused.*

Falling in love happens. Growing in love requires a special kind of effort.

When she first met Tony, she was taken by his charm. *He brought me flowers and made me feel like I was the most important person in the world. We talked for hours about everything. When I saw his smile the first time, it seemed like I'd known him forever. Looking back I think I could see the hurt behind it and I felt I could heal that wound. When I started my job, he called me at work every day just to talk. I felt wanted and valuable in a way I had never known before.*

Falling in love has that crackling fresh vitality about it like coming upon a rare species in the forest. You are wide awake and interested. If it notices you and comes close, you are thrilled and become still inside paying close attention and treasuring every detail of the encounter. Add to this vitality the joy and laughter of two human faces looking at one another like mother and father smiling down at us in the cradle and you have the necessary ingredients for falling in love. Once again we experience being the center of another person's world, each a source of pleasure, delight and mystery to the other. Every thought, every movement, every personal nuance is treasured like a newborn's first giggle.

Falling in love happens. Growing in love requires a special kind of effort.

Guilt-ridden Marriage Crisis

After a while, Gretchen continued, *Tony's phone calls became two or three times a day and I began to feel smothered. He questioned why I was fifteen minutes late getting home. When I seemed surprised or annoyed that he was being so picky, he got irritated and suspicious I was covering up something. I could feel this wire inside me stretching taut, like when my father and mother argued, but I ignored it. I stuffed down my feelings and tried to understand. He had been abandoned by his family and I felt guilty at the thought of hurting him any more.*

Tony got laid off in a downsizing about three years after we were together and sat around glued to the television. I was sympathetic, but I felt a little nervous about the finances. When I tried to talk about it, he made me feel guilty, like I was putting him down. I began to feel like I was driving him away by "nagging". Sometimes he withdrew for days into his own world. As a Christian I tried to be unselfish and make myself more available to him, but I didn't have the same feelings as before. We'd have sex but it was like I wasn't really there. After a while I began to feel used. Tony refused to go to marriage counseling. He'd say, "We can solve our own

problems." But we weren't even able to talk. I stopped going out with my girlfriends because he complained so much about it. "You've got time for everyone else but me." I felt so guilty. We had talked so much in the beginning and now there was nothing. I wondered what I had done to cause him to close up.

I didn't realize how I was taking responsibility for everything until you asked me if I thought Tony was capable of bearing his own feelings without me protecting him from them. I had never looked at it that way before. I learned all my life to avoid conflict by being what the people around me needed me to be. When I didn't, I felt guilty. I put myself in a box like it says in the Dance of Anger, in order not to lose the love of those close to me. I think I did that for my father because in retrospect I can see he had that same sadness I saw in Tony. When Tony and I first met, I felt free and alive. After things started getting bad, I thought of telling him how I felt inside, but I felt guilty like I was going to hurt him, so I just kept everything inside. After a few years I had so much resentment built up toward him I felt numb most of the time. When I did get angry, it was an explosion. Once I threw the phone and knocked a hole in the wall. Tony just gave me that sarcastic look of his and walked

out of the room. Then I'd burst into tears, feel guilty, apologize for being a bitch. We were close again and then a few days later it starts all over again. Nothing was ever solved. After a while I began to feel like I wasn't even worth loving. I was losing myself and my love for Tony was buried under a mountain of resentment. I was blaming him for controlling me. Tony was miserable too and felt emotionally abandoned. That's when I knew I had to talk to someone about it.

The Truth Shall Set You Free...

Jesus said, *If you will continue in the truth, the truth will set you free.* Gretchen's "guilt" helped her avoid the truth. It functioned psychologically as a means of preventing the self-disclosure and assertive behavior necessary for maturing into her full sense of personhood and catalyzing her husband's own growth. Tony's "controlling" behavior functioned in a similar way for himself and equally deprived Gretchen of support for her continued growth. Over six or seven years the marital relationship had become a prison instead of what it was in the beginning—a means of empowerment of each toward becoming fully human persons.

The task of achieving mature relationships goes hand-in-hand with the renewal of one's own heart.

Things eventually changed when Gretchen started expressing her feelings of hurt, anger and disappointment directly and clearly to him instead of just blowing up. She resumed her friendships and outside activities and also shared her enthusiasm and experiences with him. This forced Tony to be responsible for his own feelings and manage his fears of abandonment in ways other than through constant checking up on Gretchen. He had grown so preoccupied with fear of losing the one emotional outlet he had found in his wife, that he had neglected developing any other friendships. As he corrected this, he felt better about Gretchen having other friendships and they found they had new things to talk about that enhanced their intimacy and understanding rather than damaging it.

Many times persons will recall, as Gretchen did early in therapy, *Christians are supposed to*

be unselfish, in order to explain why he or she is not willing to be assertive in appropriate ways that create a healthy relationship. When Jesus advised his followers to *deny yourselves and take up your crosses, or, If someone strikes you on the cheek, turn to them the other as well*, or if cursed to *bless*—He was not praising cowardice or instructing his followers to become passive, feeling-stuffing emotional wimps. It is natural to either knuckle under or to strike back if you're attacked. That's the way we're wired: fight or flight. Not to do either calls for more than a mere *reaction*. It calls for a degree of self-awareness, maturity, trust and commitment to truth that are part of the image of God which makes us more than the sum of our animal reactions. By living this out over time in relationships we grow into our full *personhood*.

A Spiritual Crisis

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, it is often said. The task of achieving mature interdependent intimate relationships goes hand in hand with the renewal of one's own heart. Ordinarily what is avoided or not perceived within us is projected like film onto the movie screen and appears to us as if it resides in the other person. Unwillingness to be assertive and fear of "hurting" my partner, may appear to me as my partner trying to control me (which isn't to say that he or she isn't also doing that!). Insecurity about my self-worth and distance from my own feelings can appear as an uncaring attitude on my partner's part or a fear of being outgrown. *You don't really love me!* I plead in accusing tones, rather than acknowledging my own feelings. This sets in motion guilt and defensiveness in my partner. The remedy, as Jesus counseled, is to *get to know the log in your own eye so that you will see clearly how to deal with the splinter in your neighbor's*. The ability to see self and others clearly does not come without a struggle. Continual repentance is the mark of one who is seeking to love others as God loves us.

St. Anthony of the desert, when asked "What is the point of the spiritual life?" replied, *To become yourself.* If instead of preserving the salt of myself in relationships I consistently say or do whatever I feel the other person expects so as to avoid conflict, I am dishonoring both of us as well as God who created us each uniquely. My action deprives the other person of an authentic

One of the lessons of mature adulthood is that honoring our family and spouses does not always mean obeying them or doing things the way they want us to.

human encounter with *otherness* which is the warp and woof of human development. Jesus said, "If you have lost your salt, you are no longer worth more than a doormat - something to be trod underfoot."

We do not remember Jesus Christ for being a doormat who destroyed himself in the process of becoming a nobody, but as an incredibly sensitive, courageous, principled, creative, salty man. We easily recall the commandment, *Honor thy father and thy mother*, but Jesus was equally emphatic that unless we are capable of challenging them when they do not understand or have been hurtful or in error, we will lose our salt and remain doormats. Jesus lived out the truth of his life even when his family, closest friends and powers of the community didn't always understand or approve of his actions. One of the lessons of mature adulthood is that honoring our family and spouse does not always mean obeying them or doing things the way they want us to.

Guilt that prevents us from taking this same direction in our lives is not from God. Rather, it is a psychological habit learned as a child in one's family and culture. To make the kind of self-sacrifice Christ calls for, one must grow beyond such protective habits toward a love for Truth itself which renders the heart vulnerable to the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit burning away all that is phony and superficial. *Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God . . . in whose image every man and woman is made.*

Don't Lose Your Salt!

Salty people are unique. Like the wind which comes from where you know not and blows whence it will, they are independent of flattery and manipulation, capable of honoring the truth whatever the price. When they don't, they feel guilty. God knows we need such people. When persons in a marriage, family or a community are struggling to support one another in this battle to find and nurture persons in the heart,

fear and guilt are gradually replaced by love. It is the salty stuff of which intimacy and *human beings* are born again to see the world and each other with fresh eyes. This is the source of all healthy relationships.

REFERENCES

- Lerner, H. *Dance of Anger.*
- Hendrix, H. *Getting the Love You Want.*
- Bloom, A. *Beginning to Pray.*



About the Author

J. Stephen Muse, Ph.D., is Sr. Pastoral Psychotherapist/Educator with the Pastoral Institute and Editor of *The Pastoral Forum*. He and his wife, Claudia, have three children ages 12, 13, and 16.

smuse@PILINK.ORG



**CLERGY
RESOURCE
CENTER**
OF THE PASTORAL INSTITUTE

Responding To The Unique Needs Of Clergy

The Clergy Resource Center provides

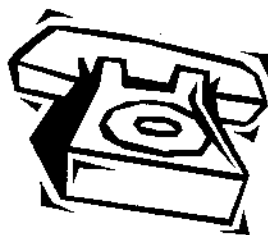
- Intervention Programs for Clergy in Crisis
 - A Winter Conference
- A Newsletter Distributed to 5,000 Clergy
- A Fall Workshop ◦ A Spring Symposium

For Information: Edwin Chase, D.Min.
2022 15th Avenue ◦ Columbus, Georgia 31901
◦ 706-649-6360 ◦ 1-800-649-6446

NATIONAL CLERGY HELPLINE

The Clergy Resource Center is making available to pastors across the country counseling and consultation by simply dialing an 800 number.

Physicians, counselors and business people do not hesitate to consult with other professionals when confronted with issues or problems around which they have little or no experience. But research indicates that ministers tend to be loners, reluctant to consult even in the most excruciating circumstances. The Clergy HelpLine sends a clear message: You are not alone. Pick up the phone. 1-800-649-6446.



National Clergy HelpLine

1-800-649-6446

Crisis Counseling and Consultation

**sponsored by the Clergy Resource Center
of the Pastoral Institute**

