

Human Relationships: Boundaries and Love

A transcript of a lecture given by Richard Harvey at La Escuela de Idiomas de Motril, Spain, on Tuesday 28 April 2015

Hello and welcome to the talk on human relationships, boundaries, and love. To introduce this theme of human relationships, I am going to talk tonight about:

- three relationships which are really one—you, the other, and the world
- our feelings and sense of being separate from each other
- an original meaning of relationships, which is relating or bringing back our stories
- boundaries as a way of connecting in relationships
- our push-pull or attraction and resistance to relationships
- what is needed for healthy relationships
- how we move through relationships which are all about ourselves into truly being with another and finally, the three fields of healthy relationships—I, you, and we.

The first very first recorded account of human relationships, boundaries, and love is about ten thousand years old; it is found in the ancient Sumerian story of Inanna and Dumuzi. I would like to tell it to you.

Inanna, the goddess of the light world, travels to the underworld to meet her sister, the dark goddess Ereshkigal. At each of the seven gates to the underworld she must give up something – clothing or jewelry – until she comes into Ereshkigal's presence, naked and bowed. The dark goddess is in mourning for her spouse and out of the pain of utter misery she has Inanna slaughtered and hung on a peg where she turns into rotting meat. But Inanna has made emergency plans. Before she left the light world she instructed the god of water and wisdom, Enki, to take steps to rescue her if she did not return within three days.

Enki waits and, when Inanna does not return, he produces two tiny entities from under his fingernails. Since they are not human, these entities are able to pass through the seven gates unnoticed. They come before Ereshkigal who is still deeply mourning and they listen to her suffering. They mirror back her pain in a litany of pure acceptance and healing. Ereshkigal is so grateful for their profound empathy that, in a gesture that would be repeated in hundreds of fairytales in the future, she offers them anything in her domain. Of course, they ask for the corpse of Inanna.

Restored to life, Inanna reappears in the light world, newly radiant and entirely transformed. Through facing her inner darkness she is now whole. She discovers Dumuzi, her spouse, sitting on her throne having assumed the kingly, sovereign position in her absence. Then memorably it is written that she "fixed on him the eye of death"... she "fixed on him the eye of death."

She invites him to make his own descent and confront his darkness. What else could she do to make her mate worthy of her now? In terror Dumuzi flees to his sister's house to hide. But Inanna pursues him and the sister strikes a bargain with Inanna whereby she stands in for Dumuzi for half the time. She will descend to the Netherworld for half the year and Dumuzi will descend for the other half. In this way, Dumuzi rejects the descent and avoids not only his own transformation, but he forfeits a deep relationship with Inanna.

So, in the very first love story ever, we have this theme of boy meets girl, woman offers a relationship to a man who avoids total intimacy by meeting her halfway, as a part-time partner... ten thousand years old, yet it's actually very modern.

There are three broad types of relationships in life. Yourself, the other and the world. These are all relationships of different kinds. You have a relationship with yourself. You have various kinds of relationships with others. And you have a relationship to the world about you, the bigger picture, the outside world. These relationships are not separate; these relationships affect each other.

Mostly we may be too busy to think about these relationships, too busy doing, surviving, feeding ourselves and our dependants, working, studying, too busy but nonetheless we are relating all the time to these three fields—self, other, and the world.

... and I would like to give you some questions now to think about—not just think about but feel—and these questions are: Who am I? and Who is the other? Who am I? and Who is the other? are not questions we often think about ... because we are always with ourselves and surrounded by others for much of the time.

Relationships are tremendously important and vital, aren't they? You cannot even think of life without them, can you? Our lives are defined by our relationships. I invite you now to take just a minute... close your eyes please... and think of the important people you are in relationship with in your life and ask yourself these questions:

What distance is there between us?
How do I judge others?
Who are you to me?
How are we similar?
and
What makes us different?

Now would you gently open your eyes... and look around the room at each other and think about these questions:

Who am I?
Who is the other?
What distance is there between us?
How do I judge you?
Who are you to me?
How are we similar?
and
What makes us different?

I am pretty sure that one thing we all share as we look, around the room at each other is this—I and the other are separate. We are different. I am not you and you are not me. Whatever else we may experience as we look around the room at each other—judgment, attraction, fantasy, nervousness, confidence, excitement, fear—we may all agree that we feel separate from each other.

Now if you consider this world, our world, the relative world of time and space where everything is changing, you notice that not only is self and other separate—but everything is separate! All things have an opposite that is separate. For example, day and night, right and wrong, near and far, beautiful and ugly. It all starts here—with the vital breath. You began your life with an in breath and you will end it with an out breath—the cycle of breathing in and out is the most immediate exchange between two—the inner and the outer—within your body and outside your body-- and when you think of your body as yourself what could be more obvious in your relationship to life but breathing in and out—life and death, life and death, vitality and lifelessness, in and out...

Take a breath now and experience it... and feel how your life, your awareness, your vitality, and your sense of relationship to the world, to others, and to yourself depends on your breath. In and out—this is the relationship... this is relationship... For you breathe in the other, take in the other through your eyes, your ears, your touch, and you give to the other in the same way—in and out.

The word relationship comes from the Middle French word for relate, relater, which means to recount or tell or bring back. So when you are in a relationship you relate or communicate some information, some events, some narrative. You tell your story by being there... simply through your presence... you are the story really, the story you are telling, the story is you and when there are two human beings involved, of course there are two stories. So the relationship of two people is the meeting of the two stories.

But... Do I know my story? Do you know your story? That means—do you know yourself?

When we look at this question deeply, the answer is surely... no... and yes... that we do and we do not know our stories.

On the one hand I know my story. My name is Richard, I was born in London, England, I had one sister and I went to school, grew up, and became a therapist, a writer, and so on... All these facts are obvious to me. I know them, because I am conscious of them. But much of my story I do not know or I did not know—because it was unconscious.

For example, when I was a young man I explored my unconscious in psychotherapy and I found out things about myself I did not know. I did not know how afraid I was of the world, how jealous I was in my relationships --- my primary love relationships—I didn't know how angry I was... and I didn't know really what I wanted.

The more I explored my inner world, the more I discovered that I did not know myself.

Now, human relationships—a healthy relationship between two people—depends on the two people knowing themselves first...

Your unconscious has a tendency, even a desire, to become conscious. It is trying to appear in the light. And you know this because when you are unguarded, you lose your inhibitions and you behave

unusually—out of your usual habit, you express private emotions freely, and you act in unexpected ways. You think less and act more, you behave more authentically, because you do not hide so much. So, for example, when a person gets drunk and acts violently or takes recreational drugs and acts lovingly or seductively or when to your embarrassment a relative or a friend at a party tells you how much they like you, you experience the hidden or secret part of them, which is their story—their unconscious story—the one they may not even know about themselves.

So far, what I am trying to tell you is also a story. This story appears to me as a point of view, but this point of view appears in the realms of relationship across a divide, a boundary between you and I. In this moment a relationship exists, defined by me talking to you, relating this story to you—we are taking each other in... we are in relationship.

Let's hold this idea of relationship as story and unconscious story for a minute and look at the second, but obviously related, theme of this talk—boundaries. Now today we are very interested in boundaries and I find that significant. We may be aware of relationship boundaries because we are aware of abuse, personal invasion, and ill treatment. This kind of thing is high profile today. Nearly everyone has a little knowledge of human psychology through the media and most people feel justified about protecting their personal boundaries, not being taken advantage of, and defending themselves emotionally, energetically, and of course physically.

But have you noticed that as we have taken up psychological boundaries, so the physical ones have gone up too? Today there are more fences, walls, road signs, painted lines, and public notices telling us what we can and cannot do, advertisements telling us what we should and should not buy... they are everywhere... more than ever before. I have lived in Andalucía for twelve years and seen the increase in the pollution of our environment, I am not talking about noxious gases and toxic substances, but these shouting, screaming, physical boundaries are pollution too. Andalucía used to be a quiet place—the town I live near used to have a lovely little dirt road climbing up into the mountains. You could see the night sky, all the planets and stars... when you looked up. Then the town hall installed street-lights—why? So children could throw stones at them—and pavements, parking signs, signs to the mountain—why do you need a sign to a mountain!—notices telling you where you are, because human beings today do not know where they are without being told!—signs about speed and falling rocks, directions to picnic areas, where before you just stopped and ate under a beautiful tree somewhere. Have you noticed that today you do not relate intimately, spontaneously, and naturally with the countryside unless you ignore these rules telling you what to do, messages shouting at you from each and every road and corner.

I have an idea about all this setting of boundaries, this authoritarianism, beyond the obvious fear and unnatural human need to divorce ourselves from nature and dominate it. I have an idea and it is this:

The last hundred years has coincided with a strong sense of a personal self. Never before in the history of humanity have we had such a strong sense of me, myself, mine... and you, yourself, and yours. We moved into the cities, into urban developments to depend on each other and share our resources, but commercial interests, religious forces and the dynamics of power, politics and massive corporations divided us and alienated us from each other still further. Today we enter into relationship with others—through our boundaries and our self-ness—in a very separate, exclusive way.

But what if boundaries were something else; not merely a negative expression of separation, this standoff and keep away, do-not-hurt-me kind of statement we make to the world, which keeps us protected and alone.

What if instead of being barked at—like road signs and advertising hoardings, like these physical boundaries—boundaries enabled relationships to be.

What if we consider boundaries in their etymological root of binding—meaning how we are bound to the earth, to this world, and to each other... in soul and spirit... and of course in heart. Bound in the sense of connected to life, obliged to respond to life and to be one with life... These bindings then become how we are bound or how we relate... or how we relate our stories to each other.

Will you join me now in a short exercise—simply take a breath and turn to the person sitting next to you, make eye contact, and allow yourself to become aware of these ideas we are discussing—let's not restrict the ideas to thinking, only to the mental plane, rather let us feel them, experience them, and see if they can enter your reality in relationship as you regard, look, sense, feel the person in front of you with openness, relating...

Good... It is said that as you grow older your face reflects the story of your life. Have you heard that? How you have lived your life, the choices you made, whether or not you are relaxed or anxious, clear or bewildered, angry or loving will show in your face.. as you are aged by time. You relate the story of your life, not only through words, but through your face, through what you look like... so as you get older, there is no place to hide, you see?

Allow yourself to be seen as well as to see the other (in this exercise).. and feel the boundary between you.

Now one point, that seems really too obvious, it hardly needs saying... is this—people are attractive. We are attracted to each other. Perhaps you would allow yourself to feel that, as you look at each other and turn to the person on the other side of you now and try this exercise again. We are attracted to each other, to other human beings—sometimes because they are similar to us and sometimes because they are different to us.

In my work as a psychotherapist I meet people who have an urge to be isolated. We call it the hermit archetype. They feel a call, an impulse, to be a hermit, to live alone and spend their lifetime with only themselves. This is the part of us that wants to be isolated from the rest of the human race... because sometimes relationships and boundaries, intimacy and connection, can seem too much too painful, too challenging, and too complicated. But, however strong the attraction to the hermit, I never met anyone who wasn't more attracted to other human beings than they were to being on their own.

We have a push-pull relationship with each other—we want to be together, to open up, and share and have companionship. But another part of us resists and pushes friendship away. We are ambivalent about relationships, about love, about friendship, and about intimacy.

This is most obvious, intense, and strong in our primary love relationships. There are many ways to resist intimacy, but here are the most common ways I have seen. They are six in number...

First is merging. When two people have no sense of themselves, their individual self, they can have no sense of the other. Each feels dependent on the other. And there is the unconscious desire to return to the mother-child relationship of security and helplessness and a hidden inability to receive nourishment. This is a boundary-less relationship in which the two individuals do not feel complete on their own, or with each other. It looks or feels something like this [interlock fingers of hands]

Second is leaning. This is a relationship of dependency, which is also infantile, child-like, and based on the need for support. [illustrate leaning with hands] If one partner discovers independence or even moves toward their individual separate life, the other falls. Each depends on the other for stability.

Third is the power-based relationship... or more accurately the power-over relationship. Here power displaces love as the primary currency, and idolizing and image replace real feeling. No meeting [illustrate one hand over the other]—no real meeting—is possible in the relationship, only power. There is no equality and no level place to meet in. The dynamics of power are continually present as domination, control, and suppression.

Fourth is twin frustration. Here, the two people in relationship believe that they can never be free. Attempting to deny their internal devils and stubbornness, they give their passion negative expression. This is the couple who are permanently irritated with each other, who disagree and argue with each other, who are always annoyed with each other. They have made an unconscious pact to go down fighting, together—but not fighting dissatisfaction and compromise in their lives: fighting each other, blaming each other, resenting each other.

Fifth is the freeze out. This couple is cold and competitive with each other. They put each other down, criticize and seem to enjoy belittling each other and rejecting each other. This is different to the previous twin frustration which has some fire in it. This type of couple are frosty, icy, and bitter toward each other.

Finally, the bridge. The couple who have a bridge between them do not cross it at the same time so they remain apart and blame the other one for not meeting in the middle. When one comes to the center to meet, the other backs away. When the one who backed away moves into the middle to meet the one who came to the middle before, he backs away when the other starts to come to join them. They express the statement: the more I come toward you, the more you back away from me.

We want to be together. We may even long to be with another person. But look at all these ways—merging, leaning, power, frustration, freezing, and the bridge—all very successful ways—human beings have created, we have created to ensure that our relationships with each other fail!

So... what about healthy relationships? How are they possible? If we really want them, how can we have them and how can we make them work?

First, know yourself, because whatever you do not know is hidden and surfaces, in small ways at first and later in bigger ways, in your relationships, as projection. We need to understand a little about the shadow. The shadow self is that part of us that we disown—what we do not accept in ourselves and which we see in others. It may be positive or negative. When you are in a relationship a lot of positive shadow qualities are projected onto the other. Only later do the negative shadow qualities come to your awareness and your relationship suffers and deteriorates. Far better then, to be aware of projection from the beginning.

Second, communicate—talk, share, and stay in touch with your partner, friend, or loved one. The boundary between yourself and the other is a means to intimacy, but only if you express, talk, share, touch, and allow yourself to be touched in a variety of ways, and allow your private thoughts and feelings into the relationship, feeling trust and safety and acceptance from the other. Learn to listen to the other without interruption, to sustain attention on them, to feel empathy and try to avoid problem solving—listening is usually far more effective than telling people what to do or solving their problems for them.

Third, discover the difference between love, need, and desire. These three form a tight plait, they are wrapped around each other so tightly it can be almost impossible to distinguish them, one from the other. Try and do it—because they are different and the difference is crucial to your relationship and to your well-being. Desire is not love. Need is not desire. Love is not need. Yet they all have a place in the human experience. No one is without need, love, and desire.

Fourth, become emotionally intelligent. Learn to experience your emotional life and your inner experience. Start with locating your psycho-physical centers. You have three principal centers—mental, emotional, and active, or thinking, feeling, and willing. These physical, emotional, energetic centers are located in your head, your heart, and your pelvis, and they are key to understanding your emotions, your energy, and your mind. Do not be vague about your feeling/emotional life, locate it within your body, ask where you feel sad, afraid, angry, or hurt. In time you can become aware of the flowing life of emotions and the layers of emotions, one on top of the other, the intensity of your feeling life and your innate responses through your feeling awareness. Work at it... grow with it... and allow yourself to become more fully human and heart-centered.

[The lecture content is given here in its entirety, although on the night the presentation ended just before the following section, due to lack of time.]

In my work and writings I have proposed a model for relationships over three levels. Tonight, I would like to share the first two with you. They are the projective level and the non-projective or truly loving levels:

The level of projective relationship. Briefly, you meet someone and experience overwhelming attraction, desire, or love perhaps. A mixture of biological, psychological, sexual, mental, and energetic impulses combine to make this an irresistible event. According to your cultural expectations, religious beliefs, stage of maturity, and level of personal development you create a form for this attraction—it may be having fun, getting married, raising a family, becoming lovers, or forming a deep friendship. Whatever the form, there is a thick set of unconscious exchanges which takes place right at the very beginning in the very first encounter. When and if the relationship, marriage, or partnership starts to go wrong, then resentment and bitterness arise between the two people—this is because unconsciously each one has given parts of themselves to the other. If the relationship is under threat, then the partners feel as if they will lose those parts of them that they gave away unconsciously to the other.

This is rather like the story idea we spoke about at the beginning. There were two stories, you remember?—a conscious one and an unconscious one. Here it is similar, because you are conscious of the person you are in relationship with but unconscious of the fact that you have given and discarded a whole lot of yourself... and... now you see it in the other. The other may be your beauty, sensitivity, self-care, wisdom, ability, or creativity, but this is the essential crucial point: you must retrieve it, bring it back, re-own it because it is not theirs—it is yours!

Now the journey of love in this first level of relationship is a circle. You start off projecting onto your partner wildly, perhaps falling in love or at the very least you are obsessed or fascinated, intrigued apparently by them, but secretly of course it is yourself. There is an element of narcissism in what we call love in relationships today and I propose very seriously that it is a responsible act to sift through the garbage and throw out anything that is not real. I say this to you in all seriousness because—and you may have noticed this along with the road signs and so on—today sex is not sex, food is not food, foolishness masquerades as wisdom, and the sacred is largely absent from our world, while spectacle—what we can see—personal ambition, and material gain, dominate and distract us from what is real and authentic.

Humanity has never been in such a dilemma, such a serious circumstance where much that is precious—and in time perhaps everything that is precious—could be lost. What is more precious than love? Can anything be more precious than love?

But notice, if the love we carry in our primary relationships is impure—and it must be impure when it is narcissistic (or merely love of oneself), is confused with need and desire (and neither of these are love, remember?), or filled with assumptions and expectations and ways to avoid intimacy with the beloved... then, it is not love.

You see the human being is an altogether extraordinary event. I know we say this and think it and feel it sometimes and even show it to others occasionally. But as human beings we live and work and play and eat and breathe with other human beings almost the whole time—so we get cool... complacent... and we take each other for granted... and we get so used to each other we become unmoved by the circumstances of extraordinariness... of wonder... of amazement.

And rightly so, because it is the potential, the capacity, and the obligation of the human being to love with authenticity, compassion, and total disregard for the consequences of the intensity of the power of that love...

In the second level of human relationship this is what we do—we rise above the conditions of our animal nature, our psycho-biological urges and conditioning, fear and desire, and cultural inhibition, and any loyalty to unconsciousness. We learn to love... at last. This is the state of non-projective relationship in which you are entirely present with the other.

The way forward, through the first level of relationship into this second level, is to follow and practice these ways of freeing yourself from merely projective relationship. This is how you do it:

- practice intimacy. Intimacy involves honesty, acceptance, respect, and being seen... on both sides
- communicate and reveal yourself, using "I"- statements... rather than talking about the other, talk about yourself
- learn how to deal with anger. Anger, in the form of irritation, frustration, annoyance, bitterness, resentment, even withdrawal, should probably be the subject of an entire lecture, but let me say for now... find a place a way to include anger to express it in your life and in your relationship, because if you don't express it, responsibly and safely, it can be totally destructive.
- commitment—make a commitment which is honest... and authentic... and expressed
- risk and be willing to sacrifice

- strive to be authentic in action, thought, and feeling
- let your friendships, relationships, and committed partnerships be a mystery, an exciting, expansive, inexhaustible mystery in which you are always open to experience and learning
- treasure trust, which is a most valuable commodity in all relationships
- and finally, always be generous and giving, allowing space for the other, and encouraging their inner and outer growth and development... because a relationship is either growing or it is stagnant and dying

Finally, there are three elements in a relationship: self, other, and the relationship. You can summarize these three fields as I, you, and we.

Remember this when you are facing problems or dilemmas in your relationships: separation and boundaries enable relationship—separation and boundaries. The two individuals in a committed relationship should be able to stand alone—separately and alone. If they cannot, the relationship is merely co-dependent. When an individual sacrifices some part of him or herself for the relationship, they should do so with awareness which involves consideration, compromise, and sometimes even genuine selflessness. When they withhold some part of themselves from the relationship that also should be done with awareness.

Moving between the three fields of I, you, and we should be done in full consciousness. Never sacrifice any one of these three fields. Always have a private (which is different to secret) place to withdraw to in yourself, and support that for your partner, and choose to meet when you are in the we field—the sacred space of binding, connection, and love, where you are one rather than two—together.

And now to end our talk for tonight, once again, would you look around the room at each other and think about these questions:

Who am I? and Who is the other?
 What is the distance between us?
 How do I judge you?
 Who are you to me?
 How are we similar?
 and
 What makes us different?

Perhaps there is a little less separation? A little less distance?

I would like to thank you for coming out tonight. My thanks too to the School of Languages for having me here and to my friend Emilio Alzueta for inviting me. And especially thank you to you for coming here tonight. Thank you.