
Harriet Lerner

The Dance of Connection
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Q: You draw on a number of valuable stories about your family in *The Dance of Connection*. Was it difficult for you to share these personal accounts with your readers? Were members of your family concerned about your using their stories as raw material for your book?

A: Sharing personal stories is what I do best, and what I most love to do. It is easy for me, except for my concern about the feelings of others. Most people do not like to be written about, and I don't blame them. How dreadful to have a writer in the family! I run the manuscript by friends and family members who appear in my books, and I don't include anything personal without permission. My father died before I began writing this book. He appears prominently and I was glad to not have to run the manuscript by him.

Q: In *The Dance of Connection*, you describe an "experiment" you conducted, in which you regularly commented on specific qualities you admired in your husband, Steve, to emphasize the positive aspects of your relationship. Have any of your readers or clients made use of this technique? Do you continue to practice it?

A: Actually, I do continue to make an effort to notice and comment on the positive with Steve, because commenting on the negative comes automatically to me. I don't think of it as a "technique" but rather as a matter of kindness and balance and truth. Readers have commented that this chapter ("Warning Things Up") is one of the most useful to them — which surprises me.

Q: You write: "Listening is an essential part of having [a] voice." Do you find that many of the problems people have in connecting with their loved ones have to do with a refusal to listen? How important a role does listening play in emotional connection?**A:** Most people don't "refuse" to listen to people they love, since refusal implies an active intention to shut the other person out. Most of us truly want to listen. But when we are criticized or attacked — or when we are anxious or intense — we automatically become defensive. We listen for the distortions, inaccuracies, and exaggerations (which will inevitably be there), rather than listening only to understand, and saving our defense for a future conversation. Another part of listening is learning to ask questions about difficult subjects, to extend an invitation to the people we care about to tell us their stories when they are ready, and to have the courage to ask, "Is there more you haven't told me?" Learning to listen differently plays a crucial role in deepening our connections. To listen with an open heart in order to understand the other person requires intention, commitment and practice. It's a spiritual exercise, in the truest sense of the word.

Q: How would you advise readers who feel that their relationships are beyond repair? Are there any simple guidelines you would encourage them to follow as they struggle to reclaim lost friends, family members, and lovers?**A:** Sometimes we need to let go of a relationship and move on. My college friend Ralph tacked a poster on his kitchen wall that said: YOU'VE GOT TO LEARN TO LEAVE THE TABLE/WHEN LOVE'S NO LONGER BEING SERVED. Sometimes what we need to do is as simple — and as difficult as that. But sometimes, we are cut off from an important family member and the challenge is to respect the need for distance — but not leave the table. Distance and cutoffs don't imply a lack of feeling, as we commonly assume. Rather they speak to an intensity of emotion that makes contact too difficult. There are no simple guidelines for knowing when to let go and when to hang in, because this is not a simple matter. I spell out the "whys" and the "how-tos" in the book, but there are no six easy steps.

Q: In your book, you talk about the "Velcro" stage of intimacy in a relationship — when partners view each other through rose-colored glasses and tend to ignore each other's important differences. How commonly does this occur, in your experience? How do you advise readers and clients who can't seem to get past this stage in relationships, or whose relationships founder when the true selves of both partners emerge?**A:** Steamy starts are compelling but our emotions can block our objectivity and blur our capacity for clear thinking and clear speaking. If we're too eager for a relationship to work, we will overlook and excuse differences, or we will be taken by the novelty and find differences exciting or appealing. Or we may resist getting differences out in the open, looking them straight in the eye and having a good fight when necessary. Only time and authentic conversation (talking, listening, observing, questioning and thinking) get us past this Velcro stage. We need to use a clear, strong voice to bring our knowledge of the relationship into sharper focus, set limits and boundaries, define differences, and test out what's possible, rather than comfort ourselves with fantasies about how our partner might change in the future. We need to speak up, insist on fair treatment and respect, and observe the other person with his or her friends and family — and with our friends and family — since you can't learn much about a relationship if you insulate it from other important relationships. We need to know what we can live with (he's not a dog person) and what we can't (he lies) — and never count on the power of our love or nagging to create what isn't there to begin with.

Q: In the writing of *The Dance of Connection*, were you surprised by any of the truths you uncovered? Was any part of the book especially challenging for you?**A:** When you write a book you don't just say what you think. More accurately, you discover and enlarge what you think. Especially challenging for me was writing the chapter on apologies — good apologies, bad apologies, and the people who can't apologize at all. I had the opportunity to clarify — for myself and my readers — why the people who harm us the most, are the least able to apologize and be accountable. Another huge challenge for me was helping readers to clarify a bottom line position, especially in a relationship like marriage where a lot is at stake and it may feel impossible to make oneself heard. I also gained a deeper appreciation of the fact that having a voice is not just a women's issue. It's an equal opportunity employer.