

relationships and have more confidence in the relationships we share. This emotional unburdening is one more avenue to freedom.

How We Are With Others

“Our relationships are a wonderful way to evaluate our recovery, because nothing is truly learned until it is lived.”

Relationships can be wonderful opportunities for personal growth. However, in order for our relationships to be healthy, we need to evaluate, on an ongoing basis, what they are doing for us. Are we becoming a better person as a result of these relationships? Are they addressing our needs? Are the people in these relationships responding to us? Are they listening to us? Are we truly being loved? We won't evaluate our relationships realistically unless we believe in our right of choice. Believing we have choices gives us the inner power to influence or change our relationships if we so choose.

When we fail to respect ourselves or our right of choice, psychic chaos results because our denial requires us to repress our feelings and deny our pain. Our self-awareness gradually slips away. We eventually feel trapped in unhappy relationships without a voice to bring about effective change. Feeling that we don't have choices is a subtle but profound result of socialization. We came to believe that the course of our life was designed by some powerful outside force and that to deviate from that prescribed path would result in devastating loss for ourselves and those we love. Choice, we fear, will bring about such catastrophic losses that no one will be able to recover from and nothing will be gained from the use of our power. That is the stranglehold socialization has on our lives. It controls us from the inside out. Feeling that we have choices is an essential part of our existence because it paves the way for our “becoming.” It leads us out of entrapping, destructive and stagnant relationships or situations. Choice keeps us at the helm of our own destiny. It invites us to evaluate life as we are living it. Choice keeps our life open to possibilities. It keeps us spiritually alive. We have to believe that choice is our perfect right in order to employ its diverse and powerful contribution to our life. Choice allows us to dream, and it allows us to activate our anger when necessary to bring about change.

Most of us deny ourselves the right of choice because we feel overly responsible for the destiny of others. Our lack of choice can create feelings of

hopelessness in our lives, which is one of the main components of depression. No outside person or institution can convince you that you have alternatives if you don't believe you deserve them. Removing the walls that socialization has created inside of you is possible, and it may be the first choice you make to recreate the rest of your life. Rely on the modeling of other women to inspire you; and as you read or listen to their stories of courage, anticipate reclaiming your own right of choice. If you recognize the value of choice -- even vaguely -- it will begin the enfolding of your liberation.

It's perfectly normal to critically examine the relationships that we're forming or the relationships in which we are involved. We do not need to stay in unhealthy, self-deprecating relationships with anyone -- including family members. One of the most subtle social influences tells women that they should be "nice" at all times, and that "nice girls" are not critical. When we find ourselves being more devoted to being in a relationship than being happy, our healthy, critical self has gotten lost. Our self-awareness slips away, and we live without being connected to our surroundings and the people in our lives. We stop enjoying life, because the life we're living is not connected to our emotional truth. We become less and less real while we pretend to be truly alive. Being busy can often replace being happy. Denying ourselves the right of choice diminishes our essential power. Be clear, there is no life without personal choice. There is only conformity, and that is a psychic death to our inner life. Self-silencing is not the purpose of our lives, nor should it be a part of our relationships.

We have to involve our partners in our frustration, unhappiness or disillusionment. We must initiate a process of dialogue that reaches outside ourselves. Resist privatizing relationship pain. Self-actualization is not an experience we attain and then coast along, enjoying its accomplishment. Self-actualization is an ongoing invitation to live and enjoy the fruits of your talents, your intelligence and your emotional development. Self-actualization is often realized during difficult times because it forces us to move outside of our denial, our comfort zone or perceived limitations.

Like so many other aspects of our lives, self-actualization is a journey not a destination. Sometimes the journey of self-actualization is bright and glorious, and at other times, it's dark and lonely. During the dark times, it may be difficult for us to believe that anything is being accomplished. Our dark moments are more difficult to believe in because they hold confusion, fear, loneliness, and an

uncertain outcome. But, darkness actually holds a great deal of promise for all of us, because it is during these moments that we fight for our survival as we define what we stand for. In order to survive darkness, we are challenged in the deepest way. It may require that we alter parts of our thinking, feeling, and social connections in fundamental (sometimes radical) ways. If we embrace that challenge, the course of self-actualization is set. The process of “becoming” will self-perpetuate, because we’ll be more convinced that darkness and light are part of personal growth.

The privatization of our relationship pain is yet another subtle effect of socialization. Because women are thought of as the supreme “architects of relationships” and the “keepers of love,” they suffer when relationships go awry. Dysfunctional relationships become our personal condemnation when privatization is our style. Privatization isolates us from healthy resources, and we become victims of shame that tells us that we shouldn’t be having this problem. Whatever we privatize we hold in silence. Silence can be a blessing, but the silence resulting from privatization is a self-entrapment that stifles the forward movement of our lives, and as discussed earlier, our self-actualization. When we hide our pain, we are also hiding our true selves from those we love. Relationship journeys grow through conflict resolution. In healthy relationships, conflict offers each partner the opportunity to reach deep inside themselves to find a loving solution. However, we have to prepare ourselves because some partners may try to thwart our efforts to resolve any problem. In fact, they may resent both our leadership and refusal to be victimized by the problem. If this pattern persists, break the silence of privatization and seek help from professionals and friends.

When toxic silence is broken, we feel immediate and profound relief. We are comforted, and we become stronger because we’re not alone. Nothing can stop our forward movement toward a fuller life; something we must seek in all the circumstances of our living.