

Ask Connie!...*about Relationships*

Dear Connie:

I've been living with my boyfriend Olaf for six months. We dated for eight months first, and he was everything I wanted in a partner—romantic, funny, considerate. But now he's always telling me what to do, like my father did, and I'm shutting down. How could I choose someone like my father, who I still don't get along with?

—Annie

Dear Annie:

It could be that Olaf is not the best mate for you, but it's also possible that he's the perfect partner! Perfect in the sense that he is giving you an opportunity to better understand your childhood experience of your father and the effect it had on you. Until you do that, you are likely to repeat the patterns you learned in childhood, and you probably won't be happy with the result. Let's take a look at what might be going on.

What was your reaction as a child when your father told you what to do? Did you withdraw inside? Did you hide your anger and resentment as you submitted to him because it wouldn't have been safe or effective to do otherwise? Are you reacting the same way to Olaf?

As a child, the reality was that you had less power than

your father, and withdrawal (shutdown) may have been the best way to cope. As an adult, you may have unconsciously chosen someone who had a tendency to want to control, partly because it would be familiar. But from the highest spiritual perspective, being with Olaf gives you a chance to explore and heal that hurt, angry part of yourself that is still in reaction to your father.

The very thing that's most troubling to you in your interactions with Olaf is potentially a great gift in terms of your own growth. Olaf may have tendencies that remind you of your father, but he isn't your father, so you don't have to withdraw. There are other options—instead of reacting, you can learn how to respond. Reaction is automatic and unconscious; response is thoughtful and consciously chosen. You can be aware of your inner reaction, process it, and talk to Olaf about what happens inside when he tells you what to do. You can tell him what it was like for you when your father attempted to control you, and it is likely that Olaf will feel compassion for you and begin to look at why he tends to be controlling. Two guiding principles, honesty and compassion for yourself and for Olaf, are essential to a dialogue that will help you both understand

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and groups. She leads workshops, retreats and teaches Dreamwork and Pathwork. Connie devoted 9 years to Jungian analysis, training, and supervision, after graduating from the Bryn Mawr School of Social Work. She went on to graduate from the Barbara Brennan School of Healing, and Society of Souls, a kabbalistic school of healing. She is the author of *Gathering the Soul, a True Story of Spiritual Healing*. Pathwork (Pathwork.org) and Imago Relationship Therapy (Gettingthelove-youwant.org) are two easily accessible sources for the theories upon which much of this column is based.

yourselves and one another and begin to transform old negative patterns into new, positive ways of interacting.

When we're first attracted to a potential partner, and it's mutual, our higher selves interact, and it can be blissful! This is the stage of idealization and infatuation, a wonderful and necessary part of a love relationship. We feel good about ourselves—attractive, interesting, desirable. Of course we want it to last forever ...but it can't. Sooner or later, usually within six months to a year, each person's "stuff" surfaces, and the relationship becomes more real, including our imperfections.

At this stage of relationship, there will be at least some power struggles. He wants to spend every Friday night with his buddies and drinks too much; she compulsively saves coupons and drives around town all weekend looking for the cheapest chicken; he drops his clothes on the floor, she puts hers away. Each person has a stake in being right—KNOWS he/she is right! Sometimes winning the argument is more important than having the relationship, and if there are enough areas of conflict, or one area of strong conflict, the relationship will falter. Or, it will continue with power struggles that go on for years with no resolution. Have you ever watched a couple in their seventies still arguing about whether the dishes should be done by hand or in the dishwasher?

However, if you see relationship as a spiritual path, your perspective on the inevitable conflicts that arise can be quite different. Instead of getting caught in anger, blame, attack, victimization, and all the other negative feelings and patterns that can exist and persist, you can ask: “What can I learn from this?” “What is my part?” “How can I ask for what I want and honor my partner’s needs as well?”

You can also lighten up, keep your sense of humor, and continue to enjoy the easy, enjoyable parts of the relationship that attracted you to one another in the first place! Each person’s willingness to explore and accept responsibility for his/her part and to look upon the other with compassion determines whether the relationship will grow and flourish, leading to deeper love and intimacy, or not.

—Good luck, Annie!

Do you have a relationship question?

Write to Connie at conniem@mcn.net—and ask!

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