

Being Imperfect Together – 02-26-15

When Buttons are Pushed...

Sue Self, LCSW

I am hopping mad at my mother in law! She has completely misconstrued a situation in a way that makes me look like the bad guy and she, the martyr.

The content of what happened isn't important. She and I have a lot of things that we don't see eye to eye on--as in how Obama is destroying this country, or how I shouldn't drink Pepsi "because they hire gays, you know". We are not talking about harmless opinions like not wearing white after Labor Day. This isn't political, it's family, which means people I love can be impacted by what happens next.

Since I'm someone who believes that I choose, in every situation, who I'm going to be in it, and how I respond is a reflection of that, I need to ponder my choices here.

I'm asking myself: How do I want people to treat me when I'm eighty something and we don't agree? What do I want to model for my family, even though they're grown up, by the way I manage and resolve difficult relationships? How can I be the most authentic and loving?

Truthfully, for me, it's much, much easier to be authentic and loving when conflict is taking a vacation. God just keeps putting this in front of me.

Considering my options...

Perhaps I should let it go. I just don't seem to be able to do that this time (and believe me, I've done it a bunch of times!)

I could post my scathing sentiment on Facebook-- there must be something altogether gratifying in that, so many people seem to freely spout and click "post" with abandon. Though I know no one for whom that has served to heal much. Besides, that's not who I want to be in this.

I could email her. My version of the truth would be in writing, and could not be twisted, right? ..."Dear Helen, your recent decision to misrepresent the situation of 17 February is an indication of your ...". Really. This is not an office spat; this is family. Okay, how about using I statements and feeling words?...."Dear Helen, I AM SO ANGRY WITH YOU I CAN ONLY TYPE IN CAPS!!!!" I'm thinking that trying to manage my relationship with her electronically is not really all that conducive to a positive outcome. It's way too easy to be hurtful as well as misunderstood in email and texts.

I could get my husband to talk to her about it. After all, it's his mother, and his wife is the injured party. He could rescue me here. I could convince myself that he in fact, should. I'm ashamed to say, I've driven down the "do it for me" road before, and I never wind up where I want to be. He just doesn't say what I want him to say. And, it doesn't hold me accountable to my relationships.

So that leaves me with picking up the phone or ringing her doorbell. Ugh. I won't even go into why the phone isn't an option, other than to say it's not that different from email, just faster. So off I go, my heart in my hand, and my anger doing cartwheels in my stomach.

I'll skip the details. Let me just say there were some moments that were not pretty; there were tears, some angry words, a moment or two that neither of us were at our best. But you know what? She hung in there with me until we were done. Looking back, I'm kind of amazed by that, but really, I could not have hoped for better. Going in with a commitment to authenticity and lovingness doesn't make everything all pretty, but it does help to keep things from exploding. Even when the conflict is digging in its heels and refuses to dissolve, it's important to walk through it, not around it, to keep talking and attending to each other, and come out the other side. And no one died from it.

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