



CHAPTER 2

CLAIMING Your Role

*Love, when I see your face it is mottled
Love, when I see your face it is blurred
Love, when I see your face I forget where I am
I no longer see your face
I no longer call you love*

You and your partner brought many things to the relationship that you have created together. Many of those contributions served to strengthen the bond between you while others have, over time, pulled you apart. Before your relationship issues can be resolved, you must assess and claim all that you have contributed, both positive and negative. You need to understand the role you have played and how it developed.

TRIGGERS FROM THE PAST

A part of every past relationship continues to exist in your current union in the form of memories, preferences, and reactions. Unhealed wounds, resentment, and anger from the past can become part of the present when they are triggered by something your current partner says or does. You may not understand why you react so strongly, and your partner is likely to be equally confused by your reaction. Your behavior may even serve as a trigger for your partner's own past hurts.

Stored pain may be leftover from childhood, previous romantic relationships, or a myriad of other things. If, for example, you had unresolved issues with your father or mother, those wounds can seep into your love relationships. An argument that in a healthy relationship would be resolved through clear communication can turn into World War III when it triggers unmet needs and anger from a past relationship. It is no longer about you and your partner, but about you and your past, and your partner just gets caught in the crossfire. Because your partner doesn't understand the reason for the intensity of your reaction, tremendous hurt and confusion can result.

When I received the letter from graduate school telling me I had been accepted into the program, my husband held it high in the air above me so that I couldn't reach it. He was just teasing, but I became furious. Someone from my past had teased me mercilessly in the same manner, and I was really reacting to years of that person's taunting. But it was my husband who got the full force of my anger.

ASSESSING YOUR BEHAVIOR

The potential for misdirected anger makes it important to be very clear about everything you've brought into your relationships. One of my clinical supervisors told me that when you get into bed with your partner, you're sharing the bed with all of his or her previous partners (and family), along with your own. So the bed can get a little crowded! By examining past relationships and dealing with any unresolved issues, you'll create a lot more space in the bed for you and your partner.

Examining past relationships and assessing your behavior in them takes courage. You have to look in the mirror and ask, "What was my part in this? How did I help create the problems?" It's so much easier to blame the other person, especially when you've gotten a lot of sympathy from friends for all

the injustice you suffered.

When I hear someone describe a pending breakup with phrases such “he is,” “she did it again,” “he won’t,” or “that greedy...,” I know there is a long way to go. Please don’t misunderstand. Anger is a real, legitimate, and necessary part of the process. Go ahead and be angry. Write out your feelings, telling your best friend what a bitch she is and your husband what an ungrateful bastard he is. Then get to the important part: it doesn’t matter what he or she is. If you choose to end the relationship, the only person you will take with you is you. So work on yourself. Concentrate on what you can do differently. Change yourself so that you can change the things you did that added to the demise of your last relationship.

EXPECTATIONS

When you entered this union, were you prepared to do your part or did you instead expect your partner to make up for all your unmet needs from the past? Were you hoping this partner would bend over backwards to be perfect and make you safe from pain and struggle? Asking your partner to be perfect is akin to saying, “Don’t be real; you and your needs are less important than mine.”

If you think of yourself as a giving person who has understandably carried a little sensitivity from the past, it may come as a shock to be described as a controller who is manipulating the relationship for her benefit instead of building a relationship based on intimacy and love. But when you gain some clarity about your current situation, you may come to realize that your partner has tired of making up for your past wounds and has chosen to be authentic in his interactions with you. Now it’s up to you to determine how you feel about this “real” individual and whether you want to remain with him as he truly is.

DROPPING YOUR BAGGAGE

Being in a relationship automatically carries the risk of being hurt. As difficult as it might be to face your contribution to the issues between you and your partner, it's critical for the health of not only your current relationship, but any you might have in the future. No matter what happens between you and your partner, your expectations, triggers, and old hurts will continue to affect you until they are completely resolved.

As you begin the work of healing past injuries and resentments, ask yourself, "Am I considerate? Do I compromise? Do I listen? Do I give? Do I give to myself? Do I ask for what I want?" We teach others how to treat us. If, in the past, you have accepted unacceptable behavior and you haven't asked for what you want, then you're likely to repeat that behavior pattern with every partner.

MAKING A CLEAR CHOICE

If you carry a lot of baggage, I recommend that you work through those issues fully before making the ultimate decision about whether to continue or end your current relationship. If the pain runs deep or if you have difficulty resolving past hurts, counseling may be helpful in healing the wounds.

Even after you have assessed your past and begun to deal with old hurts, you may still be left with significant problems in your relationship. But through the process of examining and claiming your contributions to the issues between you, you can make a clear choice as to whether you will stay or leave. And, whatever you decide, you will be able to act with love.



EXAMPLE 1

I know a couple who have been married for 54 years. Even more impressive than their relationship longevity is that they are as much in love now as they were when they started, if not more so. Each of them always has something nice to say about the other. Their comments don't reflect the narcissistic bragging that stems from seeing your partner as a reflection of you (e.g., "Did you know that Steve was first in his division of tennis? And did I tell you the church wants him to speak next Sunday?") They instead talk about behaviors. (e.g., "I was so touched that George washed my car. He really knows how to make me feel special." or "I don't know if I could have beat my opponent in the lawsuit without Hallie's support.") That kind of acknowledgment is sincere, heartwarming, and inspiring. That kind of support keeps relationships going strong.



EXAMPLE 2

Liz says that one of the worst things she does is ignore her own feelings. As a result, she deals with her husband Tim in a passive-aggressive way. When Tim doesn't offer a romantic gesture on special days (such as Valentine's day), Liz is hurt and sees his lapse as evidence that Tim doesn't love her. Instead of voicing her disappointment, Liz retaliates by burning his dinner or "forgetting" to wash his good-luck shirt before an important golf game. She engages in silent warfare that can only undermine and ultimately destroy the very thing she says she wants.

Liz could, instead, address Tim directly, saying, "It may seem silly, but I put a lot of stock in romantic, even schmaltzy, gestures like flowers and

cards. I feel disappointed when you don't do those things." Addressing the situation can be risky. Liz may be ignored, laughed at, or rejected. But if she never states her case, Liz will continue to live in the midst of an emotional cold war. Giving Tim an opportunity to hear her also gives him a chance to change. If he ignores her feelings after she has made them clear, she'll know there are deeper issues to address in their relationship.

EXERCISE 1

Buy a copy of *The Artist's Way* and write the morning papers, as the author suggests. This will give you a great deal of insight into your own issues and your role in your life's circumstances. You will see the impact your parents had on you and how, perhaps unconsciously, you have carried that behavior forward or elicited the same behavior.

If you come from an alcoholic or dysfunctional family, I urge you to buy John Bradshaws *Healing the Shame that Binds You*. He offers several helpful suggestions and exercises.

I also encourage all clients to walk, run, do yoga, or engage in some other form of exercise. Physical activity boosts self esteem and helps you deal effectively with stress and anger. If you really want to get an A+ in therapy, I highly recommend meditation. I could not have gotten through some of the rough spots in my life without it.

EXERCISE 2

For each problem in your relationship, ask yourself, "What am I objecting to? What does this behavior touch off for me? What's my part?" The process of uncovering and resolving past issues can take weeks, months, or years, so be patient.