



I Can Relate!

The monthly missalette on Relational Practice

Home for the Holidays: Relational Reciprocity at the Dinner Table

A key aspect of Being Relational for any DR practitioner is engagement. Quality engagement. We all know the difference between quality engagement and, well, non-quality engagement. It's a two-sided coin experience, right? When we interact with others in a quality sort of way, there is an ease, right? It's just nice and easy, and not just for you but for the other person too. And in that space of ease there can be a more expanded space created for better understanding, relationship, and even problem solving. And for some folks, even wisdom, depth, and insight. However, when it's an interaction that is not quality, it's rather empty, just transactional. Worse, a non-quality interaction might look good for one person but if it's at the expense of the other person, that causes suffering. Short term gain for one; long-term suffering for both.

It might not seem that way at first glance, but we know now that the experience of a fracture in an interaction creates a negative experience for *both* people. A series of fractures interactions creates disconnect and alienation and can eventually lead to demonization. But let's take a simple example to illustrate the point of the negative outcome from a single fracture created by non-quality interaction. Let's say your feelings are hurt by someone else and you retreat from them, or perhaps you scratch back. The other person likely feels bad, at least a little, that they did or said something that caused that, or they feel confused about why you were impacted in that way since that was not their intention, or they thought you could take what they said or did and they are uncertain about why you didn't, or they retreat from you and wall you off.

Essentially, what can happen is that both people lose the wherewithal to be curious and to engage in ways to restore the damage. Why is this? It's because they are *both* experiencing a sense of weakness and a sense of self-absorption. ***It's an interaction phenomenon.*** And it happens to the smartest of us, the strongest of us, and the best of us. Take political discussions at the holiday dinner table as an example. They are often non-quality engagement. And they have divided friends and family and soured what would otherwise be precious face to face time together.

The inverse of this interaction phenomenon is **Relational Reciprocity**. The positive human experience that stems from a focus on quality engagement. That focus can

come from just one person, a person who has cultivated some self-awareness. The awareness is that humans have an ability to rebound when given the chance for quality engagement, a way of engaging that is good for you and the other person, even if the subject matter is difficult or the personalities are not in alignment. For instance, in difficult interactions, with a relational skillset, the potential for Relational Reciprocity occurs when just one person is curious, open, non-judgmental, not assuming the worst about others, giving the benefit of the doubt, humble, generous and kind—being relational. They are strong if they have a view, but it is held in a relational way, with room to be changed, with a hopeful view, an optimistic view, a creative view of what is possible. And the more relational you are with others, the more curious, open, non-judgmental, not assuming the worst about others, giving the benefit of the doubt, humble, generous and kind others are likely to be with you. It's that simple. It's Relational Reciprocity.

The hard part is the choice to Be Relational rather than transactional. It's hard because it takes strength, not weakness to make that choice. It's hard because we may have walled off someone, *but when we realize we did so not out of strength but out of weakness and self-absorption* because we didn't know how to deal well with them, or how to say what we wanted to say, that begins the opening for a new start to quality engagement. *When that choice to Be Relational is made, and you are the person to choose, it starts the chain of relational action and relational reaction that creates Relational Reciprocity.* Even around political discussions, especially around political discussions. Your holiday dinner table is waiting for one person to Be Relational, and that person could be you, over and over and over again. Try it out. Let me know. Happy Holidays.

Sending love

Louise Phipps Senft is a Chair of the Relational Practices Task Force and author of the best-seller, *Being Relational: The Seven Ways to Quality Interaction and Lasting Change* (HCI 2015). She is the founder of Baltimore Mediation (1993), is a Distinguished Fellow of the International Academy of Mediators with a practice in catastrophic injury and complex business, divorce, and trust and estate conflict. She is a nationally recognized trainer in relational theory and practice and transformative mediation.