

“He had potential”

By Mel Schwartz

I often hear people; particularly women, speak of their current or former partners referring to the potential that they had previously seen in them. Asking why they chose these men to partner with, they speak of aspects of these men they believed that they could develop or guide toward achieving the desired goal. The story line might be, “I knew he’d make a good father,” or “He had good qualities and I thought that whatever was missing would develop over time.” Too often, these notions of potential are simply our way of not coming to terms with the current reality or what we truly deserve.

It’s not in our best interests to enter into a relationship based upon our expectations of someone else changing. Although we have every right to engage in our own growth and actualization, we shouldn’t base our happiness on another’s change. If your happiness requires another person’s change, you ordinarily have a prescription for unhappiness and drama. If the other person is not relatively complete in terms of your expectations of a partner, then why are you settling for less? Underscoring this dilemma is typically an issue of self-esteem. It requires a healthy and authentic self-esteem to not settle for a relationship that falls short of the mark. One in which there’s a drama around what’s missing in the other individual. If there’s something that you need for them to change, why are you choosing to be with them?

I liken the phenomenon of choosing romantic partners somewhat metaphorically to a proper tennis match. If you’re looking for a good tennis game, you wouldn’t like settle for a partner who wasn’t reasonably up to your capabilities. Could you imagine hitting balls with someone based upon the premise that they will eventually improve? That would likely be quite a frustrating experience. It wouldn’t then make much sense to blame them for the mediocre game. Their skills are what they are. The same applies in relationship. If the other person doesn’t fundamentally suit you for who they are in the present, then you’re choosing to be with them suggests an underlying issue within yourself. This sets up a drama around your need and eventually your disappointment or anger when they don’t change.

If this describes your circumstances, you might ask yourself what you do now that you find yourself in this predicament. Requiring or demanding that another change is a sure fire way to guarantee that everything remains static. No one likes to hear that they need to change. Placing fault on your partner will likely cause them to be defensive, if not altogether reactive. There is however, a paradoxical intervention that often produces results. What you desire from your partner, give to them. Rather than telling them what they need to do; be more loving, listen more, etc., try modeling that behavior for them. This often shifts the energy of the relationship and permits your partner to give you what you’ve wanted all along.

Mel Schwartz LCSW is a visionary psychotherapist, thinker and author who earned his graduate degree from Columbia University. He has been a keynote speaker at Yale University. Mel is the author of *The Art of Intimacy*, *The Pleasure of Passion* and is

currently writing, *Emergent Thinking*®. He is the founder of the *Emergent Thinking*®
Process. He is in private practice in Westport, CT. and Mt. Kisco, NY. Visit his web site
at www.MelSchwartz.com.