

*Names used in this column are changed to honor client confidentiality.*

## **The Grander Version of Love**

A client in the throes of divorce asked me: "Can love last?"

This is a problem with which many people wrestle. Is the Hollywood model of love attainable? Does "Happily Ever After" truly exist?

Scores of people have tried and failed; some, to their credit, have tried with every fiber of their being. So the question remains: Can love last? It can, but probably not the intoxicating, head-swirling-in-the-stratosphere-type. That's usually temporary. But what can last is something that sprouts after the fireworks taper off. Call it the grander version of love.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, explores the concept of love in his book, [Teachings on Love](#). He maintains that love can thrive but only in a climate that includes four aspects: loving kindness, compassion, joy, and freedom. He emphasizes that all four must be in place to have a warm and sustainable relationship. These aspects of love are interdependent so if even one is missing, the three others are affected.

What's more, before we can hope to give any of these four aspects to another person, we must be able to give them to ourselves. Hanh writes: "Only when we are able to listen to our needs and suffering, can we come to accept us and to love us. And our love of other people depends on this capacity of self love."

Loving kindness in a relationship refers to treating each other with the same degree of tenderness we did in the beginning. It includes loving speech.

Lynn's husband, Carl, frequently makes rude comments to her. When she approached him about it, he explained his rudeness away by saying he's comfortable around her. He's essentially saying: "I feel comfortable being rude to you."

That way of thinking would seem foreign to Hanh, who wrote: "You don't insult or abuse the one you love." When harshness is occurring, walls go up around the heart. Carl needs to realize that by hurting Lynn, he's hurting the relationship ... and therefore himself. How can joy—another aspect of love—flourish in such an atmosphere?

"I can't believe she gets upset over such small things!" Carl argued in one of our sessions. He was referring to his constant outpouring of offensive remarks. I had to point out that "to her they're not small."

By ignoring and arguing against Lynn's emotions, Carl seems to be lacking the next of Hanh's four aspects of love: compassion. Compassion is having "deep concern" that manifests as a heartfelt desire to understand your partner's distress.

Hanh places a great deal of emphasis on understanding. He writes: "Without understanding, love can't be true love. We must look deeply in order to see and understand the needs, aspirations, and suffering of the ones we love." He goes on to say that understanding—"true seeing"—activates a desire and a "willingness to remove the pain in the person we love." So, when it comes to this brand of love, we seek to alleviate pain, not create it.

Freedom is another aspect of love. Hanh also refers to it as "equanimity," or appreciating that our partner is equal in terms of needs, rights, interests, importance and personal liberty. He writes: "True love allows you to preserve your freedom and the freedom of your beloved." To Hanh, love doesn't insist that your partner satisfy you and it doesn't expect your partner to alter herself or himself to suit you.

One client told his wife: "I didn't marry you to become another person."

And love doesn't make demands. By the same token, love doesn't submit. Hanh writes: "When we love someone and that person restrains their own freedom—freedom to be himself or herself—then that person is in a prison, the prison called love."

Love shouldn't be a prison. And true love isn't.

Once mutual freedom is in place, along with loving kindness and compassion, the inevitable result is joy, Hanh's third aspect of love. Joy is both the result and the cause of a good relationship. But joy must blossom within first. "If we do not have peace/joy within ourselves," Hanh writes, "we have nothing to share."

He offers wise advice. "True love always brings joy to you and the person you love. If your love isn't bringing joy to you and the person you love, it's not true love. You have to work to transform it."

Lynn and Carl have some work to do.

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