

Extraordinary Relationships

*A Platform Address by Jone Johnson, Leader
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Reflection

The news, especially this week, has been full of musings and allegations about morality and ethics of relationships. There are many different lenses to use to examine our attitudes about the politics or philosophy or psychology of the events – today, I choose to focus on the perspective of relationships.

As we consider our own reaction to the events of the day, let us remember some basic ethical principles of relationships that apply to marriages, to work relationships, to relationships between friends who confide secrets in one another, to relationships between political allies and even political adversaries. As I think about the complexities of the Starr investigation and the many individuals caught up in the events around it, I see so many violations of these principles.

- That ethical relationships should be built upon mutual respect.
 - That ethical relationships require truth telling and honesty.
 - That ethical relationships do not take advantage of others for selfish political, economic, or sexual gain.
 - That ethical relationships require making and keeping commitments.
 - That sexuality is a gift to be valued and treasured, not used to take advantage of others, but to enrich our lives.
 - That ethical relationships have room for forgiveness – when those who have failed or erred not only are contrite, but make amends to those they've hurt.
 - That ethical relationships are more difficult or easier to build and maintain, in part, based on the relationships we have seen in our childhood.
 - That ethical relationships, in the end, are rewarding – and the pain caused by unethical relationships is, usually, eventually borne by all those involved.
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Words to Ponder

From M. Scott Peck (*A World Waiting to Be Born*):

As Martin Buber suggested, narcissists are incapable of I-Thou relationships. Some narcissists do recognize other people as being different, but as soon as this recognition occurs, the other becomes one of “them” — the enemy. Thus they have what have come to be called “I-Them” or “We-Them” relationships. It is an ‘either you’re totally with me or else you’re against me’ kind of psychology.

Sometimes narcissists seem unable to recognize the “personhood” of other people. For them, others exist only to be used, as if they were merely mechanical tools or unfeeling pieces of property. These are what Buber referred to as “I-It” relationships.

Finally, narcissists often seem unable to recognize the difference between themselves and others at all. They solely have what are now named I-I relationships, where they relate only to themselves. It may seem bizarre for someone to be incapable of recognizing others, but unfortunately, the condition is not uncommon.

From Kahlil Gibran:

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and the daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them,
but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

Platform Address

I certainly didn't know when I chose this topic that this would be the week the world focused on a particular set of problematic relationships. While my reflection this morning focused on that issue, I really don't want to add to the bad habit of making the relationships of our public figures a favorite discussion topic.

In the end, it's far less important to most of us what public figures do in their relationships than with how we live our own relationships. Too much of the focus on the relationship problems of celebrities and politicians, I believe, has the effect primarily of taking our eyes off our own issues and working on them.

I titled this Platform address with the same title as a book on relationships which I believe is one of the best on the topic: *Extraordinary Relationships*. While the details of that book are very helpful to those of us who are committed to improving human relationships – a central purpose of this Ethical Society – the simple idea of focusing on what GOOD relationships look like, is surprisingly rare, surprisingly empowering. Not just good relationships, but extraordinary relationships.

I am not talking about perfect relationships. There is no such thing as a perfect relationship, just as there is no such thing as a perfect person. We are incomplete and imperfect people, and so our relationships will be imperfect and incomplete. But our relationships can improve, and the possibility of having extraordinary relationships is within the reach of most of us. If we are willing to do what it takes to build and maintain those relationships.

When I perform weddings, I usually say, either in the counseling session with the couple, or in the actual ceremony, something which I consider basic to the committed relationship which we call marriage: a part of getting married, making the commitment of a life together, is a shift from a primary responsibility to take care of your self, to a primary responsibility that becomes three-fold: still, to take care of yourself, but second, to take care of your partner, and third, to take care of the relationship. Each is worthy of time and effort and love and nurturing.

In the reflection this morning, I listed some of the characteristics that I identify with ethical relationships – whether, as I said, between committed partners in a marriage, or between friends, or between people who

work together, or between political friends and even adversaries. Any ethical relationship involves those three separate and related responsibilities: yourself, the other person, and the relationship itself.

What does a good – even extraordinary – relationship look like?

My own family background had many marriages which were basically okay, but had problems with intimacy. Self-help books, at least until fairly recently, tended to focus on the problems in relationships, or on the skills needed to fix poor relationships, and didn't often even bother to describe what good relationships looked like. Most public figures don't have very good relationships for us to use as models.

When I found the book by Roberta Gilbert, “*Extraordinary Relationships*,” I was struck not just by the details in the book that are useful and, in my opinion, right on target about the work involved in building towards better relationships, but by the model she lays out of what an extraordinary relationship looks like. So, even though I've enriched my experience since then with other resources as well, I have borrowed her title for this platform.

It is important to remember that this is an ideal – no relationship is there all the time, but some are closer, and focusing on the ideal can help us with the never-ending work of improving ourselves and our own relationships.

First, the extraordinary relationship is a relationship of separate individuals. Neither is dependent on the other for emotional fulfillment, for happiness. That doesn't mean that the relationship and the other person don't enrich the other – happiness and enriched fulfillment are a byproduct, however, not a condition. We are less likely to find happiness with a partner, if we are dependent upon that partner to provide us happiness.

Another part of separateness is that each takes responsibility for their own part of the relationship. Each is able to think separately, make requests and take positions, and understand his or her own feelings, and express that to the other when necessary. The reverse is too often true – that one partner in the marriage, or friendship, has the major portion of responsibility to think, or to feel, or to figure out what the other person wants and needs.

Another crucial part of separateness, when it's authentic, is that each respects the separateness of the other, too. I used the reading this morning on narcissism to remind us that, in relationships, the person who is a narcissist is not able to function fully as a separate person. They either don't see the other at all, or they see the other as an extension of their own self, and thus only there for use, not as a separate person. Separateness isn't just for one's self – it is also a recognition of the separateness of the other.

The separateness I'm talking about here is not disconnection. It's having, in psychological terms, good boundaries. I've long appreciated the insight, which I first found in reading Scott Peck's earliest book, of the difference between being "in love" when we believe that the boundaries have dissolved, and on the other hand "loving" where we nurture the expansion of the boundaries of the other and ourselves. Being "in love" doesn't last. "Loving" can.

Felix Adler, who founded the first Ethical Society and whose words we open with on Sunday mornings, wrote extensively about relationships, including intimate relationships like marriage. He saw the chief advantage, to the individual, of an intimate and ethical relationship, as twofold: first, a place for children to be nurtured and cared for and raised with acceptance and understanding and guidance. And second, a place for each individual to be challenged to grow ethically or spiritually, by experiencing a person who is different from yourself. If that other person were not truly an individual, herself or himself, then your own growth would not be enhanced by your relationship. Separateness is the basis for the mutual growth that is part of what makes an extraordinary relationship an ethical relationship.

The second characteristic of an extraordinary relationship is equality. Not only is the other person a separate individual whose differences from our own we respect, but that individual has equal rights to have her or his needs met, to have a say about where the relationship is going. The two people in the relationship must work out tough issues so that both have their needs addressed. The creativity of an extraordinary relationship comes precisely from that which is often scary about this kind of relationship: it will, inherently, be a relationship of conflict.

If both parties in the ethical relationship are separate individuals, with different needs and desires, and if both are equal, then there are no easy answers for

who makes final decisions, how to resolve problems. Conflict must be worked out creatively – and that is where the growth for the two individuals is multiplied. Each is drawn out of the self, while remaining fully a self. There is a kind of transcendence that is also rooted on solid ground.

And finally, third, an extraordinary relationship is open. I'm not, of course, talking about the "open marriage" that was a popular idea in the 1970s, but something very different. An open relationship is one which has flexibility in it – there is no script in some book or manual for how it will exactly play out. But the patterns learned from our parents are also not what will drive the relationship.

Open relationships are ones in which both people can honestly share their real feelings, beliefs, and motivations, and know that these will be honored and respected, even where there is disagreement. Blaming is a way to close a conversation – acceptance of appropriate responsibility is critical for an open relationship. Each can feel that they can be themselves – honestly and completely – and not risk the relationship. Listening is an important part of the communication of an open relationship – if there is no listening, it is not truly open.

By honoring and respecting emotions, a paradox is that emotions will not drive the relationship. When emotions are not accepted by a supposed partner, or when the partners are not truly equal, or when one is too caught up in the emotions of the other instead of maintaining an emotional separateness, it's difficult to even get to calmness, problem-solving, conflict-resolving that is necessary for a relationship to thrive. When we can't trust our partner to react to our ideas and dreams and plans at a level of problem-solving rather than emotional reactivity, then we cannot be fully open, and we cannot be ourselves.

A connected separateness – an equal partnership – an open relationship built on communication and acceptance and creativity – these are essential for a relationship to thrive. This extraordinary relationship will help each of the individuals in it to thrive, too.

Nobody is there all the time – but we can all work to make our friendships, work relationships, community memberships, family relationships with children or parents or spouses or other loved ones more like that ideal.

What are some of the skills involved in building relationships that have those three criteria?

1) Those who have been through the “straight talk” method of relationship-building have learned important skills for building extraordinary relationships. In “straight talk” you learn to get in better touch with your own feelings and emotions and thoughts, and learn to communicate these without loaded emotional language and without blaming or attempting to control the other person.

2) Understanding the patterns of behavior we’ve all been raised with is crucial. If you learned as a child to hide from conflict, it’s probably difficult to deal with conflict now. If you learned to enjoy and relish conflict, you may have little motivation to manage or resolve conflict, and may actually seek to avoid a resolution. Understanding the patterns and making them conscious is critical work.

3) Making the commitment to look at your own behavior and its influence on a relationship is absolutely crucial. Blaming patterns that you were raised with, blaming those in your life who have wronged you, may be technically accurate, but until you learn to be responsible for choices now and in the future, you will still be entrapped by those patterns and past victimization.

4) Taking responsibility for changing your behavior is the next crucial step after understanding. You cannot change others directly. You can change how you interact with them, interrupting and disrupting the ways that you’ve interacted before.

5) Telling the truth in relationships is essential. Separate and open doesn’t mean “I do anything I want and I don’t have to tell him/her.” That’s not a relationship. The kind of truth-telling I’m talking about is being open and complete about what you are feeling and thinking and perceiving. Two special benefits will come of truth-telling: first, this kind of truth is important because the pain of not telling the truth will eventually be far worse than the discomfort of telling the truth. Second, truth-telling will help you get to a deeper level of understanding of each other, and connect on a more authentic level with the true self of the other. You will see each other more as your real selves.

6) If the relationship is to be equal and open then you also need to accept truth-telling, not just practice it. Keeping emotionally unentangled when your partner is

telling you how they feel or perceive is important if your partner is going to be able to fully express those feelings and perceptions. Just as you need to share deeply, so does your partner. I’m amazed at how often people assume that they get to share their perceptions and feelings – and they don’t want to hear them from the other. Equality is important here, you both need to be able to tell your truth to the other, and have it heard and listened to.

Accepting truth-telling means that you accept that the other is responsible for their feelings and thoughts and perceptions, and accept responsibility for your own. If you have to hear from someone their interpretation of your feelings – their assumptions that they know your feelings or thoughts or motivations better than you do – then you will be less likely to bother to share what you ARE thinking and feeling. Interpreting the other’s feelings and thoughts are that person’s responsibility. Stick with your own feelings and thoughts.

7) Keep your agreements in the relationship. Trust is easier to lose than to rebuild. Making commitments is just as important as keeping them – it’s easy to decide that the way to keep commitments is not to make any. But without commitments, there is no connection and no respect of the individuality of the other person. A commitment assumes equality and separateness, and yet at the same time is the bond of connection. Breaking commitments breaks the connection and, at the same time, invades the boundary between you and the other as the commitment-breaker puts their own convenience above the other. Make reasonable commitments, and keep them.

8) We all want to be masters of our world, our universe, our relationships. But an open relationship of two separate yet connected individuals, each equal, will be beyond the control of either person. Trying to control the other is a disrespect of the boundary between you, and of the individual self of the other. To live in an extraordinary relationship, you need to accept that you will not control it or the other person. It adds uncertainty, but it also ensures a creativity that will enhance the growth of both individuals.

9) Build pleasure into your life. It’s not all hard work, it’s about having fun, enjoying love and friendship, finding joyfulness, doing things together that build memories of happiness.

10) While much of what I’ve talked about was directed towards intimate relationships with our closest life

partner – most of the same principles work with our aging mother or father, our adolescent or grown son or daughter, our professional colleagues, our co-members of this Ethical Society, our friends. We can't always practice full equality with all those in our circle -- sometimes there are power differences or differences in maturity which make that impossible to fully practice – children, employees we can hire and fire, etc. – but we can strive towards building or growing more equality even there.

Our unconscious patterns, assumptions, feelings, and motivations can undermine our best hopes for extraordinary relationships – or even our hopes for just better ones. Consciously aiming for the three goals – a connection of separate individuals – equality and partnership – and openness, flexibility, creativity – can help to open up our lives to more joy, more love, more authentic connection. The ten practices I've described can help move towards those goals more deliberately, more surely.

As birds have a built-in desire and tendency to build nests, so do, I believe, human beings have a built-in desire and tendency to build relationships. The challenge is to build relationships that are more humane, that serve every individual involved, and that add to the creativity and diminish the suffering in our lives. It is within our reach to have more extraordinary relationships.

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Web sites with more information

Northern Virginia Ethical Society: www.noves.org

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American Ethical Union: www.aeu.org

Books on relationships, including the book
Extraordinary Relationships :
www.jjsbooks.com/books/relation.htm