

Introduction

Love, Love, Love...

All you need is love...

What makes the world go round is love sweet love...

I can't live if living is without you...

If you leave me now, you'll take away the biggest part of me...

How we all long for love. How we all live for love. The things we do for love. How great we feel when we are in love. All the songs we sing about love. All the art that was made out of love. There is no doubt about it, love really and truly is at the core of our being, of our dreams, of our greatest wishes and unfortunately sometimes our worst nightmare...

This book is a fundamentally optimistic book. After a life full of personal lessons and in working with my clients, I found to my surprise that the way to a good relationship is not that complicated! The couples that I worked with, and that committed to doing follow up homework together and individually, saw a substantial and lasting improvement in their day to day life. This was such a wonderful discovery. There seemed to be a basic logic to relationships. And it was possible to find this logic, decipher it, do the necessary work together and heal.

That is what this book is about. How to heal the relationship that we once started so full of love, hope and good intentions. How can we find back and not lose each other again? Or how can we prevent losing each other if we are still enjoying a loving day to day interaction?

One of the most fundamental things that became clear over and over again in my work with couples, was that 'when two people are open for

contact, they will always be well, no matter how big the problems they might be facing'. One of my clients put it this way during a couple's seminar, and this deceptively simple phrase kept coming back again and again. Whenever there is a problem you can be sure that one or both is not open for contact....

Also it became crystal clear that in order to heal a relationship both partners need to work individually and together on their problems. The nicely coined slogan 'you can only heal yourself' as an answer to people in therapy who asked what to do about problems with their partner, was clearly misleading and untrue... In fact, those couples where one of the two does a lot of work on themselves while the other continues in his or her old routine are the couples that often fall apart.

But first let's take one step back. Before we learn how to decipher and get to work on what is holding us back from living the love that we once shared, we are often in the dark about what went wrong and more important what to do about it.

In spite of our ardent hope for love, it seems to be very difficult for most of us to create an enduring and loving relationship. The figures are clear: in Belgium a truly shocking three out of four marriages break up, in the US more than fifty percent ends in a divorce, in all of the EU 50% fails, in Spain divorce rates have doubled (source: Eurostat 2009), in the last ten years and in Holland approximately 35% doesn't hold till 'death do us part'. The average Dutch marriage lasts 14.5 years¹. The second seven year's itch?

If prospects for staying together are not very hopeful, how about the quality of the relationships that do survive the test of time? All those marriages that do hold fast...But to what price? Many couples live their 'mutual individual' lives, hardly sharing much more than the practical side of their 'family organization' – household, children, family duties, etc. They might have long given up on truly sharing their lives and have settled into living more or less peacefully under the same roof... Long lost are the days of passion, inspiration and joy, endless conversations, sharing intimate emotions and walking hand in hand. In a sad way these couples, even though their lives might be quite functional, have almost become like strangers, intimate strangers...In PRI we call this kind of behavior the defense

¹ Eurostat 2009

mechanism² of Denial of Needs (DoN), which I shall explain more in detail in Chapter 4.

Then there are those couples who continue in spite of all the conflicts that they never seem to be able to solve. They stay together but go on fighting over no matter what. Fighting has become their way of life. Who doesn't know one of these couples who usually start putting each other down at the dinner table in front of their guests? Not hindered by the presence of onlookers, maybe they even like the exhibitionistic aspect, they take up a lot of time and emotional space with their fighting. These couples have long since lost hope that there is a possibility of talking constructively to each other, expressing their feelings while trusting that the other person will listen empathetically, and in that way coming to a mutual understanding and a solution of the problem. In PRI these people are stuck in what we call the False Power (FP) defense³. Getting angry, irritated, judgmental etc. provides them with a way not to feel painful feelings that they carry inside themselves.

A last sad stereo-type of an unfulfilling relationship is the well-known caricature where one of the two bosses the other around. Either the wife bickers at her spineless husband who seemingly conforms to every command or the bullying husband who completely dominates his wife's life. The misbalance in power in these relationships is obvious. Both partners seem to have come to accept it and live their lives in their 'stable dysfunctionality'....In PRI this kind of combination is seen as fueled by an enduring interaction of the defenses called False Power and Fear⁴.

² *The essence of PRI theory is that there are five ways – defense mechanisms – to defend ourselves against feeling old pain from our past, pain we needed to repress. All of us use these five defenses unconsciously. Denying that there is a problem, is one of these defenses, it is called Denial of Needs. See Chapter 4 for further explanation of the five defenses.*

³ *See Chapter 4 for a further explanation. False Power is one of the five ways in which we defend ourselves unconsciously against old pain coming up. False Power consists of negative feelings and thoughts about others – anger, irritation, jealousy, etc.*

⁴ *Fear is another one of the five defense mechanisms, just like False Power and Denial of Needs. Or put differently: one of the five ways to defend ourselves unconsciously against our old pain from coming to the surface. See Chapter 4 for further explanation.*

In a way the three above examples can be seen as prisons that we have created for ourselves. Prisons because as time goes by it becomes harder and harder to get out, even if there are many days that we toss and turn and ask ourselves 'how did I ever end up in this mess?'

Apart from the emotional suffering that is the daily reality of many couples, the amount of suffering caused by problems related to physical intimacy is quite impressive. In my experience not more than 10% of couples, after the initial years of passion, enjoy a mutually fulfilling sexual relationship. An astonishing 30% has no sexual contact at all anymore. This is a well-kept secret as not having sex seems to be the last taboo in our 'modern' society...And that leaves us with 60% that struggle on and off (more on than off) with their physical intimacy. He wants it more than she. She is tired or has a headache. He is afraid and insecure and suffers from erection problems or premature ejaculation. She is not attracted by him anymore. He doesn't feel excited by her anymore. They fantasize or look at pictures of other people...etc. etc. The list of sexual problems is long and couples suffer and struggle or give up completely because 'the whole thing' has become too painful or just plain 'too much of a hassle'....

Are we hopelessly lost? Can our relationships be saved? Is there a light at the end of the tunnel??

Because the quality of our relationships – or the lack thereof – has such an impact on our daily well-being, including our health⁵, the topic is very popular. The time is more than ready to write a book about relationships from the point of view of PRI.

What is really going on that is making it so tough for most of us to build a loving and fulfilling relationship? Is it enough to respect each other and learn how to communicate? To express your own needs and to learn to listen to your partners needs and wants? To learn to negotiate? To find an activity together? Is that what it is about why we don't make it through? Or is there a

⁵ *Many studies have shown people in stable relationships enjoy better health and recover from illnesses quicker than singles.*

larger underlying problem, that keeps sabotaging our efforts to do all of the above and make it work?

Those of you who know PRI, will understand what I am getting at. I will show beyond a doubt that you can have all the communication skills you like, but that won't be enough to get out of recurring patterns that are damaging your relationship. Patterns that seem to come up again and again, driving you both crazy and hopeless... Patterns that stem from your long gone past and that won't leave the present alone no matter how well we learn to communicate.

Also we need to consider the far reaching effects that our struggle with our partner has on our children. Children from divorced parents have a higher chance of getting divorced themselves (Innocent Prisoners, Bosch, 2007), lacking faith in the longevity of relationships.

On the other hand, staying together 'because of the children' is an option to consider carefully. If children perceive the marriage as not so bad, the split up makes them feel as if they don't count. If, on the other hand, the problems are clear to them this effect is not found and children might well agree with the decision no matter how much they prefer their parents staying together... Children are very perceptive though and will feel that deep running troubles are undermining their parent's relationship.

Another important aspect is whether the way you are living with your partner is the example that you want to pass on to your kids. You might sacrifice living a life that is good for you or settle for an unhealthy relationship because of your love for your children. However, if that means that you are teaching them by your example (that is how children learn, not by your words!) that it is good to stay in an empty or unhealthy relationship and be unhappy, is that really the message you want to hand over to your children? Is that what you would wish for them?

In Chapter 7 will address in more detail the difficult dilemma of how to know when it is time to stay and keep on trying, or accept that leaving is the thing to do.....

So we suffer from our lousy relationships, our children suffer. The costs are high on both an individual and societal level.

On the other hand, we have also come to expect more out of life and out of our relationships. The days are over where women would be stuck at home, with no financial means of their own, in a sort of 'economical-physical-

prisoner-for-life' situation. Accepting whatever her husband did or did not do, including being at his physical service if he so felt the need. It is hard to imagine what enormous benefits woman in our western societies have received in only the last 50 years. And from this women's lib, men have gained the possibility of creating an equal and loving relationship. All too often we forget that inequality also directly brings disadvantage for men. Disadvantage in the sense that they will not be able to experience real intimacy with their wives. After all, equality is the first and foremost requirement for intimacy and love.

But in spite of the importance of relationships for our well-being, in spite of all the suffering, the high costs of that for our society, for ourselves and for our children and therefore for our future, in spite of all that we still don't learn anything about communication or relationships in school nor from our parents. If we are lucky, we might indirectly pick up on some functional and loving behavior, but with all those high divorce rates and unhappiness in couples that stay together, those changes are quite slim. So how on earth can we do a good job in our relationship? Nobody taught us, nobody showed us....

To complicate matters further we are finding out that the popular saying 'what you see is what you believe' is actually reversed! The truth as neuroscience is showing us, is 'what you believe, is what you see'.... Think about that for a moment. It means that we will see in our partner what WE believe to be true about her or him⁶. We will NOT see what is true about that person.... So if I believe him to be aggressive and critical, it is exactly that what I will perceive. My perceptions will validate my belief and confirm my idea of the truth. If the computer broke down and my partner is irritated about that, I will think 'see how aggressively he is behaving again, today'? And this in turn will confirm my idea of the truth – that he is aggressive. On the other hand, if I see him as a patient person, I will think: 'of course, that lousy computer broken down again, how calm he reacts to this stress, he is only slightly irritated'. If I believe she doesn't love me, I will see all those little

⁶ Throughout the rest of the book, I will use 'her' and 'him' alternately. Wherever is written 'he', you can read 'she' and vice versa.

things as meaning that she doesn't love me. If he puts on his nice clothes in the morning and I believe he loves me I will think 'oh wonderful, he wants to look nice for me'. If he puts on the same clothes and I believe he doesn't love me anymore, I will think 'who is he seeing today, that he is putting his best shirt on for?'

Not only do we see what we believe, meaning that our perception of the present is a direct result of our beliefs, but to complicate matters further these beliefs about the present are a direct reflection of our.... past. In a way you could imagine that the film of our past is continually projected onto our present day life, making for a strange mixture. We see the faces and events of the present day, but the meaning of it all is a direct reflection of painful past experiences.

For example, take Sandra. Every time when she goes out for dinner with her partner and he looks around, Sandra thinks he is interested in other women in the restaurant. She is convinced he is not really interested in her, and as a consequence she will again and again perceive the evidence for this idea. The origin of her conviction is that as a child Sandra was usually ignored by her depressed mother, who showed affection only to Sandra's little brother...

In general terms we can state that what we endured as children, whether it was too little care and attention, abuse, aggression and conflict, not enough love, or over-exertion and expectations way beyond our capacities to name a few, will manifest as a belief we have about our partner, which we therefor will perceive after the initial in love phase is over. What you see is not your partner, but the painful aspects of your own past.... No wonder to most of us, it seems such an impossible task to keep on living from the love that we have in our hearts, but that got buried under such a large amount of dirt through the years.

Having children is the biggest responsibility one can take on in life, but having a partner relationship is truly the biggest challenge! Eckhart Tolle's idea reflects this: 'if you want a relationship because you are looking to be happy you will be disappointed. However, if your objective is to grow, then you will most likely be satisfied'. So why do most of us want to be in a relationship?

What is that really about, given the fact that so few are truly happy in a relationship, at least in the long run?

Is it that we are afraid to leave, afraid to confront the painful feelings that come up like little devils when we are 'alone'? Feeling that our life is not worth much when we are not in a relationship? Afraid we can't survive by ourselves? Afraid of making ends meet by ourselves?

How many of us are walking around with a 'hole in our soul' and are looking for our partner to fill up this hole so we can become whole? This means that we will have to mold that person into the exact form of the hole in our soul.... An impossible task, causing a lot of damage to integrity of the other person and to the relationship. Yet this is exactly what most of us try to do, albeit unconsciously.

How many of us realize that we all carry this hole in our soul? Each and every one of us. The hole that was caused by painful experiences that as a child we were not able to process. And how many of us realize that no other person in the world can fill this hole? That we can only do this ourselves. When we are able to love ourselves, and are happy just being with ourselves, then maybe we can find someone who is also whole in herself and isn't trapped in the illusion of looking to another person to be filled up either.

One of the greatest questions that I have always avoided answering directly, is the question what is LOVE?? Love is such a widely used and misused word. There are so many kinds of love: for your lover, your child, your friend, your family, your dog and cat, etc. What is the common denominator in all these different sorts of love... is there such a thing? Should we make a difference between unconditional and conditional love? But are we humans capable of giving unconditional love: I will love you no matter what you do or don't do...? Is that kind of love possible in a couple?

I do think that there is a common denominator. Take a moment to reflect on the following examples. Will you still love your lover if he sleeps with someone else? Will you still love your friend if she talks nastily about you behind your back? Will you still love your brother if he ignores you? And will you still love your parents if they fail to be there for you when you need them? You get the idea... Is love about what I GET from the other? Is that love? Or is it about what I GIVE to the other? I think many would agree that

love is about the latter, about what we give to another: How do YOU want me to love YOU so that YOU feel loved by ME? That is three YOUs for one ME.

If Love is about giving, it means that we need to know what to give. In order to know what to give we need to have a good capacity for empathy – listening to, understanding cognitively and emotionally what it is the other person needs or wants. We could say that an operational definition of love could be empathy. If you can be empathetic, you are able to love the other person. If you have difficulty being empathetic, loving in the sense of giving what the other needs or wants becomes very difficult. Without empathy it will be difficult to truly relate to another person, to truly connect and to be truly caring. We will see throughout this book that empathy is a key faculty in the ‘science’ of loving. But empathy alone is not enough...

The main purpose of this book is to be of direct practical help to its readers. This means that long theoretical discussions will be avoided, that the aim is to keep it short and simple so that anybody who is looking to improve their relationship will find practical guidance in this book.

In Chapter 1 and 2, I will start by explaining how I look at relationships, using five dimensions which can help us to diagnose what is or isn't going on in our relationship. After explaining these dimensions, in Chapter 3 I will provide you with a test to diagnose your couple: ‘where are we doing fine, where are we in some difficulty, where can we improve?’ Followed in Chapter 4 by a brief explanation of the essence of the PRI theory and method if you are unacquainted with it, and a very important new PRI tool – dis-identification – that I have not written about previously. In Chapter 5, I will give you with the tools to go ahead and work on the areas you discovered that are in need of extra attention and maybe repair work. In Chapter 6, I will also give a few examples of how this PRI approach has worked for couples that did the work, showing it is not even that difficult after all, as long as you DO what is suggested!

In Chapter 7, I will talk a little about dysfunctional relationships as they cause much suffering and damage and are more frequent than we would like to believe. By dysfunctional I mean those relationships that are caught in a destructive dance where there is not an equilibrium between giving and taking between both partners. Often there is a lot of fear associated with

these sorts of mechanisms. Fear of being left and staying alone. This fear, which is so present in many of us, can make us do and accept things that are not in our interest and often are very harmful to us and even worse, to our children. It is important to know how to recognize dysfunctional relationships and to know what to do to get out.

As I mentioned, the main focus of this book is very positive. You will find that if you are both willing to open up to the possibility of working on yourself and your relationship, A LOT is possible, no matter how serious your problems might be at the onset.

I have seen couples that were convinced they would need to get divorced, make a full 180 degrees change after a few simple steps and some essential insights into the destructive mechanisms in their relationship and where these really came from. Not from their partner as they were convinced of all the while.

So don't lose hope, if you once loved each other, if you once experienced the beauty of being deeply in love with each other, you can learn to love again. The fountain of your love has always been there, it has just become covered by so much dirt year after year without the necessary cleaning work. As a result it has now not only become completely invisible, but you have even forgotten its existence. But believe me when I say it is still there and you can find it again.

I truly hope that this book will be the beginning of learning to love again for you. Finding out on the way that all the love you need is already inside yourself and that sharing it with someone else is one of the most beautiful experiences this life has to offer.

France, December 2014