

Many of us cling to each other and persuade ourselves that what we feel is love. We cling to the other person in a search for a feeling of significance or importance. And as our need to feel importance, significance, or in-control then love diminishes. We are forced to turn inward and become obsessed with our own self-importance. We get anxious about our ability to control and influence our partners or family.

However, because we can never gain our self-esteem from another person, nor can we wrestle a sense of our own significance in life from them, we become increasingly helpless. This withdrawal from the front-line of vulnerable love to the trenches helplessness fosters increasing anger toward the other. This, over time can grow into resentment and eventually abusiveness.

So great is the emphasis on love to provide the solution to life's unavoidable predicament (that we must find our self-status and happiness within ourselves) that our esteem rises and falls depending on the degree to which we feel loved by our partners. Those who are in secure relationships or families can become smug and self-satisfied in the visible proof of their status (unaware that the tragic, accidental, and unfortunate deterioration of relationship can happen in any home). And those who feel they have failed, be they the parents of difficult children or the spouses of distressed partners, can feel not simply upset by family problems, can feel that their self-worth and effectiveness has been fractured.

Parents and spouses can feel marked as a new species of social failure. People who are going through separation, parents who have become estranged from their teenagers, adults who have lost contact with their siblings, can feel plagued by the gnawing conviction that they have somehow missed out on the great secret of life. They can feel when they look at the so-called secure family or marriage, that they are flawed people, that what seems easy to some has become traumatic for them.

However, the real truth about a lot of family distress or breakdown is that it does not always arise out of personal failure but out of the accidental, unfortunate, and random events of life and fate that leave some people burdened with a great weight, and still others who walk through life untouched by its cruelty. So, be very careful how you judge others, how you designate failure to someone who has been struck by the lightning bolt of fate. No child is immune to falling into the ditches of life that lie ahead. No parent is so powerful as to protect themselves or their family from life's tragedies, breakdowns, or thunderstorms.

You may have noticed in my descriptions above that when it comes to marriage and family love there are three things that we need. We need control, we need significance, and we need acceptance. The problem with relationships is that they cannot guarantee these things. When we look to love for a sense of authority, significance, and acceptance we are doomed to creating distress for us and our loved ones.

Though we cannot to be in control of our life we often end up trying to control our partners. We tend to try to do this passively by being accommodating, compliant, or even caring with the intention of manipulating them into being kind to us. Or we can do it actively by being critical, angry, or complaining with the intent of getting them to do what we want to do. But the need for control is a

human impulse that serves us well in most areas of life but if we use our marriage or family give this to us we then sacrifice love for our need for power.

Similarly, we can hijack our marriage or family with the subconscious goal of having them provide us with a sense of significance in life. Because it cannot ever be anyone's purpose or destiny to provide this, we become frustrated and angry that they are not reflecting back to us how right we are. When they fail in this we may rise up in anger or protest that they don't care for us, that they insult us or that they have failed us. While at a superficial level their behaviour may well have been unacceptable, if your self-confidence and esteem in the world is reliant on their behaviour, you are doomed.

And finally, the same applies to our need for acceptance. When we co-opt our marriage or family to make us feel good about ourselves, to give us the acceptance that we are unable to give to ourselves, we place a great strain on our relationships. Small things can flare up into big arguments. Bad behaviour by someone you care for can make you feel deeply hurt or rejected at a level that your relationships cannot bear.

So what are we to do? To the degree that we value our own self-integrity, the necessity of courage, and have an appreciation that relationships and love are unable to guarantee any of these things, we then become softer with ourselves and with others. Your child's purpose, or your husband's purpose, is not to bestow a sense of control, significance, or acceptance on you – his role is to be true to himself in all its awkward imperfection – even if that truth seems to offend your need for influence, recognition, or status. Love, unfortunately, always has to be vulnerable. In its vulnerability is the recognition that it cannot give you everything you need and that your partner will, because of their unique humanity, let you down. Love needs the grace and humility of soft hands. Love is patient, kind, and must have a lightness of heart.