

Engaging the Dragon

CHAPTER FOUR

The Awesome Invitation – “Let’s Talk”

Don’t have sex man. It leads to kissing and pretty soon you have to start talking to them.

Steve Martin

“WE HAVE TO TALK.” These are four of the scariest words in the English language. A man shudders when he hears them. He looks wildly about for a place to hide but the woman who stalks him is unrelenting. Her eyes pierce his flimsy defenses, penetrate his evasions, and hold him trembling in her sights.

“Darling, I only want to talk,” she says innocently.

He cringes at her duplicity, suspicion instantly inflamed, as he helplessly awaits the *dreaded* ordeal of “conversation.”

A woman invites her husband to converse with her completely confident that talking is absolutely necessary. Her husband has a different outlook:

“She *always* wants to talk,” one man protested.

“When a woman tells you she wants to talk,” another complained, “what she ought to be saying is, ‘I want you to listen without arguing or defending yourself while I tell you what a miserable piece of [bleep] you are.’”

Men are downright paranoid about their wives’ intentions! They do not welcome such conversations. Yet a man’s antipathy toward intimate discussion isn’t based solely on his fear of what his partner might say about him or about their relationship. Wifely invitations to a dialogue occur within a much broader context of aversion: a woman’s upbringing encourages discourse as a means of social connection, but a man’s preparation largely discourages it. Private tête-à-têtes about relationships aren’t a part of the masculine blueprint. The more

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familiar, masculine, form of communication is non-verbal, and when verbal, clearly goal-directed. The masculine approach to problems is to “*fix*” them — with as little discussion as possible. Talking is a tool to be used sparingly. “Hand me that wrench.” Thus, a woman’s insistence on talking for its own sake seems pointless.

“What the hell good is talking about it going to do?”

Men believe talking *wastes time*. A man wants to get his teeth into something, to come to grips with it if he can. He is often frustrated when his partner is content merely to complain. What he wants are concrete suggestions about how they can mend things. He has little patience if his wife only wants to talk.

“I have to stand there and listen to her yammer on and on when I could have fixed whatever it was she was talking about five times over in the same amount of time.”

For her part, she has little patience with her husband’s insistence on diverting everything toward some concrete goal. She sees a solution as less relevant than the conversation itself, because to her the conversation *is* the relationship, or represents the relationship. How the conversation proceeds is important, so she evaluates it as she goes along, commenting on it to her husband. But, her attention to process is aggravatingly irrelevant and unpleasantly distracting as far as he’s concerned, especially if it contains criticisms of him.

Consequently, a man often finds his wife irritating when she talks “just for the sake of talking.” He has trouble seeing the purpose in her discourse and places little value in the quality of a conversation with her if it doesn’t seem to be going anywhere. Because he has no idea what talking *does* for women, he assumes his wife is crazy for insisting on chatting all the time! And if complaints or criticism play a part in what she has to say he will avoid such conversations like the plague.

Yet, women convey such a strange *certainty* that talking is important! So committed to it are they that they will beard the lion in his den, or goad him into talking as he is about to fall asleep. When a man relents and engages with his partner, how does it go?

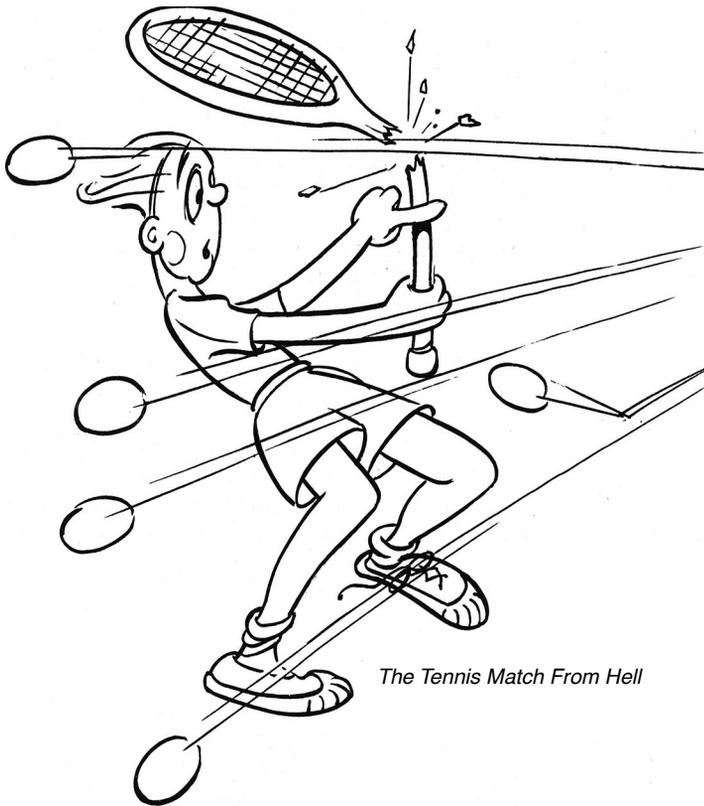
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The Tennis Match From Hell

A metaphor that describes these conversations is a tennis match. The server is almost always the woman; she hits the ball across the net, asking, for instance, “Why aren’t we intimate anymore?” She is then astonished when nothing comes back! She tries again, with the same result — *nothing*. She begins to wonder what the hell the guy is doing with the ball! Is he eating it, or what?

On his side of the net, the serve whizzes by him! “Intimate? What the hell does that mean?” He’s perplexed; he hasn’t a clue about how he can return her serve.

He cringes as his status dwindles precipitously while he freezes on the court. He feels humiliated and confused, and although he becomes irritated and angry in frustration, the risk of showing it makes him tremble with a horrified anticipation of terrible things that might fly at him from the other side of the net. In short, he is afraid. Even if it did occur to him to say something about intimacy he would keep his mouth shut.



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“If you asked a woman the same question, ‘Why aren’t we intimate anymore?’” one man commented, “What would you get? *Blamed!* Suppose you answered the same way — blaming her? What do you think would happen then?”

These conversations go poorly for a number of reasons. Take for instance, the simple fact that the woman is skilled at this kind of activity and the man is not! And consider this: the four little words “We have to talk,” portend calamity to the poor slob, and while he reacts proportionately, his

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wife is only just getting warmed up! He is also at a tremendous disadvantage because he is afraid to tell the truth, not just about his own peccadilloes but also about hers. *He avoids intimacy, terrified that he might tell her what he actually thinks!* She on the other hand, is unafraid to scrutinize every little flaw in the relationship; she thinks it's her *job!* But, he knows there are things she won't talk about, things *he'd* love to see on the agenda, like sex, that will never see the light of day, or the dark of night. Consequently, few men see any profit in engaging in a dialogue that offers them nothing and threatens to cost them a lot.

From the wife's point of view, these things go poorly because the guy does a lot of things wrong. If she gives even a hint of being upset in any way, for instance — god forbid she should cry! — he is often infused with a sense of disaster and wants to hide so he won't have to deal with whatever is going on with her. Her emotions confuse him. They stir up feelings that make him acutely uncomfortable; he wants them to go away. So, he urges her to *stop* feeling upset, to “look on the bright side,” to “get over it.” He is annoyed when his wife is irritated rather than calmed by his advice. Unfortunately, he isn't deterred by rejection of these naïve attempts to calm her, and rather than try to find out what is going on with her so he'd *know* what he is dealing with, he leaps prematurely into attempts to fix the problem before he knows what it is! It is so much easier for him to deal with problem solving than with feelings, and if *her* feelings receive short shrift as a consequence, he is spared the realization. *She, however, is not.*

This is disheartening (or something a great deal worse) to the woman on the tennis court. She feels hurt and abandoned. She seriously begins to believe that her husband doesn't care about her, or about their relationship.

“Explanations” — Our Dismal Theories About One Another

When things upset us we want to know *why*. In the absence of a true understanding of what has occurred we begin to formulate hypotheses to explain the disturbing events.

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Unfortunately, these theories tend to be based primarily on what we *fear*. So, a woman begins to think that her husband doesn't care about her, that he *doesn't love* her— a theory almost universal among women. The hands-down favorite theory of husbands, however, is that their wife is *crazy*! How could she behave so “irrationally” otherwise? Thus, we mistakenly regard as *fact*, things we are merely *afraid* may be true.

In the following example a woman consistently misinterprets her husband's behavior in line with childhood experiences of neglect. Her husband illustrates the difficulty men have in clarifying their own motives.

Returning home, Janine became upset when her husband continued to “play” with his computer, offering only the most cursory acknowledgment of her arrival.

“You don't love me,” she said. “Or, you'd stop fooling around with that computer and come and give me a hug when I get home.”

Tom was astonished by her accusation. Too stunned to tell her why it angered him, he blurted out something about her being “irrational.” She took this as confirmation that he didn't love her. Actually, he looked like he wanted to strangle her!

This bear of a man neither looked nor sounded like a wimp, but Tom was far from confident about his ability to handle the situation. Perplexed and exasperated, only self-discipline prevented him from making an even bigger mess of things.

One thing that stood out with this couple is that Tom wouldn't speak up for himself when his wife behaved like this. He seemed preoccupied with his wife's dramatic behavior, and focused fruitlessly on attempts to reassure her. I asked him, “Is it true what Janine says: that you ‘don't love’ her?”

“No!”

“Would you please tell me, then, why you allow her to say that about you?”

He didn't know why, he said.

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“When she comes home and you’re at work on your computer, why do you keep working?”

“Because my work is important to me,” he replied.

“Okay. Would you please look at Janine, and say: Janine I resent you telling me I don’t love you, because I do. And it offends and hurts me when you say it, because it isn’t true. And I resent you thinking that my work on the computer isn’t important, because it’s important to me!”

Janine looked baffled when Tom delivered his words; there was genuine passion in what he said.

“I don’t understand,” she murmured in a small voice. “How can you just keep playing with the computer when I come home?”

“Because usually when you come home, I’m in the middle of something,” he said.

“Why the hell should I drop what I’m doing just because you come flying through the door?”

“Because it would mean you love me,” she replied petulantly.

I turned to Janine. “Okay, Janine. I can see you’re confused. One of the reasons you’re confused is that Tom usually doesn’t stand up for himself; he doesn’t tell you the truth. He always chickens out and lets you run off with your scary ideas about whether he loves you or not.

“You think your ideas about how Tom should love you are the only way to love you— that they’re the ‘right’ way. You get upset because you think he’s not treating you the way he should. I’m not saying your ways don’t make sense; there’s nothing wrong with them. But, you don’t seem to have any respect for what is important to him. If he enjoys using his computer, what makes you think that has something to do with you? You keep thinking everything is about you! But it isn’t. Trouble is, Tom isn’t honest with you about this.”

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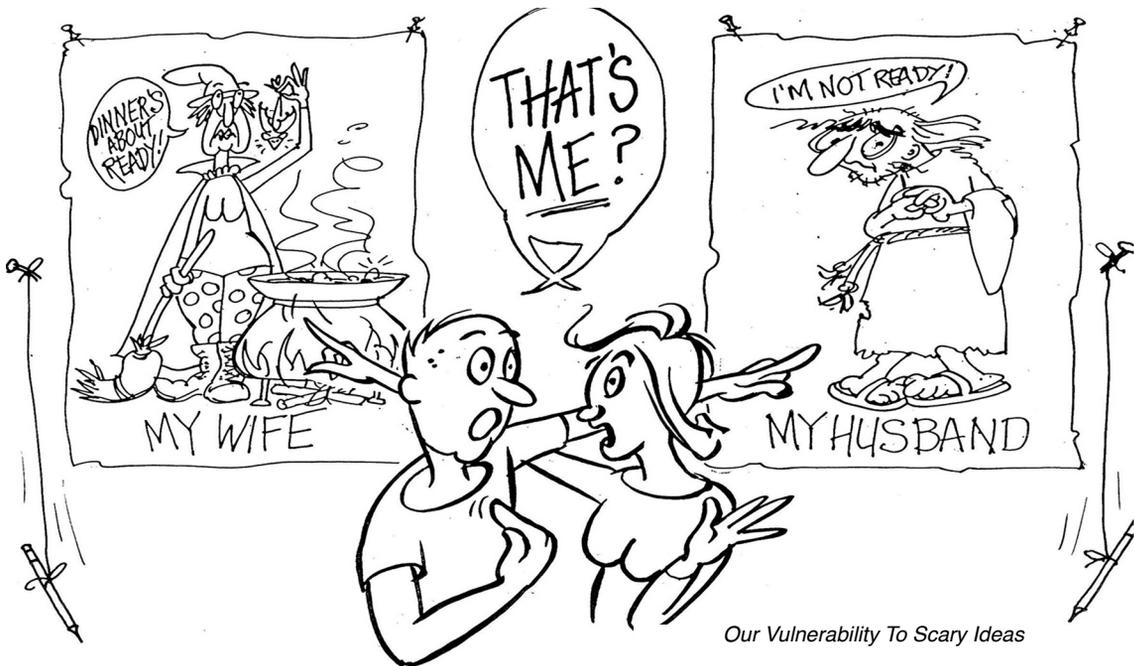
Janine was shaken. “You mean it isn’t true? He does love me?”

“Janine, Tom is furious with you at the moment. It may be hard for you to believe he loves you. But, I hope it is clear to you why he’s angry. You run off with your own feelings leaving him and his feelings behind. But, in spite of that, this man keeps coming back here to work on this with you. He’s still married to you, Janine! The only reason I can think of is: he loves you.”

“I do,” Tom said quietly. His hand sought his wife’s and she took it, tears streaming down her face.

Our Vulnerability to Scary Ideas

When we are confused or troubled enough about our situation to require an explanation for it, we are usually in a *heightened emotional state*. Any time we are scared, or hurt, or confused we are *hyper-suggestible* — wide open to suggestion. Because of this it is very important what we allow in. If you are feeling ill, for example, and someone comes up to you



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and says, “My God, you look pale!” you are likely to feel *worse*. Even though the other person may have had your welfare in mind, their suggestions can adversely affect how you feel. So, when we are upset we need to attend very carefully to what we let in.

This doesn’t just pertain to what *others say*. We are also vulnerable to what we say to ourselves. So, if your emotions get kicked into high gear in the midst of an argument, for instance, what you say to yourself — about you, or your situation, or your partner — can have the effect of a powerful suggestion. It will be much more *credible* than had you said the same words to yourself under normal emotional conditions.

So, the ideas or beliefs we have about ourselves (“I am an innocent victim”), or our partners (“a power crazy maniac”), during everyday emotionally charged conversations, will tend to appear more credible than they would under calmer, everyday circumstances. We tend to believe as fact what are merely expressions of our momentarily fearful or angry evaluation of the situation. *This is not reliable information*. Erroneous beliefs may become firmly entrenched with repeated experiences like this. We come to believe we understand something when truly we do not.

Consequences for Marital Happiness

When we are relatively content with one another we tend to cut each other slack, interpreting negative behavior as circumstantial, a temporary aberration that needn’t trouble us. And, we regard *positive* behavior as a true reflection of our partner’s character. On the other hand, when we are *unhappy* with one another positive behavior is seen as irrelevant, and we persist in negative beliefs despite evidence to the contrary; we see it as a true indicator of our partner’s qualities. *Thus, the unhappier we are with one another, the more difficult it is for us to change.*

“Happiness” is something we need to take seriously! It isn’t less important than getting the job done and raising kids and paying the mortgage. If you aren’t happy in your marriage you need to do something about it. *Research tells us that for marriages to have a chance of success we need to experience at least five times as many positive moments with one another as negative ones.*¹ So, our founding fathers were right to emphasize the importance of the “pursuit of happiness.” It can make the difference between a marriage (relationship) that thrives and one that fails.