

“May I ask who is Calling?”

Barrington Brennen, February 24, 2016

I often like to have a little fun when I call a business establishment and a receptionist answers the phone. After making a request to speak to someone, the receptionist would ask the seemingly unavoidable question: “May I ask who is calling?” My response to the question confuses the receptionist. I would say: “Yes, you may ask who is calling.” Then I wait for the receptionist to ask who is calling and she would not ask who is calling. There is a long silence. The receptionist thought that she had already asked “who is calling,” but I would tease by telling her that literally she hasn’t. Only a few receptionists would respond by saying: “Who is calling please?” Isn’t it funny, why would someone ask me for permission to ask me a question? At least that’s how it sounds.

I know some of you are wondering where I am taking this. I am not dealing with proper grammar or syntax. I am illustrating that what one is saying might not always be what the other person hears. Often one can write down exactly what one heard the person said; however, that is no proof that the person got the message. Here is an example. A husband wakes up late at night and says to his wife: “Honey, it is hot in here.” She responds by saying: “I know” and falls back to sleep. What was the message that the husband intended his wife to get? It is that she must get up and turn on the fan or air condition. Truthfully, he did not actually say that, but he intended her to understand or get the message.

The truth is, in romantic relationships it takes a little while before partners understand each other’s language—use of words and sentences. Things are often said with the assumption that the other person knows exactly what the speaker is thinking or the emotional meaning of the words. Interestingly, in the above illustration, when the husband wakes up he accuses his wife of not listening to him. Then an argument ensues.

Often the literal meaning words are embellished with emotional experiences and exposure. This is a result of years of repeated observations and treatments. Thus the person creates a new kind of emotional vocabulary and assumes that the other partner knows it. Here is another example. In a romantic relationship both partners will know the dictionary meaning of the word “love.” If each of them would write down the meaning of “love,” perhaps they would both write the same thing. However, in relating to each other, “love” or “I love you” might really have different meanings and expressions. This would be a direct result of family culture, traditions, and parental/adult modeling. For example, one partner might have grown up in a family where the words “I love you” were followed by open expression of lots of hugs, kisses, and other warm words of affection. This partner would be expecting the same in the relationship. The other partner’s experience might be different. “I love you” did not have much affection, touching, loving words. Thus, this partner would not naturally express “love” so warmly. This would be disappointing to the other partner.

What then should happen? It is imperative that between partners there are no assumptions. One author says “assumptions are termites in a relationship.” Do not

assume that your partner knows what you are thinking or saying. Do not try to get in to your partner's brain and speak or think for his or her. If your partner does not hug you the way you are used to being hugged in your family, do not assume that your partner does not want to hug you. Talk about your different experiences and expressions. Seek to begin to understand each other's language. This is a part of becoming compatible. No couple is truly compatible on the wedding day. Compatibility is a learned behavior that takes years to attain.

Here is another illustration I like to share with my couples. After a week of a wonderful honeymoon with very little expectations, they are now home, settled in their new apartment. The husband decides to cook dinner, and one dish to prepare is white rice. In his family white rice is always cooked with diced onions, thyme, and goat pepper. When his wife sits to eat she sees then specks of "dirt" in the rice.

"This is not white rice, honey," she shouts. In her home white rice is cooked with just water and salt. The meaning of cooked "white rice" for her husband always includes the other ingredients, but not for the wife. From then on when the husband says we are having "white rice" today, the wife understands her husband's meaning of "white rice." Do you realize that couples can have huge arguments over such things? All it takes is for individuals to listen with the heart and not just with the ears. It calls for couples to learn each other's language and make the necessary adjustments.

One of the techniques used to teach couples how to understand each other's language and to communicate effectively is called clarification. It is making sure you repeat what you think you heard your partner said before you respond to what was said. Every word has a different meaning to each one. These differences raise unrealistic expectations and can cause havoc in your relations. Be truly willing to listen to your partner. Do not assume your partner knows what you are feeling, hearing, thinking, or wanting.

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