

The “Third Candle” in Relationships

by Charlyne Gelt, Ph.D.

Who am I without you?

In a healthy relationship, the right answer is *me*. I am who I am, and with you I am more (and so are you). I am not diminished by you, nor are you by me. We are *we*.

For many couples, the process of defining appropriate emotional boundaries in order to create a healthy sense of a “*we*” in their relationship can be tricky. Couples enter therapy for guidance on how to define and articulate their boundaries, how to learn to distinguish between negotiable and non-negotiable needs, and how to raise awareness about destructive family patterns and belief systems that may be impacting their union.

The Third Candle

In the Judeo-Christian marriage ceremony, the father walks his daughter down the aisle and turns her over to the awaiting groom who is then expected to take on the job of caring for her and protecting her. The daughter’s identity as her *own person* is ignored.

In some marriage ceremonies, when a couple walks down the aisle, each one carries a candle. At the altar, they light a *third* candle to symbolize their union – their *we*. Then they blow out their own individual candles.

The trouble with this ritual is that symbolically it perpetuates the cultural idea that in marriage, two individuals should *fuse into one* — the third candle: “I am my beloved and my beloved is me.” But this can be destructive because one day somebody wakes up (usually it’s the woman) and realizes that her individual candle has been *snuffed out*.

How much healthier it would be if the couple getting married could not only light that *third* candle (which symbolizes their union), but also *keep their own individual candles lit*. $1+1 = 3$. This represents two independent individuals uniting to enrich one another -- but without either one of them giving up pieces of themselves in the process.

Unfortunately, this doesn’t always happen.

Here’s a case in point: When Joe and Evie fell in love, it was wonderful — at first. Each felt they’d found the perfect partner, a kindred soulmate who’d meet their innermost longings. As in most early romances, they were deliciously “high” on each other, with great hopes for the future. At that point, they were at the fork in the road where the relationship could either lead them towards health and *individuation*, or swallow them up. Joe and Evie nearly got swallowed up.

Joe got so caught up in being the apple of Evie’s eye that he forgot to get to know her as a person — what she liked, what she thought about, her dreams. It never crossed his mind that she had a mind of her own. While her need to be needed and his need to control felt like the perfect match at first, after a while it began to irk Evie. She started complaining that she felt controlled by Joe, that he never listened to her, that she felt she had no room to breathe. She realized that her candle had been snuffed out. Joe didn’t understand what the problem was. He was confused: “What made her change?”

Setting Up a Win-Lose Situation

When one person unwittingly turns themselves over to another person (as Evie did with Joe) in order to fill up their own emotional emptiness, it sets up a win-lose dynamic. The “*I*” in the relationship gets lost or discounted, and the person starts to feel ripped off. Joe needed Evie’s nurturing, emotional support and validation which initially she was willing to give – until she began to realize that she had needs of her own, and Joe wasn’t meeting them.

Resentment and anger set in.

Keep Your Own Candle Lit

Romantic love in a relationship starts to dwindle when one partner is viewed as emotionally dependent on the other. Expecting our partner to be on call, to rescue us, to fill up our bottomless pit of emotional neediness, can destroy all good will.

So in your own relationships, and when working as a therapist with couples, don’t just light that “third candle” and blow out the individual candles. Keep all three candles lit as a reminder that the “*I*” is as important as the “*we*.”

By keeping our individual candles lit, we are saying, “I am a person. I expect to be considered. Do not discount me. I need to state what I want to eat, where I want to go, and if I want some space from you, and I need you to do the same with me. I need you to know what I am feeling, and I need to feel comfortable saying just that to you. I need to not lie down and play dead. I need a relationship that is reciprocally communicative without fear of losing you. I want and need that from you.”

That is the “*I*” candle. Don’t snuff it out.

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