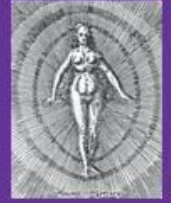


CHARLYNE GELT, PH.D.

Encouraging Self-Discovery and Empowerment



Defining Moments by Charlyne Gelt, Ph.D.

“What is necessary to change a person is to change his awareness of himself.”

— Abraham Maslow

Defining moments, or turning points, can come from insights, crises, or from external events. Opportunity for change, to move past the fears that hold you back, to slay your personal dragon, is always knocking but we don't always hear it because either we are too comfortable, or we are attuned to meeting the needs of others. (author?)

Meet Anne, a 50-year-old housewife and mother whose main characteristic is her need to be needed. She is content to work behind the scenes to be supportive of others, make them look good, and help them grow while asking little for herself. Their needs and feelings are more compelling than her own. “I feel good about myself when I make someone else happy,” she says. She *likes* being a hero, the one to help out. In her eyes, being “strong” and not being “needy” are her greatest virtues. She is invisible — but invaluable.

One day Anne hears some important words from a close friend: “Anne, has anyone ever told you that it is not your responsibility to make someone else happy? That is not love. These people you keep trying to please have you on a string and are controlling you like a puppet. What about your own needs? What about your own growth? Where do you think this false sense of responsibility to make others happy comes from?”

Anne's Defining Moment

For Anne, this frank confrontation is a defining moment, a turning point — because she has started to realize that the pressure to fix everyone in her life has been creating anxiety and has been draining her of her aliveness and sense of self. *Over-helping* others has not been helping *her*. She's worn out and feeling used. It has even been impacting her performance at work where her over-pleasing style, and her need to control and run things, is only alienating her co-workers. In the love arena, things are also not going well. She has unconsciously looked for men she can fix or "glue together," men whose emptiness she can fill. As a result, her relationships have been doomed from the start. She puts up her shield to avoid intimacy — and it's all over. Now she is determined to free herself from this emotional slavery. . .

Recreating the Past in the Present

What Anne had been doing (unconsciously) was recreating her role in her emotionally enmeshed family of origin. There, she was the hub of the family wheel. She was always the expert, the fixer, the doer, and they all depended on her. The payoff for Anne was knowing they would never leave her. They *needed* her too much! She created this childhood defense mechanism of being the “helper” as a protective shield to save her from the pain of not belonging, not loved, just used. Children who experience compounded relational trauma often learn that they can fend off distress if they are hyper alert and focus on reading the other person's emotions and moods to the exclusion of their own (van der Kolk, 1997). By being *outer* focused and attuned to preventing chaos, they lose



touch with what is going on inside. Childhood defense mechanisms, which may serve people like Anne in childhood, rarely work in adulthood — especially in love relationships. Something must take its place.

Can “Over-Helping” Behaviors Be Unlearned?

Yes, there’s a way out! When we develop personal boundaries and take care of ourselves, it earns respect. Whether the emotional enmeshment involves a parent, friend, or a current love relationship, we must cut the string of control and criticism. Learn how to stop pleasing for approval or for fear of abandonment. Stop allowing their problems to become yours. If your parent, friend or partner gets upset and gives you the cold shoulder or silent treatment, that is not caring or loving, that’s *their* need for control. Learn how to not to buy into their need. Confront them. Learn how to tell others when they are acting in ways that are not acceptable to you. A first step is knowing that you have both the right and a duty to take responsibility for how you allow others to treat you. Put your foot down and do not allow others to control your life. Decide you are going to be liberated, freed emotionally. When you stop trying to fix the wounded parts of others, and allow them to do for themselves, you will be forcing them to take a good look inside themselves, rather than to you.

Do not allow someone else to keep you unhappy.

Relationships based on control and manipulation have little to do with love. The partner is not interested in you, only in what you can do for them. Let them face the music on their own and take the heat. Your work is to make yourself happy, not make them happy. When you get rid of the false face of responsibility, it’s even possible for your relationship to go to a new, improved level. The process of cultivating more awareness in your life can be confusing, exciting, and challenging — sometimes all three at once. Don’t enable the dysfunction. Become the solution, become all you were created to be.

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