



It Takes a Community to Raise a Relationship

"For thousands of years we have gathered in circle - around fires, around bodies, around altars - because we can't do this alone."

—Wayne Muller

Thirty-four of us are packed into infinite darkness and penetrating heat. Water is generously poured over red-hot rocks and the steam pushes me deeper into my hidden places. This is the third and hottest of four rounds in this sweat lodge ceremony. I feel pain rising. There is healing that I need for the blocks that come up in relationship with my beloved, and I'm here to receive support for that healing. Some of the others in the lodge I know well; many I haven't met before. Nonetheless, in the sweltering blackness of this lodge, in our shared intentions and inward focus, we are an intimately connected community. My body shakes and my breathing quickens as I begin to cry. I call out for help and something about this simple act opens up a deeper mourning. I can feel the sadness in this old pain that I carry from my past, pain that blocks me from being free to love. I can also feel this pain as pressure in my head, the beginning of a mean migraine. Under different circumstances I might not have the courage to embrace and express this pain and ask for help. In this moment, held by this community with acceptance, compassion, and by a shared intention to support healing, any beliefs I hold about what I should look or act like lose their grip. My pain begins to dissolve in the waves of my feelings and the pressure in my head begins to release. After the ceremony there is new energy stirring and growing in me and mixing with the vestiges of fear that are still releasing. I have a mild headache that will be gone by the morning, and a sense that the next phase of my journey with my beloved is unfolding.

In intimate relationships, we express our highest intentions of love and most painful wounds from our past. We join in unbounded ecstatic union and push apart in contracted anger and fear. A commitment towards ever expanding conscious loving is no small undertaking. There are several key elements that help my wife Melody and I navigate all that arises in our relationship and create an inspiring, loving partnership. Some of these elements include a flow of appreciation, transparent honesty, shared responsibility, commitment to growth, and support from others. Why do we need support from others, what might it look like, and what blocks us from asking for support from others are the questions I will explore below.

Why do we need support from others? When we join in relationships, we co-create a system within which we exchange energy through how we relate to each other. I have found it helpful to look at how energy exchange works in other systems and apply it to human systems. The study of systems in thermal dynamics shows that



closed systems stagnate or lose energy. Closed systems are systems that are cut off from their surrounding environment and so do not receive energy from outside their system. Human relationships can be open or closed systems, and my experience is that closed human systems also lose energy. The more intimate and consistent the connection between two people, the more often and more intensely core issues tend to be stimulated. How we work with the core issues that come up in relationships will determine if our systems gain or lose energy. Attempting to work through all that gets stimulated in a closed system -without support from others - usually leads loss of energy through demands, blaming, and criticism. When this happens, the flow of genuine giving disintegrates and vital energy is lost through reactive emotional patterns. Melody and I have successfully worked together to transform the old pain that arises between us, but sometimes we have worked against each other and lost energy and connection trying to work with issues that have arisen. When we are working against each other, it is either because we've become unconsciously stuck in old fears about not getting our needs met, or we don't have the resources to be present with what is arising. When we relate to each other from old patterns, or when we try to push through when we don't have the resources, we don't transform our pain. Instead we lose energy, and we may reinforce our negative beliefs about intimate relationship and withdraw from each other. Receiving support from others to transform our issues and old pain fuels us so that we can have more fun together and better give to each other from a place of fullness within.

What might outside support look like? Often, when we are not successful at transforming what arises, one or both of us needs a caring empathic presence. It is not possible to give a one-way flow of supportive empathy to another if we need empathy for ourselves. (This one-way flow of supportive empathy is what I wrote about in a previous article: *Presence With Pain: The Art of Empathy*.) However, when we are aware that we both need empathy, we can save our energy by asking others who are not involved in our situation to help us.

Last fall was a stressful time for Melody and me. We had moved out of our house so that a mold problem could be remedied with some major renovations. During the renovations a carbon monoxide leak was discovered. Also, it was a busier than usual time for our business, including extra travel to other communities. To top it off our health was not at its best due to the mold and the carbon monoxide leak we had been living with. Stressful periods can be times when old issues are more likely to surface, which can mean a greater need for supportive empathy and less energy available for giving to others. Furthermore, during stressful times it can be more challenging to be aware of what is arising and how we are relating to what is getting



stimulated. Our relationship, our human system, was under stress and we needed outside support.

On a Saturday morning, near the end of our stressful period, I finally connected with support from outside our relationship. An empathy buddy was willing to call me from Mexico, even after two long days of travel from Australia. Despite his jet lag, he gave me such a clear and compassionate quality of supportive empathy that I released feelings I didn't even know I had been holding onto. After the call I was lighter and more relaxed than I had been for weeks, and I had more energy and desire to give to Melody. Sometimes our conflicts are less about the content and more about the fact that both of us need supportive empathy - our system needs to open up to energy from others.

What blocks us from asking for support? From the consciousness of Compassionate Communication (Nonviolent Communication, NVC), everything we are doing is an attempt to meet a need. Also, our unconscious beliefs often influence the way we try to meet our needs. I may have beliefs that if I can't work through pain that arises, then I am either not strong enough, not good enough, not smart enough, or not loving enough. Underneath these beliefs are my needs for self-acceptance, self-worth, and contribution. Without awareness of how my beliefs are influencing me, I push ahead instead of finding other ways to meet my needs.

Another of my beliefs may be that if I ask for support, then others will think less of me, not accept me, and then I will not belong. Therefore, in trying to belong in my community, I may try to do things on my own instead of ask for support. The irony is that the sense of belonging usually strengthens when we allow others to give to us. Others experience the joy from meaningful contribution and perhaps more freedom from their beliefs involved in not asking for support. My experience is that when I authentically express myself with consciousness and compassion, even when I believe others will think less of me, my sense of self-acceptance and self-worth strengthens if I stay connected to my needs and the needs of others. Each time I have the courage to do this, I gain more strength and courage to stay open and authentic about the state of my needs. When I act from authenticity instead of from my beliefs, I also serve the connection in my relationship.

Sharing an intimate journey of transformation and love tends to come with seemingly cosmic synchronicities. It just so happened that without our planning it, an hour and a half away from the sweat lodge, Melody was being held with tender loving by new friends. With tears flowing, she released layers of the pain from hiding her true light and from trying to be something else in order to be loved. The next morning we came together and shared our journeys, the depths of our insights,



and the beauty of our love. We then met with a trusted friend who, in sharing her wisdom and empathic presence, gave us more support towards greater ease and love in our partnership.

My hope is that we all open up to receiving more support no matter what our relationships look like. We are not meant to be closed systems doing it all on our own. Life thrives in a flow of interconnectedness where we receive so much from giving and give so much from receiving.

Eric Bowers and Melody Greger



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Through her own healing journey, Melody has immersed herself in practices for transforming trauma, empowering creative expression, communicating compassionately and living connected to our true divine nature. She has a degree in Intercultural Psychology and Expressive Arts from Naropa University, is a certified Nonviolent Communication trainer through the Center for Nonviolent Communication and is trained as a Life Coach. She has collaborated in developing various innovative non-profit programs for youth including a residential home for teen girls and a restorative justice program, and has worked as a counsellor doing group work in schools. In the artistic realm she has exhibited her paintings in the US and Canada, performed in dance and acted as artistic director of events. She teaches Compassionate Communication courses and workshops and runs self-empowerment programs for emerging young women. She does personal sessions with adults and teens integrating Compassionate Communication, Art and Somatic Therapies and Coaching. Together with her husband Eric Bowers, Melody also supports couples in conscious, compassionate partnership.