

Hearing Challenging Comments and Stretching into Love

LaShelle Lowe-Chardé

You have the freedom to stretch into love, when your sense of identity isn't tightly attached to your preferences, habits, competencies, physical attributes, opinions, or feelings. Giving and receiving love is an evolving flow of life energy that often asks you to stretch out of a limited sense of identity and into loving. Any significant relationship in your life will ask this of you. It is for you to discern the nature of that request and how you will respond.

How you hear the request to stretch into love, directs your response. If you hear the request as criticism, a threat to your identity, rejection, etc., then an opportunity to stretch looks to you like a limit or an attack. This kind of "hearing" arises from a sense of unworthiness, powerlessness, or fear as well as confusion about the request itself.

Unfortunately requests for you to stretch into love aren't typically stated directly but rather only hinted at or, perhaps, demanded. Here are some examples of someone asking you to stretch into love:

- "This relationship is all about you!"
- "I need more affection, why are you so cold?"
- "I can't tell you how to show up, you have to figure it out."
- "You are so negative."
- "Why you do act like my mother, you're always criticizing me."

These are a few of the most common indirect requests for stretching into love I have heard over the years in working with students. While any of these could be broken down into multiple specific doable requests and the accompanying universal needs, they point to something more. That something more is asking you to cultivate something new in yourself. It could be a new awareness, a new sensitivity, a new ability, a new level of access to a particular quality, a new perspective, etc. Cultivating a new way of relating to life has a level of subtlety and complexity that is difficult to articulate, even with the skills of Mindful Compassionate Dialogue.

Regardless of the clarity of the request someone offers you, your agency lies in a willingness to ask yourself the question: "How could I stretch the boundaries of who I believe myself to be in service of love?" (Replace love with the word that inspires you, e.g., generosity, meaning, fulfillment, freedom, thriving, etc.). And of course, the more you can ask this question, before there is frustration in a relationship, the easier it is for you to embrace transformation from the energy and inspiration of your deepest values. Let's look at how these questions might get more specific relative to "request" offered by others.

- You hear from another: "This relationship is all about you!" You ask yourself:
 - How can I find receptive stillness and quiet for another to enter and share?
 - How many ways can I invite and embrace another?
 - How often am I asking the other person to share first?

- How long do I listen before I return to stuff about me?
 - How much emotional reactivity could I manage internally?
 - Could I wait longer for the other to come forward?
 - Am I getting curious about another's experience only as it relates to me?
 - If my need for mutuality is unmet, have I made clear and direct requests regarding my needs?
- You hear from another: "I need more affection, why are you so cold?" You ask yourself:
 - What could I do in my body to soften?
 - How can I find the courage to reach out in warmth?
 - What if I just shared a warm smile even when I can't find warmth inside?
 - How could I access warmth inside?
 - How many tiny ways of offering warmth and affection can I name?
 - How many ways could I move toward another with love?
- You hear from another: "I can't tell you how to show up?" You ask yourself:
 - What do I want to offer?
 - How can I find the courage and support to take the risk of offering what's alive for me?
 - What if my belonging was a given, how would I show up?
 - What needs do I see around me that I would like to serve?
 - What gives me a sense of meaning and purpose?
- You hear from another: "You are so negative." You ask yourself:
 - What is the other person really needing when they say that?
 - What do I believe "being negative" protects me from?
 - Who do I think I would betray if I were just content and thriving?
 - What do I think will happen if I stop complaining?
 - How could I get support to tolerate the vulnerability of undefended joy?
 - What if just for the next interaction with another all my expressions were of gratitude and celebration?
- You hear from another: "Why you do act like my mother, you're always criticizing me." You ask yourself:
 - How might I be treating this person like a child and crossing boundaries?
 - What if I were present with what's happening without anger and demands?
 - What support do I need to allow the vulnerability of not trying to control or manage others?
 - What's the difference between standing in my power and trying to wield "power over" others?
 - How do I show acceptance for other's preferences, styles, and ways of doing things?

Like any form of self-reflection it is only helpful if done with compassion and kindness towards yourself. If shame or an inner critic is on board as you ask these questions, wisdom and insight will elude you. Better to find someone who can offer kind and empathic presence while you reflect using questions like these.

Seen from the expansive perspective, you will find that releasing from the contracted and limited notion of "me, myself, and mine," allows you to accept the invitation to stretch into love.

Practice

Noticing what inspires curiosity, choose just one question from those listed above for contemplation. With an attitude of kindness and compassion for yourself, set the intention each morning to notice the answers to that question during the day. Or, talk with a trusted other about it. Or, spend time journaling about it.