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The Power of Middle Ground

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WHAT'S THE MIDDLE GROUND?

By Marty Babits

Most [couples](#) who seek help feel their difficulties center around communication. Carl and Amanda echo this concern when they consult me. At their first session, I ask, "What brings you to seek help at this time?" "We don't communicate," Amanda replies. "That's right," says Carl. "We have problems with communication." I inquire, "But what brings you in to see me at this time? Why now?" Amanda takes the lead. "Recently Carl lost his temper. That's been happening a lot lately but this time, the force of his anger frightened me. I said to myself, 'Something is wrong here.' I don't frighten easily. That's when I knew we needed help." Not all couples complain of explosive anger as a key problem, but it is far from a rarity that I hear this complaint. At this point, Carl slouches back on the deep purple couch and pulls a fringed pillow against his chest, as if it were a hot water bottle. Carl speaks haltingly. "She's right about what she said. There's something wrong, something missing." "Can you tell me more about what is missing?" I reply. "Can you describe this thing that isn't in your relationship now? This thing that you need."

He nods his head, acknowledging my question; appears deep in thought; but, in the end, simply shrugs. My first hunch is that, like a lot of men, Carl grew up with little awareness that this skill talking about feelings would be so critical to his success or failure as a relational partner.

When Carl finally speaks, I learn that he feels like he is failing in his relationship with Amanda. He feels that, as a man, he should be able to maintain and project a stabilizing, reassuring presence. Amanda's growing insecurity confirms just how far short Carl has fallen. He realizes, without being able to stop himself, how hurtful his lashing out at Amanda is. He is unhappy about the relationship and about who he is in it.

Although painful for Carl, his dissatisfaction with himself is a potentially hopeful sign. Embedded within his dissatisfaction is the wish to make more of the relationship than what currently exists. Carl, unknowingly, is poised to discover that he already possesses sufficient motivation to make the positive changes that, as yet, he cannot visualize.

Couples who lack a middle ground, like Amanda and Carl, feel underappreciated and misunderstood. Each feels alone and lonely in the other's presence. Their attempts at communication end up in a power struggle. This situation is so common that it could be designated as the usual starting point for couples' work: Square One.

WHAT IS THE "MIDDLEGROUND"?

Imagine a place that brings the potential for love and compassion alive within your relationship. What would you call a place where you and your partner learn to communicate more productively? What would you call a place where understandings can develop from genuine differences? What name would you give a place in which natural capacities for sharing can be unfrozen and an atmosphere of emotional safety can flourish? I call this place the "middle ground."

If you are looking for help in your relationship, it's very likely you can't see this place clearly. Perhaps you've seen it but didn't recognize what you were witnessing. Perhaps you have never not even within your imagination had a glimpse of it. This is the middle ground.

This book will help you identify the middle ground potential in your relationship and guide you in developing it.

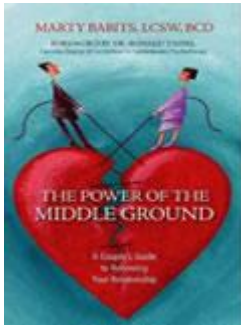
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