



Harville Hendrix & Helen LaKelly Hunt

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Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. and Helen LaKelly Hunt, Ph.D believe that how we interact with each other, in all our contexts—family, workplace, schools, etc.—is the key to our emotional, physical and economic well-being and to the well-being of our children and society. Harville and Helen co-initiated *Imago Relationships International* as a training institute for couples therapists, *Relationships First*® as a collaborative mission to change the cultural value system, and *Safe Conversations*® as an experiment to raise the joy index of a whole city. Their professional partnership has produced 10 books including three NYT best sellers (*Getting the Love You Want*, *Keeping the Love You Find*, and *Giving the Love that Heals*). Their latest book is *The Space Between* (2017). They are working on a new professional text on Imago theory and therapy. A 30th anniversary edition of *Getting the Love You Want* will launch in 2018.

The *Somatic Perspectives* podcast explores somatic psychology, relational therapies, mindfulness and trauma therapies. It is edited by Serge Prengel, LMHC, who is in private practice in New York City.

The following is a partial transcript of the original audio. Please note that this conversation was meant to be a spontaneous exchange. For better or worse, the transcript retains the unedited quality of the conversation.

The excerpt begins with Harville describing how they developed a method or understanding of the layers of communication between couples, and what is optimal...this is about 45 years ago, after an argument they had as a couple, where they decided to get couples to talk to each other rather than to the therapist...

There are a few beautiful ideas here – the beginning is relatively generic, but as the conversation unfolds:

- *Harville and Helen explain how a dialogue between a couple can move from a relatively conventional level of mirroring and witnessing to the emergence of previously unlanguageed elements. And in these elements, each one reveals their mystery to each other and becomes more than they were before. In place of staleness and over-familiarity, emergence happens.*
- *There is then a lovely description by Helen of how decimating and destructive her attempts to demonstrate to Harville that she knew him were, and how what he needed was not to be known by her, but to express his own sense of self in response to her curiosity – to become a mystery*
- *There is then a beautiful description of a crossover with Quantum Theory – a sense of how profoundly the field reflects the energy and expectations a couple bring to it*
- *The final layer transcribed here speaks to the importance of knowing how certain ways of being and thinking activate our neural circuitry; and how to some extent we can choose ‘what we want our bodies to feel as we are processing our experience of one another’....*

Harville:

[we were screaming at each other] And Helen said *'stop, one of us talk and the other one listen'* and we found that it regulated us. The intensity went away when I had to listen to Helen without interrupting her, and she had to listen to me without interrupting me. And I was in clinical practice at the time and realised that we had just enacted something that happens in the therapy session. And at that time -this was 45 years ago, I realised something that we had not done - that I could get couples to talk to each other, instead of talking to me. So I went to the clinic and took this thing that Helen had introduced and then insisted that the couples do that, and noticed that they regulated down: One talked without interruption, then the other would talk without interruption, but we also noticed that we didn't get very far. So I began to do an inquiry to - in this case particularly with the woman - who finally her husband listened to her without interrupting her, he had never done that before, and she said, *'oh, that's the first time that's really wonderful'*, and I said *'well what else do you need from him now?'*, and she said, *"oh, I want him to tell me back what I said"*. And I didn't know it at the time, but she had asked for a mirror. Later on we labelled that – you need to mirror it back. And he said, *"okay, I can do that"*, so he started mirroring her back, but he got it all wrong. And she said *'let me tell you again what I said'* and he said *okay* and then this time he got it right and mirrored her accurately and she decompensated into tears. And I had not seen that before – this was 45 years ago at a time when therapy was pretty much a cognitive process for couples... .so she cried, and I kept asking her, well, what else, is there something else you would like, and she said *"Yes, I would like him to tell me I make sense"*. And he said, *"well, I can't do that, because you don't make sense"*. And I said *"what will making sense to him do for you?"* And she said *"Well you don't have to agree with me, you have to see me, and when you see me, you see I don't think like you, I have different thoughts"*. And so finally he says, *"well, if I don't have to agree with you, then I can see you the sense your making."* which was the introduction of validation. *"Then I can disagree with it. But I can't say you're crazy: you make sense and I make sense"*. So now we are holding two senses with each other.

Yes. And then the flow is again separate but connected, it's beginning. And I can notice their bodies neurophysiologically are changing. He's breathing differently, and his jaw had dropped. So I asked *"Is there anything else that you want from him?"* and she said *"Well can you tell me what you imagine I'm feeling with what I'm thinking?"* She was asking for empathy.

So now this took way more than one session to work all this through, but this evolved into a three step process, in which when you're when you're in the polarities, you speak and I mirror, and then you speak and I mirror, and then I check *"Am I getting at?"* and she says *"Well some of it"* and then *"Well can you tell me what I miss?"*, and say the rest and mirror it, and then you say *"so yeah, you got it"* and then you say *"Well is there more about that?"* and we found that that shift into curiosity at that point (instead of shifting to the other person talking, because usually it's *'Okay it's my turn now'*), but if you can hold the person in the next step of curiosity, *"Is there more about that?"*, that this person over here now goes into the implicit. That is, they go into spaces... (The initial statements will be symbolic - they've already had these thoughts), but as he mirrors the *"Is there more?"*, then she or he drops into the unlanguage affect, the unlanguage sense, they go down into the what we now call the third brain - into the gut - and begin to put language to – (its like Eugene Gendlin's Focusing), putting symbols to the unsymbolized, experiencing becomes symbolization and they start going up and mirror that, and that activates more of the unlanguage and now this couple really goes deep because they go into spaces they have never put into words before, and this partner is listening to symbols that they have never heard this person say before. And so what happens is safety is re-established, and when safety is re-established, the flow starts again but now it goes deeper because there's no judgment going on, no negativity, there's accepting of each other's reality. Now you don't do that in one session but over time that becomes the new reality.

Serge:

Yeah, yeah, so what you're very nicely described is that that process of listening, mirroring validating, is not some kind of neutral abstract "following the step to get a check mark", [yes] but an entry point into a process of awakening a sense of curiosity about the other and about the space between, and a capacity for actually paying attention to what happens implicitly in the space between, and to be jointly engaged in that exploration - taking turns and being in it.

Helen:

And one the issues in our marriage that I learned about one day really helped me. I was so shocked that when we were married, Harville didn't think I was the greatest person on the planet because I was so devoted to him and I wanted to help improve him and help him be the best, and I was gonna do all these wonderful things to help him with his work that he wanted. And you were very, very unhappy with me treating you that way.

He was miserable in our relationship, and I'd already been divorced once and to a different - a businessman, and here was my dream - a therapist - because I was in training to become a therapist. And what I learned was all my good analysis of Harville and what he needed to do to improve himself - that wasn't what Harville was wanting from me: he was wanting me not to know him, but to not know him. To be beside him and ask him how he was feeling each day and to be someone he could talk to, and he could tell me what he was struggling with, and my shift from trying to know Harville to recognizing the importance of not knowing him was absolutely transformational to a flow happening. As long as I was just gonna really master knowing him well - knowing what he needed before he knew it before he could even ask for it I knew what he needed. And that eradicates another person, you decimate another person when you think you know them. And there's a whole state between - Rumi said, *there's a field beyond right or wrong and I'll meet you there* in the meeting, in the felt experiencing...

Serge:

Right, so you go to couples therapy to learn to not know your partner.

Helen/Harville:

And you wonder who they are. Yes right isn't that fascinating? It's a paradox that the transformation occurs when you release all that you thought you knew because you know you made it all up, and it's called a symbiotic consciousness, and go into differentiation and now you can connect. There's nothing linear at all about that, but it's a very complicated circular almost paradoxical process.

Helen:

Brain science today - certain top neuroscientists say that "tolerating ambiguity is a sign of brain health." It's the dorsal lateral prefrontal cortex of the brain, and you have to be pretty neurally integrated to function from this side of a brain. This is where people go when they meditate. They stop their monkey mind and they move into an OM, and they begin to connect to their high higher selves and that whole sentence of structure in dialogue, where you mirror someone and you say "did I get it?" and then when you say "is there more?" you're asking for that person to tell you more that they haven't said yet, you're wondering is there more, you're wondering if there's something even deeper than they have already said, anymore vulnerability that they'd like to share because you're here to listen to them and not edit them or tell them they don't see it right, or you see it differently.

But spending some time wondering about your partner. And in that wonder too is that moving into that felt experiencing.

Harville:

This is the other major thing among others that Helen brought into this system which is when you wonder about your partner they become creatures of wonder. And if you judge them they become despicable, because they don't they don't match your interior fantasy of them. But when you release that and go into curiosity and wonder about them, then you peel back all of those accreditations that you've been living in and also they appear in their own pristine reality, and they're creatures of wonder and now you got to live with that person rather than with this other person over here as a fiction of your imagination.

Serge:

Yeah, so that in a way ties back to how we started this conversation about paying attention to the space between that is apparently empty, and noticing its richness. And what we're talking about is a sense of being conscious that there is a more and keeping focused on looking for that more, instead of reducing it to what we think we know, and which is essentially your cycle of impoverishment as you mentioned Harville, because then you know you're always going to fall short of some expectation. But to be focused on the richness of the more and to keep inviting it.

Harville:

Yes, right, and thank you for mirroring that back. I've gotten two sort of underlines out of this conversation with what we're doing. One is that one of the purposes of going into therapy is to **not know** your partner. [laughter] I think you could market that statement. **Not knowing your partner.** And the other one is to live in the in the **arena of the more**, that there is a more, and to be looking for that, is another part of the of the space between. And that this now is safe here and curiosity is the mechanism of the exchange, and when that's going on you'll continually evolve in each other's presence, when negativity will shut it all down and then you'll go into protecting yourself from each other and then you have to then go back and create the safety so that the energy can flow again. And we think, and this is way beyond our knowledge base and I've been been fascinated for years – and so is Helen – years ago we read The Tao of Physics – Fritjof Capra, We were both reading that when we were dating, and we haven't been really intentional about bringing Quantum into Imago, although we've been aware of that every time we get a little clearer about what Q,uantum is that Imago is doing it, but we hadn't quite integrated the quantum feel although we knew we were no longer in Newtonian physics where things are all separate and isolated and their interactions are causal and predictable when you are in something else. But as we got more and more aware of the quantum mechanics (especially quantum field theory) we're aware that Imago was - we were intuitively doing relating to that - so some of the things we learned from there was like '*oh okay*'. So the point of what I'm saying is that we now operate out of the idea that this space between arises in the quantum field, that we are in the quantum field, and what we put into the field that determines what becomes subjective, so you want to be really careful because a quantum field if we understand it right, magnifies whatever energy you put into it and if you put negative energy into the quantum field it will magnify the negative energy, and that's why you should never say "*I'm gonna have a bad day today*" because the quantum field will then give you a bad day because that's almost the instruction to the field.

So you want to have a different energy, and so as we sit with couples we want to really be clear with them (we don't go into all this stuff about quantum), but really clear that what they put into the space is: connecting, is respectful, is safe, is curiosity, is a positive energy, because we know when

they put the positive energy into the field, they'll experience a subjective impact of that, and if they put negative energy it'll trigger the neurochemistry and they'll then activate cortisol and adrenaline rather than endorphins and dopamine.

So it's from the cosmos all the way down to neurochemistry, that this field regulates the body as well as the mind and the emotions, and it's sort of a fascinating thing to think about how your attitude toward each other each day is magnified by the quantum field. And so Helen and I practice really - and we've gotten recently putting as much as possible only positive energy into the field - so instead of talking to each other about "how bad I feel today," we talk to each other (and Helen is better at it than I am) about what a wonderful world we live in, and you can just feel that. **It becomes a sensory experience, because the body is also the quantum field**, it's doing the same thing here as it's doing here, it's just doing it in this form. Am I making sense?

Serge

So what I'm hearing were I'm hearing about your explaining it, is a sense that **actually instead of just telling people, say "be positive", you're explaining a sense of what interaction happens with the quantum field, and how you can then experience that interaction or the effects of these interactions in your felt-experience.** [yes] So in essence, you know what you're instructing people, is to pay attention to be attuned to what happens so that in a way as you're attuned, you're gonna keep noticing that putting positive energy out is going to feel good, yet though that sense of, you know noticing it, is obviously going to help you do more of it. *[That's right]* **And so we're talking about the attunement in a way, more than just by the way "do it by rote"** [Yes] Because what I'm getting from it more is really the sense of the attunement to that flow, how that attunement is actually going to help you do what feels right.

Harville:

And the structure of the dialogue conversation helps with the attunement because it moves you into the prefrontal cortex away from your amygdala, so that you can actually stay in that attunement, and then you feel something in the amygdala which is that it relaxed, so your body sensation becomes less tense.

Serge:

And also again I'm noticing as you're doing this, you are pointing to the prefrontal cortex then you were pointing to the amygdala, so the pointing illustrates that these are in two circuits. And that you know what I'm getting from it is just okay so you know if you think of it in terms of two circuits, if you activate if you engage in a given circuit, then you're going to be in the flow of that circuit and you're going to experience what it does, [yes] and by activating this circuit, you're gonna deactivate this one, and so therefore there is a logic to that kind of behaviour, because it's really about choosing which current you want to be in like a bird that's flowing. You choose which current you want to be carried by.

Helen:

and which neurochemicals you want flowing throughout your body. If it's down here: *"I think Harville talks too much, and I don't like what he has to say, and then he takes all the emotional oxygen, I think I'm dying in this relationship..."* So that's like cortisol - the neurochemicals of fear and anger. But if I wonder why Harville is the way he is, and begin to ask him questions about why does he like to talk the way he does, and can he tell me about that and I listen and I learn and I feel this acetylcholine, norepinephrine, dopamine - a whole other set of neurochemicals, they are akin to what the Dalai Lama and his practitioners use when they go on spiritual practice, that they, **it's how**

do you want your own body to feel as you are processing your experience of being with your partner.

Serge:

So Helen in some way what you're talking about is self-medication in a good sense, because you just notice where you tap the good chemicals instead of the noxious ones.

Harville:

We tell couples you should choose what you want your partner to remember about you and then create that memory.

Serge:

You should choose what you want your partner to remember about you and then create that memory?

Harville:

And we find that's really challenging because usually they're yelling about their partner and that's what the partner's going to remember, so do you want them to remember that and all that cortisol and adrenalin? Or do you want your partner to remember your soft eyes and the tone of your voice; do you want them to see your body relaxed and hear kind words and see you as a person that's safe to be around? then you have to be that person. And that really disarms the defensive mechanism because now they know they have the power to create the reality they want.

Serge:

Listen, I want to give you a compliment. And that is the feedback you give back to us, I've learned more about our system than I knew before. The emphasis has been really nice: it's like "oh yeah I think that's what I mean" We've been saying, but you underlined it like with the curiosity. Anyway thank you for being very precise [about the two circuits]: **"When you go to this circuit, you deactivate this circuit"**, I hadn't put that together before. I know you can't go to both at the same time, but it was never "go here it'll deactivate this" and **"if you want to have feelings move away back to here and away from here because you can't feel it here, there's no affect [feeling] up there, just processing, so the feeling is back here, you gotta go back there..."**

Transcribed by Emma Bowman

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