

Escaping Blame with Larry Zucker

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I work primarily with couples. I think it is a bit radical these days for a therapist to truly believe that no matter how couples behave, they are fighting *for* their relationship. Even if they look like they are fighting *with* each other, or with me, or quietly drifting apart, they are in my office with a dream of the relationship becoming—or returning to—something that fulfills important purposes and expresses deeply held values in each of their lives. It is radical to *not* see them as examples of familiar pathologies, to *not* see them needing to learn from me, to *not* accept their invitation to mediate. I am not a diagnostician, a teacher, a referee, or most of the other roles that the culture of psychotherapy creates for us. Rather, I think of myself as an enthralled *student* of the purposes they hope their relationship will serve, the values that it will express, and what difficulties they encounter when they try to get their relationship to comply with these hopes. My job is to invite a conversation in which these purposes and values spring to life in the room, and thus create paths forward for them.

If I were allowed to ask only three questions, they would be, in this order: “What do you want your relationship to *do* for each and both of you, and—while we’re at it—for everyone you care about?” “What might you have to do *for* your relationship to increase the odds that it might be willing and able to provide these things?” and “If your relationship could talk, what would it tell me about what goes wrong when the two of you try?” Those familiar with Narrative Therapy will recognize the externalization of “the relationship” that is at the heart of this line of inquiry.

Fortunately, I’m allowed many more questions. Another pass at what might be radical is my purposes in asking *any* questions. I don’t ask questions to gather information I would mistakenly feel entitled to achieve my own understanding of “them.” That’s a diagnostic approach. And I don’t ask questions that are disguised attempts to influence *how* they communicate with each other. That’s a didactic approach with the teaching smuggled in. And if I find myself making too many statements and asking too few questions, I’ve probably slipped out of my

student position, my stance of *wonder*. When I catch myself doing these things, I try to return to my avowed purpose: I ask questions that are meant to seed the couple's imagination for how differently things could be going than they are.

Only sufficiently unusual questions can invite imaginative answers. Seeking a balance between not unusual enough and too unusual, a question should stimulate new reflections without inviting people to "defend" themselves or their relationship. If you looked at transcripts of my conversations with couples, much would seem ordinary. But on closer examination you'd find that there are three ways in which a decent percentage of my questions depart from the ordinary. All three of these lines of inquiry take some bravery and much practice, and require that the couple has agreed to go down less-familiar roads with me. Reading a transcript, you'd notice...

1. that over time they become comfortable answering questions *from the perspective of their relationship*, rather than from their own perspective.
2. that they also grow accustomed to my asking them to speak speculatively about what they think their partner's experience might be, rather than presenting (and then inevitably defending) their own experience.
3. And that sometimes we have conversations that are structured around the idea of the "embodied other," and I ask them to speak *as* the other instead of to or about the other.

Why am I avoiding asking them to speak *as themselves*? Again, perhaps it's radical to defy the sacred "I Statement," but I've found that the *least* imaginative and *least different* conversation take the form that their debate is already taking, in which each person presents *and* defends their own perspective while not really taking in the perspective of the other. If you were to ask people to make an I Statement in which their partner can't detect any implicit accusation, they'd discover that it's impossible, and that their partner predictably *will* be defending against that accusation. And if you ask people to repeat what they heard their partner say as proof that they were "hearing" (while they were forming their rebuttal,) well, then you're just training parrots.

Thinking of No. 1 above, I might ask:

LZ: Jack and Jill, if I were to ask your relationship why gathering water is so important, what might it tell me about why it would want you to risk breaking your crown, Jack, or why tumbling after might be worth it, Jill? Who would like to answer first?

Jill: Our relationship requires us to gather enough water for all of us, so that none of us go thirsty.

LZ: Why is it concerned with your thirst?

Jill: It wants us all to survive.

LZ: Is your relationship pretty sure that you and Jack have divided up the responsibility for your collective survival in a way that works for both of you, or might it worry that that question is not yet settled?

Or, No. 2, a series of questions for Jack:

LZ: What do you think Jill might be feeling as she sees you heading up the hill, knowing the dangers you might face?

Jack: She's feeling that it's my job and that I owe it to her.

LZ: Is that your best guess about what she might be feeling? To my ear you're describing what she might be believing rather than feeling. So even if you're right about the belief, what do you imagine she's feeling?

Jack: Well, certainly not worry about my safety, like your question implied.

LZ: Sure, perhaps not. So what instead?

Jack: She might be worried about whether my life insurance is paid up.

LZ: So she might be feeling some kind of worry or even fear about whether the collective survival we were just speaking of was secure?

Or, No. 3, an “embodied” interview of each *as* the other, in this example, of Jill *as* Jack:

LZ: *Jack*, (addressed to Jill who has agreed to be interviewed *as* Jack, while the “real” Jack listens to her “embodied” Jack:) *What is it like for you to be the one to head up that hill first every time?*

Jill as Jack: *It feels like a lot of responsibility.*

LZ: *Jack*, *do you feel you chose to take on that responsibility?*

Jill as Jack: *No, not really. It’s more like it comes with the territory.*

LZ: *You mean the territory of your gender?*

Jill as Jack: *Yeah, I suppose.*

LZ: *Jack*, *how well do you think Jill understands what it’s like for you to fulfill a role that you might not have entirely chosen of your own accord?*

Jill as Jack: *Not very well.*

LZ: *Jack*, *do you think she tumbles after you of her own accord, or is her life similarly complicated by what we might say are assigned roles? Might she have preferred a different arrangement than this one?*

Hopefully the three of us are no longer replicating a process where each presents/defends their own experience in endless circles. (And I include myself here.) Here, each might actually listen to the other’s answers to more unusual questions about what “the relationship” might want, and to the other’s best effort to respond to the more unusual task of presenting their partner’s experience rather than their own. Something new might happen.