

Helping the difficult people who are making your life miserable.

Helping Difficult People Change

by Russ Rainey PhD

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HELPING DIFFICULT PEOPLE CHANGE

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ISBN: 978-1-63492-123-7

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc. 2017

First Edition

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Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1 – Horse Sense	9
Chapter 2 – Ancient Wisdom	39
Chapter 3 – Coach Approach	77
Chapter 4 - The Change Process	105
Chapter 5 – Modeling Change for Those We Are Helping	135
Chapter 6 – How a Career Criminal Changed His Stripes	157
Appendix A – What is Codependency and How Do You Overcome It?	177
Appendix B – Overview of Helping a Difficult Person Change	191

Chapter 1 – Horse Sense

"You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink."

- Unknown

Have you ever ridden a rent-a-horse? You know, one of those stable horses that people ride while on vacation – the kind of horse that gets ridden routinely by people that don't have a clue what they're doing? Please don't take offense, but an amateur rider on one of these horses is a perfect picture of someone trying to help a difficult person without knowing what they are doing. You see, the horse knows the rider is a greenhorn, and he has learned all the tricks necessary to make this a miserable experience for the rider. The horse wants to get this over and done with as soon as possible, and he knows that the rider is naïve at best - dangerous at worst, so the horse shows his fear and anger by acting out through resistance or aggressiveness. Does this remind you of your helping relationship with that difficult person you know? When you jerk hard on the reins, the horse, or the difficult person, becomes even more stubborn and ornery.

Whether it's intentionally walking under tree limbs or biting the rider or kicking another horse or just heading back to the barn on a dead run, this horse is going to do only what he chooses, and there's not a whole lot the rider can do about it. I was once thrown off of a horse like this in the middle of a stream, because the animal decided that this was a great place to settle an old score with another horse from the same stable. Both horses reared up and began kicking and biting each other, and I was ejected and hit the water upside down. Of course, my horse ran off after he dumped me. After walking a couple of miles back to the stable, I found out that this was routine behavior for the horse I was riding, and the stable hand then enlightened me by adding, "Dude, you're just lucky you landed in the river instead of a cactus patch or a pile of rocks." Thanks for nothing, partner! You knew I was an amateur and this horse was trouble, and you put me on him anyway.

But, there are people who know how to work with horses like this. In fact, they work with the wildest of horses and help them change both their behavior and their attitude in a fairly short period of time. One such expert is Monte Roberts, and he's been described as a man who "listens" to horses. Notice that he is not called a man who "argues" with horses. He doesn't take them on in a loud, aggressive style. Instead, he might more accurately be considered a "horse whisperer". That is, he has learned to speak the language of horses. What sets Roberts apart from old-fashioned horse trainers is that he doesn't abuse horses to get them to change their behavior – he actually "joins up" with the horse and becomes partners with it so that it wants to change.

Equine change experts like Roberts have the wisdom to know that a horse described by others as wild, mean, or unbreakable cannot be changed by trying to *make them*

act differently. Problem horses become hypersensitive to even being caught, much less controlled. They have a strong fear of a rope being thrown around their neck, a bit being forced into their mouth, a saddle being strapped onto their back, a stranger sitting on top of them, reins being jerked back and forth, and sharp spurs digging into their flesh. Come to think of it, most human beings don't respond well either to being roped, saddled, jerked around, and spurred. Imagine that!

We've heard it said that most animals, when faced with danger or pain, react by fighting or fleeing. Although this is true, it may also be a little simplistic. We should also add two other potential responses: freezing up and freely joining up. Some animals freeze instead of fleeing or fighting. Rabbits, for instance, sometimes freeze when they see a predator coming. They count on their ability to blend in with their natural surroundings and stay nice and quiet, but their little rabbit hearts are beating like crazy. Humans may choose this response as well. Children of abusive parents innately know that they have no place to flee, and there is no use in fighting. So, they try to disappear – they freeze up emotionally and try to stay out of sight, but their hearts are racing in their chests.

Horses are natural fight or flight animals, and they rarely freeze up. But, like a few other intelligent animals (and humans), they can opt for an amazing fourth response to distress: freely joining up. To illustrate this concept using my dog, Riley, this is how

joining up works: Riley, a Border Collie mix, corners a large possum in our backyard. Everything in him is ready for a fight to the finish - he's aggressively squaring off, snarling and barking, and the possum is hissing back with bared teeth. But, when I come over to investigate what's going on, Riley looks at me and waits for an order. I can say, "Get him!" or I can say, "Back off!" and either way, he joins up with me. If I say, "Get him", Riley will viciously terminate the possum, but he's likely to get hurt in the process. So, I say, "Back off" and take care of the possum myself (who has been eating my neighbor's chickens). Riley wins because he bravely cornered an intruder without getting wounded, plus I give him a lot of praise. It is a win/win situation, except for the poor possum. But the chickens will certainly appreciate his demise.

Likewise, with the right human handling, horses can learn to join up with humans even in very difficult situations. Bear in mind that horses have played a major role in fighting fierce battles throughout history. They have learned to join up with warrior horsemen even when they are required to race headlong into an oncoming army. They remain in partnership with the rider even when swords and lances are flashing all around or a rider is firing a rifle right beside their head.

Out of the four alternative reactions mentioned above, there is only one state of mind that is conducive to change for horses or humans, and that is joining up. If we try to force change, which is perceived as a threat,

we're most likely to get a fighting, fleeing, or freezing response. On the other hand, if we can help another feel at ease, we have something to work with. It may not be apparent, but neither horses nor humans resist change, itself. They may, however, violently resist *being* changed. It seems to be good old horse sense that God has not put any one of us in charge of making another person change, but we can offer them an opportunity to join up.

When trying to help another change, though, Monte Roberts notes, "It is not the great trainer who can cause his horse to perform. The great trainer can cause a horse to want to perform." (*Horse Sense for People*, Monty Roberts, 2001, Penguin Putnam Inc., New York, NY, pp. xxii) Roberts has a lot of knowledge and experience to back up that statement. He studied wild mustangs in their natural habitat for so many years that he now understands their mannerisms and their fears and can communicate in their language. In other words, he speaks "equine". As a result, he can tame a wild mustang in less than an hour, which is an incredible feat!

Most importantly, Robert's methods are completely respectful of the horse he is training. He helps them feel at ease, so joining up is made easier. The horse gets the freedom to choose to cooperate when it's good and ready. Wouldn't you love it if you could help a difficult person become willing to change? Following are some of the lessons that Roberts and other masters of horse

training have discovered over the years. Fortunately, this kind of horse sense can help us avoid the most common mistakes made in working with either horses or people.

Don't Come Across as a Cougar

A wild mustang's most feared enemy in nature is the cougar (also called a mountain lion or panther). Horses in the wild can sense a cougar's presence. They know his smell and they have studied his stalking behaviors extensively. They know when the cougar is just scoping things out and when he is about to spring a ferocious attack. They know if he is simply relaxing in the grass or if he is poised to take the weakest of them out for lunch. So, understandably, the horses are hypersensitive to being pursued and caught by a cougar.

If you and I are as smart as a horse, we will realize that the number one rule for helping another change is: don't come across as a cougar! Does that make sense? Think about it: when a cougar is chasing a horse, what does the horse experience? The cougar is roaring, it has its teeth and claws bared, and it is in all-out pursuit. Consider that picture for a moment. Have you ever gone after another person to help them change but come off like a cougar in hot pursuit? I know I have, and it made things worse. Unlike the cougar, you and I have benevolent intentions, but how does the other person know that? After all, they see our behavior, not our heart. What they experience internally is fight, flight, or

freeze. The adrenaline is pumping, their brain has lost all objectivity, and they are reacting on impulse – not logic.

So, think back for a moment. It's possible that the person you're trying to help has had several bad experiences with you when you were angry, accusatory, manipulative, controlling, and trying to fix them. When your verbal intensity and your body language said "I'm coming after you", you were seen as a threat, so they ran, fought, or froze up. Running is expressed in behaviors like lying, deceiving, disappearing for hours or days, avoiding you, and ignoring your attempts to connect with them. Fighting equates to yelling, cursing, becoming violent, stomping off, arguing, and getting you off-point by blaming you. The truth is that if we come across as a threat, it's natural for the other person to run or fight. And, if we have developed a pattern where we're routinely seen as a threat, the other has ceased to respect us or have any desire whatsoever to listen to what we have to say. It's like chasing a scared horse in a large pasture - not very smart, and we're going to get worn out and very frustrated.

But, when Monte Roberts works with a horse that is scared, he makes sure that he doesn't come across as a cougar. Instead, his arms are held close to his body and his fingers are tucked into his hands so nothing reminds the horse of a cougar reaching out with claws bared. He speaks and moves calmly. He wants the animal to know that he is not a threat. If we're going to help others

Russ Rainey, Ph.D.

change, we cannot be perceived as a threat. So, let's get personal for a few minutes:

In what way, might your past helping behaviors have been perceived as a threat? Make some notes below that will help you change your approach in the future.

Even more importantly, Roberts does not pursue the horse. Picture what it would be like to be in a helping mode but not pursuing the other person. What would that look like? Instead of pursuing, Roberts stands in a stationary position in the middle of a corral and encourages the horse to run around the corral in a circle until it is tired of fleeing. This helps the horse deal with his natural anxiety and gives him a chance to see if Roberts is a threat. Then, when the animal is in a calmer, more receptive state, Roberts actually turns his back on the horse providing a kind of invitation to come closer. Horses are naturally curious. So, this is an invitation to come take a sniff of me and find out what I'm all about. He is saying to the horse, "See for yourself that I'm not a threat to you. I'm actually

friendly, and I could even have a nice tasty treat in my hand for you."

In a similar fashion, imagine that instead of running a horse around in circles until it's tired, you allow a difficult person to talk on and on about his/her problems until they are tired of talking and somewhat curious about why you are listening so intently. As the talking goes on, you just listen and clarify what's being said and keep asking pertinent questions until the person simply wears him/herself out. This will almost guaranteed have the effect of non-vocally inviting the person to join up with you, because you've done what no one else has done – listened non-judgmentally and accepted them where they are. You've proven yourself to be a friend, not an enemy!

Doesn't it make sense that a calmer, gentler, come-tome approach would work better with those whom you would like to see changed? The old saying applies here: "You catch more flies with honey than vinegar." We can't go full tilt at another person with our claws bared and expect them to accept what we have to offer.

Working with wild horses or wild people requires patience and an even temper. If you've ever tried to catch a horse in an open pasture, you know how frustrated and angry you can get. You pursue and he flees just as you are getting close. It's as if this horse is trying to make you mad and wear you down so you will

give up. Sounds like that difficult person you know, doesn't it?

Then there is this: when we take the other's behavior as a personal affront and allow anger to rule our brains, we have only doubled down on the problem. Not only is the other defiant, now we've complicated the matter by flooding our own brain with negative emotion that keeps us from thinking clearly. In this kind of scenario, who really needs the help? When we reach the exasperation point, it's time to work on ourselves, not on the other. There is truth in the maxim: "When you've got a finger pointing at someone else, there are three pointing back at you." We are all responsible for our own emotions, and we must control them if we are to help a difficult person change. Often this may mean taking a break and regaining perspective and self-control.

Less is More

When it comes to partnering with a horse for a harmonious and enjoyable outcome, the trouble most inexperienced riders have is that they try to do too much. You might say that they over-steer. They jerk the reins around trying to control the horse (to show it who's the boss) instead of "letting it have its head". Those who love to ride horses understand that, under normal circumstances, riding does not require doing much at all. In fact, good horsemen have an "understanding" with their horse, and they realize that

the less they do, and the more the horse takes responsibility for, the better the outcome. The idea is to work *with* the horse, not to try to make it do exactly what you want. Less is more.

This philosophy runs entirely counter to human nature. Our instincts, at least the fallen ones, tell us that if the key we've selected for the lock is not opening the door, we should try it over and over again with more force. We're driven to try harder, to do more, not less. Our instincts tell us that if the nail is not going into the wood, then bang it harder. If the person is not hearing what I'm saying, then tell them over and over again with more intensity and volume. Redouble your efforts.

Sadly, this never works. The only person throughout recorded history that could truly change another person from the inside out with a simple word or a touch never took this double-down approach to helping. The person I'm referring to is the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who physically and mentally healed thousands of people. But, Jesus never tried to make others change. He only healed those who were ready to change. He didn't chase people down to heal them whether they wanted it or not. Instead, He is recorded as asking even congenitally lame and blind people if they wanted to be healed. He wanted to know if they were motivated, if they were ready to change. Try to imagine Jesus doggedly pursuing people to heal them ("Hey, get back here. I am trying to do you a favor, you ungrateful wretch!"). You won't find those kinds of stories in the Bible. I'm

relatively sure that Jesus would have agreed that less is more.

If the less is more philosophy worked for Jesus, the Great Healer, it should work for us as well. We cannot help difficult people if we over-steer and try to control them. Remember: our tendency when trying to help another change is to do more than we should. Some examples of doing too much for another might include:

- Offering more advice and control than they want.
- Over-rewarding good behavior.
- Over-punishing bad behavior.
- Doing things for others they are responsible for doing themselves.
- Caring more for others than they care for themselves.
- Providing more for others than they provide for themselves.
- Rescuing others repeatedly instead of allowing natural or logical consequences.

In counseling terms, giving too much unwanted help is called "enabling". Enabling never creates positive change in another. It actually rewards the other's bad behavior and self-centered thinking. It's like continuing to hand-feed a hungry horse that bites your hand every time you feed it. But like the person with the sore hand, we're slow to learn. In counseling sessions, I've noticed

that when a client is confronted with the observation that they may be enabling another's bad behavior, they immediately deny this fact and say something like, "I'm not enabling! I'm just trying to get him to see that... get her to be more... get him to stop his... get her to understand that... get him to avoid..." This is classic over-steering vocabulary. And, over-steering is enabling.

Here's the hard truth: guess who actually benefits most from all this over-steering and enabling? The enabler, the one who is trying their best to control the person and the situation for their own relief and benefit! Just like a horse resents over-steering and tries to regain control of its head and its direction, a difficult person resents fixing and rescuing and tries to escape the helper's control. A rider often feels he must control his horse (because the rider is scared and insecure), so he kicks it in the flanks and jerks the reins back and forth aggressively. An enabler feels scared and insecure and tries every strategy conceivable (from being extra-sweet to being ultra-controlling) to see what works best. Both the unwise rider and the unwise enabler may believe that they are doing what's necessary to help, but both are at least somewhat blind to their own motivation, which is, to create better feelings and a better outcome for themselves

When this happens, there is no workable partnership. One party in this situation is going to buck up and the other party is going to get bucked off. Remember: less

is more, and the more compulsive we feel about helping, the more we should back off. Compulsive helping, the kind of helping that is not asked for or appreciated, is also called "codependency". Please see Appendix A to learn more about this important topic.

Joining Up vs. Blowing Up

Horse-trainers in the old days wanted the wild horse to know who was in charge, and when a horse didn't cooperate, the trainer often got angry and took it out on the horse. The controlling methods that horse handlers chose were often cruel and abusive. Horses could be tied to a post, forcibly pulled to the ground, beaten, or worse. They were only considered "broken" when they were almost completely bereft of any spirit or personality.

Unfortunately, some of those methods are still practiced today by uninformed horse trainers. But, Monte Roberts developed methods that do not require controlling or abusing the horse. Instead, these approaches allow him to speak the horse's language and form a mutually beneficial partnership with it. Through thousands of hours of observation, Roberts discovered that horse herds in the wild use two general methods of gaining compliance and producing change in a herd member. They use a "sending away" tactic within family groups as discipline for an unruly horse. Then, they use a "joining up" process to re-create trust and the changed

behavior that benefits both the unruly horse and the herd.

Imagine a horse that is creating trouble for the rest of the herd. This horse is going against the social norms that govern herd behavior – rules that keep the horses safe and working as a team. Instead of being a team player, though, the difficult horse is doing whatever it feels like doing and has become an annoyance and a danger to the other horses. This horse may go ahead of the herd or lag behind it. It may kick and bite the other horses and even create a stampede from time to time. The difficult horse requires the herd to focus on him/her instead of focusing on the herd's safety, sustenance, and herd relationships. From the herd's point of view, it's time for a change.

Using the "sending away" tactic, the lead mare of the family group will run the difficult horse out of and away from the rest of the herd. The herd leader thus ensures that the difficult horse has no herd interaction until improved attitude and behavior are observed. When the troubled horse once again submits to authority, there can be a "joining up" process which signals a second chance to form trust and become a functioning member of the herd. So, instead of the lead mare trying to fix and control every move of the difficult horse while it's in the herd, she simply sends it away for a time to enhance the natural desire to be accepted, and this keeps the herd safe as well. Sounds a little like the "time out" method we use with children,

right? Instead of trying to make a difficult person change, have you ever thought of simply sending them away for a while? Not to Abu Dhabi, just out of your physical presence or away from your emotional warmth. It's a natural consequence for upsetting the family system.

In Monte Robert's approach, he mimics the lead mare's form of discipline. He operates inside a corral and sends the difficult horse away by first confronting the horse through an eye-to-eye, assertive position resembling what would happen in a herd with the lead mare staring down a difficult herd member. Remember the look your mother or father could give you when you were being an unruly child? This look establishes Robert's authority in the relationship. The difficult horse naturally begins moving away, and Roberts throws a loose rope behind the animal to start it running around the corral

The troubled horse eventually tires of circling the corral, dislikes the fact that it has been sent away, and becomes somewhat submissive. Horses, like humans, are relationship-driven. They need to join up. So, the difficult horse indicates its submission by lowering its head and actually turning an inside ear toward the trainer showing that it is ready to listen — open to negotiation. At that point, Roberts ensures through his own gentle but firm behavior that the horse knows the trainer is both safe and in charge.

And then he does something paradoxical. He turns his back on the horse and waits for it to come to him. Of course, Roberts has a reward in his hand that certainly helps the horse consider exploring a new option. But the horse understands this arrangement due to his herd instincts, and he soon begins the join up process with the trainer. Before long, the horse is nuzzling Roberts in the back with its soft nose as a gesture of trust. Are you getting the picture? We can't have a join up unless we first have a sending away.

Imagine yourself assertively sending away that difficult person in your life. This may or may not require literally sending him/her out of your house, depending on the age and the life circumstances of all involved, but even sending them out of your physical presence for a time or away from your emotional connection can be effective. Then, when the person desires a relationship again and appears remorseful, imagine joining up with them in a way that requires that they come to you willing to create a new social contract. If they refuse this offer, the same sending away process can begin all over again. Use the space below to envision how you might use the process described above to begin a new and improved relationship with your difficult person.

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I wish I had a nickel for every time I have suggested to enabling family members that they simply send a family member away when there is serious misbehavior and the using of others for selfish agendas. Instead, many family members do the exact opposite – they continue an enmeshed pattern of over-steering and trying to make the troubled person do what they "ought to do". These efforts are doomed to failure, but it's amazing how many times people will repeat the same ineffective pattern over and over again. We can learn something powerful, though, from a horse whisperer who knows the transformational results of sending away and later joining up.

To be clear, sending away is not the same thing as emotional rejection or punishment. It doesn't convey anger or hatred or disgust. It simply and calmly conveys the message that, "We love you, but we won't tolerate the damage you are doing to yourself and others, so, you must go away until you have reconsidered and decided to act differently." Remember the story of the prodigal son in the New Testament? The biblical father in Luke 15:11-32 gives us a real-life example of sending away and joining up. It looks like the old truth is still the best truth.

Please note this caveat, though: there are times in a few difficult persons' lives when sending away is not appropriate. When a person's thinking or behavior is a serious threat to themselves or others, a medical and/or legal intervention is in order. For these extreme circumstances, extreme measures are required. The care giver may need to call 911, see a judge about commitment procedures, and do everything possible to ensure that the difficult person and others are not being harmed. In the midst of these unpleasant actions, the care giver will often be seen as "the enemy" of the difficult person, but the interventions must be followed through with regardless.

Joining up, then, is recreating a safe, trusting relationship based on a new way of thinking and relating for both parties. Joining up requires forming a new behavior and relationship contract. The contract involves clear understandings about expectations, rewards, and consequences. The difficult person must take personal responsibility for his/her own bad behavior and exhibit new healthy behaviors that are reinforced by accountability.

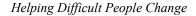
But, the person who is in the helping role must stop pursuing, fixing, rescuing, and enabling the difficult person. They cannot go soft or feel sorry for the difficult person because the person is experiencing the natural and logical consequences of his/her bad behavior. Consequences are the very thing that God invented to change our behavior. We must let God have

His way if we want to see deep and long-lasting change. We must let God be God!

Think of the things that natural and logical consequences teach us that instruction may not:

- If it tastes bad, spit it out; it might make you sick.
- If it hurts, don't do it again; you might be permanently injured.
- If you offend someone, they won't like you or help you; you will lose friends.
- If you look physically scary, people will avoid you; you may not get the job you want.
- If you don't take care of your health, you will pay for it; you might even die.
- If you don't work you won't have money; life will be very, very hard.

Consequences are actually man's best friend. I know you thought that was the dog, and I love my dog, but his ability to change my life for the better is limited. Consequences can literally transform lives, and we should not rob anyone of this valuable corrective God put here for our good. In the space below, list some of the ways you may have robbed others by helping them avoid consequences.



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Ryan's Story

By the time he was 16 years old, Ryan had already become a difficult person. He grew up in a middle-class home where both parents were overly career-oriented. They wanted more for their child than they had growing up. Ryan's dad was from a single parent home, because his father died when he was young. His mom was from a home where her father was an alcoholic and left the family when she was 13 years old. Both parents struggled with not spoiling Ryan who was their only child. Ryan's dad was an electrical engineer with a nuclear power plant, and his mother was a real estate agent. Due to their demanding careers, his parents tended to give Ryan what he wanted instead of what he really needed – their time and discipline.

Ryan's childhood was fairly unremarkable, but when he hit the teenage years, he became a person his parents no longer knew. He had little interest in school preferring to ride his skateboard and hang out with guys who liked taking risks. Ryan liked the attention of girls from an early age and he went through puberty at age 12. He always had a girlfriend, and it seemed that he knew how to pick the girls who were more trouble than he

was. His parents were often called to middle school for a conference with the Vice Principal due to Ryan's skipping class and paying more attention to the girls than his teachers. Although his behavior concerned his parents, they saw this as typical teenage growing pain.

As Ryan entered high school, he discovered cigarettes, beer, and pot. His weekends were spent getting intoxicated or high with his friends. Early on he was sneaky enough to avoid the suspicion of his parents. However, as he began to miss more and more school and refuse to get up in the morning, his parents grounded him from TV and the phone and pleaded with him to slow down on the party lifestyle. Eventually, Ryan's substance abuse problem became the elephant in the living room as all three members of the family made an unspoken pact to ignore the issue and hope it would go away. After all, "Boys will be boys and they usually grow out of this phase."

Neither of Ryan's parents had ever used street drugs, but both of them currently enjoyed numerous glasses of wine each night to relax. They were concerned about Ryan's alcohol and drug use, but their denial kept them believing that he was really a good boy who just got caught up in the wrong crowd. They talked with the Vice Principle of his school numerous times about his friends who were steering him in the wrong direction. As a junior in high school, though, he informed his parents that he wanted to drop out of school, get a job, and move in with some older guys. These friends, as it

turned out, were not only using drugs but also selling drugs to kids all over town. Ryan's parents finally sat up and took notice when Ryan was arrested for possession of a significant amount of marijuana. They paid his fine and pleaded with him once again to stop his self-defeating behavior. But, their lecturing on the evils of marijuana seemed to have no impact.

Fast forward three years and Ryan is still living at home and still smoking lots of dope. He did drop out of school but managed to get a GED. He has been fired from too many jobs to count, and his girlfriend is pregnant. His parents are now beside themselves with anger and shame. They feel hopeless in helping him, so they continue to allow him to live at home with all its benefits. They pay his car insurance and give him gas money. His mom does his laundry. And, on top of that, they are giving financial help to the girlfriend who is pregnant with their grandchild. The only good news is that Ryan does seem to love this young woman. But, what is the way forward?

Fortunately, Ryan's parents discovered that their local church offered free counseling sessions for those in their community. Ryan had zero interest in going to counseling, but his parents knew that something had to give, so they went to counseling for themselves. They finally insisted that Ryan go to counseling in order to continue living under their roof, but he only went twice. Over the course of time and numerous counseling sessions, here is how Ryan's parents changed their

approach to helping and how that impacted Ryan's behavior:

- 1. With the counselor's help, Ryan's parents came to the conclusion that they had been enabling his destructive behavior for many years. They agreed that half-measures would no longer be effective in getting Ryan's attention or in helping him change his behavior. So, the parents took the advice of the counselor and sat down with Ryan for a serious talk. They reiterated how much they loved him and believed in him, and then they gave Ryan a deadline for moving out of their home. Ryan was, of course, shocked and angry. He couldn't believe that his parents would "throw him out". He threatened that they would not see their grandbaby, and he left and went to live with his girlfriend and her indigent mother in a tiny apartment – a miserable arrangement but a very effective natural consequence.
- 2. Within a couple of months, Ryan began calling his parents and making requests for money. He always had a sad story about how desperate he and his girlfriend were, how they couldn't afford gas to get to work, etc. Wisely, his parents said "no" with the encouragement of the counselor. They came to realize that they should do nothing for Ryan that he was capable of doing for himself. They did take he and his girlfriend out to lunch every so often as a

reminder that they loved and believed in them. They listened to the sad stories but didn't cave in when the expected requests for money came. And, they did their best to explain how they had become a part of the problem by enabling. They were waiting for Ryan to experience enough pain that he would turn away from his old behaviors and turn his ear and his heart toward something new. The silence was deafening, but with God's help, they waited expectantly.

Six months later, Ryan's parents saw his beat-up car pulling into their driveway. They steeled themselves for another pathetic plea for money. What they heard instead sounded more like true remorse. Rvan admitted that he had lived an irresponsible life and added that he had found a new job and a new friend there. The friend was an older guy who had led a rough life when he was younger but now had his life in better shape and was willing to provide mentoring a relationship. The man was a frequent attendee at Alcoholics Anonymous, because he was a recovering alcoholic. Ryan was hopeful that this new relationship might help him turn his life around, because this guy really seemed to care about him and understand him. His parents were encouraged as they listened, but because they had learned well from their counselor, they realized that Ryan desiring change and Ryan actually changing were two different things. They affirmed Ryan's new thoughts

direction and offered to be partners in his change process, but they lovingly explained that their willingness did not include rescuing him. They didn't offer any financial assistance, but what they did offer was prayer and pertinent questions about how Ryan planned to proceed in the future. Any good intention that Ryan expressed was met with enthusiastic support.

Over time, Ryan continued to visit with his new friend, the recovering alcoholic, and was introduced to the world of 12 Step recovery. But, he didn't stop smoking pot so easily. He had to overcome years of justification that pot was a not a "real drug". He still struggled to keep a job, and his mentor stuck with him through the trials. Over time, he found work managing a skateboard park and eventually broke up with his girlfriend who refused to stop getting high. Ryan now has two years of recovery and attends Narcotics Anonymous meetings regularly. In fact, these days he regularly provides hope and help to other drug users and finds meaning and purpose in doing so. Ryan's parents have forged a much healthier relationship with him and continue to encourage him instead of enabling him. Ryan got custody of his daughter, and now Mom, Dad, Ryan, and little Tristan can all enjoy each other's company. They have all joined the church that offered the counseling services, and they still stop in for a check-up with the counselor from

time to time. Things aren't perfect, but they're certainly getting better.

Practical Stuff

Here are a few practical steps for sending away and joining up with that difficult person in your life:

1. Stop Pursuing Like a Cougar and Do Less

- a) Stop all enabling behaviors. When a difficult person is hurting self and others and is without remorse, sending them away (physically and/or emotionally) starts with the helper recognizing and stopping all pursuing and overdoing behaviors which amount to enabling. Enabling looks like:
 - 1) Providing money or other valuable things to others.
 - 2) Taking on the responsibilities of others.
 - 3) Hectoring others into changing.
 - 4) Making excuses for others.
 - 5) Rescuing others from consequences.
 - 6) Giving advice to others they have not asked for.
 - 7) Threatening consequences and not following through.
 - 8) Accepting blame that should rest on the other.
 - 9) Avoiding or denying what is really going on with the other.

- b) Set and maintain healthy boundaries for your own good. Boundaries are another way of doing less versus more. Examples of boundaries might be:
 - 1) "You cannot live here and be abusive or addicted. Get your things together and move out at once."
 - "You're welcome to live here on a trial basis for one month if you live responsibly, consider others, and don't have to be reminded to do your chores."
 - 3) "I cannot help you financially unless you get a job and first pay back the money you already owe me."
 - 4) "I'll be happy to talk to you about this when you are calm and have a cooperative attitude."
 - 5) "I love you but I will not go on covering for you when you have a hangover."
 - 6) "I'll be happy to give you a ride to work this week if you fill up my gas tank."

2. Join Up

a) Encourage accountability. Difficult persons need more than good intentions. They need accountability for working a plan of action, and they need someone besides you to report

- to. The person they account to should be asking them questions like:
 - On a 1-10 scale, what is your motivation to change? What would increase your motivation?
 - O What do you want to change, and how would that positively impact your life?
 - What are your options for accomplishing this change?
 - What are your specific action steps? When will you do these things?
- b) Be loving. Believe in the person, be their cheerleader, and project a positive future for them. Commit to being more of a partner in the change process than a parental figure (unless the difficult person is a child) so that your affection for them is not based on their behavior. But, use "tough love" to create a new way of relating predicated on the difficult taking personal person responsibility and being a giver instead of a taker. (See the next chapter on creating a new way of relating that is absolutely transformational.)
- c) Celebrate true change. When the difficult person makes real change, be the first to notice and provide sincere compliments and encouragement. Remember the party that the prodigal son's father threw for him when he returned? Celebrate!

Russ Rainey, Ph.D.

The best way to help another change is to not make it your responsibility to change them. Instead, allow consequences to be the teacher so your focus can remain on believing in the person and helping them see themselves as God sees them. Fan the flames of that vision every chance you get. Helping a difficult person believe in a better version of him/herself requires being in the relationship for the long haul which is very, very challenging. Therefore, to continue to find the good in a person when there is so much bad staring you in the face, you're going to need an uncommon wisdom and motivation. But, those godly commodities are readily available, so read on...

Chapter 2 – Ancient Wisdom

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

- Jesus (John 13:34)

In one of the most haunting passages in all of ancient literature, the Apostle Paul muses about the greatest gift we can give another, love. His admonition: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal... If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing." (1 Corinthians 13:1, 3)

Love is the only pure motivation for helping another person change. Please reread that statement several times before you read on – I believe it will stand up to all scrutiny. Therefore, let's acknowledge that the change *approach* used by a helper, as well-intentioned as it might be, is nowhere nearly as important as what is in the heart of that helper. Before helping anyone, we should all ask ourselves, "What is my chief motivation for helping?"

We must grasp the reality that difficult people are not broken things that need to be fixed so that we can experience joy or relief. They are human beings made in God's image who are choosers by His very own design. They get to choose whether they will change. And our task, according to God, is to love them regardless of whether they change or not and, when possible, love them *into* change. We are representing God, Himself, when we help others, so our motives for helping must be clear and pure. Otherwise, we may unintentionally manipulate others to serve our own agenda. Walking this fine line is tricky, and wisdom is required.

It is this author's belief that true wisdom comes from above. Thus, in this chapter, we're going to consider the role that God can play in helping a difficult person. So, I have a request of you, the reader: if you are not a believer in God, please don't check out or skip this chapter.

When it comes to genuinely and effectively helping other people, no one has ever come a close second to God's Son, Jesus Christ. He is the only person who ever lived life perfectly, and His motivation for helping difficult people was always pure love. He created each of us, and He always wants the best for us. He lovingly gave his life for us so that we could be changed eternally. And, please don't miss this: He had completely unique methods for producing change in difficult people, and those methods *never* failed.

For over two thousand years, many books and scholarly articles, sacred and secular, have been written about Jesus as the world's most effective change agent. He had unbelievable insight into the source of people's problems, and He helped them resolve those problems in entirely unorthodox ways. Authorities of His day

were astonished, speechless, and threatened by the things He accomplished in less than three brief years of ministry. And, just think of it: this one man's life-changing message of Christian love and redemption, in spite of intense persecution, overtook paganism in the Roman Empire only a short while after Jesus' death. Jesus literally changed the world in His day, and He's still changing it to this very day through those who practice "the Way", a kinder, gentler approach to helping.

Since the last chapter cautioned us not to chase after others to "get them" to change, it's probably important to note that Jesus never chased after others or issued ultimatums. Although he could have authoritatively quoted "the law" to difficult people and simply demanded that they change, Jesus chose instead to accept people as they were and to love them into change. That was a very tall order in his day. The Bible is full of stories about those whom Jesus helped change. They were seriously difficult people: adulterers, lepers, demon possessed, the blind, deaf and dumb, murderers, prostitutes, hard-core Roman commanders, thieving tax collectors, all of whom experienced a changed life because of Jesus' motivation and His methods. We have so much to learn from Him.

Contrary to the legalists of His day, Jesus the Son of God didn't come to "lay down the law". His people, the Jews, already had more laws than they could count much less obey. Jesus came to "lay down His life" out

of pure love. He didn't come to lay heavy moral burdens on others — even the difficult people. But He did come to give one new law, the law to end all laws — the law of love. Helping a difficult person absolutely requires that the helper exercise the same kind of love for the other that Jesus expressed for difficult individuals during His time on earth. A heart of love makes all the difference. And, here's an interesting aside: Scripture teaches that even if our methods of helping are flawed, we can still count on a heart of love to make up the difference.

One of Jesus' well-known disciples, Peter, was known for being brash, impulsive, and flawed in his attempts to help Jesus and His cause. He was usually the first one to offer unsolicited advice even to the Son of God (now there is a real "fixer"), and he was also the first one to do exactly the opposite of what Jesus desired when the chips were down (he denied Jesus three times before the crucifixion). But, Peter held on to the hope that his heart of love would make up for his blatant mistakes. In the book of the Bible that bears his name, Peter encourages us, "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8)

Another biblical stalwart, the Apostle Paul, formerly an angry, religious zealot who was a mortal enemy of Christianity, and who remained to the end an antagonist to his own people the Jews, learned that difficult people (like himself) can only be won over by love. He states,

"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a)

Love absolutely works. It never fails. It finds a way to connect to the difficult person's heart where real, long-lasting change is born. Any other motivation for helping people change will fall short of the mark, because without love:

- We accomplish only a self-centered agenda.
- We do not promote trust and safety in the relationship.
- We depend on the strategy of man not the true wisdom that comes from God alone.
- We do not take into consideration the other person's readiness for change.
- We push a solution on the person that is probably unacceptable to him/her.

Jesus never failed in His attempts to help others, although there were times when a person was not yet ready for His help (see the story of the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-27). If a difficult person is not ready to be helped, even Jesus can't help them. But Jesus' loving approach to the difficult person was always effective (for an example, see the story of the woman at

the well in John 4:4-42). Jesus knew men's hearts, so He didn't just speak to their heads – He spoke to their hearts out of a motivation of love, and their hearts either received that love or they didn't – their choice.

Jesus changed many people's lives through miracles like giving sight to a man born blind, and that may be a little above our pay grade. But what you will read in the rest of this chapter are some of the more surprising and powerful tactics Jesus employed that we can repeat. Jesus didn't do things in ordinary ways. He surprised He often used paradoxical interventions (approaches that seemed, on the surface, to be absurd but turned out to be very effective). And He rarely did the same thing twice, because what was good for one person might not be good for the next. But one thing we can be sure of – what He did for each person was in the service of that person experiencing a full life: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)

So, let's not leave this murky. How did Jesus love people into a changed heart? What did He actually do, and how can we repeat what He did with the same results?

Believe in the Person

Biblically, this is a true statement: Jesus completely believes in people who believe in Him. If a difficult

person believes in Jesus, Jesus believes in him/her. How do we know this?

- God knew us before we were born and wrote all the days of our lives in His book before we lived a single day of life. (Psalm 139:16)
- God created us in His own image. (Genesis 1:27)
- God blessed us and gave us authority to rule over the earth and subdue it. (Genesis 1:28)
- God has a plan for every person's life. (Jeremiah 29:11)
- God gives us gifts, strengths, and a purpose in life that reflects His goodness. (Ephesians 4:11-15)
- God's son, Jesus, came to seek and to save all who are lost. (Luke 19:10)
- God sacrificed Jesus, His only son, to rescue us from sin and death. (1 John 4:10)
- God desires a very personal relationship with each one of us. (John 15:13-17)
- If we are willing to receive Him, God gives us His Spirit to comfort, convict, and guide us. (1 John 4:13)

Think of this amazing truth: God is FOR US. He believes in us. He stands with us no matter what we are going through. He knows our potential for good and for bad and yet He loves us just as we are. He never pulls away from us even when we are running from Him.

Just think of Jesus' reaction to the tax collector, Zacchaeus (found in Luke 19:1-10). Tax collectors were despised in Jesus' time, because they extorted money from their own people, the Jews, and gave it to the Roman conquerors. Yet, Jesus did not condemn Zacchaeus – He believed in him. Jesus picked him out of a crowd and publicly announced that He was going to Zacchaeus' house to eat with him. Jesus chose to hang out with a despised crook. The result? Zacchaeus gave half of his wealth to the poor and paid back four times as much as he had defrauded others. That's what I'd call real change, and all because Jesus believed in him

And, remember Jesus' response to the woman caught in the act of adultery, an offense that demanded that she be stoned to death? Jesus focused his attention on her unloving accusers, not on her, and He simply said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more." (John 8:11) There was no lecture, no guilt trip, no shaming. Jesus believes in all of us like that. He accepts us just as we are, and He wants the very best for us.

And this, my friends, is something powerful that we also can do for others – we can believe in them the way God believes in us. We can believe in them like no one in their life ever has. Have you ever experienced someone believing in you to the depth that it literally changed the course of your life? If you have, you are truly blessed.

I was fortunate enough to have a professor in graduate school who loved me like that. I still don't know why he chose me out of 4000 students and invested time in me. I don't know why he listened to my concerns and dreams, but he did. And, I don't know why he was keenly interested in my ideas instead of offering me his own sage advice. But I do know this: that man changed my view of myself, and I began to truly believe in myself for the first time in my life. What a gift!

So, what does believing in another look like? Believing in another person is being FOR them no matter what the circumstances. It is being generous with support, encouragement, and sincere compliments. It is seeing the person as capable and competent and telling them so. It is trusting that the person can make good decisions out of good motivations in spite of the fact that they don't have a good track record. It is projecting a bright future for the person even if they have lived in darkness. Psalm 118:5-6 says, "From my distress I called upon the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me in a large place. The Lord is for me; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"

God "set me in a large place...the Lord is for me..." Let that sink in. A "large place" means I'm not hemmed in – I'm set free to take a deep breath, to take time to consider my many God-given options, and to simply be myself. I'm not constrained by what others think I should be or do. God is "for me" so "what can

man do to me?" Have you ever experienced such a peaceful, empowering place?

What if I could give another person that kind of freedom by being for them? What would that be worth to a person – to set them in a large place, to be for them, and to truly believe in them? Really, who does that for another person? Who has done that for you? If your answer is "no one", maybe you can take a moment and just grieve that. But don't stay in the "poor me" state too long, because God wants to play His "I believe in you" role in your life right now. And the more you can accept that He believes in you, the more you will want to pay it forward by believing in someone else. Do you see how God's belief in you can free you to believe in others?

Believing in a person literally changes their life, and that's what Jesus did for others. He chose twelve very ordinary people as His disciples, and He believed in them. And what did those followers do? They loved and believed in others as Jesus loved and believed in them, and over 2000 years later, we see the evidence that Christianity has changed the world. And, now it's your turn to believe in someone and see that person changed. You can do this. God's belief in you will enable you to pass along this amazing gift.

Believing in another person means that I am entirely convinced that the difficult person can find the answers

to life's problems with God's help. It means saying things to the person like:

- "I believe that you can..."
- "I have faith in you."
- "I have confidence that you will ..."
- "I know that God will lead you."
- "I've seen you tackle harder problems than this before."
- "You've got what it takes to see this through."
- "God has given you everything you need to..."
- "I know you are going to knock this one out of the park!"
- "You're a smart person you'll figure this out."

And, it means doing these kinds of things:

- Refraining from giving advice.
- Holding space for the person to think their own thoughts and discover their own truth instead of crowding them with ideas.
- Helping the person brainstorm solutions to prove to them that God can give them great ideas of their own.
- Allowing the person to learn from their mistakes.
- Being patient with the person while they try out their wings.
- Celebrating successes versus correcting mistakes.

Believing in another person is experiential evidence that we love them. As the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:7-8, love "...bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails." You will never go wrong by believing in another. And, who needs to be believed in more than a difficult person?

Listen to the Person

Question: why would Jesus, the Son of God, the creator of the entire universe, use His valuable and brief time on earth to listen to the pleas and desires of thousands of pathetic people whom society saw as losers in every sense of the word? Jesus did this, you know, every day of His three-year ministry on earth. He listened to the stories and the needs of the poor, the starving, the blind, the lame, the chronically ill, the demon possessed, the Roman oppressors, and the morally bankrupt. He listened, He asked them clarifying questions to better understand, and then He listened some more. Why would He do that for them?

But maybe more to the point, why does God listen so patiently to you and me today as we pour out our concerns to Him? I'm astounded at how much time God spends just listening to me whine. I can be a world-class whiner. So, why doesn't He just shoot straight, get right to the bottom line, and tell me what he knows to be the answer whether I like it or not? Why does He bother to listen to me drone on and on about the same

things every day in prayer? After all, He knows exactly what I should have done already and what I should do going forward. He sees the patterns of my failed past, and He knows how I will fail in the future. So, why does He go on listening to a sinner who fails over and over again and rarely seems to get it? What does God know about the power of listening that we don't? There must be something incredibly powerful about listening. Maybe that's why we all need "a good listening-to" so much more than "a good talking-to"?

This is one of the world's great mysteries, is it not? I've been a professional listener for over thirty years, and I can't tell you exactly why listening is so powerful, but it absolutely is. So many good things happen to a person when they are listened to. It's life changing. In fact, there is probably nothing that compares to the benefits of being listened to. Just for starters, the person being listened to:

- Feels valued someone is giving up their valuable time to give them undivided attention.
- Feels safe enough to share their true concerns and feelings.
- Feels free to be themselves, warts and all.
- Feels relieved someone else is now sharing their burdens.
- Feels a sense of clarity as they hear themselves talking out loud.

Russ Rainey, Ph.D.

- Feels willing to open up about long-hidden, basement issues.
- Feels permission to confess their own shortcomings.
- Feels connected once again to humanity.
- Feels motivated to take more personal responsibility going forward.
- Feels healthier and happier as a result.

If there is one thing we can do that changes another person the most, it's listen to them. Please underline or highlight that statement. And yet, we're so bad at this! We rarely ever listen attentively to another person – even those whom we love the most. Even when we know we should be listening instead of running our mouth, we are still thinking our own thoughts and waiting impatiently for the other to pause for one second so we can jump in and share our own version of the truth. For most of us, this is not planned – it's impulsive. We do it in spite of ourselves and in spite of the strained relationships it produces. But we're not alone in this. Even the wisest of us makes this same mistake over and over again. We talk instead of listening.

For a moment, imagine that you are Solomon, whom the Bible describes as the world's wisest king, and you have over 1000 wives and concubines in your royal palace. Hmmm – maybe not the wisest move! These women may have expected him to listen to them

lovingly and attentively, but Solomon didn't have enough days in the year to listen to every woman he cared about. But at least he was wise enough to realize the problem he created. Solomon had a significant problem with listening. We know this because he wrote about it so often. Listen to some of the things God taught him over the years:

- Zip it up "When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise." (Proverbs 10:19)
- Keep your opinion to yourself "A fool does not delight in understanding, but only in revealing his own mind." (Proverbs 18:2)
- Listen before you speak "He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him." (Proverbs 18:13)
- Keep listening "Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is counted prudent." (Proverbs 17:28)
- Draw out the other's thoughts "A plan in the heart of a man is like deep water, but a man of understanding draws it out." (Proverbs 20:5)

Solomon demonstrated his wisdom (in Proverbs 20:5) when he wrote that the task of a listener is to "draw out", not to speak into. When another person has a lot on their mind, their felt need is to have someone be there to help *draw out* their thoughts and feelings. They need to come to conclusions of their own, on their own.

They are not asking for an education, and they are not asking for advice. They need to be heard, understood, validated, and have someone listen intently as they process what is in their head and their heart. This is an incredibly important and life-changing gift that we can give others, especially if they are one of life's difficult persons whom others tend to avoid.

So, here's a challenge: will you commit to listening to and learning about the difficult person in your life? It would be a gift of love, and this is essentially what it would look like:

- Listen attentively this means eye contact, no distractions, and putting your own thoughts entirely on the back burner.
- Listen quietly no comments other than "uh huh", "I see", "I understand", etc.; and only simple questions designed for further clarification: "Will you say more about that?"
- Listen long longer than you've ever listened we're talking hours, not minutes.
- Listen for feelings and desires make a mental note of these vulnerable revelations so you can ask more about them later.
- Listen for patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving patterns dig a rut in the brain and the heart that allow the person to become stuck. Your listening can help the person get out of that rut. The more the person talks, the more

their patterns are revealed. This allows them to see where change is needed.

Larry King said, "I remind myself every morning: Nothing I say this day will teach me anything. So, if I'm going to learn, I must do it by listening." (http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes.html) How true it is! If we will only listen long and attentively, we will kick-start the change process.

Ask the Person Questions

When the difficult person in your life knows that you believe in them and that you are willing to listen to them intensively, you will have *earned the right* to ask them some straightforward questions. Now, before you get all excited about this, please understand that what we're talking about here is not the kinds of questions you have wanted to ask them for a long time – things like: "Seriously, what in the world could you have been thinking when you did that?" Or, "What are you using for a brain?" Or, "What's in that stuff you've been smoking?" Or, "Why don't you get off your rear and look for a job?" These questions are tempting but obviously not very well received. Many of us have asked those kinds of loaded questions to the people we love, and we know how well they went over – not!

The questions we want to consider in this chapter are the kinds of questions that Jesus used to grab a person's attention and cause him/her to think outside the box. Jesus wanted people to break out of their ruts and see a different perspective. In the first four books of the New Testament, containing the story of Jesus' life, we find many of the questions that Jesus asked. A small sample would include the following:

- "What are you seeking?" (John 1:38)
- "What do you want me to do for you?" (Matthew 20:32)
- "But who do you say that I am?" (Luke 9:20)
- "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" (Matthew 22:42)
- "Why do you question in your hearts?" (Luke 5:22)
- "Do you want to be healed?" (John 5:6)
- "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" (Mark 4:40)
- "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" (Matthew 9:28)
- "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26)
- "Where is your faith?" (Luke 8:25)

Jesus asked questions that helped people think deeply and expansively. He got them off their game, so to speak. His questions helped them think about things from a new perspective, yet the questions, themselves, were often simple, short, and to the point. His questions

unlocked the mental doors that kept the other person a prisoner to their old way of thinking. Can you imagine walking up to a person who has been sick or deformed for their entire life and asking the question: "Do you want to be well?" That's what Jesus did. Apparently, the man who was asked that question had formed his identity around his handicap and needed to be jolted into questioning his long-held, victim way of thinking.

We can learn to ask those kinds of questions and help others get unstuck. There is both an art and a science, though, to asking great questions. Interestingly enough, the art of asking has more to do with listening. People sometimes ask me, "How do I know what question to ask?" And my answer is, "Listen closely to what the other person is saying, not saying, saying repeatedly, and saying between the lines." If you listen long enough and thoughtfully enough to get to know the person well, a good question will just pop into your brain. You might say that intuition takes over. Or, some of your better questions may be born out of simple curiosity. Example: "So, what led you to make that decision?" Or, in a spiritual sense, God may prompt you to ask a question and you don't even know why. But the end result is that the other person may respond, "That's a good question..." or "I've never thought about that..." or "No one has ever asked me that question before." And now you know you are getting somewhere.

You may have heard the old Chinese proverb that goes, "When the pupil is ready, the master will appear." This

is very close to what happens when you are totally with the person you are trying to help. If you have become a student of the other person's life, if you have their best interests at heart, and if you listen to them intently, good questions will appear. On the other hand, if you are trying to "get them to do" what you want, the only questions that will appear to you will be manipulative, controlling questions that are based on your own agenda. Not helpful. Trust your listening to provide the questions you should ask.

The *science* of asking good questions is based upon the experience and wisdom of many thinkers over at least the last 2400 years of history. Socrates, the philosopher, was famous for his "Socratic method" in which he used questions instead of lectures to teach his students. Unfortunately for Socrates, his students learned their lessons so well using his method that they became a threat to the leaders of his day, and Socrates was murdered as a result. Law students to this day are taught to think logically and comprehensively by answering questions asked by the professor. Philosophy, itself, is the study of life's ultimate questions pertaining to reality, existence, knowledge, values, reason, etc., so it offers many thoughtprovoking questions.

There are not many philosophers on a par with Socrates these days, but there are still great question-askers. Some of them are even media stars we know well – professional interviewers like Barbara Walters, Oprah

Winfrey, and Larry King come to mind. Then there are professional counselors and life coaches who are certified and paid for asking powerful, probing questions. We will look more at their domain in the next chapter. But, below are a few tips that all good question-askers could recommend – tips that will help you craft questions that are literally transformational:

- Start with open-ended questions that lead the difficult person to consider wider and deeper thoughts (example: "What is on your mind?").
- Ask clarifying questions to make sure you understand what you've heard (example: "Can you say more about that?" or, "Am I hearing you say that...?").
- Keep your questions brief and to the point (example: "How satisfied are you in your current job?").
- Don't ask questions that can be answered "yes" or "no" – you can't get to the heart of a matter this way.
- Ask questions to determine what the other person wants (example: "So, what do you really want where a career is concerned?").
- Primarily use questions that expand, not limit, the person's thinking:
 - o Who "Who could you talk to about that career path?"
 - o What "What are the upsides and downsides of working in that field?"

- When "When would you expect to have a conversation with the HR folks?"
- Where "Where could you find other resources to find out what you need to know?"
- o How "How will you find open positions in that career field?"
- Avoid questions starting with the word "why" it puts people on the defensive (example: "Why haven't you talked about this with your boss before now?").
- Avoid asking questions that include the solution (example: "Don't you think an internet search could help you find what you need to know?").
- Use questions to brainstorm options (example: "What are your options?" and "Which of those options do you like best?").
- Rely on pointed questions to produce action steps (example: "Now that you've chosen an option you like, when will you put it into action?").
- Use follow-up questions for accountability (example: "So, what was the result of the conversation you had with the professional recruiter?").

The only way to learn the science of asking is to practice using questions. Practice with any and everyone who will allow it. And, hang onto the thought that you can mess up another person much faster by

offering suggestions than by asking questions. So, just ask. Questions require much more thought on the helper's part than suggestions which may be blurted out on impulse without rational thought or respect for the other person. The main idea to bear in mind is that questions are not to be used for sideways advice or to guilt or needle the other person.

Questions are to be used to help the other person discover things they are not now aware of – things that might help them rethink their current values, beliefs, and behaviors. As an example, instead of asking an alcoholic *why* they keep drinking when they know it's going to kill them, we could try asking them *what* they really want out of life and how alcohol might potentially alter that dream. That's a much better use of a question, and it's not threatening.

Other positive things about asking versus telling include:

- If you ask instead of telling, you are not responsible for the outcome.
- Asking is less stressful than telling pressure mounts when you give your best advice to someone and they don't warm up to it. Asking is just exercising your curiosity.
- Asking is much more fulfilling than telling. Don't you love to ask people questions that make them think deeply or create an "aha moment"?

- When you ask a good question and it helps the other person discover a unique solution, they think you're a genius and they often implement the solution. It's a win/win.
- Asking instead of telling reinforces your intention to believe in the person.

So, are you tired of giving unsolicited advice that falls on deaf ears and creates animosity in the relationship? Try asking questions instead. Your efforts to help in this way will be rewarded, and you will be loving the person the way Jesus loves you.

Encourage the Person

According to news from the UK news outlet, *The Telegraph*, December 17, 2014, there are now over 12 million people in the world who are millionaires. That's an astounding number! I'm sure that these wealthy persons are at least somewhat encouraged about how life is treating them. They have all the money they need. But, if I were a betting man, I would bet that there aren't 12 million people in the entire world who would say that they have all the encouragement they need. Even with wealth, encouragement is in short supply, and few of us are rich in this, one of life's most valuable commodities. Personally, do you have all the encouragement in your life that you need? I certainly don't. I can always use more encouragement.

According the *Collaborative* International to Dictionary of English and the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, the root meaning of the phrase "to encourage" seems to be that one inspires another with "heart, inclination, desire, or will" to "face danger, fear, or the vicissitudes of life with self-possession, confidence, and resolution." Seriously, could one person do all that for another person? Actually, the answer is "yes", and it costs very little to do so. But, something like this that is so necessary, so life-altering, and that costs so little to give - where would something like that have originated? The answer: it came from the Creator of the human spirit, because He knows what we need most

Known as "The Trinity": God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are world-class encouragers. Nobody does it better. And their encouragement of humans starts on page one of the first book of the Bible. Is it not encouraging to you that you are made in the very image of God and that you were made to "rule" over the rest of God's creation? Seriously, you can actually say, "Dude, I rule!" without being struck by lightning. Check out the first book of the Bible, Genesis 1:26-28, and see if I'm exaggerating. And this kind of encouragement from God continues all the way through the scripture.

For example, about half way through the Bible is the book of Psalms, one of the wisdom books. One of the

most well-known passages for encouragement in the scriptures reads:

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and your staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (Psalm 23)

And, the very last book of the Bible, Revelation, offers us this eternal encouragement, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." (Revelation 21:3-4)

God knows that we need lots of encouragement. And He knows that we need it not only from Him but also from one another: "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up..." says 1 Thessalonians 5:11. And, no one needs encouragement like a difficult person. We can get so angry and so fed up with a difficult person that we actually refuse to offer them simple encouragement. What the person doesn't need is our babying or enabling them, but what they do need badly is encouragement and support. What's the difference? Remember that enabling is doing for others what they can do for themselves (like providing for them what they should be providing for themselves). Encouragement is doing for others what they cannot do for themselves (like offering them inspiration and support to face hard situations with a resolute heart). Enabling and encouraging are mutually exclusive. Can you see that?

So, what does it look like to encourage and support another person? First, we have to get our head and our heart around a new approach to relationship with the difficult person. We should never use encouragement to get difficult people to do what we want. Irresponsible people will sometimes do a little of what we want them to do just so they can stay in our good graces and use us to get what they want. Drug addicts, alcoholics, peopleusers, and other irresponsible persons may act compliant at times so they can stay in our homes, eat our groceries, and use our cars. But if we are playing along with that game, enabling them, they are not being encouraged – they are not being helped, and we're being used. That's a lose/lose situation.

Second, we need to find ways to encourage the person on the heart level. Many of us are not good at inspiring, supporting, and encouraging, but we can get better with concerted effort. Below are a few examples of how you might encourage another:

- Use short texts or emails to communicate, "I believe in you, I love you, I know you can overcome this, I'm with you and I'm pulling for you, etc."
- Spend time with them and keep the conversation positive, upbeat, and forward-looking.
- Pump up their confidence by reminding them of their abilities, past successes, etc.
- Send inspiring cards Hallmark has already done the heavy lifting for you here.
- Give the person an encouraging book you know they might identify with.
- Give a small, thoughtful gift to the person that they would not get for themselves.
- Take them with you to a fun event.
- Make a brief call to the person to say, "I was just thinking about you..."
- Ask the person how you can pray for them, and then do it as they listen.
- Affirm and celebrate any positive steps the person takes.
- Simply hang out with the person and listen this is huge.

 Offer encouragement on a routine basis day after day – this wave after wave approach works much better than a "drive-by", lengthy, pep talk.

One word of caution about offering encouragement: encouragement softens the other person's heart, and it puts them in a more receptive mood. So, unfortunately, it can be used to manipulate a person. I've seen this done by desperate parents of irresponsible adult children and by lonely men who take advantage of a woman's grief after a recent divorce. Encouraging others during desperate times should never be used for the purpose of manipulating a hurting person. On the flip side, though, encouragement out of a motivation of love can effectively prepare the difficult person's heart for a healthy dose of truth that is the counter balance to grace. Both grace and truth are necessary for change.

An encouraged person is much more likely to change. Even though it's a challenge to provide this kind of help for a difficult person in the midst of the chaos they create, it can be the real difference-maker. If that weren't true, the Bible would not be full of encouraging verses.

Test the Person

OK, I realize that you may have been gritting your teeth as you waded through all this content about believing in the difficult person, listening to them, asking them thought-provoking questions, and encouraging them.

So, this loving intervention, testing the person, may bring a little smile to your face. In fact, the word "testing" may bring back a memory of the mean old teacher you had in the sixth grade who gave you tortuously hard exams and seemed to get personal pleasure out of putting a big red "F" on your homework. If that's your mental image of testing, subjectively enjoy the thought of giving that kind of treatment to your difficult person for just a moment, and then let it go. That's not where we're going with this.

According to *Webster's Dictionary*, a test is a very *objective* process, "a critical examination, observation, or evaluation". It comes with no bias or sense of judgment, punishment, or manipulation. It has nothing to do with the way you feel about the difficult person. It is a reality check – feedback on what's what in the real world. A test helps uncover what is – not what could be or should be or what was intended. You might say that it is *graciously* holding up a mirror that helps the difficult person see the real *truth* about him/her. Jesus was a master of offering both grace and truth in a packaged deal, and the difficult people who came to him for help realized that they were in serious need of this two-for-one special.

So, what might your test for a difficult person look like? Is it a written document, a physical ordeal, a verbal inquisition? Actually, it can be as simple as a four-word question: "What will you do?" Scholastic

tests are typically worded as a question, and that's what we mean here by the term "test". It's a simple, straightforward question that helps a person examine reality and determine what to do next. Examples of a test question might sound like:

- "What's your next move?"
- "What do you plan to do?"
- "What action step are you committed to?"
- "What do you want to see changed going forward?"

And, by the way, the kind of test we're referring to here is best provided by a person who is functioning like a proctor. A proctor is an objective person with no agenda or skin in the game. A proctor is not the teacher you had all semester who has a vested interest in whether you pass or fail the test. A teacher's salary and well-being depend on students passing tests to prove the teacher's competency. On the other hand, a proctor simply provides the test and hopes that the students will learn from the experience. He/she is not trying to make a point or teach a lesson. This is a very important distinction.

If my competency as a helper is hanging in the balance when I offer a test, I will have impure motives for providing the test, and I might actually de-motivate the other person. When giving another person a test, my best role is as an objective proctor — not a teacher. Granted, that's easier said than done when the difficult

person is in close relationship with you, but make it your goal to play the proctor role by being objective.

What motivates a difficult person to accept your test questions? First, if the person has gained new perspective from the conversations and the safe relationship they have enjoyed with you, they are in a better frame of mind than before. They are feeling more at ease and more hopeful, and they know that you are for them. After gaining the difficult person's trust through believing in them, listening to them, asking them pertinent questions, and supporting/encouraging them, you have essentially earned the right to offer them a reality test. In fact, you may be the only person who occupies that unique position in their life.

They are now in a place where they can say, "Yes, ask away." I must have asked hundreds of people over the years, "Can I ask you a hard question?" Not a single person has ever said, "No". But that's only because I first believed in them, listened to them, asked them good questions, and encouraged them. It's a great privilege when others allow you to test them as a result of you having built a safe, loving relationship with them. What an honor!

Second, most difficult persons have felt stuck for a very long time, and they do want to move forward – they just don't know how. So, when you offer them a test, they understand that it's their choice. And, the person most often likes the idea that the choice is theirs. But, if the

person is, for whatever reason, not ready for a test, then you simply do more believing, listening, asking, and supporting until they are ready. Your patient endurance means more to them than they can express. I can tell you with confidence that this method never fails. Treat people as Jesus treats you, and you will have a very low rate of failure in helping relationships. Love never fails. It may take a while, but it never fails.

Traci's Story

Traci was a bossy overachiever, and she offended people left and right – especially if you worked for her. Traci was a mid-thirties, upper level manager for a large corporation. She was the kind of "large and in charge", dominating person you would definitely want leading you through the smoke and out the fire escape if the building was on fire. She liked barking orders and expected full compliance. If a hard and fast decision needed to be made, she was your girl. And, where work relationships were concerned, she took no captives.

Traci got plenty of kudos at work from senior executives, and she often won corporate bonuses and prizes due to her competitive nature and the lean, mean team she put together. But the word at the water cooler was that you only worked for Traci for a brief stint, mainly to learn from her, then you fled to another company to avoid a personal nervous breakdown. Employees that worked for her either became her puppets or they stayed angry and hurt until they

couldn't take it anymore. This pattern eventually got Traci in trouble with her company. Although she was competing at the highest level, the human resources division convinced the CEO that Traci was running off some of their best hires, and they couldn't afford that. That's when the corporation determined that Traci must get some help with interpersonal skills, but they were a little unclear in how she should do this. What was very clear was that she needed to change a.s.a.p.

When she first visited with her sister over the phone about her dilemma, Traci readily admitted that she wasn't fond of this new "touchy-feely" stuff that her employer now expected, but she felt confident that if other managers were better at relationships than she was, she could catch up with them in short time. This was like one more contest for her. At least that's how she felt until her sister suggested that she take an online personality test, and the results showed that her primary personality type (dominant, competitive, controlling) naturally intimidates others. The test's personalized feedback information was not good news. It indicated in very plain language that unless she overcame her weakness, she would never be able to work with the best and the brightest in any setting without offending and discouraging them.

With that discouraging news came concerns she had never considered before. She was humbled and scared, and she began looking for answers. This is precisely where a difficult person needs to be personally before

they are ready to receive help. When they get to this low point, though, they do not need advice as much as they need a partnership with a person who can help them find their own solutions and implement them. Traci's older sister fit the bill perfectly, because she knew that under that hard-as-nails exterior was a heart that could be very generous. She recalled Traci's tireless hours volunteering at the homeless shelters and her sizable financial gifts to underprivileged children in third world countries, and she knew that there was good there to be drawn out.

Over the course of several weeks, Traci and her sister walked the following journey together:

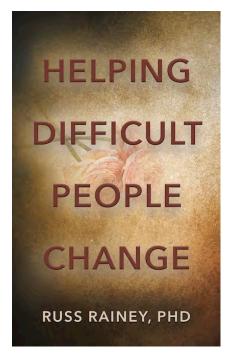
- Her sister explained to Traci that she would be 1 giving her no advice and that she would not be responsible for solving Traci's personal or corporate problems. Instead, she would be the person who championed Traci's motivation and capabilities to solve her own problems. She believed in Traci, she knew there was a generous person in there waiting to blossom, and she never missed an opportunity to let that be known. They would be partners, but Traci would be the person doing the hard work and the person accomplishing the goals to receive the praise of her company.
- 2. Traci responded to her sister's approach like a duck to water. She enjoyed being listened to by her older sister. She was used to being listened

to by others at work, but this time, she was not giving orders to others. She was answering valid questions about the patterns of her work relationships – questions like, "What would it look like for your team to experience you as a more caring person?" But, the more she talked and the more her sister listened and asked pertinent questions, the more uncomfortable Traci became. She began to realize that she had what one of her leadership development books called "low emotional intelligence" (meaning that she neither read other's emotions well nor responded to their emotions well). She also confessed that she rarely questioned her own emotional states and was known to become easily agitated and angry.

Seeing that Traci was getting to something important, her sister asked Traci how she could encourage her in the process of moving toward a emotionally intelligent pattern more relationships at work. Traci thought for a moment, and it occurred to her that what she wanted to accomplish was not something she alone – she was could do already too conditioned to take the most direct approach with others. She would need her sister's help. So, she asked if the two of them could talk several times a week by phone so she could have routine support and accountability. Of course, her sister said "yes".

4. One night as the sisters talked, Traci's sister felt the time was right for her to get to the bottom line with her bottom line sister. She asked, "Traci, our talks have been great over the last few weeks, but can I get down to the last ten percent with you? I know that you are learning more about this thing you call emotional intelligence, but information only goes so far. Exactly what do you plan to do differently at work? And when do you want to start?" Traci's answer: "I've got to start now, like tomorrow, and what I need to do is start by apologizing to my team. Then I need to meet with each one of them personally and be generous with my praise regarding their unique contribution to our work. I need to keep learning about the importance of emotions in relationships, but I've got you to process things with, so if you're up for it, we can keep talking about this in the future."

What did Traci's sister offer that produced change in Traci? She applied ancient wisdom that was practiced by Jesus, himself. She believed in her sister, listened to her, asked her probing questions, supported and encouraged her, and tested her commitment with pointed questions when the time was right. It's a very simple structure for drawing out the best in another person. Try it – I know you will like it, and I can assure you that the difficult person in your life will experience their best opportunity for change.



Helping the difficult people who are making your life miserable.

Helping Difficult People Change

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