

MOOD:  busy

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 tacit<https://tacit.livejournal.com/>

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Some thoughts on choosing relationships

One of my sweeties has a policy never to get involved with someone who has never had his heart broken. She believes quite strongly that there are certain things about yourself that you can only learn when your heart is broken, and that having your heart broken is the only way to discover whether or not you're the sort of person who can pick himself up, put himself back together, and move on with courage and joy, or if you're the sort of person who is destroyed by it.

I think there's some value to that notion, and I've written about it in my journal before , though I don't use it as a rule.

A few years back, I had a really painful breakup with a woman I fell very hard for and then, after investing a great deal in the relationship, discovered was a very poor partner for me. That relationship really brought home for me a lesson that I knew intellectually but didn't know emotionally, which is this:

It is possible to deeply, sincerely love someone and still not be a good partner for that person.

That relationship also caused some nontrivial damage to one of my other relationships, and ended up changing the course of my life in ways that I still feel. I can't say that if I had to do it over, I would never have gotten involved with that person at all, though I can say that I would have made different choices about what to do with that connection. But I digress.

There's a socially sanctioned myth that says that love conquers all. It's a deeply and profoundly silly thing to believe; love is a feeling, and a feeling can no more solve problems than it can refinish the sofa or put a new circuit breaker box in the attic. A feeling can impel action, can influence the way you make choices, but it can't, of and by itself, do anything on its own. And making a relationship work requires more than just a feeling. It requires that the people involved make choices that are compatible and work toward a common end--which is extraordinarily difficult to do when those people have different goals, different priorities, different expectations, or even different internal templates about what they want their lives to look like. No matter what they feel.

And the feeling of love isn't the only thing that influences our decisions. Other feelings, like fear or anxiety or anger, have a vote, too, and it's not always the feeling of love that casts the deciding vote--even when that love is genuine.

The lesson that I can really, deeply love someone and we can still not be good partners for each other was probably the most expensive relationship lesson I've ever learned, and it's completely rearranged my approach to choosing partners.

The approach I used to use, and I suspect the approach that many people use, was to keep a sort of internal list of "dealbreakers" that I'd refer to whenever I met someone who seemed interesting to me and who seemed interested in me. I'd kind of run down the list--Is she monogamous? Nope. Is she giving me the psycho vibe? Nope. Does she hold conservative religious ideas? Nope. All the way down the list, and if I didn't hit a dealbreaker the answer would be "Cool! We should totally start dating!"

That isn't the way I work any more. The dealbreaker approach "fails closed;" it assumes that if no dealbreakers are hit, then we should start a relationship, so if something later comes up that I didn't know was a problem...well, I find out about it after I've already started to invest in a relationship with this person.

The approach I use now isn't to keep a list of dealbreakers. Oh, there are some, to be sure; I'm not likely to date someone with a history of violence against her past partners, for example. But instead of keeping a list of dealbreakers these days, I keep a list of things that I actively look for--things that light me up in another person.

If I meet someone who seems interesting, and seems interested in me, I am more likely to ask the question "Does this person really light me up inside and bring out joy in me?" than "Does this person have some disagreeable trait that I don't like?" That approach tends to "fail open"--the default is *not* to start a relationship unless there's something very special about the person, rather than to start a relationship unless there's something disagreeable about her.

That approach takes care of a lot of "dealbreakers" on its own, because a person who has the qualities that really shine isn't likely to have the qualities that would be dealbreakers for me. For instance, a person who has demonstrated to me that she favors choices that demonstrate courage and integrity isn't likely to be a liar.

It's more than just taking the dealbreakers and flipping them on their heads, though. There are a lot of qualities on my "must have" list that wouldn't have been reflected on my "dealbreaker" list.

So all of this is kind of a longwinded way to get to the qualities that DO light me up about someone. The things that really attract me to a person, without which I'm unlikely to want to start a relationship with her, include things like:

- *Has she done something that shows me she is likely, when faced with a difficult decision, to choose the path of greatest courage?*
- *Has she done something that shows me that, when faced by a personal fear or insecurity, she is dedicated to dealing with it with grace, and to invest in the effort it takes to confront, understand, and seek to grow beyond it?*
- *Does she show the traits of intellectual curiosity, intellectual rigor, and intellectual growth?*
- *Has she dealt with past relationships, including relationships that have failed, with dignity and compassion?*
- *Is she a joyful person? Does she value personal happiness? Does she make me feel joy?*
- *Does she seem to be a person who has a continuing commitment to understanding herself?*
- *Does she seem to be a person who values self-determinism?*
- *Does she approach the things that light her up, whatever those things may be, with energy and enthusiasm? Does she engage the world and the parts of it that make her happy?*
- *Does she seem to demonstrate personal integrity?*
- *Is she open, honest, enthusiastic, and exploratory about sex?*
- *Does she communicate openly, even when it's uncomfortable to do so?*

There are probably more; the things that attract me to a person are in some ways a lot more nebulous than my old list of dealbreakers used to be.

In some ways, the approach I use now is an approach that relies on a model of relationship that's based on abundance, not on starvation. A person who holds a starvation model of relationship, in which relationships seem to be rare and difficult to find, is not likely going to want to use an approach that fails open, on the fear that if he doesn't take a relationship opportunity that presents itself, who knows when another person might express interest? If relationships seem rare, then why not jump at an opportunity if there seem to be no dealbreakers standing in the way?

The approach of seeking positive reasons to start a relationship, rather than looking for reasons NOT to start a relationship, means that I say "no" to opportunities that come by more often than I say "yes." I have found that, for whatever reason, I tend to have a lot of opportunity for relationship, so there may be something to the notion that I have adopted this model of relationship because I can afford it.

But I do believe that holding an abundance model of relationship tends to make it true. I think that people who hold a starvation model of relationship often seem to be always searching for a partner, and that can really be off-putting; whereas in an abundance model, if you simply live your life with enthusiasm and joy and instead of seeking partners you seek to develop in yourself the qualities that you desire in a partner, then other people will tend to be drawn to you and relationships *will* be abundant.

TAGS: [polyamory](#), [relationships](#)



46 comments

 
[April 13 2010, 00:48:39 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Agreed, agreed, agreed!!!

-- A <3

 **Thank you...**

[April 13 2010, 01:24:19 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

I won't explain why, but that fact that you wrote this at this particular moment in time means a great deal to me.

 
[April 13 2010, 01:29:09 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Love conquers all in only one specific circumstance: removing or getting around the obstacles which keep people apart when both are strongly in love with each other. It doesn't work to keep them together in the long run if they're incompatible, nor does it transform a one-sided attraction into a two-sided one (much to the dismay of stalkers everywhere).

Even then it's only true in the case that the obstacles are actually surmountable; for example, love does not conquer death, unless one considers suicide-so-we-can-meet-again-in-the-afterlife to be romantic.

 
[April 13 2010, 08:14:02 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

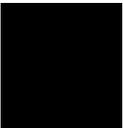
(I'm going to preface this by saying it's not you I'm irritated at, just the pop culture in general.)

I'm repeatedly irritated by people's idea that "Love conquers all" means necessarily "by the power of love, we who are in love will overcome all obstacles to be together." Even if that's become a valid interpretation through ubiquity (much like "begging the question" has started becoming accepted to mean "raising the question" when the original meaning was a particular kind of logical fallacy), there *is* another meaning: love conquers *everyone* -- everyone (in theory) is vulnerable to the wobbliness that being in love, or loving, tends to cause in people.

The line from Virgil is *Omnia vincit amor et nos cedamus amori*, and the second part translates to "let us yield to love" -- which isn't the sort of thing that one would imagine an obstacle to lovers saying! Rather, it implies more a willing surrender to the often-overwhelming force that love can be.

Anyhow...lapsed English major rant over.

 [April 13 2010, 20:05:17 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Love conquers all in only one specific circumstance: removing or getting around the obstacles which keep people apart when both are strongly in love with each other

Again, "love" doesn't perform any of the actions you're attributing to it. "Love" cannot "remove" or "get around" anything. People who feel love may feel motivated to make difficult choices and exceptional compromises in service of that love, but they may still find obstacles that are not surmountable and boundaries that cannot be crossed.

  
[April 14 2010, 00:49:52 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Actually, I'm a-gonna disagree with that assessment. Love isn't just an emotion, it's a combination of an emotional attraction *and* the actions which result from it. Simply because that's what most people seem to mean when they say it, so defining it otherwise is overly pedantic and unnecessarily confusing.

When I refer specifically to the "feeling" portion of love, I call it an "emotional attraction" or "emotional attachment" depending on which is more appropriate for the circumstances. Nobody seems to have any trouble understanding what I mean by that.

  
[April 13 2010, 01:33:25 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

I was thinking about this today.

I also tend to be attracted to people who have suffered in some way. To me, their eyes seem to carry more depth and understanding.

As for the second part, I do think one can have a good, reasonable sort of internal list of dealbreakers (for example, no anti gay, religious lunatics, criminals, etc) but after noticing that the deal breaking elements don't apply to the person in question, one doesn't necessarily think "great, let's date!". And it's for the same reason you mentioned. It's because a relationship between two people involves much more than a list.

So, if we have two people, A and B: A likes B and thinks B might like him back. A notices B has the qualities he is attracted by and doesn't have traits he is turned off by. At the same time, A feels greatly attracted to B and for A, all this involves pretty much his *own* feelings and thoughts, not *those of B*. Then, if A is an intelligent person and doesn't feel entitled to B, A will know that, in order to have a relationship, B must feel attracted too. And if they're both attracted to each other, that still doesn't mean they are good for each other as partners. And even if they notice that chemistry exists and they are good for each other, they still have to *want* and *decide* to be together. And I think focusing only on the must haves (which, in a way is also a list) can lead to the same outcome of "great, let's date". Many people have both must haves and dealbreakers. For example, no matter how many must haves on my "list" someone shows, if they really want kids, getting in a relationship with that person would mean setting us up for future suffering. So I don't do that, because we want essentially different things and because I don't start a relationship thinking I'll change later what really doesn't fit me about them.

Also, I believe in the importance of partner selection. In fact, I think most relationships end because of poor partner selection, so it's good knowing yourself and knowing what you need, at the same time keeping yourself open and optimistic, centered on self growth.

I think it's a fine balance, but basic point is, I see no reason why at the end of running down a list of dealbreakers or must-haves one should say "dating time", haha. That is only opening a door to further talk and so on. Unless one feels a bit entitled to be with someone just because to *him* it seems they fit. But it takes *two* to decide this.



[April 13 2010, 01:36:23 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Thank you for writing this. I've felt this way for a long time, and have a couple of people in my life that I will forever love dearly, but are just not good partners.



[April 13 2010, 01:42:24 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Great list! I would add "similar sense of humor".. but that's me.. :)

My favorite piece of advice from my Nana was "When a relationship ends, make a list of all the things you liked, and disliked about that person. When you looking for your next bf, try to find one that has a lot of the qualities you liked, and not so much of the ones you didn't. "

My Nana and Popo are still married, and still hold hands and take long walks together. I wouldn't be surprised if they still have sex. They are in their late 80's. :)



[April 13 2010, 03:07:10 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Aw, that is sweet! My parents are 79 and do such things. I love that about them.



[April 13 2010, 08:42:08 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Your Nana is most wise, and your Nana and Popo are very, very lucky people.



[April 13 2010, 02:21:01 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

The reasons to thank you for this post are too numerous to expound on



[April 13 2010, 02:30:35 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

I think I've been indoctrinated too much into corporate think. My immediate thought was to map your approaches into Belbin's "team inventory" roles.

What you call the "dealbreaker" approach maps quite well into Belbin's "monitor evaluator" role. As the [wikipedia page](#) says:

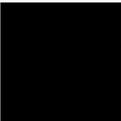
However, they can become very critical, damping enthusiasm for anything without logical grounds, and

they have a hard time inspiring themselves or others to be passionate about their work.

Why, yes, when I self-evaluated that was my role :-)

I'm not quite sure how the other approach maps; maybe a "plant" or "resource investigator".

I didn't say it was a perfect match to Belbin, merely that I saw some parallels :-)

  
[April 13 2010, 02:45:27 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

I heartily agree with the abundance vs. starvation thing, though of course not with everything, because that would be wrong! :)

I have a question, though. What is self-determinism?

   **tacit**
[April 13 2010, 02:53:10 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

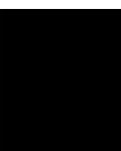
The notion that we choose our own path, without being forced into roles by tradition, social convention, or the expectations of others.

  
[April 13 2010, 03:02:21 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

That makes much more sense than my original interpretation, which was that everything is caused by the thing before it back until the beginning, so for each of us our life is determined by the circumstances of our birth, or something. I was having trouble seeing how that was a valuable viewpoint in a partner. Mmm, lack of free will!

  
[April 13 2010, 03:08:51 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

I also thank you for this; I too have gone from starvation to abundance mode, and gotten more selective, and more positive in my selectivity, about new relationships.

  
[April 13 2010, 03:24:18 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

That's...

Wow.

You just took my "Just because you love someone doesn't mean you should *live with* them," to a whole new level. Thank you - I really like the positive spin there. :) Boosting the signal if you don't mind.

   **tacit**
[April 13 2010, 04:52:59 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Thanks! Don't mind at all.

  
[April 13 2010, 03:44:31 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

This is exactly what I needed to reinforce my thinking at this moment. Thank you.



April 13 2010, 03:53:19 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

It took me a while to remember what this reminded me of, but I finally did.

I used to watch gymnastics. There were often contestants who were technically proficient, did all the moves and did them without flaw, had enough grace and strength and what-all - but they didn't often get perfect scores. They came close, but no cigar.

It was the ones who had all of that, plus a certain amount of flair, élan, a song in their hearts and a smile on their faces, that always won. Perfection, in other words, plus extra oomph, except that that little extra bit was never classifiable or describable: you just knew (s)he had it by not only what was done but also by how.

There are a few people who come up to my standards, but, y'know, there's no spark there. These are the good friends. The ones with spark turn into (potential) lovers.

omg YOU'RE Tacit? ;)



April 13 2010, 06:38:16 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Thank you. Frequently you are able to put into words something that I think but have difficulty expressing verbally. Usually you do it in such a way that I have to go away and think about it.

"know thyself" spelled backward on my forehead



April 13 2010, 06:52:24 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

It is possible to deeply, sincerely love someone and still not be a good partner for that person.

Truly so. The people I've been most in love with, who have been the most in love with me, so far all have turned out to be unsuccessful partnerships for me. This may have happened for a number of reasons, but I find as I grow older I no longer need to obsess about the answers, because the circumstances were specialized, and knowing why good love didn't equal good relationships isn't so important. Rebuilding the friendship is more fulfilling.

What I begin to determine is that ultimately the relationship fail goes back to something that can't be "fixed" -- our deep selves were not compatible in the kind of relationships we tried to have. As friendships, the dynamics between us remain amazing (once we get a grip on the ego and work out the hurt that most people subjectively/mutually experience in relationship fail). I understand now that my deep self is fulfilled more by friendship, and that romance and sex are deep, resonant spice notes that although they cement loving friendships passionately with the right sort of person, they don't sustain over time. Most of the time, solitude is my need. Domestically this is definitely the case. In terms of collaborative projects, I can dig on some partnership but I need to be able to get away and for the other to feel free to do the same without anyone feeling rejection or loss. This is hard, because most of us learn that in relationships separateness is dangerous and bad. I feel that feeling as a reflex, although I understand it's misguided. A hard habit.

I don't wonder now when I will be in a romantic and sexual love relationship again, if ever. Sex is an adventure; romance is exciting; but friendship is best. I also know that most people don't feel this way and

couldn't be happy living this way. Until I find someone who does and could, a relationship would be irresponsible and deceitful.



[April 13 2010, 07:38:44 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

"holding an abundance model [...] tends to make it true"

With respect to more than just relationships, imho.



[April 13 2010, 16:02:32 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Yes, indeed.. this was going to be my comment too. Living an abundant life in general is an awesome thing :)



[April 13 2010, 08:39:56 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

I think I do a bit of both: dealbreakers for deciding whether to get to know the person better with a potential eye to a relationship, but positive factors for actually attempting to start a relationship with the person. That still hasn't saved me from heartbreak, but it has at least minimized how many have gotten the chance to break my heart.



[April 13 2010, 08:40:23 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

You forgot to mention the other thing that you say frequently attracts you - someone who is excited about, motivated by, and proficient in skills in an area of study you don't (yet) know much about. That you like the way that enriches your life as you gain insights.

Of course.. the cynical-at-moments version of me still wonders if that means your interest would wane once you have gotten to know the technical skills that they know. :P



[April 13 2010, 10:48:18 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

I've been following your lj for a long time now, and I just realised I've never commented to say how much I value your writing.

Almost everything you write is thoughtful, interesting and valuable to me. So thank you.



[April 13 2010, 11:00:25 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

It is possible to deeply, sincerely love someone and still not be a good partner for that person.

So very, heartbreakingly true. We should really be teaching our children this, instead of "love conquers all". Maybe it does in other contexts, but not romantically. Although I suppose it's just one of those life lessons you have to learn. I definitely learned it the hard way, more than once. Often times it's worse when you love

them so much, because you'll continue to hang on in relationships that just aren't right or are even bad for you. It took me so long to figure out what things really matter and what things just don't.



[April 13 2010, 12:47:22 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Just boosted the signal on twitter and my LJ. I too am one that is usually astonished at the clarity in which you write something that has been nebulous in my brain. Thank you. This post is very appropriate for me right now, and it's given me a lot to think about.



[April 13 2010, 13:40:12 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

It is possible to deeply, sincerely love someone and still not be a good partner for that person.

I have a pair of friends who dated for years then married and after several years of marriage realized they worked better as best friends than a couple. They are still friends to this day and say their divorce was one of the best things they did for their relationship. They love each other but realized they were not good partners for each other.

As I read your post, I was reminded of friends from the teen years who used to say they couldn't wait to meet and marry that perfect person because it would solve all of their problems. Because I'd had the opportunity to watch the trials and tribulations of my mum and step-dad's blossoming relationship and subsequent marriage, I just had to roll my eyes at these people. They had NO clue! None whatsoever of the work involved in a successful relationship.

As someone who is mono but poly-friendly, I really appreciated your list of qualities that draw you to someone. These are the kinds of questions that anyone could ask before delving into an intimate relationship with someone, whether you are poly or mono.

Here via .



[April 13 2010, 15:01:33 UTC](#) CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

There were two things about this post that had me thinking:

The first was about one's reaction to having one's heart broken. It is possible for the same person to be completely destroyed by having his/her heart broken by one person, and be able to pick him/herself up and put him/herself back together when its broken by another. It can vary greatly depending on circumstance; the person's current mental state, the amount of stress in his/her life, how messy the split is, how expected the split is...

The other thing that I found was the irony of my current situation with the idea that just because you love someone doesn't mean you should live with them. Five years ago I had a short but intense relationship that I did completely get destroyed over; over and over again. We stayed friends, vacillating between being very close and eventually having a physical relationship as well, that part of the cycle lasting usually 4-6 months, and then not speaking to each other for months at a time. Finally, about a year ago (after a year of not speaking to each other), I told him that our relationship had to stay platonic or I was done for good; it was too hard the other way. Ever since we've been smashing friends, and now we've been roommates for

about 4 months and we get along great. I'll always love him on some level, but we don't fit together as lovers, we fit as friends, and he's one of my best friends, and realizing that we can be as close as we want and spend as much time together as we want provided we don't cross that line speaks volumes to your statement "It is possible to deeply, sincerely love someone and still not be a good partner for that person."

 
April 13 2010, 15:06:27 UTC CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Here via   This is a fantastic post. Mind if I link to it from my LJ?

  [tactic](#)
April 13 2010, 23:33:56 UTC CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

By all means, feel free!

 
April 14 2010, 00:45:26 UTC CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Thank you.

 [I followed her link...](#)
 
April 23 2010, 15:06:21 UTC CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Thankyou for writing this.

Deleted comment

 [Re: I followed her link...](#)
 
April 23 2010, 16:12:40 UTC CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

My pleasure and it really is a healthy way to look at and evaluate relationship choices.

 
April 13 2010, 17:58:17 UTC CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

I came over from  LJ. Thank you. You have given me a great deal to think about.