Perpetual Problems- Dialogue and Dreams within Conflict

What is a “Perpetual Problem”?

These are problems that never get resolved. They are differences in personality, or overall style of life. In Gottman’s longitudinal studies, when couples engaged in conflict, 69% of the times, the focus of these fights are about unresolvable “perpetual problems.”

A perpetual problem has these indicators:

- Both partners feel rejected.
- The couple keeps discussing the same issue, spinning their wheels and making no headway.
- Both partners are entrenched in their positions on the issue.
- Their conversations leave them feeling frustrated and hurt.
- There is little humor, affection, or amusement when they discuss the issue.
- The gridlock worsens over time, and the partners end up vilifying each other.
- They do not easily listen and appear to fear accepting influence.
- After a while, the partners become even more polarized, extreme, and uncompromising.
- There is often domineering or belligerent behavior.
- Eventually, the couple may become emotionally disengaged and lonely.

Usually there is a resistance to accepting influence because a set of metaphors, narratives, and mythological stories go back into the person’s past and perhaps into the person’s primary family. This is true of even seemingly trivial gridlocked issues.
Working with Perpetual Problems

Gottman Methods Couples Therapy works with perpetual problems differently than resolvable ones. He saw differences between how the “Masters and Disasters of Relationships” handled them:

MASTERS of RELATIONSHIPS

- The emotions (affect) used when these issues were discussed was critically important in the relationships of the Masters of Relationships.
- Like two people looking over the hood of a car together, Masters established a dialogue about what was wrong, and what they both might do to fix it. They saw it as a mutual problem, not one that existed within their partner alone.
- They communicated acceptance of their differences.
- They displayed humor, affection, even amusement about these differences.
- They were in “active coping” with unresolvable problems rather than “gridlock.”
- They did a lot of “pre-emptive repair.” This means that they did a great deal to avoid having the conflict discussion become negative to begin with.
- They “toot their own horns:” one partner would tell the other how well they were coping with this difficult issue.

DISASTERS of RELATIONSHIPS

- They were in emotional “gridlock.” Gridlock is life and death battle that pits one partner against another…where you are right and your partner is wrong.
- The emotions were often intensely negative around perpetual problems.
- They often located blame IN the other person, and demanded change from them.
- They pathologized their partner for the differences they noticed.
- They allowed negativity to dominate the conversation.
- Discussions are often painful exchanges or icy silences.
- The Four Horsemen were present (Contempt, Criticism, Defensiveness & Stonewalling)