Form and Meaning in Relationships

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**The interplay of form and meaning**

Forms are essentially things. The essential nature of things is that they go away. We use forms to express meanings.

**When we first encounter a form it usually comes with an attached meaning**, which is to say that our natural reaction upon seeing something is to assess what it means. Although it can seem as if there is only one way to interpret the form, one meaning it can have, in actuality the meaning isn’t part of the form, but only attached to it.

Similarly, **the form may seem to be the only way to express a meaning**, but in actuality it’s usually not the only way it can be expressed.

**The effect of time on form and meaning**

The key thing about forms and meanings in terms of relationships is that the attachment of form and meaning is subject to time. Time creates change. That change needs to become incorporated into the present reality. **Over time the original form-meaning relationship naturally changes. The meaning of the form changes, or the form used to express the meaning changes, or both do**.

Consider a red formica-topped dining table from the 1950s. Let’s keep the form of it exactly the same over the years. Its original meaning is trendy and utilitarian – a reasonably cheap and effective modern solution to having a place to eat. It’s a bit bold and reflects the optimism of the time. By the 1970s, however, it’s a dated piece of furniture that should be replaced if you have the money to do so, or it’s something a bit nostalgic that reminds you of growing up as a kid. By the 1990s it’s become an ugly piece of junk to give to the Salvation Army Thrift Shop. In the 2010s it’s become a piece of original retro furniture and owning it shows you’re hip. In 2050 it’s a valuable 100-year old antique.

In all this the table is hasn’t changed a bit! Because the form is the same, it’s the meaning of it that changes.

Consider the reverse situation. You love your mother and want to express that to her – that’s the meaning you want to stay the same over the years. At age 6 you draw her a picture with big hearts in it. At age 13 you tolerate going with her to shop at the mall. At age 25 you have long talks about life and being an adult. At age 40 you make sure to visit several times a year even though you now live far apart. At age 60 you now call her once a week to make sure she is doing OK and isn’t lonely.

The form is constantly changing, so the meaning can stay the same.

**Effects of form-meaning changes over time on relationships**

In relationships (as well as elsewhere in life) it’s easy to get “locked in” on a form and meaning going together. Much of that is due to the natural process of learning and habituation, which operates on the principle that once we find something that works we should keep doing it exactly the same way, and we don’t have to consciously think about it.

If we do that, then over a long enough time or with big enough changes something has got to give – either form or meaning (or both).

**Usually what gives way is meaning, because we most typically become rigid on the form.** We still do the same things, but “for some reason” they don’t have the same meaning that they used to. That thing the other person does is no longer cute, it’s now annoying. It used to think them doing that was because they’re spontaneous, but now I see it means that they’re irresponsible. Talking about the relationship was exciting but now it’s tedious.

Instead of seeing this as a need to change the form, it’s easy to see it as a mysterious loss of meaning that is clearly irretrievable – the old ways SHOULD work, after all they DID, and if they don’t it means the meanings they had are just GONE. It’s time for a new relationship, this one just couldn’t hold onto the meanings it once had for me.

**Problems with changing the form to keep meanings the same: memories**

So if we want to KEEP those old meanings, we should change the forms, right? Usually yes, but there are some major exceptions. Here’s the real kicker:

**What happens in our lives, and the memories we have of what happened, are the set-in-stone elements that make us who we are. Over time we should accept and recognize that we’ll usually keep re-arranging the meaning of these things, but we need to keep the memories intact.** This is how it should be. We can always go back to feel the meaning it had for us back then, but we recognize that we “see it a little differently” now.

What sometimes happens though is that **to keep the meaning the same** **we actually change the memories**. Why do things feel smaller when you go back to visit your old house or neighborhood? Because when you were a child these things had bigger meanings for you, they “felt” bigger. The things that meant something big to us in the past have a tendency to get bigger in our retelling of them as adults, **because to have the same meaning now they would have to be bigger**.

We can unconsciously and subtly change our memories – changing the actual form of what happened – in order to keep the meaning of it the same now as it was then. It’s why police trust the eyewitness report gained immediately after the event more than the one made a day or two later – the memories actually change.

**How sudden changes in meaning affect memories**

The other hazard for accurate memories is when the meaning of things drastically changes. We have a natural tendency then to change the old forms, to “adjust” the memories, to match the new meanings. The other person’s behavior we now remember as much worse than we’d have described it last month or two years ago. Now “I remember that they always had that streak in them…” or “I can see that they really pulled the wool over my eyes back then.” etc.

**We think of our memories as reflecting the unchanging reality, as set in stone. They are instead set in clay, and can get remolded unless we protect them.**

This is one reason why bringing up past choices or behaviors – especially long past ones – is usually a bad idea. When we are trying to prove our interpretation – our meaning – is the right one, our brains can unconsciously distort our memories to conform. And since we believe are memories ARE set in stone, we believe we are remembering the actual truth.

**How do we best handle changes in forms and meanings in relationships?**

**In relationships, then, what is helpful?**

1. **Recognize that time and change naturally cause us to find new ways of looking about past events, that the meaning of what happened in the relationship is going to naturally change.** Done well this means that relationships get richer and more nuanced, just as our lives do going from being a child to being an adult. And like that, sometimes things like innocence and pure unrestrained love can be hard to find a new form that expresses them as simply and clearly as a child can.
2. **Periodically stop and consciously look at the forms you use to express the meanings in your relationship**. Are they still expressing what they once did, or do they need to be modified, adapted, or replaced? If they have a different meaning now, is it one you want to keep or one that isn’t helpful?
3. **Periodically stop and consciously look at the meanings you want in the relationship right now.** Some meanings we may want to keep, but others we may want to change – or to add on. If you aren’t finding the meanings as well expressed as you want, consider what possible forms might work to do that better.
4. A huge area of problems in relationships is that of people believing that a form has ONLY ONE REAL MEANING – the one I attach to it. If you **understand that form and meaning are not locked together inseparably,** you can take the wind out of the sails of many arguments.

**The advantage of focusing on meaning in relationships**

**The vast majority of relationship arguments are about FORMS.** People try to reach agreement on what a form “should” mean. A far better approach is to **focus on what MEANING each person is trying to convey, and then to search out a form that matches the meanings for both people.**

Here’s an example: If doing the laundry means punishment to me, that’s what it means to me, even if it means being responsible for sharing household duties to you. You’re not really trying to punish me, even though that’s what I think this means, and I’m not really trying to dodge sharing responsibilities, though that’s what this means to you.

If we don’t address the meanings then the resolution, if any, will always feel unfair to one person or another. I might say "You claim this is about sharing household tasks, but since I know (from my reality) that’s not true, then you must really just want to punish me – or you don’t care if I’m unfairly punished.” In return, he or she says to me "You claim this is about me punishing you, but since I know that’s not what I’m doing, you’re just saying that to unfairly get out of doing what you should.”

**The way out of this destructive morass is to ask: “Is there a way (a form) that will get us both the meaning we want? “** Can I do the dishes instead of the laundry – will that be non-punishing to me and be sharing responsibilities to you? If not that, what else?

If our child talking back means disrespect to me but means “she is becoming more independent” to you then **we can argue endlessly and without any resolution about it** –or we could instead try to define a form the child can use that works for both of us.

Yes, sometimes the other person’s meaning seems wrong or crazy or unhelpful and I don’t want to accommodate it. But that’s our gut reaction to any different reality – we’re right, they’re wrong. Usually when you explore meanings you find that accommodations can and do happen. Also, in most relationships if someone is really out of touch with normal reality they are aware of it and willing to give up more towards what’s normal. “I know I over-react to this, but I can’t seem to stop doing that. How can we work this out so that we accept that but still work to change it? I’m trying to change but I’m not there yet.”

Finally, here’s metaphor that may help:

It’s World War II and the Allied and German armies are fighting over a bridge across the Rhine River. They’re at a stalemate – neither side able to force the other out of its position, neither side able to advance, neither side feeling they can accept a retreat. They just keep pounding at each other, taking casualties on each side and using up tons of resources and energy. There is no sign that this will change, but they just keep at it… maybe taking a short cease-fire every now and then, but always going back to the fighting.

The bridge is the FORM. But what is the meaning? For the Allied army the meaning is likely that of getting across the river. **There are other forms for doing that, IF you stop seeing this as the ONLY form to do so.**

**Don’t let a form overwhelm the meaning. Don’t let a form DICTATE the meaning – “the meaning is winning the bridge battle” – when that’s not the meaning you really want or care about.**

**A final reminder: watch out for habituation**

Habit focuses us on one single form – one way of doing something. The whole point of habits is not to have to consciously choose between options, but to stick with the one way you figured out worked best.

**If the habitual way of doing things gets you stuck, especially repeatedly stuck, you must make yourself look consciously at all the other options, all the other forms, that are available. It won’t feel right (what feels right is to do what the habit says to do). But it is usually the right way to get unstuck and moving again.**

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