

August 6  
A New Map for Relationships  
Rev. Linda Simmons

This sermon topic was won at the auction last year by the Strands and they asked me to discuss the book, A New Map for Relationships Creating True Love at Home and on the Planet by Dorothie and Martin Hellman.<sup>1</sup> Thank you for the encouragement to read this wonderful book and investigate this topic.

The basic premise of the book is this: When we give up fighting for what we want individually and start putting our energy into fighting for what's best for our relationships, our individual and relationship needs are fulfilled, and in using this strategy, we can also build world peace. Quite a premise!

Though the first piece of this is simple in its wording-when we give up fighting for what we want individually and start putting our energy into fighting for what's best for our relationships-individual and relationship needs are met. The concept can be a bear to integrate in the middle of an argument. I remember once when Gary and I returned from a dinner with my family and my sister had made a joke in which I was the main topic. It was subtle but its sting hit home. She laughed and laughed, and so did everyone else, including Gary, everyone except me that is.

When we got in the car that evening, I explained that I did not appreciate being the butt of everyone's joking or that he took place in the laughing.

Gary didn't get it and said it was just a silly joke and mentioned that I am usually not so sensitive. "I was just trying to be light hearted with everyone," he said. I wanted him to understand how it felt to be the butt of this joke and how it might feel to have my partner joining in at what felt to me to be everyone laughing *at me*. Needless to say, the drive home was not pleasant.

This is how the Hellman's would have us alter this exchange. When I told Gary how it felt to hear that joke and experience the laughter, he could have said, you sound really hurt. I'm sorry that all happened for you. And that could have opened up room for me to hear how he felt in negotiating being part of my family.

Instead, we both plowed forward needing to be right, and feeling the other was wrong. One too sensitive. The other too insensitive. And let's be clear, those tables get turned as often. We're versatile that way.

The Hellman's ask us this series of questions in their book: What is your goal in life? Who

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothie and Martin Hellman A New Map for Relationships, Creating True Love at Home & Peace on the Planet (New York: New Map Publishing, 2016).

do you want to really be on this earth? And then they have a challenge for us too. They ask: If you can't get along with the people you are closest to, indeed with those you profess to love, how can you expect that there should be world or national peace and to proclaim you are working toward it?

So, what is your goal in life for who you want to be? I want to be someone who knows how to love and be loved be part of helping others find the understanding that they too are loved. Those two things are really important to me.

And yet, how much time do I take, do you take, to really work on your most primary relationships to make them places where love is, where love grows and thrives? Me, I take more time trying to make the world around me grow and thrive than the immediate world I live in. For the Hellman's, that recipe can never work.

So they pose a another challenge to us all: What would it be to work to not only get what we want, but what we thought the people we loved wanted? Not by sacrificing ourselves in unhealthy relationships or abusive patterns, but by nurturing a kind of love that allowed all of who we are a presence so that we were most alive, most fulfilled when the ones we loved most were also fulfilled?

When I first read this, it sounded foolish to me, like some kind of old religious dogma or some manipulative psychology. How many times have women been told that giving up their needs for someone else's would make them happier? A new dog with old tricks I thought. But the language being used here was different. This was not about compromise or self-sacrificing. It was about seeing a bigger picture and working from a new model or map.

Let me explain with an example. The other day, Gary promised to do some chores around the house that I really wanted done that day. The night before, he had slept badly and been up at 3am. His shoulder where he had surgery a few months ago was bothering him and he couldn't get comfortable. As the day began, he got one call and then another to do this and that for the Meeting House and the many things he's involved in.

Sound familiar? And then by 3pm he was so exhausted, he could hardly move. I started to get annoyed and roll out the usual: But you promised to do such and such, I can't even remember the list now. I went upstairs to get a book or something and there he was, uncomfortably resting because he knew I'd be upset. I asked, Are you going to sleep now? Yes, he said. I'm so tired. I feel useless.

I heard those words and my heart softened and I said, "You're not useless honey. You're tired. Anyone would be. Go to sleep."

Gary got his nap and the chores got done the next day. The Hellman's call this kind of communication, Holistic Communication, because it recognizes that we are all interconnected, that we are all reflections of one another and that when the relationship's needs get met, the individual needs have a shot at getting met too, not just one on one, but

also on the global level too because we see and affirm one another and in doing so, become more whole ourselves.

And I realized it's true that day at 3pm. I did get my needs met by meeting the needs of the relationship, my need to be a loving human being was fulfilled.

And Gary was so happy to do those chores the next day because I was kind the day before when I might not have been. I did not lose anything. I did not disappear. I became happier, more whole, more fulfilled because I could be more than someone who needed something immediately because it was promised. It felt good to be that person.

What does this have to do with world peace you might ask? When we can consider how we are all complicit in the stories that circle this globe, how each country's truths are wound around another's with power and privilege playing undeniable roles, and take responsibility for our parts, as nations, then perhaps we can allow a way forward that allows each country an authority and wholeness founded in respect for the interconnected web of all existence or said another way, for the mediated, historical, situated truths we all exist within.

David Whyte, poet, author and speaker who wrote the first poem that Natalie read, also writes about the conversational nature of reality. In an interview with Krista Tippett he said:

"[I]n the Galapagos, I began to realize that, because I was in deeply attentive states, hour after hour watching animals and birds and landscapes — and that's all I did for almost two years — I began to realize that my identity depended not upon any beliefs I had, inherited beliefs or manufactured beliefs, but my identity actually depended on how much attention I was paying to things that were other than myself. And that as you deepen this intentionality and this attention, you start to broaden and deepen your own sense of presence. And I began to realize that the only place where things were actually real was at this frontier between what you think is you and what you think is not you. That whatever you desire of the world will not come to pass exactly as you will like it. But the other mercy is that whatever the world desires of you will also not come to pass."<sup>2</sup>

What I hear him saying here is something the Hellman's are saying in another way: It is the meeting place between self and other in which one comes into the mystery of all that is and can be, the same place that one's self lives most fully and whole heartedly when given a chance and not impeded by all the noisy distractions we keep coming at us because we are afraid of disappearing, or changing or letting go of a way of doing things that gives us ourselves back to ourselves the same again. When we can risk becoming in these in between place, what we thought we needed and who we thought we were gets all tangled up into something else.

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<sup>2</sup> David Whyte, "The Conversational Nature of Reality" on Krista Tippett, *On Being* April 7, 2017, <https://onbeing.org/programs/david-whyte-the-conversational-nature-of-reality/>

We arrive here, to this place of possibility, not by focusing on ourselves and our needs, but by awakening our perception and letting it guide us to the next awareness, understanding, experience. And here's the thing, perception is unique to each of us, seeped in the caldron of our lives and also something that is universal, that we all share as a species. We all perceive the rain as wet but some are refreshed, others made cold, others run and others open their arms and linger. Rain is a universal truth and rain is a personal dance, like love, peace, hope, truth, beauty.

When we can give into the dance of our lives touching the lives of others, touching life itself, knowing that we will be changed and knowing that life will be here to catch us when we land with new words and understandings, we can begin to learn the dance of self and other, and needs that are not mine or yours but a mine and yours that becomes ours opens before us.

This muscle, the muscle of being able to see another's needs while remaining whole and fully intact and able to respond with compassion, is the same muscle needed to create global peace. As the Hellman's write: [Y]ou can't be loving in your personal relationships while being hateful in other areas of your life, such as how you view other nations or ethnic groups."<sup>3</sup>

I would extend that sentence. The hatred that is building up around us as the civil rights of LGBTQ groups is questioned and transgendered people are being unwelcomed in the military and millions of people are being threatened with no health insurance is affecting us all- not only in its contraction of humanity and basic dignity, but in the ways it is filling our own hearts with anger and a contraction of our own humanity.

I have felt how this is affecting personal relationships. I have felt the impatience and distrust and lack of nurturing and simple ease that is seeping into our personal lives and how we are expressing that in our conversations with one another. We cannot build a more peaceful world if we are cannot speak and see one another with compassion in our homes, offices, organizations, churches and meeting houses. It is simply not possible.

Risking true interconnectedness, when the very place between self and other gets just a tinsy weeny bit blurry, even if only for one empathic moment of recognition, is the place where we are re-emerged into a self that needs more than we know how to need for ourselves alone, and wants more than we know how to want for ourselves alone and fulfilling those needs and wants gives us all room to breathe with more hope and self awareness and fulfillment.

And these are the same tools needed to create more peace in the world. Seeing ourselves in another, balancing our own needs in relation to the needs of the world and the earth, learning to listen beyond what is familiar or easy, and learning to edit our own agenda in relation to another's.

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<sup>3</sup> Dorothe and Martin Hellman, 23.

Can we really show up, David Whyte and the Hellman's ask us in different ways? Can we really show up? Here's how David Whyte puts it.

"One of the great theological questions is around incarnation, which simply means being here in your body. Not anywhere else, just here with life's fierce need to change you....will you actually turn up (in your own life)?"<sup>4</sup>

Risking compassion, inhabiting the space between, leaning into our own vulnerability, these are all ways of showing up for ourselves, our loved ones and our world: a holy triangle of sorts in which every end gives meaning to and allows the other its very existence.

The Hellman's pose the question: What can you do to help accelerate the process of society becoming more compassionate and acting more holistically? You can make those qualities central to your personal life.<sup>5</sup> You can become a better, (more consistent) model for what is needed globally. You can envision what a loving world looks like to you<sup>6</sup> (and then commit to looking like that, literally, to looking like that.

What does a loving world look like to you? What do you look like in this world? Let's be more of this my friends. Let's be more of this!

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> David Whyte on Tippet, April 7, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothe and Martin Hellman, 271.

<sup>6</sup> Dorothe and Martin Hellman, 272.