The Cooperative Process

The Cooperative Process is a set of guidelines for behaving, thinking, and feeling that creates equality, respect, honesty, and compassion in relationships. It allows each person to be autonomous, and simultaneously, encourages intimacy. I think of the Cooperative Process as a way of living. I use it a lot. (Not always, and not perfectly.) It works.

Competition

First, let me describe some competitive behaviors in relationships:

- rescues (doing something for someone that they can do for themselves, thinking that I know better what they need)
- power plays (from a one up position, or a one down position)
- secrets and lies (keeping important information to myself and intentionally distorting the situation)

There are situations where it is functional to behave competitively (in business), where it is enjoyable to be competitive (playing sports), and where it is extremely difficult not to behave competitively (in a court room). Competition is usually based on the belief that some people are superior and others inferior, and that there have to be winners and losers.

Many of us have been systematically trained to be competitive, believe in the merits of competition, and believe that competition is naturally human. At the same time, we might not have learned how to be cooperative, might have been taught to distrust cooperation, and/or believe that we are not capable of being cooperative.

Whether or not we are programmed as human beings to be cooperative or competitive (or both), I am sure that we are capable of being cooperative. And I believe that many of us want to be cooperative.

Cooperation

If you use this model, then it is useful to accept the following propositions:

- How we communicate is as important as what we communicate.
- Acknowledging the "goodness" in ourselves and others (giving strokes) is nutrition for our soul and for the relationship.
- Each person's own experience is true for them. There are different "truths."
- Each person is capable of thinking for themselves and getting what they need.
- This model assumes equality of worth: no one is better or less than anyone else. So, what you want is of equal value to what I want.
- It is possible to let go of unpleasant feelings and thoughts ("unfinished business"); to do so, we usually need support.
- Healing from past and current injuries is the goal; these old injuries can get re-injured in a current relationship. In this model, blaming, determining right and wrong, or punishing yourself or others is not the goal nor useful.

Cooperative Behaviors

Initiation   *Response*

Set boundaries for myself
    "I don't want …. It's not okay with me …"   "I will respect that."

Asking for what I want
    "I want … Will you … ?"   "Yes. No. Yes, under these conditions …"

Appreciate myself and others (positive stroking)
    "I like that I am/did… I like that you are/did…"   "Congratulations, I agree … Thank you."

Share relevant information
    "I have some information. Can I share it?"   "That's helpful, thank you"

Accounting for my behavior
    "I made a mistake, I …"
    "When I did … , I was thinking/feeling …"   "That helps me understand. Thank you"

Verbalize my feelings and sharing what is "true" for me
    "In that situation … , I felt (scared, sad, angry, glad) … "
    "When you did …, I felt …."   "I hear you. Thanks for telling me."

Check out a story I am making up
    "When you did … , I thought …"   "The grain of truth is … "
        "And what's not true is …"

Some helpful tips when using these cooperative behaviors:

- When initiating, keep the focus on yourself and your needs; talk about your partner's behaviors only to provide context, not to blame or punish or teach them.
- When responding, focus directly and only on your partners' expressed needs; if you are unsure of what you partner needs, ask them: "Is there something you need from me?" In any case, only do what you are willing and ready to do.
- With most initiations, contract with your partner: "Can I tell you …"
- Finish one transaction before moving on to another.
- Use "both/and" and remove "but" in your language.
- Use the behaviors yourself, and be cautious in teaching them to your partner.
- Even if you aren't completely prepared to accept the propositions above, if you use these cooperative behaviors, I believe you will eventually accept the propositions.
- Practice, practice, practice; you will make mistakes, and you can use this process to clean up your mistakes!