

TAKE OUT THE GARBAGE IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP

I've been asked the same question a lot over the years—"What does therapy have to offer me? It sounds like hard work and it's probably gonna be painful. For what?"

This is a valid question and I've tried answering it in lots of ways but it's hard to put into words in a way that makes sense and is meaningful to people. What I've found works best is a true-life example of how the growth and self-reflection gained through therapy can enrich your relationships and thus, your life.

A couple I had been seeing for a while had been making some real progress. Their usual dance was for her to ask and him to resist. It didn't matter what the subject matter was. She would ask and he would delay doing what she'd requested if he'd do it at all.

This time, she asked him to take out the garbage. She made her request with the usual edginess in her voice, expecting yet another stall. He reacted the way he usually did, by sandbagging. It wasn't convenient for him to stop what he was doing and do it right now. He'd get to it later. She was making a big deal out of nothing, per usual; he felt nagged and put-upon. She became angry and frustrated. She'd have to wait yet again, maybe remind him, and if she got tired of waiting, take the garbage out herself. She did lots of stuff around the house. A little help wasn't too much to ask.

This is certainly not an unusual scenario in the everyday life of the American family.

But this particular time, something different happened. He heard himself. A new little voice in his head said, "Hey man, what's the matter with you? Why are you dodging? You're not doing anything else right now. Why won't you do it?" He was aware that he felt like a little kid, trying to wheedle out of doing what his Mom wanted him to. He recognized that that was about him. He was making it about his wife but it had nothing to do with her. This was a fair request.

And with that, without saying a word, he turned on his heels and took out the garbage. She was almost speechless, but she did get out a "wow thank you."

And so ended the garbage wars.

When we are willing to look at ourselves and risk seeing that, in fact, we are blemished and imperfect, we discover that that doesn't mean we are bad people. It just means we are human. When we tolerate the discomfort of the awareness and the unfamiliar and risk feeling our way through the dread, we wind up, surprisingly at first, feeling much better about ourselves than we would have had we not understood.

As in the garbage scenario, before he realized what his part in perpetuating this was, he was acting like a bad little boy rebelling against Mom. But he was doing so outside of his awareness which make him project his Mom's nagging onto his wife and feel inappropriately angry with her.

He had to feel righteously right as a defense against feeling bad about himself because at a deeper level he knew that was a reasonable request and there was no way to fully discredit it. His behavior was creating a nagging wife, the very scenario he was defending against.

The moment he understood and owned his participation and stopped making it about her, he felt better about himself.

For her part, she stopped feeling annoyed, began asking in a civil voice again, and was willing to work with him for the good of both of them.

Surely a real win for each of them and a gigantic win for the relationship.

Bravo for them and bravo for therapy!