

INTRODUCTION

Why Being Fair Will Make Your Relationship Stronger

To be happy, one must be just.

—ARISTOTLE

Life isn't fair. But relationships can be. Fairness is the key to solving problems and making love last. Despite the fact that most of us learned to tell right from wrong at about age three, curiously, few partners have mastered the art of what it takes to be fair to each other. And you can't solve this vexing (and sometimes deadly) relationship problem simply by taking turns, or even "fighting fair." Instead, you need a new way of understanding the intricacies and intimacies of fairness. This new way recognizes that partners bring to their relationships a host of deeply felt "truths" about fairness, based on their own unique family experiences. When these differing "truths" collide, they can prompt a downward spiral of unhappiness. In this context, you need to *learn* to be fair in a whole new way. If you do, you'll have a more loving and vital marriage. That is my conviction and the promise this book makes.

When most of my clients first hear this message, they look at me with disbelief and curiosity as if I must live in a fantasy world and certainly must be clueless about their lives. Most couples don't think of fairness as their defining problem. Most reveal their troubles, as Michelle and Jim did, with a cross fire of accusations. Though this was only their second therapy session, like

many couples in distress, it was easy to see that Michelle and Jim were having a recurring argument. They were stuck in their own private, hellish loop with no exit and no apparent solution.

Jim recounted his complaint for what sounded like the umpteenth time: “The spark is gone. I want passion and romance, someone who wants me. I want the woman I fell in love with. I’ve been unhappy for a long time. I don’t think Michelle can meet my needs.”

Michelle retorted: “I’m so sick of those two words, *passion* and *romance*. I think if I hear them again, I’ll scream. We have two little kids. I feel like a cow, always breast-feeding, or changing diapers, wiping noses. Have you ever considered that helping me, like doing the dishes or cooking dinner, might be a form of foreplay? You’re totally oblivious. You have no idea about what I go through every day. How could you treat me this way and think I’d have mad passion for you? I don’t think you love me. I don’t even think you like me, and I’m not sure I like you anymore, either.” Michelle then broke down crying, as Jim stared blankly, at a loss for words.

I wondered if their marriage was in trouble simply because they were overwhelmed by the overload of child care demands. Was this yet another well-worn scene from the chore wars? Clearly, division of labor was a problem area, just as their sex life was. But my hunch was that there were other barriers to a loving relationship, or as Jim put it, romance and passion. In my experience, most problems in relationships, whether small or large, have issues of fairness at their core. Similarly, the resolution of conflict requires that partners feel fairly treated. Yet fairness goes beyond simply reassigning chores, communicating better, meeting each other’s needs, or adding romance. Fairness is the silent working model that guides couples’ expectations of each other and underlies every interaction between them. You need fairness to build trust, feel close, and make your marriage work. Yet, how do partners decide what’s fair to give and to get, and who gets to decide?

I stopped their argument, and challenged each of them: “Jim, not having romance and passion is merely a symptom of something deeper going on. So instead of thinking this is simply Michelle’s problem, let’s look at what the problem is between the two of you. And Michelle, help me understand how

you've asked Jim for help, because blaming him, or telling him he's oblivious, won't work. Tell me more about what you expect from each other, and where you learned those expectations. Tell me what you learned about love and fairness from your families growing up. Tell me when it broke down for the two of you."

Michelle began: "Fairness didn't matter in my family. My mother was a doormat, and my father was a bully. Sounds a lot like Jim and me. I have a hard time standing up for myself, with Jim or really with anyone. I know this comes from my growing up. But knowing it hasn't helped me. The only way I got around my father was by being pleasant and giving in. I did the same thing for years with Jim." Michelle addressed her next remarks to Jim: "I used to try so hard to please you. For years I went along because if I didn't, you'd get angry. Arguing with you is like being in a boxing match with a heavyweight champ. Even if I win, I'm beat up. Now I don't care what you want, I don't care about your so-called romance. I'm out of energy."

Once again, Jim sat stunned. He was used to her accusations. But he wasn't prepared for her hopelessness, or for her willingness to take some responsibility for her part of their problem. I prompted Jim to tell Michelle if he could see some truth in what she'd said. Finally, Jim spoke: "Michelle, you're right. I do have a really short fuse, but for me it blows over. I didn't know I had shut you down all these years. And maybe I have expected you to do more than your share." Then Jim turned to me: "Michelle isn't the first person who's told me that when I think I'm right, I don't budge. I'm used to being in charge—since I was a kid. Maybe that wasn't as good for me as I thought." He paused, and then turned back to Michelle: "Michelle, I'm really sorry I hassled you so much. I guess I knew it in some sense, but I hadn't put two and two together—about me and your dad."

Jim had begun to see Michelle more sympathetically. Then he asked Michelle to try to see it his way. "But you know, I feel rejected by you. How many hundreds of times can a guy hug his pillow instead of his wife without feeling hurt? I guess I turned my rejection into a demand and a put-down of you. I helped create my own rejection." Jim was beginning to realize how each fed into the cycle of unfair expectations, rejection, and hurt between

them. Jim's expression of acknowledgment and remorse, and his own display of vulnerability moved Michelle. He added, "I hope it's not too late." She slowly smiled and took his hand. Now for the first time after months of tension, they felt more hopeful. The couple had begun the process of learning to be fair.

In this brief scene from a marriage, we glimpse how a couple's distinct disappointments are rooted in both past and present unfair patterns of relating that fuel their quarrels. Their imbalances of give-and-take created a withholding cycle between them, in which neither felt cared about. Like Michelle and Jim, most couples don't present their problems as fairness issues. Fairness problems come disguised in loyalty conflicts: *Why do we have to go to your parents for the holidays? Remember, I have a family, too. Why don't you take my side when your mother puts me on the spot? You choose your kids over me—but I didn't marry your kids.* Fairness conflicts also pop up in the everyday abuses in relating: *It was your turn to clean the kitchen. Why didn't you fill up, when you were the last one to use the car?* Fairness concerns also underlie the growing pains of life: *Why am I always the one getting up in the night with the baby? Why are you supervising what I spend money on? I earn money, too, you know.* And the lack of fairness is at the heart of the enduring injustices of a relationship, such as affairs, alcoholism, a secret life, financial infidelity, and other massive betrayals.

Yet couples don't intuitively think in terms of fairness. They say there's not enough love, or they say they're unhappy. They ask me, "What's fairness got to do with love?" When people first learned that I was writing a book about fairness in love and marriage, I got a variety of responses. "Is it fiction?" one joked. "Good luck," another quipped, "it must be a small book." But for many it struck a serious chord. "Absolutely, you can't have a loving relationship unless people are fair-minded." Several others agreed that "couples struggle with problems of fairness all the time." A mother of young children challenged, "Marriages with children can't be fair!" Others zeroed in on the core questions: How do you decide what's fair? And who gets to decide? This book shows you how love crucially depends on fair treatment. Fairness helps you resolve conflicts, enables you to give and to get what you deserve,

and is the key to a healthy, happy marriage. *Try to See It My Way* offers a fresh way to understand fairness in the world of intimate relationships, while providing a road map for creating a more loving relationship because it is based on fair relating. Let's start by looking at the importance of fairness in sustaining love.

What's Fairness Got to Do with It (Love and Happiness, That Is)?

There are two conditions for enduring happiness. One of these is relatedness. We are wired from birth to respond and to engage in a primary relationship. Humans, second only to ants, are a hypersocial species. Relationships can make us feel happy and cared about over time. That's why couples still seek the secret of lasting love, hoping to defy the odds, even as more and more relationships fail. But it's not any kind of relationship that makes us happy. After all, an unharmonious relationship, the kind I treat in my clinical practice, is one of those noxious stressors that couples never get used to. Interpersonal conflict makes us unhappy. Not only are couples stressed by conflict, but those negative stressors can also contribute to heart disease, depression, and a lower rating on that elusive goal of "happiness." So what is the other condition for happiness? Fairness. Fairness is that enigmatic, critical component of an enduring, loving, happy relationship. Unromantic as it sounds, it takes fairness to sustain love. Your own understanding of fairness in the world of close relationships begins with the decisive first step of acknowledging that fairness is at the heart of all healthy relationships and that imbalances of fairness underlie many problems that ail relationships.

This book begins by asking you to explore your own "take" on the fairness issue. While everyone, even kids at the playground, thinks they know what's fair, have you ever bothered to thoughtfully state and then evaluate what you expect from your partner? Have you ever named what you expect from your marriage as a whole? Do you know what disappoints you? Do you know what you owe your spouse, and what you deserve? In other words: do