

Hooked on a Feeling

By Jerry & Tippy Case

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Impatient, resentful, smug, cynical, protective, disoriented, anxious. For a person who didn't know what a feeling was, I was sure having a lot of them that Friday night as we sat waiting for our Weekend to begin. But those feelings were bottled; stoppered and stored within, save for the smugness and the cynicism.

With those, my last line of defense, I regaled poor Tippy and, I'm sure, made her doubt her suggestion that we go on the Weekend in the first place. And she sat patiently and waited with me-somehow knowing (why didn't I know?) that something startling was about to happen to us.

She was right, and we left, 44 hours later, a different couple. And I suppose we got the traditional 10% of the Weekend. God knows there were dozens of phrases and sentences caroming around inside of us.

Along with the total delight in the rediscovery of that cute couple we remembered from 12 years before, there was one phrase firmly planted in my head.

It was the phrase that got me into the Weekend and enabled me to listen to the rest and above all, to Tippy. It's the phrase that freed, the phrase I spouted and still spout, the phrase I still treasure. Yet it's the phrase that I still, incredibly, will refuse to understand with my heart and be converted by. *Feelings are neither right nor wrong.*

No Right or Wrong, Really?

We are writing an article on feelings. Feelings: the keystone of our communication since Marriage Encounter. Feelings: the awareness of them has changed our way of living together. You'd think writing about them would be easy, but we feel as though we're standing in front of Mt. Rushmore, and have just been handed a hammer and chisel.

The concept that feelings aren't right or wrong was the first bombshell of many that Weekend. But we think sometimes that if we just lived that one idea, more fully and consistently, we'd be a lot easier on ourselves and each other and our lives would be more fruitful.

I readily recognize the times I tell myself I shouldn't be angry or jealous -that's a "bad" feeling to have; I find that I'm far less open to recognize the times I'm judging a feeling to be right.

When I shove the kids off to watch the Brady Bunch for the 49th time because I feel nice and peaceful now, and I don't want to disturb that feeling. When I want Jerry to feel tender and romantic on my birthday, because it's a good feeling to have.

I'm saying my feelings are right when I feel sorry for myself, when I nurse a grudge, when I can't understand why he isn't more concerned about our money problems.

I know feelings are neither right nor wrong, but my actions often contradict my knowledge. But even with this abuse, and others, I know too, that sharing our feelings with one another is vital-whether we're "doing it right" or not.

Sharing Feelings Pays Off

There are personal rewards and couple rewards that are too important to overlook. I used to have five or six awful nightmares a year, and I don't anymore. I used to be extremely quiet (except when I was being vulgar), but now I seem more able to relax and show more nerve and gusto. (One of the great compliments I've received since our Weekend was "Case, you're getting more Italian everyday.")

So I still believe in the "I" phase of the Weekend because I'm aware of what can happen to me, personally, if I put the stopper back on the bottle. I don't believe I write my feelings down on paper just to get them off my chest, or to discover more about myself- and yet that's one of the really exciting bonuses for me. Sometimes writing is a joyful time, sometimes it's painful, and sometimes it's searching. But often I'm surprised by what I've written, and how strongly I feel.

And then I stop, and look at the words and think about the feelings, and where they came from and I've squirmed and shrunk and laughed and cried just from what I've admitted there about myself.

That's been a change for me. Jerry used to call me Pollyanna and shake his head, because all my feelings were rosy and pretty. And he wondered about himself, and why was he so pessimistic. It took a lot of decisions and a lot of love for me to express my doubts to Jerry-how I can doubt myself as a wife; how uncaring and cold I feel sometimes; how bristling I feel at some of his suggestions.

When I recognize my feelings - when I accept them in me as just "being" there, and then share them with Jerry, they don't come between us. They're out and in the open and I'm free to deal with and change some of the attitudes behind them.

Whenever we've talked with other couples about the importance of feelings, certain phrases come up: "up to date" and "caught up" and "we've said all there is to say." And we catch the sense of those phrases, even if the words fail. Because that's how it is with us; we feel complete when we are communicating our feelings, even though, obviously, we'll never get to say all there is to say.

But the sense of it is there. The incomplete sense is gone and we can look at each other and know that we've done something that's helped us to feel that mysterious thing that is coupleness, or unity, or closeness, or whatever you want to call it.

Sharing feelings can do that for us it makes the "thing" happen. And we'd love to take three or four pages to explain that to you, but a) we don't understand it, and b) it starts to disappear on us as soon as we try to explain it.

Jerry hates it when I complain about the children. It's "here we go again" to him, and I can hear him click off if I start on this one's messy room or that one's grumpiness. He wants to know about me, not my complaints about other people, but telling him my feelings is harder.

I have to make the effort to find them first, quiet myself down, look into me and admit to them. And that leaves me wide open. I have to trust that he really wants to hear. And I have to take the time to express my feelings as feelings.

I can get careless with that, and then I expect Jerry to interpret me correctly, to read between the lines and know my feelings of frustration or depression, even though I haven't said the words.

He doesn't have a crystal ball, and we can easily get lost in a whole new set of feelings-him annoyed at my whining and me even more alone and misunderstood.

Feelings Get Us Past Issues

Feelings get us past the issues, so that we can discover each other. I used to sit across from Jerry in the living room and wonder who this man was that I was living with. I knew all his jokes, knew what he liked for dinner, but I wished I could climb inside his head and see how the wheels worked.

I didn't know how to ask, "What are you thinking?" sounded vague, and "Let's talk about us" stopped him cold. The only answer for us is sharing feelings. It gets us off the level of talking "out there" about money, or the house, or the kids, and helps us to be involved with each other.

Another thing: we're both opinionated people, who have different approaches to almost anything. Jerry likes to sit around, I like doing things. Jerry likes to hurry through meals, I like to linger. Jerry likes sports, I like crafts. He likes to plan things out logically; I like to work them through as we go. And we bump heads.

We have to be able to share our feelings in these areas-find a non-threatening meeting ground where we can't argue, where we can find a bridge to reach each other and enjoy each other without getting defensive about who's right or who's wrong. That, for us, is feelings.

I realize I'm not quite honest about my feelings; I often put disguises on them. I feel hurt and I settle there, nice and secure in my hurt feelings, and actually pointing a finger at Jerry. But I don't like looking under that hurt to see how I feel about myself. Am I unsure of myself? Am I expecting more from him-on my terms? Am I oversensitive? Am I trusting him?

Or resentful. I can settle for feeling resentful, or else I can wonder what in me brings on that resentment. What was I expecting? Resentment tells me how I feel towards him, or the situation, but how do I feel about myself? Doubtful? Confused?

I can settle for the easy, surface feeling, or I can ask myself the questions that cause me to look, to wonder, and maybe to change.

The panicky times for me are when I can't locate or identify any feeling. A real pressure, absurd, perhaps, but no less real, comes with the question, "Well, how do you feel about that?" There follows the frantic search; I don't want to be seen as incomplete, as cold, as faulted! What am I feeling?!

And I start mentally flipping through the index cards-alive, alert, aloof; bewitched, bothered, bewildered; xenophobic, ye-ye, zoolatrous. Nothing fits. I'm not feeling anything, God makes junk after all. Call up Hertz and rent me a feeling!!

And it somehow never occurs to me to say "I feel empty," or "I feel this funny pressure," or "I feel disappointed" or "nervous" or "out of it." That's saying too much, why that's revealing how I'm feeling and I might get looked at funny.

Still, if that happens over and over again, there's probably something going on in me or between us. I should be free to feel my feelings, for me and for us, and if I'm not, or don't think I am, why not?

Part of the problem is that we've discovered we even have different attitudes about feelings themselves. I look on my feelings as dear friends. I ponder them, resort to them, and let them be my barometer. Jerry is wary of them, searches for them desperately, scoffs at them, and ignores them.

And so when we come together, we're coming from different places, defending our viewpoint and worried that the other may turn out to be right.

Right or Wrong-Again

For example, I have an attitude that there's an answer to everything. If you have a flat tire, change it. If you haven't got a spare, go out and buy one. If you haven't got the money, charge it. If you haven't got credit, walk. So the answer is clear-walk. And now why waste time and effort worrying about the flat, the spare, the money or the credit?

I bring this attitude to feelings, and it's bad enough when I do it to myself, but it's a disaster when I do it to Tippy. It's why I hate positive, joyful feelings. They just sort of sit there saying, "Look at us-aren't we terrific (read "right") feelings?"

But I have nothing to do now, no answer to bring, no problem to solve. So when Tippy tells me she's feeling happy or joyful the best response I usually can summon up is "Super."

But I'm really disappointed; she doesn't need me, I can't do my number. But I wouldn't tell her that; "disappointed" certainly seems inappropriate (read "wrong") and if I am weird, I don't want her knowing it.

But let her tell me she's feeling depressed, or scared. Now it's action time, Tippy's got a downer (read "wrong") and I can find out why, smack a kid, balance the check book, tell

her I love her, provide an insight, do or say something that will . . . that will what? Why, make the feeling go away, of course. Why should she be saddled with that negative thing, when she can be feeling better? (Read "right.")

And you know, I'm still surprised that that doesn't work. And I'm still amazed to see that I haven't ever really learned the truth of the statement that meant so much on our weekend. I mean, "slow learner" is one thing, but imbecile is hard to swallow.

If I really believe my feelings aren't right or wrong, I won't blame Jerry for them. I've been known to accuse him of making me angry, or frustrating me. I don't accept that feeling in myself, so I blame him for causing it.

But really, the feeling was there in me; all he did was to activate it. It's too easy to blame him; then I don't have to question what it is in me that becomes threatened or angered or frustrated. I don't have to ask myself how I might have to see things differently, and change.

Unspoken Feelings Are Blocks

The feelings that get most in our way are the un-faced, unspoken ones that work under the surface-that we won't admit to and look at, much less share. The other day we were having an open, non-threatening conversation. Then Jerry said something-a silly, unimportant, throw-away kind of remark that I picked up on.

I was still trying to be open, and objective, and intelligent, and I couldn't and didn't admit to myself, or to Jerry, that his silly comment had hurt me and threatened me. I still talked intelligently, I thought, but the whole tone of our conversation had changed.

I accused, subtly; Jerry lashed out, mildly. We weren't open at all anymore, we weren't objective. But we didn't stop and ask what was happening -we let our feelings take over, unshared, not even realizing it.

Each of us was hurt, and judged we shouldn't have been feeling that way, and the feelings came between us. Our feelings can dictate how we act with each other, under the surface, because we aren't open enough to pull them up and out and look at them.

And the effect is nothing drastic, like slamming doors because I'm angry; it's the sarcastic remark when I feel threatened, or silence where there would ordinarily have been laughter, or a kiss that's left un-given because I'm feeling distant right now. All the little things.

Feelings are never right or wrong. Unspoken feelings do not disappear. Shared feelings have a positive effect on interpersonal relationships. Those are the only three things really worth knowing about them, and the three things we, and probably you, nod about with vigorous approval when we read or talk about them.

But are they just another set of banners that we have hanging in our heads or are we able to put the beliefs to use? The bottom line has a familiar ring. Are we loving the concepts or living the Weekend?