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The Science of Self-Control

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Anxious Mind

Gretchen Rohr
Law Professor and Mindfulness Instructor

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and tap into the vivid world around you

RADICAL HONESTY

How to have a difficult conversation

\+ LOVE AS PRACTICE
TARA BRACH

APRIL 2017
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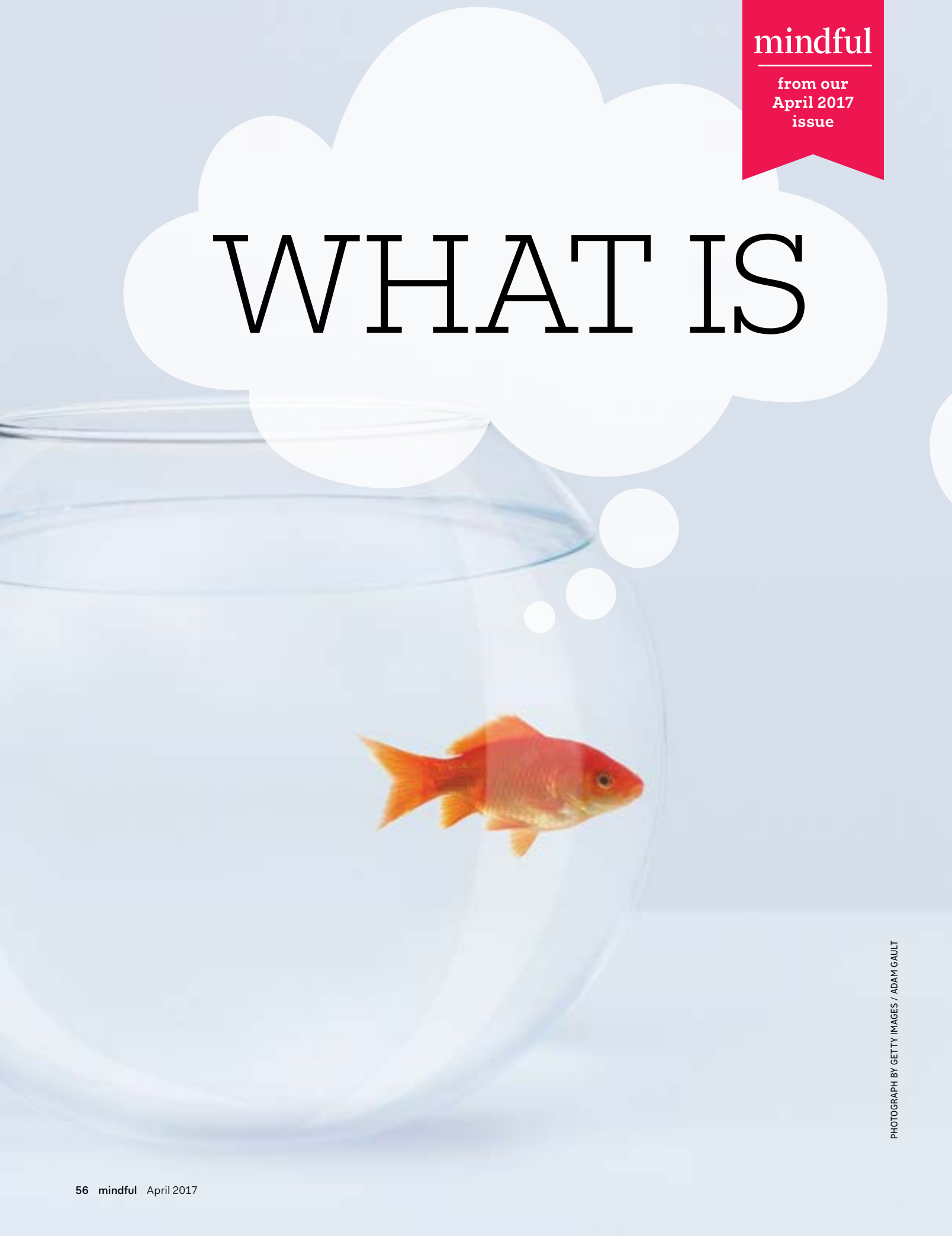
WHAT IS



PHOTOGRAPH BY GETTY IMAGES / ADAM GAULT

LOVE?

Photographs by Adam Gault

There is no single answer to that profound question. Nor should there be. When **Barbara Graham** sought deeper connection within her decades-long marriage, she discovered that love is not something we can find and make perfect: it's a mindset.

"So why are you here?"

Twelve couples—many of us married, some living together or dating—are jammed into the living room of a house high up on a hill in northern California. It's the first gathering of "A Path for Couples"—a workshop led by psychotherapist George Taylor that will meet monthly over the course of the next year. My heart pings anxiously in my chest as I listen to others answer the question posed by George, who goes by Geo.

"I need to learn to tolerate my partner's negative emotions without freaking out," offers a woman I judge to be in her mid-30s.

"I want to live in a state of connectedness, but we get stuck in endless power struggles," says a man whose wife, sitting next to him, nods her head in agreement.

"There's way too much conflict in our household," a man in his 50s pipes up, "and it's hell on the kids."

Barbara Graham is an essayist, journalist, and playwright. She is author/editor of *Eye of My Heart: 27 Writers Reveal the Hidden Pleasures and Perils of Being a Grandmother.* She is a regular contributor for *Mindful,* her most recent piece, about insomnia, appeared in the December 2015 issue.

I'm impressed by how open this collection of strangers is on Day One. Yet, listening to them I wonder if my husband, Hugh, and I have stumbled into the wrong group. Many of the other couples seem to be on a quest to manage conflict, while Hugh and I live quite peaceably. In fact, friends often tell us they think we make the perfect couple, and in many ways I agree. We're easy together, supportive and kind. We hold hands and make each other laugh. Our arguments, fleeting as summer showers, are almost always laced with humor. And we (mostly) tolerate each other's annoying habits and ridiculous idiosyncrasies with generosity and goodwill.

And yet.

Content as we are, I've sometimes felt a current of longing ripple beneath our sturdy twosome like an underground stream—longing for something I couldn't quite name. Hugh must have been feeling the same way too, because when I suggested that we sign up for a daylong class called Radiant Intimacy at Spirit Rock Meditation Center taught by Geo and his wife, Debra Chamberlin-Taylor, a psychotherapist and meditation teacher, he was game. We felt so energized and connected by the end of the day, we decided to go for the yearlong workshop.

When it's Hugh's turn to reveal why he's here, he says, "I want more intimacy."

I say, "I want more intimacy, too. A deeper sense of presence with each other."

With twinkling blue eyes and a ready grin, Geo lets us know right away that he's one of us. "Relationship is a spiritual path that never ends," he says, noting that he and Debra still deal with their old, conditioned patterns of reactivity. "We can all become more loving and present. But you have to be willing to look at your fears, your jealousy, your anger, your feelings of incompetence and helplessness," he explains. "You have to be vulnerable and say, 'This is mine. I can't pawn this off on my parents or my partner.' Conscious relationship takes commitment, courage, and awareness."

I know something about so-called conscious relationships; I've even written about them. The concept had always struck me as slightly dreary, more work than play, the cod liver oil of love. Would Hugh and I have to start parsing every glance, every sentence, in search of hidden meaning? If we put our marriage under close surveillance, would we discover things we didn't want to see, like when you turn over a pretty rock only to unearth a nest of scorpions? I'm relieved when Geo jokes, "Sometimes

I think the best we can aspire to are *semi*-conscious relationships."

Maybe Hugh and I belong here after all.

Paying Attention

Though Hugh and I have been practicing meditation for decades, the focus of my practice has been on myself, investigating the contents of my own spinning mind, my habitual reactions and their reverberations in my body. Hugh's practice has been much the same. And while it's clear to me that our marriage has benefitted enormously from our unfolding understanding of ourselves, I realize during the first meeting of the class how little mindful attention we've actually devoted to the unfolding of our relationship.

I'm struck by this when Geo says, "When we have a partner, we live with our teacher. We have a daily opportunity to meet our own resistance and reactivity. We can see it in our body language and responses, and those of our partner. We become incredible mirrors for each other."

So maybe that's part of the missing piece for Hugh and me: not enough focus on our connection. It's almost too obvious to be true. Yet, when we—or any two people who are close—don't see and listen to one another with fresh eyes and ears, we drift into automatic pilot. We make assumptions based on past experiences and future expectations. When we do so we're caught up in our stories. And when we're caught up in our stories, the reality—and possibility—inherent in →

> When we're caught up in our stories, the reality—and possibility—inherent in the present moment becomes blocked.

the present moment becomes blocked.

Relationship guru and psychologist Katie Hendricks calls attention "the currency of relationship." Coauthor with her psychologist husband, Gay Hendricks, of *Conscious Loving* and *Conscious Loving Ever After*, she tells me over the phone that she regards her own marriage as a living laboratory. "Considering it in that framework creates a context of ongoing discovery. One of the big principles of our work is that you can choose continual renewal and recommitment," she explains. "When people lack that kind of orientation, we literally see them begin to fold up and become crystallized—physically, energetically, relationally. It's a daily choice. Are we going to expand and continue growing and learning, or are we just going to put the shell on?"

Inevitably and paradoxically, however, staying in the present moment with a partner sometimes means tapping into old wounds. As William Faulkner famously wrote: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Still, when we get into a tangle with our beloved and, instead of reacting in habitual ways, we bring awareness and inquiry to the source of the feeling, then share it with our partner, "that moment of consciousness is powerfully transformational," Geo says at our second meeting. "It's where the healing takes place. It's how we build trust and empathy." And, he adds, "By telling your story over and over, the triggers diminish. You can see them coming and say, "Oh, there I go again.'"

Describing the challenges with her boyfriend, a woman in our group named Brenda confides, "This relationship is a crucible for both of us. We are very much engaged in healing stuff we've been dealing with all our lives."

Certainly, the same is true for Hugh and me. I notice that the more we allow ourselves to experience and name the roots of our conditioned reactions—his, that he has to be entirely self-sufficient and his subsequent withdrawal; my feelings of being unseen, followed by hurt and,

{ INVESTIGATE }

Unhook from Your Past

By Barbara Graham

How to break free from old habits that no longer serve you—or your relationship.

Strong emotions that arise during conflicts almost always have their origin in the past, most often in childhood, says couples' therapist George Taylor. When we inquire within to identify the source of our reactivity, then share it with our partner, we begin to break free from old, conditioned patterns of behavior that no longer serve us or our relationship.

The four most common strategies that most people rely on when they feel threatened are to:

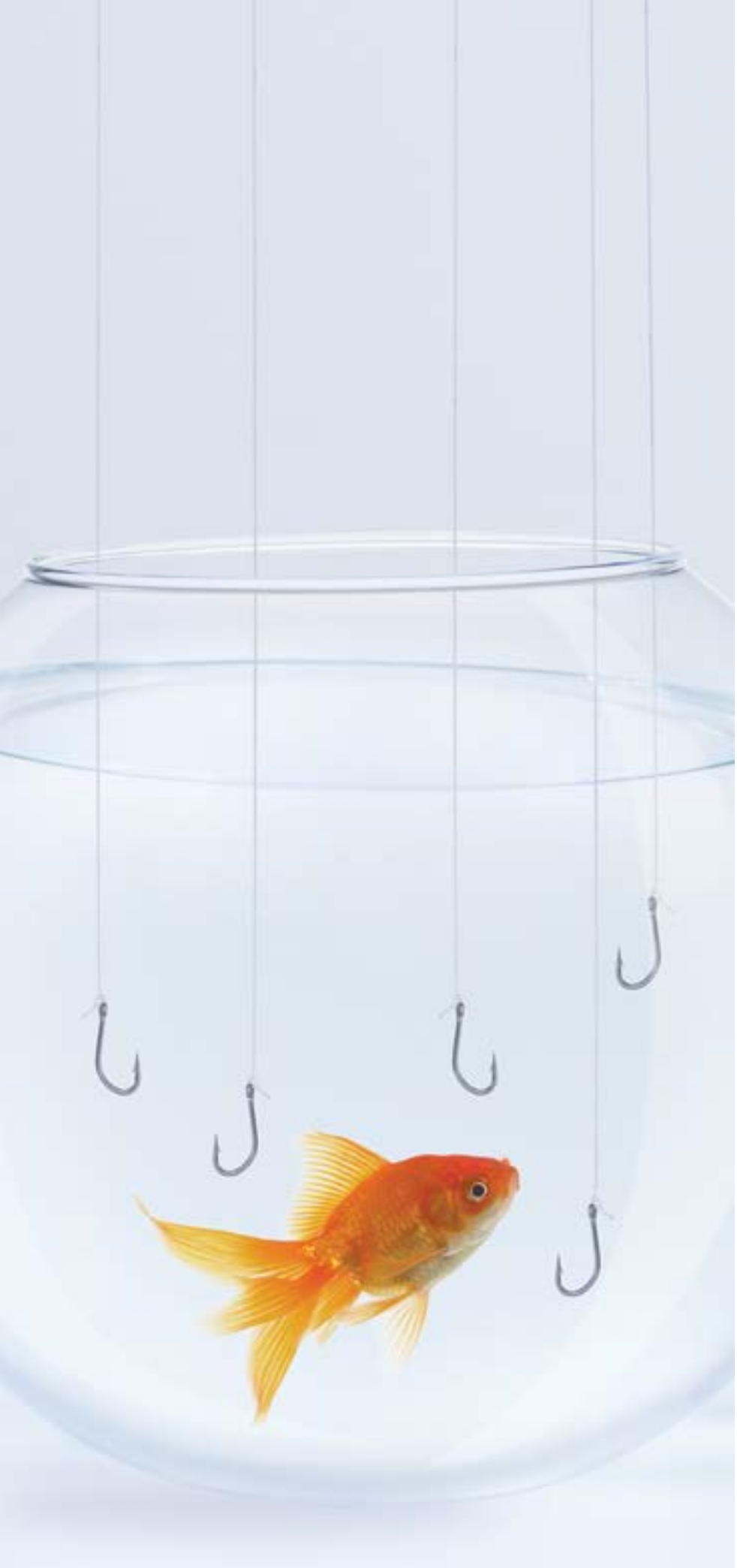
Attack
Defend
Pursue
Withdraw

Dismantling these kneejerk reactions is a courageous process that requires both self-awareness and self-disclosure, but the results are transformational, Taylor says. The key is to focus on your own experience, without blaming or criticizing your partner.

In other words: Be mindful and investigate your own strong reactions to see what old trauma or wound might be getting triggered before you lash out or withdraw. The questions to ask yourself, says Taylor, are: Does this response feel familiar to me from childhood or previous relationships? Where might I have learned it and what can I learn from it now? Knowing this, how do I want to respond to my partner?

For example, if one partner goes ballistic when her beloved is five minutes late, instead of screaming at him and calling a thoughtless jerk, she might stop to explore why she's so distressed. In doing so, she may discover that her response has much less to do with her devoted and usually on-time partner than the fact that in childhood her mother never knew what time—or day—her angry alcoholic father might turn up.

When people set the intention to take responsibility for their reactivity by examining and then sharing the source of their upset with one another, their connection inevitably deepens. "Being aware," Taylor explains, "helps foster compassion for yourself and your partner, and helps you make much better choices."



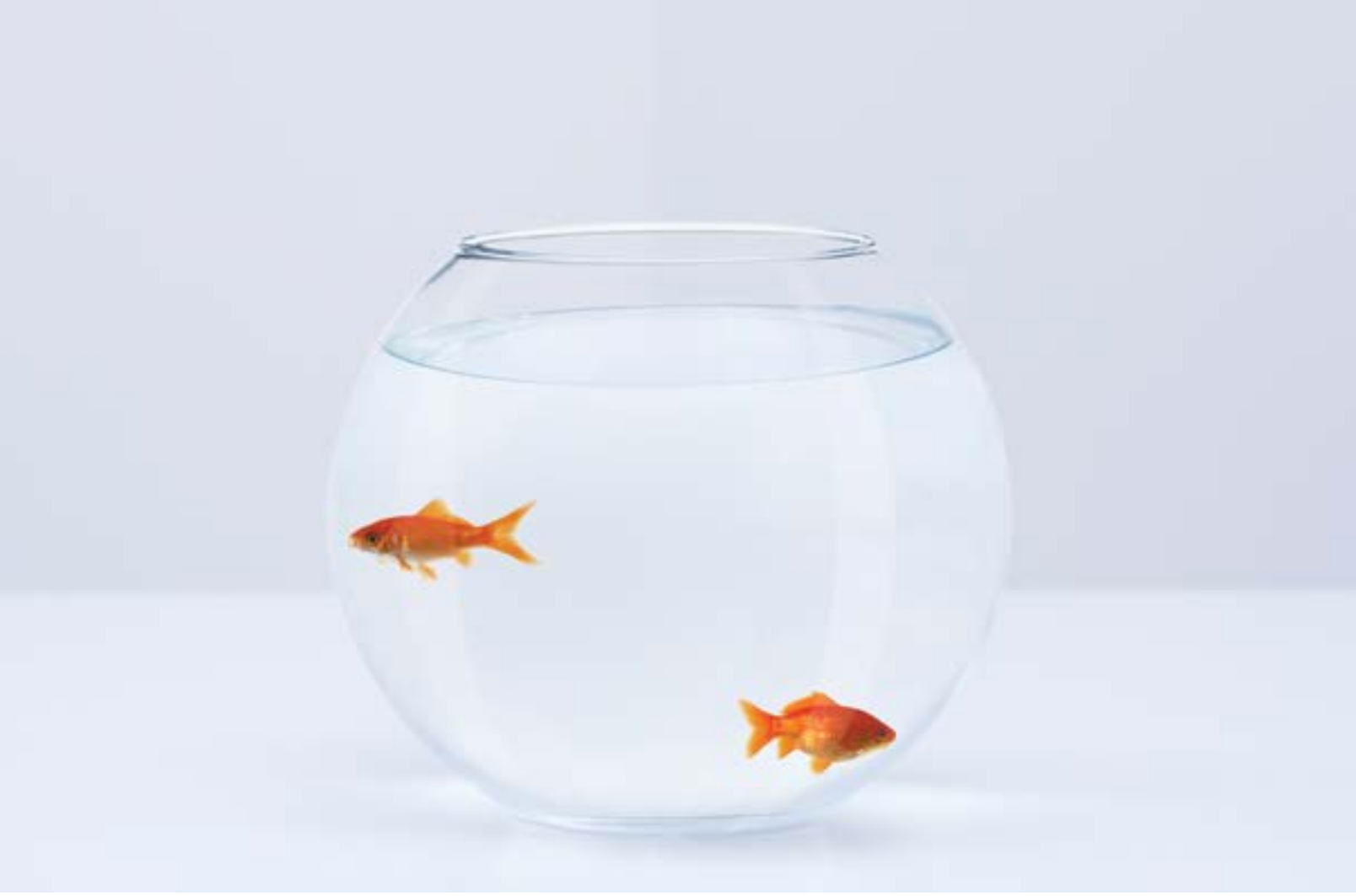
sometimes, anger—the more tender we are with each other, the more present and loving.

Body Intelligence

It's not enough to focus on what's taking place in our minds, Katie Hendricks stresses when we speak. "Fear is at the bottom of the issues in most relationships and the greatest obstacle to intimacy," she says. "On some level, we're all scared we're unlovable. And if we don't feel lovable, we can't let our partner love us." In order to turn that around, she explains, we need to start with ourselves. "We can't expect to get love from someone else if we don't believe we're lovable. We need to start loving all those aspects of ourselves we think are awful."

Paying close attention to the sensations arising in our bodies as well as to our thoughts helps to transform the fear of being unlovable, she explains. "If you don't shift fear there's no opportunity to learn anything. If I'm scared, you look like the enemy." When that happens, we humans get stuck in our primitive, reptile brain and can't access the more rational, civilized, and peace-loving parts of our brain, including the pre-frontal cortex, insula, and hippocampus. However, Katie adds, "If we identify that we're scared and feel it in our body, we can breathe into it and move in different ways that melt the fear and allow us to connect more with ourselves and our partners. Then we can let love in at a whole body level."

Geo, who with his wife, Debra, studied with Katie and Gay Hendricks, also emphasizes the role of the body in deepening intimacy. "In all relationships there are breakdowns in connection," he says. "They show up in the form of unconscious judgments, forgetfulness, blame, and endless projections. The body is like a tuning fork and if you pay attention, you begin to notice that these breakdowns begin with tiny sensations of anxiety and tension. But if you ignore them, you tend to resort to an unconscious →



strategy, such as attacking, defending, or withdrawing from your partner." For example, when Hugh is in withdrawal mode and I feel ignored but am *not* tuned into rising feelings of contraction in my body, I tend to lash out at him. I might blame him for leaving a pile of dirty dishes, when really what I want is a little attention.

"Mindfulness of the body includes tuning into the relational field as well," Geo adds. "There's a constant signaling back and forth in relationships that most people miss out on." In other words, things such as body language and tone of voice directly reflect what's going on between two people—and these signals never lie. "The key is to try to understand the impact the signals you're sending have on the other person, and what they say about you," Geo explains.

Tapping into the relational field is a core exercise in Geo's book, also called *The Path for Couples*, and a practice we're supposed to do at home once a week. After taking a few breaths together, the instructions are for one partner to ask the other: "Imagine our relationship right now. How does it feel to you? Do you feel connected to me? Neutral? Distant? What does your body sense when I'm near you?" The partner being queried next is asked to silently note the sensations he or she felt during the exercise, using words such as *hot*, *cold*, *close*, *loving*, *angry*, etc. Afterward, the partners switch roles, then take turns sharing their experience of connection or disconnection aloud, without judgment or blame.

I confess: Hugh and I have been slackers. The first time we did the exercise was about an hour before the class started. I felt mostly agitation as I tried to sense the energy between us. (I've always hated homework.) Still, weeks later, when we actually allowed ourselves enough time to practice, Hugh and I both felt a strong connection. "Alive and tingly," were the words he used to describe it, and I felt that too.

How Are *You* Crazy?

Sooner or later, people in long-term relationships secretly think, "My partner is an idiot!," Alain de Botton, author of *The Course of Love*, said in a radio interview when the book came out in 2016. "We're all deeply flawed and broken inside. We have to accept with grace that we're imperfect and crazy, and so is our partner."

Interestingly, this perspective on love is supported by scientific research. In a talk called "Why People Fall in Love," anthropologist Helen Fisher reported that fMRI studies show that people in happy long-term relationships have "positive illusions" about one another, and tend to overlook qualities in their partners that

they don't like. In one groundbreaking study of happily married people, Fisher and her colleagues found significant links to brain regions associated with beefing up positive illusions and suspending negative judgments, as well as reward and motivation, empathy and attachment, and the ability to regulate emotion and stress.

Yet, no matter how forgiving couples are with one another, there are bound to be chronic differences. In multiple studies conducted by the Gottman Institute, researchers found that only 31% of marital issues can be resolved, while the other 69% fall into what psychologist John Gottman calls the "perpetual problems" category. "The trick is to find a partner with whom you share a set of perpetual problems you can live with," says Carrie Cole, director of research at the Institute.

I was cheered when I learned this, because I'd pretty much concluded the same thing. For example, long ago in our 34 years together I realized that Hugh would rarely—if ever—be the one to initiate difficult conversations about emotional issues, such as feeling jealous, disappointed, or disconnected. And though this may be a typical male–female thing, I've come to accept that bringing up the hard stuff is part of my wifely job description. At the same time, Hugh has generously learned to accommodate my anxious wiring, which manifests in bouts of insomnia, hypochondria, and panicky gasps when he's behind the wheel, zipping across multiple lanes on the freeway, without making me feel like a crazy person.

Conflict Happens

Even if we give our partners a pass on some of their most annoying habits and practice greater self-awareness and compassion, there are still times when we feel threatened by old, conditioned patterns of reactivity that invade us like a body snatcher.

"Noticing that my aggressiveness is the same strategy my mother uses to manage her anxiety, and which I seem to have inherited, has been really helpful," says Elena, a woman in the group whose marriage has been riddled with conflict. "I see clearly how this pattern doesn't serve me at all, but I don't necessarily make that leap in the middle of an argument."

Even happily married couples can let loose and engage in loud screaming matches without jeopardizing their marriage.

Conflict happens; it's human nature. "There's no relationship without conflict," says Stan Tatkin, a psychotherapist and author of *Wired for Love*. "If you know this, then you can problem-solve." For example, he explains, "In order for me to get what I want, I need to know what you want. If I show you that I care only about my own interests, you're going to do the same, and that stance is the stance for war. But if I know that I have to take care of you at the same time I take care of myself, which is a novel idea for many people, it's a win–win situation."

Moreover, avoiding conflict is never a solution and only causes trouble, Tatkin adds. People can't work things out if they don't talk. But in order to engage in friendly conflict, they need to feel safe and secure in their relationship. Most important, he says, "They have to focus on the relationship, not on themselves as individuals. The relationship is a third entity that they've created together, and they have to decide together what works for them and what the dealbreakers are," he says. "When people feel secure, most of the things that burden others in relationship are off the table. They become more creative and free up resources in each other to do amazing things."

Interestingly, though, in longitudinal studies of 700 couples conducted by the Gottman Institute and psychologist Robert Levenson, researchers found that even happily married couples can let loose and engage in loud screaming matches without jeopardizing their marriage. "It's a myth that anger is a predictor of divorce," explains Carrie Cole. However, she says, "an important predictor of whether people will stay together is their ability to repair after an argument—and how quickly they make amends."

Repairs, which may involve an apology, humor to defuse the tension, or another tactic the partners agree upon, seem to be most effective when there's a strong foundation of friendship and trust. In research on same-sex couples, Gottman and Levenson found that gay and lesbian couples are more upbeat and affectionate during conflict, and use fewer hostile, controlling emotional tactics than straight couples. They also become less physiologically agitated when they disagree. One reason for this, researchers conclude, is that homosexual couples tend to value equality in their relationship more than heterosexual couples.

Regardless of a couple's sexual orientation, a recent study published in *Hormones and Behavior* shows that mindfulness helps to speed up →

After receiving gratitude, participants saw their partner as significantly more responsive to their needs and were generally more satisfied with their relationship.

repair following conflict. In the study, partners' cortisol levels spiked during arguments, reflecting high stress. However, cortisol levels in those with greater mindfulness were quicker to return to normal once the conflict ended. Researchers surmise that mindfulness helps people regulate their emotions more quickly, respond to their partner with increased empathy, and disengage faster from conflicts that turn destructive.

A beneficial way to handle conflicts that threaten to escalate is for partners to take an intentional pause, or time-out. In fact, the day I interview Geo he tells me that he had asked for a time-out that morning when a conversation he was having with his wife began to generate negative feelings in him. "Debra and I are sensitive people with hot buttons embedded in our software," he says, noting that in the past it might have taken them a few hours to resume talking, whereas today it took only about ten minutes.

"Even though people may want to be conscious and empathic, there are times when we all get flooded with emotion," he explains. This flooding, which increases heart rate and blood pressure and launches us into full-on fight or flight mode, is usually a signal that some childhood wound has been triggered. When that happens, Geo advises, it's wise to take a break, with a clear agreement as to when the time-out will be over.

The 100% Solution

Since taking the couples' workshop and researching this story, there are two concepts that have made an indelible impression on me. The first is that both partners are *100% responsible* for their own happiness—and unhappiness—as individuals and in the context of their relationship.

"People thrive in a climate of 100% accountability, where nobody blames or claims victim status," Katie Hendricks told me. "Taking responsibility means acknowledging that you're two whole people, and when issues arise each person asks her- or himself, 'How am *I* creating this situation?' The only way to break out of the cycle of chronic blame and criticism is to take ownership of whatever is going on, and release the other person from having anything to do with it."

From such an empowered position, she continues, "problems can be solved quickly, because time and energy are not squandered in a fruitless attempt to find fault with the other person. And by taking full responsibility for our own lives, we reclaim our creativity. We free ourselves up. It's not so much a moral issue as an energetic issue. When there isn't any blame or criticism, appreciation becomes the ground of the relationship." Alternatively, she says, when people remain locked in struggle, they perpetuate the struggle as long as they're convinced they're victims.

For the most part, Hugh and I are pretty good at taking responsibility for our own behavior and choices, and when blame or criticism do arise, they don't stick. Yet, I think the reason why the idea of 100% responsibility has resonated so deeply with me is that I was married once before, to a man who was a world-class victim—an unconscious but intractable trait that led to our divorce. From the time I met this man, an artist, he claimed to be used, abused, hurt, disrespected, unfairly rejected and misunderstood by just about everyone, from his parents and sister to the high priests of the art world to people he worked for, as well as his children, his second wife and, of course, me. It wasn't as if he didn't have good cause for his woundedness: his dad was cruel and his mother was too frightened to protect him. Still, to the end of his days—he passed away a year ago—my ex remained chronically unable to own his part in his story—and suffered terribly as a result.

Hugh and I don't keep secrets (as far as I know!) and we don't tell other people things we wouldn't tell each other. Nevertheless, the second concept in this relationship business that really strikes a chord with me is: *transparency.* Maybe that's because earlier in my life I did keep secrets, painful, confusing secrets, that left me feeling separate and alone, and took years of therapy, meditation, and a memoir to unpack. I'm familiar with the sense of freedom that comes from telling the truth, but there's something about committing to transparency as a practice that makes me feel even more connected to Hugh.

"The willingness to be transparent with your partner, to reveal rather than conceal, is the key commitment,"

Katie tells me. "That blossoms into an extraordinary openness and deepening. When we share what we're experiencing, we act and speak from a sense of discovery, which has a very different quality than an exchange that has judgment, defense, or interpretation underneath it."

When she says that I realize that my old worry about becoming *too* conscious in a conscious relationship—dissecting every word and glance and focusing on what's wrong—was based on fear, not an open and loving heart.

Keep On Paying Attention

Even though Hugh and I have been somewhat delinquent in doing the home exercises for Geo's class, we've consciously been devoting more time to each other: talking more; exploring the roots of old feelings; arguing, instead of withdrawing into our separate corners, which for us is a good thing; expressing our appreciation for the other; and making love.

In a TED talk for Valentine's Day, Esther Perel, a Belgian psychotherapist and the author of *Mating in Captivity*, noted a few ways in which couples in committed relationships keep Eros alive. For one thing, they create private time and space where all the minutae of life are left behind. And though they recognize that passion waxes and wanes just like the phases of the moon, these couples know that sexual feelings "aren't just going to fall from heaven while you're folding the laundry," she said. "They also know that committed sex is premeditated sex. It's willful, intentional, focused, and present." Perhaps most important, she adds, "erotic couples also understand that foreplay isn't something you start five minutes before the real thing; it's something you start at the end of the previous orgasm."

One aspect of happy partnerships that need not wax and wane is appreciation and gratitude. More than just a nice idea, a study of 77 couples published in the journal *Emotion*, found that after receiving gratitude, →

ILLUSTRATION BY JACQUELINE FERNANDES / THE NOUN PROJECT

{ BE CREATIVE }

The Key to Lasting Love

By Barbara Graham

The secret to lasting love, according to Katie and Gay Hendricks, is to approach love as you would any creative endeavor.

In *Conscious Loving Ever After*, coauthors (and husband and wife) Katie and Gay Hendricks advise partners to make the following pledge:

I commit to enjoying my full capacity for love and creativity.

Often when we think about creativity, we worry that we must produce something of value—a painting, a written work, even the perfect rendition of Julia Child's Coq au Vin recipe. But, says Katie Hendricks, this perception misses the point. True creativity is a whole mind, whole body approach to life that is playful and joyful—a way of relating with openness and curiosity to ourselves, the people we love, and the world around us.

So, you might say, that sounds nice, but what does that have to do with my relationship?

Absolutely everything, says Katie.

In *Conscious Loving Ever After* the Hendrickses describe how, for them and the thousands of couples they've coached, reconnecting with their individual creative spark has been the secret to lasting love. "When people get in deeper communication with their own individual creative essence, their relationships blossom as a direct result," they write. What's more, people who are alive to their inner flow become available for co-creativity. They let their experiences enrich and expand their choices, and they learn to apply the same creative energy to envisioning their relationship.

Easier said than done, because by the time we reach adulthood, most of us have lost touch with our creative spirit, says Katie. "In my family, I was the second born and my brother was always called Number One. I developed this Avis persona: I'm number two and I have to try harder. And I brought that with me into my marriage with Gay. But when I made a choice to put my own creativity first, our relationship improved dramatically.

"I asked myself, what is my unique genius?" Her answer came via a daily morning practice that includes journaling and movement, and is the source of new ideas and projects.

But the process doesn't stop with oneself. "You can ask the same question of your partner," Katie says. "'What do you want to do in the world, and how can I support you and how can you support me?' That support is an expression of the genius of your relationship."

Keep the Lines Open

By Tara Brach

Tara Brach and her husband, meditation teacher Jonathan Foust, have developed a regular practice for keeping the lines of communication open and maintaining a deep, loving connection. They enage in the practice two mornings a week. Here's how Tara suggests going about it.

1

Begin by **sitting silently together** for 10-20 minutes, as time allows.

2

Next, take turns telling each other **what you're grateful for**, what's enlivening your heart at present. "This is called gladdening the heart and serves as a good way to open the channel of communication," Tara says.

3

After individually expressing gratitude, take turns naming any particular **challenges you're dealing with** that are currently causing you stress. These are difficulties you're facing apart from your relationship.

PHOTOGRAPH OF TARA BRACH BY JONATHAN FOUST

4

Then, deepen your inquiry by taking turns noting anything that might be **restricting the sense of love and openness** you feel toward your partner. First, you might ask yourself: "What is between me and feeling openhearted and intimate with my partner?" This is potentially the stickiest part of the practice, as well as the most rewarding.

"Naming difficult truths is the best way to bring more love and understanding into a relationship," explains Tara. For example, she says, "There are times when I get busy and Jonathan takes on a larger portion of the household responsibilities and ends up feeling unappreciated, and I need to be reminded to express my appreciation. When we acknowledge what could cause resentment if left unsaid, it brings us closer together." But, she cautions, for this step to be productive, it's essential for both partners to **practice speaking and listening from a place of vulnerability**, without blaming the other person.

5

Next, **expand your inquiry** to see whether there's anyone in your wider circle of family, friends or society at large who's important to you as an individual or as a couple, and who also calls out for your attention. Take turns identifying them, and sense what might serve well-being in this larger domain of relationship.

6

Lastly, enjoy some **moments of silent appreciation** together, ideally in a long, tender hug.

participants saw their partner as significantly more responsive to their needs and were more satisfied with their relationship. These effects reverberated six to nine months later.

That didn't surprise me at all. My friend Geneen Roth, author of *Women, Food, and God*, tells me that she and her husband set time aside every evening before dinner for a ritual they call "sweet talk," in which they express their appreciation for each other—a practice, she says, that has strengthened their bond and deepened their love.

Intention, it turns out, is everything. "Just as we exercise to keep our bodies healthy, paying attention to our inner life and to each other is necessary if we want to have a healthy relationship. We need to do it in an intentional and regular way," says author and meditation teacher Tara Brach, who leads relationship workshops with her husband, Jonathan Foust. The two also practice what they preach. They've created a twice-weekly check-in process that includes meditating, expressing gratitude, naming challenges, and, generally, exploring anything that stands between them and loving presence (see box at left). "People need strategies," says Tara. "If a couple checks in twice a week, that changes the relationship. We need to take time to remember what we're forgetting and cherish what we have."

As Hugh and I are discovering—more each day—it's the quality of attention we pay to each other and our relationship that energizes us and keeps our connection vital and alive. "Otherwise, so many things go unsaid and unnoticed, and we fall into a sort of automatic, semi-comatose state," Hugh tells me. "One of the most exciting things for me about this process is seeing you in a different way. I didn't expect that or to learn so much about myself in relation to you."

OK! I think. Maybe after 34 years together, Hugh and I are finally closing in on that perfect semi-conscious relationship Geo joked about the day we set out on the path. ●