

# CAN WE CHANGE THE PEOPLE WE LOVE?

Recently a friend of mine called asking for advice. She was angry because her sister had let her down—in the same way she had let her down many times before. My friend had written a letter to her sister detailing the disappointment she felt in her behavior. The very act of putting her feelings down on paper had been helpful to her, but she wondered, having written the letter, should she send it? I hardly had to think before answering her: I told her not to send the letter.

My advice stemmed from the conviction that much of life's torment comes from our inability to accept people as they are, from our need to make the people we love into what we *want* them to be, and from our recurrent feelings of disappointment and failure when they insist on being themselves and doing things we don't want them to do.

This conviction was slow in coming, the result of painfully acquired experience. I speak as a veteran of the ultimately futile battle of trying to change people I love. I've spent an embarrassing amount of time and energy on this activity and, to my peril, I still engage in it every so often in spite of myself.

My own sister was probably the first person from whom I tried to wrest substantial personality changes. My ill-fated attempts to make her be someone she was not started almost immediately after my arrival in our family as her unasked for and unwanted younger sister. From the start I tried to extract from her the very things she could not give: protection, allegiance, respect, unqualified love. I wanted to be her friend, not



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her pest, which was my role assignment from birth to approximate age twenty. I wanted her to protect me from school bullies, not pretend that I was as unconnected to her as a visitor from another planet. I wanted her to teach me what she'd learned in the six years she'd preceded me on Earth, and confide in me what I suspected to be her awesome secrets. Instead of secrets, I got silence. Instead of open arms, I mostly got a door slammed in my face and the injunction to "Leave me alone!"

For a good part of my life, I ignored the fact that her needs for our relationship were very different from my own. I kept insisting on the impossible and becoming enraged when it did not materialize. Even after we grew older and our relationship changed for the better, that early emotional dynamic—me wanting, her withholding—persisted to some degree as I went on beating my head against the stone wall of her nature.

Through the years she gave me a lot: access to her life and to her family, support in my efforts to extricate myself from our parents and to lead a life of my own, introductions to men, and—when I broke up with them and characterized them as louses—agreement and sympathy. But no matter how much she gave, it was what she *didn't* give that I craved, things like unconditional approval and an unlimited amount of her time. She was willing to be my sister, but she didn't want to be my best friend or my mother, and those were the very things, I now realize, I wanted her to become.

In one way or another, I've replicated this basic emotional dynamic in every important human relationship (*Continued*)

**by Bette-Jane Raphael**

I've had. For a long time I wanted more than anyone I loved was prepared to give. I was unwilling to give up a childlike assumption that people should respond to me as if I were the central fact of their lives. As a result, I was often asking the wrong questions: Why didn't my friend drop everything to have lunch when I was feeling miserable? Why didn't the man I loved stop doing things I found hurtful? Such questions brought me little besides my own, and others', anguish.

Most of us have wanted to alter a family member in some way or other. Who hasn't wished for a more understanding mother or a less conservative father, a more giving brother or less competitive sister? And this kind of emotional tug-of-war—one person wanting change, the other remaining unchanged—isn't confined to our families. The same dynamic goes on just as often between both friends and lovers.

Unfortunately, our culture encourages us in the belief that we *can* change the people we love—especially the men we love. I grew up on a steady stream of movies and books about women who changed their men. For love of the right woman, crusty old bachelors turned into romantic fools, and gamblers and con artists became solid citizens and family men. On this diet of miracle turnabouts a lot of us grow up thinking that love can conquer all. And we're always surprised and chagrined when it proves a fantasy.

My friend Nancy complains that her husband never wants to talk seriously about the angry feelings that occasionally mar the surface of their life together. She rails against Jim's lack of interest in their emotional life, sits him down for confrontations and periodically makes both of them miserable over this issue.

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Jim is kind, even-tempered, successful—and, yes, as emotionally introspective as the lamp on his desk. Why, I want to ask her, can't she enjoy her blessings and accept the fact that she's not married to Freud? Why, when she has a truly loving relationship, can't she leave well enough alone?

My friend Sue complains that her supposedly best friend isn't giving enough, that she will never put herself out for her. Disappointed in what she sees as the friendship's failings, Sue often threatens to end the relationship. Yet she agrees that this friend is supportive when it comes to Sue's work, and has given her lots of tips about her job. She agrees that this friend is an interesting person, and great fun to be with. So does she really want to end a relationship that's rewarding on many levels, simply because it doesn't satisfy *all* of her requirements?

I don't challenge Nancy on her demand for perfection in her partner, nor ask Sue why she can't accept her friend as is. For I know that the futility of their behavior is something they will have to learn for them-

selves. Also, I recognize too much of my own behavior in theirs. Instead of enjoying the large good of a relationship in spite of the small bad, I, too, have often engaged in a struggle for change, and gotten myself in trouble as a result.


Ultimately I was exhausted by the struggle. It was getting me nowhere, and I suspected that there had to be a more profitable way to conduct human relationships. I started to realize that the problem with trying to change people is that when we are *unable* to change them, we begin to feel bad about ourselves. We think, "If only I were better, or more powerful, *then* they would be the way I want them to be." It's curious that we often mistake having control over our own lives with having control over the feelings and behavior of others, especially those we love.

We compound this mistake with another: assuming that we can't change the people we care about because they don't love us enough to change. Both mistakes can trip us up. Because if someone makes us feel either unloved or unhappy about ourselves, we're apt to become angry—and thus take the small step from love to enmity.

When this happens in relationships other than family, we're always free to end them. Nobody forces us to remain in unfulfilling friendships or unhappy partnerships. There is an obvious problem with this kind of human squandering, however. Those of us who can accept only *perfect* relationships risk living very lonely lives.

I think we're less likely to throw relationships away if we remember that the people we love probably *try* to accommodate us, just as we try to accommodate them. We try not to leave our clothes on *all* the chairs in the house if our partners complain that there's never any place to sit; we don't insist on having sushi for lunch when eating with friends who gag at the idea of eating uncooked flesh. But the fact is that we can all stretch just so far before we begin to resent being asked to be what we are not in order to be loved. For all that he would like to accommodate Nancy, Jim cannot turn himself into Freud, and he resents Nancy's insistence that he try. No matter how close Sue's friend feels toward her, there is no way that their friendship can effect her change to Lady Bountiful. That's just not who she is, and she is angry at Sue's nonacceptance of her.

I'm not advocating that we accept unacceptable behavior in those we love. We can, and *should*, negotiate the terms of our relationships. But the limits of others' behavior are set by them, not us. My friend's sister has her limits, and my friend's sending her a letter won't change her behavior, but rather, will make her resentful.

In any case, it's not my friend's business to change her sister's behavior, but her own expectations. My friend's job is to get a clear idea of who her sister is—not who she would like her to be. For if she has an understanding of her sister's limits, she won't be forever trying, and failing, to expand them. This is the ultimate accommodation we all make at one time or another with everyone we care about, and want to care about us. 

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