

Names used in this column are changed to honor client confidentiality.

Puppets Can't Love

"She turned me into a puppet, and then wondered why I no longer loved her. The answer is simple—a puppet doesn't have a heart."

Gordon was reaching a point where he could no longer forfeit his sense of self. He had to get out. To stay would have been soul-squelching—a form of suicide. The last straw occurred one afternoon after he spent time with a buddy.

"She was expecting me at 4:30," he said. "I knew I was running a little late, so at 4:20, I called to let her know I was on my way. She came unglued, saying: 'If you're not here by 4:30, then don't bother!' And that made me think, 'Why am I bothering?'"

Such unreasonableness and inflexibility—a constant in Gordon's relationship—invariably triggers the demise of devotion from a loving partner. Just as plants require a hospitable soil in which to flourish, so does love.

Gordon gave numerous examples that led to the collapse of his fondness and devotion for the woman who once occupied a special place in his heart. He recalled the time he got up in the middle of the night to prepare chicken noodle soup for her because she was sick. There were other ways he cared for her that night too.

When she climbed out of bed several hours later, she complained that he hadn't washed the dishes. Gordon shook his head in disbelief while saying, "Can't she remember what all I did for her just hours before?"

Confronting her—even tactfully—under such circumstances never panned out. She would become enraged.

"I instinctively knew that being strong would end the relationship," Gordon said. "She didn't want me strong. Staying with her would have required that I become weak and stay weak."

Numerous men share Gordon's sentiments. Some move on, as did Gordon. Others surrender their will, accepting the fate of being a "neutered male," as one client put it, adding, "I've been domesticated. I might as well have a little tag on my ear."

Gordon noted that "Each time I gave in to her, I could see another chunk of me fall away, piece by piece, bit by bit. It got so I couldn't even recognize myself in the mirror anymore."

After several weeks passed, I witnessed Gordon's strength and sense of humor return. I asked

him what he learned from that experience.

With a chuckle, he said, “As men, we share a single purpose: to find that one special female who will kill us just slowly enough that by the time we reach 80, we’re already dead.”

He went on: “Women have lists, and those lists are endless; therefore, the things on those lists are never completed. And guess what? A man is in a constant state of condemnation because he hasn’t done everything on the list. Such a thing earns him the distinction of being a failure in a woman’s eyes. He will never get it right, he’ll always be perceived as a failure.”

No surprise, Gordon is savoring living alone.

He told me, “It’s nice not to have that constant sizzle in the background of the other person wanting something from you, and their intangible disapproval over what you’re doing or not doing.”

Gordon offered some advice for women: “If you want your man to remain a hero, then you must keep treating him like one. But typically this is how it goes: When you first meet a man, he’s confident in himself, but the more he’s with you, the more your opinion of him actually matters in terms of his self-worth. So, over time, you lose respect for him because he allows you to ‘run’ him, and he stops being your hero.”

Gordon’s on to something. As a counselor, I have encountered numerous women who lament over the spinelessness of their men. And, unfortunately, many fail to see their role in the weakening process.

As for Gordon’s advice to men, he said: “Giving in to the casual whims of women has a short-term gain but a long-term loss, so stop doing it! Yes, you should treat your mate with respect, but the day you allow her to treat you badly is the first day of the last days of your relationship.”

Embarking on his path of independence, which includes meeting other women, Gordon won’t be wearing his puppet uniform. He disposed of it. When encountering anything that smells like control, he stifles it by saying, “I think you’re being a backseat driver. No, thank you.”

Gordon’s ripe for discovering that there are exceptions to his past relationship, including one that embodies mutual respect.

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