

MARINE SÉLÉNÉE

Connected
Fates,
Separate
Destinies



**USING FAMILY CONSTELLATIONS THERAPY TO
RECOVER FROM INHERITED STORIES AND TRAUMA**

Foreword by Ruby Warrington, author of *Sober Curious*

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CHAPTER 5

Yes, Yes, Yes

Daddy Issues

We all want to love and be loved. At every turn our culture bombards us in song and story with the message that romantic love is the zenith of fulfillment. And yet, despite our desire and despite our efforts, very few of us seem readily able to enter into or sustain healthy relationships. Six out of every ten people I work with come to me looking to transform their love lives. Either they're struggling in a relationship or struggling to find a relationship, and they're ready for radical change. Most of these people begin either by enumerating everything that's wrong with their partner or reciting a litany of things that are wrong with themselves. A few reference, half-ironically, that old pop-psychology favorite: *daddy issues*. But with almost all of my clients, the problem doesn't actually lie with their partner, with them, or even with the relationship itself—but in unresolved family system issues and the unconscious loyalties, entanglements, and dynamics they produce. Love and relationships are always the natural extension of the dynamics in our family system, and of our inner child's continued quest to demonstrate their loyalty and secure their belonging.

If you took a quick look at my life, there'd be no question about it, right? *Daddy issues*. And like most of my clients, I used to accept the "truth" of it as obvious. But Family Constellations shows us

that the truth is often anything but obvious. Like so many of my own clients, I thought the problem with my love life was a simple matter of repetition: I was choosing painful relationships with men because of the hurt I'd experienced with my dad. What I would come to discover instead was the blind love of my inner child, carefully demonstrating her loyalty and securing her belonging.

The strangest day of my life was an otherwise ordinary Sunday in January 2008. It was a chilly but bright Parisian winter day, made colder by dampness and the slush melting on the sidewalks. My brother was home for the weekend from boarding school in Brittany. And the four of us, my mom, my dad, me, my brother, were sitting down for lunch, a ritual we had shared countless times over 20 years. But this would be the last meal we would share as a family for more than a decade.

Over the previous weeks, my mom and I had packed box after box in preparation for our move to the new apartment we'd be sharing. As we'd wrapped our dishes in newspaper and folded our linens, as we'd layered photo albums and books neatly in stacks, as we'd sorted through the accumulated memorabilia of a lifetime, culling the keepers from the giveaway pile, we'd never even mentioned what was happening. After 28 years of marriage, my parents were divorcing.

It had been a year since it became clear that *something* was amiss between my parents—my mom had been increasingly absent, traveling for work incessantly (from my perspective, her coping mechanism for managing pain and worry), and my relationship with my father, never the easiest since I'd become a teenager, grew even stonier and more silent as we moved around each other in our house, avoiding contact. Still, they never told us directly what was happening; my brother and I were left to piece things together from context clues. My parents had always kept any difficulties in their marriage private: They never fought in front of us and they always presented a united front, something I had always been grateful for. But now . . . it was a bit like I was going crazy. Nothing was normal, nothing would ever be normal again, yet we were all pretending as if it were. *Nothing to see here.*

It took only a moment for that illusion to finally become completely unsustainable, though. I remember looking up at the kitchen clock, wondering how much more time we had before my brother needed to leave to catch his train, when my father began to speak. His tone was formal bordering on indifferent. "Listen, I have no animosity toward you," he said. He was speaking *to me and my brother*. "But if your mom leaves, we won't be a family anymore. It's either the four of us, or it's over."

I don't remember the rest of the afternoon. I know my brother tried to speak with him, to reason with him, to insist that *just because you and Mom are divorcing doesn't mean we need to stop seeing each other*. That went nowhere, the only evidence of the conversation the damaged mailbox that had absorbed my brother's fury on his way out of our home. The next morning, my father got up very early and left for work before my mother and I were awake so he would not have to see us leaving the house. We did not say good-bye. That Sunday lunch was the last time I saw my father for the remainder of my twenties.

For seven years, my father refused to speak to or have any contact with us. My brother saw him once in that time, when my father entered the salon where he was having his hair cut—my father, spotting him, just turned and left, refusing to acknowledge him. The only exception to this came a few years into his silence, after I'd had a dream that my paternal grandmother had died. With no small amount of hesitation, I e-mailed my dad, asking after my grandmother. I ended the note, "I hope you are well." My father's scathing reply went something like, "Your grandmother is alive. As for me, how could I be well? Your mother left me. I am alone." *You are alone?! I couldn't believe he saw himself as the victim or expected me to be sorry for him. You are alone?! You cut your own children out of your life.*

By August 2008, just eight months after my dad stopped speaking to me, I was married to a man I'd known only two months. The relationship, initially intoxicating, rapidly turned toxic—controlling and abusive. Within a year we were separated and then divorced, though we dallied with each other, painfully,

for several years after that. In 2014, I married a second time and again, it didn't work out. Two failed marriages under my belt by 30. And with every relationship between and since, I have found a way, consciously or unconsciously, to sabotage my chance at happiness, despite how much I want love.

As an adult, whatever is left unresolved in your family system you will re-create in a romantic relationship. Fear of intimacy, fear of commitment, putting up walls, neediness, lack of trust, jealousy, infidelity, loss, self-sabotage—whatever you were unable to heal in your family dynamics, whatever you could not make sense of, whatever you could not solve, there is a 90 percent chance you will “ask” your partner to take care of it for you. I don't mean you will explicitly request something of your partner, but that through the dynamic with your partner you will seek to subconsciously heal old wounds. Your partner will be your next target. The uncomfortable truth is that there is no coincidence in love; you don't choose your partner randomly.

Yes, conventional wisdom has it that we choose partners who remind us of our parents (applied to hetero folks, typically your opposite-sex parent). But this isn't what I'm getting at here. Like most conventional wisdom, it's a little bit right but mostly a lot wrong. Most of my clients, most of us, do not choose partners who *overtly* remind us of our mother or father (in fact, I think for most of us, there'd be a big *ick* factor in doing so). And most of us don't overtly seek to replay history. We don't think, *Oh, my grandmother was widowed before she was 50 and so was my mom, so let me find a partner who will die young*. When we use relationships to resolve family system issues, it's less about the type of person our parents were and more about the dynamics between us or the larger dynamics in the system—and how they shape our current relationships.

One of my clients, Lila, had a husband and a father who could not be more different: Her father was introverted, liked to work with his hands, held a series of odd jobs rather than pursue a career, and when angry, withheld affection, subjecting his daughter to the silent treatment; her husband was charismatic and

extroverted, a poet, and a tenured professor at a prestigious university who was a champion yeller and hurler of insults when they disagreed. When we started working together, she had become deeply unhappy with the way her life felt limited by what she perceived as her husband's overwhelming negativity; it seemed like everything in their life was oriented around something her husband had said no to, as she put it: He didn't want children; he didn't like pets; he was a vegetarian and expected her not to eat meat at home; he didn't like "clutter" and hated to see any of her craft projects out (she was an accomplished knitter and quilter); he didn't want her to have houseplants because he considered them messy. The list went on, from the petty and mundane to the life-altering.

Lila described a tense childhood with her father, who angered easily (though quietly) and took any request—for his time, for his attention, for a trip to a park, for a toy or a treat—as a personal affront. "I knew just asking him for something would annoy him," she told me. "If we went somewhere like the park and an ice cream truck pulled up, I wouldn't even bother asking him if we could get something. I knew asking him would annoy him and his answer would be no anyway." As she spoke the last sentence, she faltered. It was the first time she had ever articulated out loud the central theme of her dynamic with her dad: *no*. For the 14 years she had known her husband, she had always remarked how different he was from her father—but all along, she had been reenacting the same dynamic, one in which she subsumed and denied her needs to keep the peace.

Why she was repeating this dynamic is of course the heart of the matter: When it comes to unresolved family system issues and our relationships, it's so often a matter of our inner child still trying to prove their loyalty and earn their belonging. In Lila's case, she never felt heard by her father; he wasn't available to her or to meet her needs. When children don't feel heard, they don't feel they belong. They feel rejected. In continuing this dynamic with her husband, Lila's inner child was still trying to demonstrate to her father that she was a good girl who did, indeed, belong. That was how she knew to demonstrate love and loyalty: acquiescing,

even when—especially when—it meant sacrificing her own hopes and dreams.

In the years of silence that elapsed between my dad and me, I would get occasional reports on him from family friends and acquaintances. One of my best friends still lived in the Parisian suburb where I'd grown up, and where my dad was still residing, in what had been our family home. Every time we spoke, she would update me on the seeming absence of life at the house. "Marine," she would tell me, "the shutters are always drawn. It looks like no one lives there." "Marine, the house looks abandoned." When my dad and I saw each other again for the first time in 2015, I was surprised by how different he seemed—it was like the spark had gone out of him. I thought about the lifeless house he had been haunting for the better part of the last decade, how he was moving like a ghost through his own life. Even now, though he has reconnected with my brother and me, an act of love and thus of life, I believe the divorce remains heartbreaking for him.

And all along, I have been loyal to him, deeply so, despite—or because of—his abandonment. When my dad left, when he essentially disowned me, a fundamental part of my identity was severed: my identity as my father's daughter. I lost my sense of self and have been trying to recover it ever since. When my dad left, when he rejected his place in my family system, he created a tear in its fabric that I've been trying to repair ever since. Not through "replacing" his love via my ill-fated marriages, but through loyalty to his own heartbreak. For the last 12 years, I've worked, without realizing it, to prove to my father that I do belong to him. If his heart was broken, so will be mine.

We always remain loyal to our families, especially to our parents. The fierce, blind love of our inner child burns in each of us, regardless of whether we consciously sense it, whether we are aware of it, whether we repudiate our family or embrace it. We will do what we must to right the wrongs of our family system, even as we get it wrong, even as we harm ourselves. We will do what it takes to restore belonging, our own or others'. Of course, the unresolved issues each of us carries from our family systems are

too particular, too individual, too diverse and plentiful to even try to list them comprehensively—but that’s not my goal. Rather than attempt to iterate all the ways that our parents could have fucked up, or all the ways that a family system can go haywire, I want you to remember the primary duty of a parent (beyond passing on the gift of life): guaranteeing a child’s belonging through making sure that they are **seen**, that they are **heard**, that they are **recognized**.

The adult dynamics that undermine connection or prevent us from entering into relationships—fear of intimacy, fear of commitment, putting up walls, neediness, lack of trust, jealousy, infidelity, loss, refusal to grow up, etc.—are almost always an expression of a failure to be seen, heard, or recognized by a parent in childhood: violations of precedence and priority, taking the place of a parent’s partner, taking care of our parent’s feelings, merging with a parent, rejecting a parent, experiencing a break in a bond, being subject to abuse, etc. It’s no surprise to me that most of my clients who come in to work on romantic relationship issues describe their problems *with their partners* in just those terms. I hear more times than I can count: “I don’t feel seen,” “My partner doesn’t listen to me,” “I feel rejected.”

I had a client who became her parents’ go-between after their divorce. They could not speak with each other or be civil toward each other. Suddenly, at age five, my client had to become the grown-up in the relationship, acting as a bridge between her parents. She wasn’t *seen* for who she was—a child, their child. Now, in her adult relationship, she wants to be the child, expecting her husband to baby her and take on the majority of the emotional labor between them.

Another client who was perpetually single and unhappy about it described growing up being the caretaker for her father, who had multiple sclerosis. My client was single because, in a sense, she was already in a relationship. She wasn’t available—she was her dad’s partner; her inner child felt guilty betraying him by moving on with her own life.

With the oldest children in large families, there is often a dynamic in which that child becomes a substitute parent for their

younger siblings, charged with endless diaper changing, feeding, babysitting. With their partner, they may feel a sense of “Don’t you dare ask me to do anything that I don’t want to.” The subtext is “Because I was responsible at a very young age, I refuse to be even more responsible now.” They may refuse to take on any mutual responsibility with their partner—paying bills, arranging for home repairs, doing the grocery shopping, cooking, laundry, etc.—causing great strain between them.

As adults, children who have had to stop school or couldn’t go to school in order to work to help support their families often transfer their resentment to their partners, often in the form of cheating or financial infidelity. There is a feeling of “I didn’t get to have the life of my choosing, so I’m entitled to do what I want now.”

An unresolved dynamic with a parent may condition how you *respond* to your partner. Let’s say you didn’t feel heard by your father growing up. And one evening, your partner isn’t paying attention to what you’re saying. They’re tired; they’ve had a long day at work. But to you, this may feel at a subconscious level like the rejection you experienced as a child. You explode at your partner as a result: “You never listen to me!” To your partner, this outburst will probably seem bizarre and disproportionate to the situation at hand, possibly hurtful or even exhausting if this is a fight you’ve had before. In this scenario, you’re not even upset with your partner, really. It’s the little girl or little boy inside of you lashing out, transferring to your partner the hurt and anger he or she feels toward your father. You’re transferring the responsibility of the past onto the present, demanding that your partner compensate for your parent or that they stand in for the parent who let you down.

My client Anne’s husband, René, was the youngest of three boys. While he was growing up, his parents always “joked” that they’d been trying for a girl. They’d even had a girl’s name picked out. Can you guess what it was? Yes, my friends, it was Renée. Sure, it’s a unisex name in France but for the spelling, but still, they named him the same thing they had planned on naming their

hoped-for daughter. In a sense, he didn't even get his own name. René grew up feeling that his parents, no matter what they said, really were disappointed that he—and not the little girl they'd been dreaming of—had been born. That he was not enough for them.

René's first great love had broken his heart by telling him she realized she'd never been in love with him. When I met Anne, she was in a bad place in their marriage. She had had an abortion, against René's will and without telling him. They had a son already and following the son, they'd had a miscarriage. After discussing trying again, they decided together they were "one and done." When Anne unexpectedly became pregnant, she told René she did not want another child. They fought bitterly about it, until Anne took the matter into her own hands.

So again, René felt rejected by someone who was supposed to love him. He literally told Anne, "It's like by refusing my sperm you're rejecting me, the person I am."

Since the abortion, René had become hypercritical of Anne's parenting. She also felt that he was alienating her from their son. Every time she wanted to have quality time with their son, René interrupted the moment. "You should do this. You should do that. Oh, you're playing guitar together? Let me show you how. I'll take him to his music lesson." Slowly but surely, he was pushing Anne away, ensuring their son would be madly in love with Daddy. *Daddy knows everything*. And the son can't reject him, won't reject him, of course.

Anne and I discussed how there was a dual dynamic happening: René was, on the one hand, trying to repair his childhood injury through his own child. And on the other hand, he was reliving his childhood dynamic through his wife: doing everything possible so that his partner would reject him, confirming that he was unlovable, confirming that his parents were right.

Of course, unresolved family system issues are not only limited to dynamics with our parents. Entanglements and patterns that repeat over generations in our families can also play out in our relationships. One of my clients had been with his girlfriend for 10 years. He loved her deeply and couldn't imagine spending

his life with anyone else. He was ready to buy a home with her and start trying for a family. But despite that, he wasn't "ready" to get married. This had become such a point of contention between them that his girlfriend was seriously ready to leave him. My client was not opposed to marriage in theory; he didn't subscribe to the "It's just a piece of paper" cliché and he clearly wasn't afraid of being "tied down." But every time he thought of proposing, he experienced overwhelming anxiety. As it turned out, in the three prior generations in his family, every first marriage had ended in divorce, followed by a happy second or even third marriage. A constellation revealed his real fear: that by marrying his girlfriend (a marriage that would be his first), he would somehow ruin their relationship and it would inevitably fail. He was so resistant to marriage because he was actually afraid of losing her, not of committing to her.

Another client was at an impasse with her partner regarding having children. She was 35 and her partner, whom she had been with for seven years, was concerned about their remaining window for pregnancy. Though she and her partner were professionally and financially secure enough to raise kids without undue struggle, she felt certain that once they had children, "something" would happen and they wouldn't be able to take care of them. She also worried that her *partner* would regret it and leave her, despite the fact that it was her partner who was pushing for a child. My client came from a line of single mothers: my client's mother had been a teenager when my client was born; my client's grandfather had left her grandmother for another woman shortly after the birth of their daughter (my client's mother); my client's great-grandmother had been widowed with three kids in her twenties. Despite the fact that my client was in her late thirties and was in a happy and solid partnership with the means to care for children, she was entangled in the fates of the women who had come before her.

When we think about our own relationships and how they might be informed or even shaped by past dynamics that long predate them, we can always start by asking: *Do I feel seen? Do I feel*

heard? Do I feel recognized? If the answer to any of these questions is no, take the time to really explore why. Give yourself the space to write out your thoughts. Once you've done that, ask yourself if that was the case in your childhood, even if for different reasons. In other words, if you don't feel recognized by your partner (valued for who you are, right now, exactly as you are), ask yourself if you felt recognized in your childhood. Maybe your partner expresses no interest in your work, which feels central to your identity. Perhaps in childhood or adolescence, your parents rejected your gender expression or enforced certain gender roles that felt unnatural to you. Though the two experiences differ in detail, they are both emblematic of a failure to be recognized.

You can also reverse engineer the above by asking yourself, *What are my complaints about my partner? About my relationship?* The answers to these questions can often give us insight into unresolved family dynamics. If your greatest complaint about your partner is that they're emotionally unavailable, for example, you don't feel heard. What does feeling heard look like to you? Given that, did you feel heard in childhood? Think about how you described your parents earlier. Again, the language you use can offer clues to your issues with them. Do you describe your mother as distant? Critical? Depressed after her divorce? Now, does the way you described your relationship or your partner reflect at all how you described your parents and your relationship with them? What are your biggest fears in your relationship? How do they reflect your dynamics with your parents?

Embarking on the path toward illuminating the connections between your family system dynamics and your relationship can be surprisingly healing. When we return an element of control to our actions and behavior and stop acting at the whims and mercy of a disordered family system, we begin the process of positive change. We can see what we're dealing with and make informed choices that are aligned with the highest good of our relationship, rather than in service to our family system. We empower ourselves to reject narratives we didn't author and to write stories that better reflect reality—to say yes to our relationships.

AFFIRMATIONS

My relationship with my partner is not a vehicle to heal my relationship with my parents.

My loyalty is to the present, not the past.

I say yes to a relationship that faces forward, not backward.

EXERCISE:

A Relationship Inventory—Taking Stock of Relational Dynamics

In this exercise, we dive more deeply and more explicitly into taking stock of how our relationships might be informed or even shaped by past dynamics. You'll want to write your answers down. Let yourself go as in-depth or get as detailed as you'd like. I find sometimes that once you start writing, it can be surprising how much you suddenly have to say.

Start with your current relationship. If you are single, skip the first set of questions. For the second set of questions, which regard past relationships, complete a set for every relationship you feel has been significant to you, regardless of duration. Only you know which relationships have truly been impactful—even a month-long fling can potentially teach us a lot about who we are and what we want.

Current relationship:

- When you started this relationship, what were your expectations of it?
- When you started this relationship, what were your expectations of your partner?
- Do you feel seen by your partner? If not, why?

- Do you feel heard by your partner? If not, why?
- Do you feel recognized by your partner? If not, why?
- What do you feel is most difficult in this relationship? In other words, what are the greatest sources of conflict that arise between the two of you?
- What do you feel is most lacking? In other words, what do you feel is missing between the two of you?
- Do you repeatedly blame your partner for certain issues? If yes, what are they?
- Do you repeatedly criticize your partner for certain behaviors, actions, or traits? If yes, what are they?
- Finally, be completely honest and try your best to set aside any defensiveness you may feel: What would your partner say is most lacking in this relationship?

Prior relationships:

- When you started the relationship, what were your expectations of it?
- When you started the relationship, what were your expectations of your partner?
- Did you feel seen by your partner? If not, why?
- Did you feel heard by your partner? If not, why?
- Did you feel recognized by your partner? If not, why?
- What was most difficult in the relationship? In other words, what were the greatest sources of conflict that arose between the two of you?
- What did you feel was most lacking? In other words, what did you feel was missing between the two of you?
- Did you repeatedly blame your partner for certain issues? If yes, what were they?

- Did you repeatedly criticize your partner for certain behaviors, actions, or traits? If yes, what were they?
- Did you end the relationship? If so, what was your reason for doing so?
- Did your partner end the relationship? If so, what was his or her reason for doing so?

Now that you've answered these questions for all the relationships you've deemed important to your personal history, take the time to compare your answers for each relationship. Do any patterns emerge? When and how did you answer similarly? Make a list of all of your overlapping answers (e.g., "Didn't feel seen—John, Alex, and Mark").

Next, we'll look at the dynamics with your parent or parents. Complete the set for each parent separately. I use "mother/father" here, but if you grew up with same-sex parents, of course please answer a set of questions for each. If you had a relationship with only one parent, answer only regarding that parent. If you grew up with parent figures or legal guardians (such as grandparents), answer in relation to them. Several of the questions speak to both the past and the present. When it comes to our parents, old habits can be hard to break.

Relationship with parent:

- Growing up, did you feel seen by your mother/father?
If not, why?
- Growing up, did you feel heard by your mother/father? If not, why?
- Growing up, did you feel recognized by your mother/father? If not, why?
- What is and/or was most difficult in the relationship?
In other words, what were the greatest sources of conflict that arose between the two of you?

- What is and/or was most lacking? In other words, what did you feel was missing between the two of you?
- Did/do you repeatedly blame your mother/father for certain issues? If yes, what were/are they?
- Did/do you repeatedly criticize your mother/father for certain behaviors, actions, or traits? If yes, what were/are they?

Do you see any of the patterns that emerged across relationships in your answers about your parents? Which ones? Write them down. Is there any overlap between individual answers about a partner and answers about your parents? Which ones? Write them down.

Now that you've mapped the potential overlap of patterns in your adult relationships with your parental dynamics, ask yourself for each overlap: *Is this really about my partner, or am I projecting on them past issues with my parents that have remained unresolved?* If the issues with your partner are real, ask yourself, *Am I choosing this partner in order to heal my past?* As tough as this is, ask yourself, *Does this relationship really serve my highest good?* Ask yourself, *If I set aside my attempt to heal my past through this relationship, is what is left enough for me to commit to?* *Is there the possibility for enlightened love between my partner and me?*

Staying in a relationship or deciding to end it is an extremely personal choice. But making either decision from a place of enlightened love, and then doing the work to follow through from that place, isn't possible without starting with self-awareness. No matter what, saying yes to relationships begins, as ever, with a fearless recognition of reality as it is, not as we wish it to be.



Say Yes

The foundation of a good relationship requires more than just awareness and resolution of unresolved family system issues, though. Yes, doing so enables us to show up for our relationships right here, right now, without subjecting them to the burdens of the past. But once we're here, unburdened, what do we do? We say yes.

Saying yes is hard. Saying yes is consenting to reality. Saying yes means engaging in enlightened love. Saying yes does not mean approval or endorsement—but it can feel that way, causing us to resist. When we say yes, we are saying, "Yes, this is real life. I can control myself, but I cannot control another person."

A good relationship requires that we say yes three times. First, you must say yes to your partner exactly as he or she is, without wanting to change them. This means saying, with 100 percent authenticity, "I say yes to you." It means saying yes to your partner's past: their past partners, their experience of their sexuality, their mistakes, their history. Our partners are not projects; they are not fixer-uppers. We can hope they will change and grow as they experience life, just as we would hope for ourselves, but that is different than hoping they will change in a specific way that you find more pleasing, more palatable, or better suited to your vision of your future. If your partner has spent their twenties rootless, tells you they love to travel and that they do not foresee ever wanting children, you cannot decide that you will change their mind and they'll settle down after marriage. If your partner has never left their hometown and tells you they want to stay close to their family, you cannot decide that you will persuade them to move across the country to the city you prefer. If your partner is unambitious, too ambitious, a workaholic, emotionally avoidant, needy, allergic to cats, messy, a clean freak, whatever—this is who they are. They may choose to go to therapy or alter their lifestyle or have an epiphany, but this is not something you get to initiate, control, or count on.

Second, you must say yes to your partner's family, exactly as it is. This one is tricky. It's obviously a problem when your partner

is close with their family but you don't like them. How many times have I heard, "Marine, I love my husband, but I hate his family" (there is usually a difficult mother-in-law relationship lurking in there). This is impossible. Your partner is a product of their family system. When you reject the family, you reject your partner. Your partner likely still shares, to some degree, the values and beliefs of their family of origin. If your partner rejects their family, however, this does not mean *you* should reject their family (again, in doing so, you reject your partner). This is where it gets especially tricky, because it is also never your place to try to force your partner to reconcile with their family. This one can be hard for those of us who are close to our families. We think, *But they would be happier if they were at peace with their father, or How could someone really not want a close bond with their mother?* We see ourselves as the hero who will fix their story and restore order to their system. But that is not our role. Saying yes to your partner's family exactly as it is means saying yes to your partner's relationship to his or her family.

Third, and finally, you must say yes to your own destiny and to the destiny of your partner. This is easier to do when you have said yes with clear eyes to your partner as they are and to your partner's family as it is. When you have done so, you are grounded in reality. Your vision is unclouded and the path ahead becomes sharper. And sometimes, as painful as it may be, saying yes to your destiny and to your partner's destiny means acknowledging that your paths are diverging. Your destinies are moving away from each other.

I see so many of my clients in pain because they are holding on to a relationship that no longer serves them or their partner. The reasons for doing so are, as ever, deeply individual, but also universal: fear of being alone, the sunk cost fallacy, shared children, inability to withstand conflict, and so on. But when we stay in a relationship that no longer serves our destinies, we stop having agency in our own lives. We perpetuate dysfunctional dynamics and set ourselves up for failure. Sometimes, nurturing a "good" relationship means knowing when to end it, and how: with respect and love.

Remember, I did say that saying yes is hard. Ending a relationship, even a very bad one, with respect and love is a way of saying yes. It does not mean agreeing to the ways in which the relationship was painful or how your partner may have hurt you (or how you may have hurt them). Respect means *respecting your shared story*. It means taking responsibility for your part in your relationship and acknowledging that through that relationship you have arrived where you are now—acknowledging all you have learned, all that you take away from the relationship. When we end a relationship with respect, we accept reality, and we accept what is beyond our power to control: other people.

Love means *enlightened love*. Remember, when love is enlightened, we see people for who they are, without judgment; we are able to acknowledge not only their flaws but also what they have given us. When we end a relationship with love, we don't engage in berating our former partners (or ourselves) or living in our anger perpetually.

The more we reject our former partners, the more we reject ourselves. We reject that earlier version of ourselves, who sought out that love for whatever reason. We reject our vulnerability; we reject our mistakes; we reject our own history and what it has to offer us. It isn't unlike your dynamic with your parents: The more you can accept and respect your parents, the better able you are to accept and respect yourself. With relationships, the more you can respect your past—the more you respect priority, what came first—not only will you be better grounded in the present moment, but you will be better able to choose a partner who respects and accepts you, and better able to accept and respect your next partner.

I have had clients who feel that they treated their former partner with respect and love in ending a relationship, but who still nurse deep-seated anger toward them. Look, this just isn't possible—you can't have ended things with respect and love but still feel red-hot rage about it. You might have gone through the motions of respect and love; your outward behavior may have been spotless. But when we are still deeply angry with a former

partner, we are still de facto entangled in that relationship, which means it did not end properly. And when we are still entangled in a previous relationship, there is no way to be truly, 100 percent available to our current partner or open to a next partner. On the other side of the spectrum, I also have clients who claim to feel nothing toward their former partners. This is also bullshit, sorry. We are made of feelings. When we “feel nothing,” we are engaging in a coping mechanism to protect ourselves from pain. When you end a relationship with respect and love, you don’t feel nothing—you feel at peace. At peace with what was, at peace with your choices, at peace with your partner.

Here’s the thing: A relationship might technically end after a breakup, but it may live on within us for quite some time. After all, a relationship is separate from the people who entered it. The relationship is what you created between you. It doesn’t just disappear when a person exits your life or take on a new role in your life (as with a co-parent). Ultimately, ending a relationship with respect and love is about ending it *within yourself*. Yes, you should do your best to end things with love and respect in the moment, but none of us can fast-forward our way to peace. You make room for it by allowing yourself to mourn, by accepting what is, and by extending that enlightened love first toward yourself. And remember, your ability to choose respect and love isn’t contingent upon your ex-partner’s behavior. Many of us have experienced ex-partners who are neither respectful nor loving, who seem to live to make us miserable after we part ways. When that is the case: boundaries, boundaries, boundaries, boundaries. No one else gets to control how you feel.

I see both situations—unresolved anger or an absence of emotion—primarily after relationships that were particularly painful, such as when cheating was involved, or that were, horribly, emotionally or physically abusive. I will never pretend that coming away from a relationship like this with love and respect is easy. It may take a long time to get there. That’s okay. I’ve been there. And it’s understandable to say, “Why should I want to?” In

the next chapter, we'll dig deep about consenting to reality—saying yes—after trauma.

For now, this is what I want you to hold on to: When you end a relationship with love and respect, as we discussed it, you are saying yes to your destiny—you are choosing yourself. The problem in so many relationships is that we choose our partners instead; we put them first. This is disorder, quite literally. You come first in your own system. Make yourself happy first, and then you can share that happiness with a partner. Instead, what happens 90 percent of the time is something much more transactional—we put our partners first, with the hope that in making them happy, they will make us happy. *I will see you, so you will see me. I'm going to love you, so you will love me.* This is not love. This is co-dependency.

You have to feel secure in your love for yourself first. You have to feel safe with yourself before you ask a partner to make you feel safe. The problem is, when we shift that responsibility to our partner, we alienate ourselves from knowing and understanding our own boundaries. Not to mention we are bound to be disappointed. Our ways of feeling safe and secure in a relationship are likely to be different from our partner's, as we grew up in different homes with different expressions of love. Their way of expressing love may feel foreign to us and thus unsatisfying; the goal is to arrive at a mutual understanding of what the other needs and meet them there. When only one particular expression of love is acceptable, when we demand adherence to our norm rather than open ourselves to what is, the relationship becomes fragile. Our wounded inner child, who wasn't fulfilled by the love their parent had to offer (but which was the only right love for them, as it was the only love there was), has taken the wheel. This is where accepting our parents and saying yes to what is comes back into play: When we have done so, when we work to heal the wounds our inner child has sustained, we learn how to be safe with ourselves. We learn how to create healthy boundaries. We love ourselves first. We choose ourselves first.

If you don't feel safe and secure with yourself, you may disregard the early signs of an abusive relationship. These often reveal

themselves quickly, though in small ways at first, which can be easy to miss or acquiesce to. Your partner might insult you: “Wow, you didn’t know X? How stupid.” How you react hinges on that sense of self. A person who feels secure and safe with themselves might respond, “Listen, maybe you think it was stupid, but I would ask you to respect me,” because they have that self-confidence to know that *No, I am not stupid, I just did not understand something*. This is self-love. They are saying to themselves and to their partner, *Hold on a minute here! That’s my life. I respect my life. And that’s exactly what I ask of you in return: to respect my life*. When we answer instead, “Oh my god, I am so stupid; I’m sorry,” we are not choosing ourselves; we are choosing our partner and our partner’s “safety” first.

My first husband completely swept me off my feet when I was young, dumb, and vulnerable. Our two-month courtship was a blur of intense sex, declarations of undying passion, and the feeling that someone was madly in love with me, quite literally—there was a madness, an insanity, an unbalanced, unstable nature to my husband’s “love,” which was more like an obsession. Within months of our impulsive Las Vegas wedding, his controlling, domineering, and jealous behaviors had blossomed into full-fledged violence. Though all the signs were right there at the beginning—red flag after red flag—I was blinded by my much greater need to feel seen and desired, which the relationship provided to a degree I had never experienced before. My self-worth had been utterly crushed under the bootheel of my father’s rejection earlier that year. And, to be honest, my father had always been distant, an enigma even as I had lived side by side with him for the previous 22 years. When it came to my new husband, at first I didn’t even question his love. I didn’t think his behaviors were weird or that I was in danger. I constantly chose him first, so that he would choose me. I wasn’t safe or secure with myself.

My husband had his own unresolved issues to contend with, I understand now. He was the middle child of three sons, and his younger brother—whom he loved fiercely—was severely disabled and died at the age of 12. Despite how much he loved his brother,

he was also jealous and resentful of him while growing up. He was incredibly angry with his mother, who'd had to devote a large part of her life to caring for his little brother and was then undone by grief when he died. He once told me a story about how he'd had to be hospitalized after an accident in his childhood. While he was sleeping, his mother had to leave the hospital briefly to go back home and care for his little brother. She slipped off the bracelet she always wore and left it, with a note telling him she loved him and she would be back soon, on his bed, so he would see it first thing when he woke up. When he told me this story, I felt so sad for his mother. I thought about how difficult it must have been to leave her son in the hospital, how torn she must have felt, how guilty. But my husband saw it as an unforgivable betrayal, even all those years later. "Who leaves their child alone in a hospital?" he said. "What kind of mother was she?"

Deep down, my husband believed all women would betray him, would leave him, like his mother had. He was a jealous person who wanted to be left so that he could prove he was right in his rejection of his mother—and by extension, all women. A few years after we divorced, he attempted to apologize. "I can see now that you were everything that I was looking for, but I was afraid," he said. "You were not afraid," I answered. "Your little boy was afraid—but the situation was between you and your mother and not between you and me."

I tell you all of this not to excuse my husband—there is no excuse and never will be for what he did—or to imply that you should feel sorry for him. I don't. He is an adult and responsible for his actions. But developing an understanding of what drove us both has helped me to say yes to that relationship. It has removed the shame I felt for staying with him. It has helped me let go of anger, to finally, finally end the relationship with love and respect. Respect for my story and enlightened love for what I took from it. We were two broken people whose unresolved family system issues complemented each other perfectly, perpetuating a cycle of loneliness and rage. Saying yes has helped me to choose myself first going forward, and to feel safe and secure with myself.

Even if you've never been in an abusive relationship, almost all of us have been in relationships that have had issues, from minor to serious. All relationships have issues at times. But regardless of the quality of the relationship, or the nature of our partner, there is a constant: We must say yes to it. At its most basic, this means simply accepting that you did, in fact, choose to enter into the relationship—it didn't just happen to you. We are always responsible for our participation in the relationship. In a relatively "healthy" relationship, this means accepting that you played or play some part in its dysfunctional elements or friction points. In a damaging or toxic relationship, this means acknowledging how the relationship served you initially, even if that is difficult to confront. Doing so does not mean that you deserved the treatment. Doing so does not mean that you approve of what happened to you. Doing so does not excuse the other person's behavior. It simply means that you are acknowledging the full picture so that you are better equipped to choose yourself in the future.

You are responsible for your life. You are not responsible for what happened to you in childhood. But in adulthood you do get to choose, to a large degree, what you want for yourself, including your relationships. You may have lacked self-awareness, you may have been entangled, you may have been unconsciously trying to heal old wounds, but your choices were still your own. However uncomfortable it makes you, it's a truth you must accept. When we avoid the truth of our responsibility for ourselves, we miss out on what our relationships have to teach us about ourselves: what we really need, what we will and won't accept. We miss out on better understanding our motivations—and avoiding self-sabotaging behaviors. You can't learn from your relationship when you insist that you played no part in it. After all, what is there to learn about yourself when you did nothing?

When we avoid the truth of our responsibility for ourselves, we aren't able to say yes to our destiny—to choose ourselves—because we haven't said yes to reality. The more practice we have at choosing ourselves, however, the more safe and secure we feel in ourselves, and the more likely we are to find and sustain the great love we deserve.

AFFIRMATIONS

I say yes to my partner exactly as he or she is.

I say yes to my partner's family exactly as they are.

I say yes to my destiny and to the destiny of
my partner, even if our paths diverge.

EXERCISE: Respecting Your Shared Story

I really hate the phrase “Everything happens for a reason.” Bad things happen all the time, without reason, and there is often nothing that can lessen the pain of the bad thing. That said, I do believe that every experience, no matter how painful, offers us the opportunity (at some point) to *learn*: learn about ourselves, about others, about what it means to be human. What we learn shapes us. Relationships are some of the richest sources for this kind of learning. That’s why I write that respecting the story of your relationship (a story you share with your relationship partner) means acknowledging that through that relationship you have arrived where you are now, acknowledging all you have learned, all that you take away from the relationship. But where do you start? That’s what this exercise is all about: giving you a focused, rather than comprehensive, way to think about what your relationships have to teach you about yourself. It’s meant to be a catalyst for a longer, ongoing conversation. I encourage you to approach the exercise from a broad perspective, thinking about the history of your relationships overall, rather than one relationship in particular. After all, how does the saying go? *Meet one asshole today and you’ve met an asshole. Meet three assholes today and you’re the asshole.* Patterns, patterns, patterns—it’s the Family Constellations way.

Remember the Relationship Inventory you just did? (Of course you do.) Grab it. Awesome. We are going to use the work you did there and turn it on yourself. As you work through this exercise,

take the time to write down your responses without belaboring them. Again, go into as much depth or detail as you'd like or need—you may be surprised at what comes to you once you start writing.

First, I want you to review your answers to the question “When you started the relationship, what were your expectations of it?” Do you see any repeating themes here? What are they? Our expectations for our relationship can reveal to us *what we believe relationships are for*, what purpose they serve: the *why* behind the expectation. Once we've uncovered those beliefs, we can assess whether or not they're actually in alignment with our values.

Look back at your answers to the question “What was most difficult in the relationship? In other words, what were the greatest sources of conflict that arose between the two of you?” Did you experience similar conflicts with more than one partner? What are they? The same conflict repeating with different partners can shine a light on our *own* weak spots, such as in our communication style or in our attachment style.

Next, look over your answers to the question “What did you feel was most lacking? In other words, what did you feel was missing between the two of you?” What we feel is missing in a relationship—physical intimacy, emotional intimacy, romance, etc.—can point us to how we experience love (what feels like love to us, rather than what we tell ourselves love is). If there is a repeating theme here, it can illuminate that we may be on a search for the kind of love we imagine is the real “only right love,” the love we feel our parents *should have* given us in childhood.

Practicing facing the less palatable parts of yourself without judgment is an act of bravery and an exercise in saying yes to yourself and your destiny. Taking an opportunity to learn is also taking an opportunity to grow. In acknowledging and accepting any schisms between our beliefs and our actions, we are empowered to close those gaps and be in integrity with ourselves.





About the Author



Marine Sélénée is a New York/Miami-based Family Constellations therapist, author, and speaker. She offers in-person and virtual private sessions and workshops. She also speaks on panel discussions and at conferences delivering motivational speeches. Her unique approach to Family Constellations helps people heal from family wounds and find individual blocks rooted in the family system. Her clients are able to get to the root of their pain, in order to heal not only themselves but also the generations before and after them. Her greatest passion is sharing the transformative power of Family Constellations.

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