Opinion: Of Dating and Diplomacy

Couch: A series about psychotherapy

By Daniel L. Shapiro

Not long ago, while I was boarding a plane to Europe, a close friend called to tell me she had just walked out on her life partner of more than 25 years. My heart dropped. I was headed to a secluded location to conduct a negotiation training for Israeli and Palestinian diplomats, and I didn’t have much time to talk.

My friend is the sort of person who always puts others before herself. Even when her partner would criticize and berate her, she would ritually forgive him. It was a painful cycle of abuse and victimization. Despite being highly intelligent, she seemed blind to the dynamic that was emotionally entrapping her.

Now, after decades of living like this, she had abruptly broken the pattern and walked out. I suppose I should have felt relief, but I was concerned. My work in conflict resolution has taught me that disputes are not so easily reconciled, and relationships are not so easily settled.

In the weeks that followed, my friend experienced profound grief and anxiety. She became consumed with whether to return to her partner, despite understanding the severity of the abuse she had suffered. Day and night she mulled over what to do, talked about it incessantly with loved ones and friends — myself included, even while I was in the midst of my workshop abroad.

Friends and family begged her not to go back. Though it was tempting to join this chorus, I refrained from offering advice, and focused instead on helping her recognize the nature of the emotional forces that seemed to be pulling her back.

My friend kept returning to the belief that it was time for her to go home — a dynamic that Freud called the repetition compulsion. This is our drive to cling to an identity with which we are familiar, even if it is dysfunctional and personally damaging. In ways big and small, we all experience this cycle in our own lives, repeating time and again the same damaging patterns of interaction with friends, loved ones and colleagues. Ethnopolitical groups fall victim to this dynamic, too, as they pray for reconciliation but find they cannot stop fighting.

The repetition compulsion is strikingly resistant to change. To try to escape it, we may read self-help books or enlist in a communications course, but these actions often have little long-term impact, for the compulsion lures us back to our place of comfort, to the dysfunctional relations we know so well.

The challenge of how to build a better life confronted my friend, as it did for the Israelis and Palestinians who attended my negotiation workshop. They, too, were haunted by well-earned fear and mistrust, borne of seemingly endless cycles of retributive cruelty. They were as disoriented by the prospects of peace as they were hopeful. And they felt a deep
temptation to give in to the tyranny of routine, even when they knew it would fuel further conflict.

In our workshop, the participants were prompted to examine their own tendencies to defend rather than listen, to confront rather than collaborate. I encouraged them to better understand what might be driving these behaviors, and a common theme emerged: They all longed to feel recognized for their emotional pain and for the legitimacy of their interests.

Several weeks after my return to the United States, I received an update from a few participants. One reported that during her participation in a politically sensitive discussion between Israelis and Palestinians, she had noticed her tendency to be confrontational, and had successfully resisted falling back into that pattern. Another wrote about his deliberate effort to reframe his approach to negotiation as a collaborative challenge rather than an adversarial battle. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict had not, of course, been resolved by these changes, but small steps forward had been taken.

A few days later, I received another call from my friend: She was going home to her partner. As much as I wanted to argue against her decision, I resisted the impulse. I objected to her decision but appreciated the fact that, for the first time, she was able to identify the powerful forces entrapping her, calling them out for what they were, even as she succumbed to them. It was a start.

As my friend learned, breaking free of the repetition compulsion is not an easy process. Even when warring groups move from conflict to peace, the repetition compulsion still lurks in the background. It took nearly a decade to implement the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, and Protestants and Catholics there continue to struggle to maintain peace to this day. My Israeli and Palestinian colleagues know that a technical agreement is but a piece of paper; real change will require emotional reconciliation.

My friend may someday leave her partnership for good, just as clashing ethnopolitical groups may someday substitute peace for violence. But it is hard work. To expect that leaving a relationship or signing a peace agreement will result in a new beginning is to underestimate the power of identity. Real change entails not just intellectual understanding of our patterns but also deep emotional acknowledgment of their allure. Only then can we begin to willfully resist their draw — and open the door to a new and healthier reality.

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