

The Journey from "I-TO-WE"

Introduction

*We come to love not by finding a perfect person,
but by learning to see an imperfect person perfectly.*

~ Sam Keen

Steve and Amy came to see me three months after Steve had ended their engagement. They had broken up three weeks before their scheduled wedding date. The couple sat on the couch in my office with sad blank expressions, which clearly showed me they were both still in pain. Also obvious from the way they held hands was their love.

Amy looked at me with dark circles under her eyes. She asked if I could help them understand why their relationship had been so painful and traumatic. She said they desperately wanted guidance. Could they find a way to heal and repair the damage? Would they be able to move forward? Could they possibly fulfill their hopes and dreams?

I replied that anything was possible if they were absolutely committed to one other. However, they had to be willing to do the hard work required. I explained that it would not happen overnight; they would need to be patient. If so, I would guide them in laying a new foundation to rebuild their shattered home. They both expressed total commitment and readiness to do whatever was necessary to establish a healthy and successful relationship.

I asked that they take turns providing an overview of how they began and how they found themselves in their current situation.

Amy went first. "A mutual friend told Steve about me," she said. "Our first planned encounter was at a coffeehouse near his office. In truth, we were not overly enamored with each other. No romantic sparks. I thought he was handsome but slightly arrogant. He talked way too much about himself. Then, when it came time to pay the bill, he said he forgot his wallet and asked me to pay. Even so, when Steve invited me to see a movie with him two weeks later, I accepted. Afterwards, we really enjoyed one another as friends. Gradually, after four months of developing a close friendship, the spark finally ignited. One delicious kiss turned our friendship into romance. It wasn't long before I began to think of Steve as my Mr. Right."

Steve's version of their initial meeting mirrored Amy's description. "I was not impressed with Amy the day we met. Although she was

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clearly beautiful, I didn't see her as my type. She seemed negative and sad."

Steve proceeded to talk about losing his job. "Amy and I had been dating about four months when I lost my dream job," he said. "It was a huge financial blow. I had a mortgage payment, my son's private school bill, a car loan, large credit card balances, and no savings. Every time I withdrew some of the cash I had received from a second mortgage on my home or took a cash advance on a credit card to pay the monthly bills, I sank one level deeper down a black hole. I actually had a recurring nightmare that I was being buried alive."

Hunkering down in an emotional bunker, Steve wanted to protect himself from further disappointment, guilt, shame, and pain. He lacked energy and enthusiasm. He felt the urge to hide from familiar people and places. At that point, Amy reported, the relationship ceased to be fun and exciting; the courtship period had come to an abrupt halt.

"We were seven months into our relationship when I told Amy that I was unsure about my feelings for her," Steve said. "Amy continuously pressured me. Despite what I said, Amy wanted to hear me say I was in love with her. When she asked, I managed to avoid the answer by playing dumb; I told Amy I did not know the difference between loving someone and being in love."

"I felt it would be best for both of us if we ended the relationship," Steve continued. "I thought we should start seeing other people. I knew Amy wanted to get married soon and have a child. How could I commit to getting married and having a baby when my life was such a mess emotionally and financially?"

"After Steve lost his job, his behavior changed," Amy interjected. "That left me with serious concerns and doubts about our compatibility. He rarely seemed interested in going out or socializing. On the nights when he had his son, he never called a babysitter—not even to take me out to dinner on Saturday night's.

"It wasn't long before I found myself in a pretty dark place," she said. "My social circles shrank because I was so focused on Steve. I spent night and day with him. Despite all of his challenges, I hoped to reassure him that we could still manage to build a wonderful life together. I still recall vividly Steve sitting on his back porch. With his head in his hands, he sat there chain-smoking and biting his nails. The look of deep distress on his face made me feel hopeless, too."

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Over the next two years, Steve and Amy experienced deep emotional pain in their highly volatile, chaotic relationship. They repeatedly broke up and came back together. Following each period of reconciliation, they would repeat the same dysfunctional patterns. The courtship period would come on strong and end swiftly. Steve would begin to seem ambivalent and withdraw emotionally, while Amy would react—both with words and actions—in anger and frustration.

"I kept waiting for him to grow up, to make a commitment," Amy said, "but Steve would reply that I should find a man who could fill all of my needs. He'd tell me to find someone who could take care of me and give me everything I wanted. But all I wanted was to marry Steve. I wanted us to have a family together, but he refused to make a solid commitment. He used to say his ship was sinking. He could barely support himself and his son, so marriage and children were not on his agenda anytime in the reasonable future."

"It's not like I refused to take no for an answer," she said. "Each time we broke up and I grew strong enough to date other men, he found his way back to me—and I to him. But it would not be long before Steve started again with his confusing mixed messages. One minute he was taking care of me and the next he was telling me to date others. For over two years, we spun in circles getting nowhere."

"After the first seven months, our relationship had enough drama and anger to last a lifetime," Steve said. "Besides dealing with my financial problems, I faced Amy's constant emotional, irrational behaviors. One minute she would demonstrate all the reasons we should be together and the next she would either be emotionally closed off or go crazy on me. Rarely would she be supportive or passionate. Riding that rollercoaster made me sick. Still, for whatever reason, I would be drawn to go back to her. Then, after what I called an 'event', I'd have no choice but to end the relationship."

"I tried so hard to stay calm and steady," Amy replied. "Inevitably, however, when we came to the topic of the future—with marriage and family—Steve would shift the focus to the two excuses he found for us *not* to move forward: my emotional reactivity and his financial difficulties. Clearly, Steve was not aligned with me. With Steve in my life; I was absolutely ready to marry. I believed we had a bright and lasting future ahead. I wanted to step out into the world together, have fun, and enjoy life. Unfortunately, the man I loved could not see his way past his problems and ours."

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"I should have left once and for all," she continued, "but I loved Steve. My loyalty was unshakeable. He took care of me, and we had a deep and powerful connection. It did not seem right to leave him in the middle of his personal struggle. I tried to stand by his side and support him. However, the relationship was scary for me. Steve had a way of twisting situations. He blamed his ambivalence about our future on my emotional outbursts. Even though he had major issues, I started to doubt myself. The unhappier I became with myself, it seems, the angrier I acted towards Steve."

"This is the way it always played out," Steve continued. "Not long after we would get back together, she would have an emotional meltdown. She'd then push me away before we had a chance to enjoy any real period of love and happiness." Clearly exasperated, Steve exclaimed, "Amy made it impossible for me to love her!"

This very dynamic—Amy's outbursts and Steve's withdrawal—described the couple's relationship dance. After a two-year period, Steve described a powerfully life-altering, spiritual awakening.

"One day, a close friend of mine was killed in a plane crash," Steve said. "He was to be married within two months to the love of his life. After I got off the phone with his finance, I was devastated and shaken. The news hit me hard. I was forced to see myself and my life in a different light.

"I did a tremendous amount of soul searching," Steve continued. "I realized that I had been feeling sad and confused for a long time. It became clear to me that I had been living in fear. It was the fear that caused me to keep people at a distance. The epiphany enabled me to examine my life, look at issues differently, and choose to live with a positive attitude from that day on. I was ready to make some radical changes. Embracing that thought gave me peace," Steve said. "I could not remember feeling peaceful before that moment."

"As I realized my part in our chaotic relationship, I took responsibility," said Steve. "Opening up for the first time in my life to Amy, to anyone, I could hear and feel my true soul. I was madly in love with Amy. I now knew Amy and I belonged together. I wanted to live the rest of my life with her."

"I decided I would do everything I could to win her heart," Steve continued. "We had been broken up for a month when I asked her to meet me. I was so excited to look her in the eyes and share what had happened. I told her how much I loved her and wanted to be together. I promised her that I was ready to marry and start a family."

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Steve called Amy's father to ask his permission before proposing to her one evening.

"I said yes," continued Amy, "but I was still in a lot of pain over our past breakups. In truth, I didn't trust Steve. At 2:00 in the morning, I awoke in a panic and told Steve that I couldn't be engaged—not then. We dated for another month or so before Steve ended the relationship."

"After that breakup, I spent the next two months thinking about whether or not Amy and I should be together," Steve offered. "I wondered if I could ever trust her, let alone make her happy and satisfy her. Still, as time went on, I began to miss her terribly. The painful memories faded. My body was like a magnet that kept pulling me to her."

"Amy always said that her anger towards me came from my ambivalence towards her," Steve continued. "She'd say that she needed to see concrete changes in me to prove that I was serious about moving forward. I knew I had not given 100 percent of myself to her. I would regret if I did not give us that chance. I had to know if she would calm down and be more flexible if I gave her everything she asked for. Would my new behaviors be enough to inspire her to change? Could I get us to a place where we could be at peace and just love each other?"

"I made the firm decision to try one last time." Steve sighed. "Amy always wanted a romantic proposal with a particular type and size engagement ring. I was determined to make all of her dreams come true. I surprised her with a romantic trip to Mexico."

"Near the end of our trip, we enjoyed a sunset couple's massage on the beach. Afterwards we sat in the sand at the shoreline with our legs entwined. The tide was coming in. At first, the water reached our ankles. By sunset, the ripples were lapping our knees. As the sun sank into the ocean, I got on one knee and asked Amy to marry me. I had no doubt that she'd accept wholeheartedly, and she did. I presented a beautiful, two-carat diamond ring. The look in her eyes and the smile on her face made a cherished memory that will last the rest of my life."

"It was the most romantic moment I had ever experienced," said Amy.

"Once away from the daily routines and memories of the past, we were magic together," said Steve.

"Talk about sparks!" Amy injected.

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Steve smiled. "Yes, we laughed and had fun again. We were happy, affectionate, and our lovemaking was more incredible than ever. But the words we spoke to one another were also in sync. We vowed to fulfill our promise to take care of each other. We promised to help each other feel loved the rest of our lives. We vowed to meet each other's deepest needs in the relationship. We vowed that we would never hurt each other the way we had in the past. We would create a peaceful home filled with love and understanding. We would do everything to rebuild the trust we both had destroyed. I was exhilarated; I felt finally everything was falling into place."

"I was excited to tell the news to my son," Steve continued. "I share custody of Parker with my ex-wife. She is remarried, and we all get along well. Amy even spoke with her on the phone the morning after we were engaged. Amy told her she would call to meet for lunch after we returned home to become acquainted. I was elated that Amy was making an effort to set a new tone to our relationship."

"I didn't foresee any barriers," he added. "Parker is a sweet, easygoing kid. Although he and Amy hadn't spent much time together, their encounters in the beginning had been positive. I could not believe it when Amy began to have a hard time accepting Parker."

"In any case," Steve said, "we got engaged and then arranged for Amy to move in with me. From that point, we began to plan the wedding. I never anticipated all the chaos, drama and pain that happened. During the next six months, our ecstasy turned to agony. Finally, I had no choice: I called off our wedding and ended our relationship."

Steve and Amy then shared the story of the painful events that transpired in the weeks before and after the cancellation of their wedding and the day of the broken engagement.

"I was devastated beyond words when Steve cancelled our wedding," Amy said in a shaky voice. "Steve's ambivalence returned. His commitment wavered. During those last few weeks, when I cried and begged Steve for answers, he would stare blankly at me. He'd tell me to get a hold of myself, calm down, and stop acting like a child. One minute he would say he was ready for marriage and the next he would say he could not picture walking down the aisle with me. He said he couldn't be joyful over the thought of spending his life with someone who treated him as I had. Meanwhile, my life was a nightmare. I did not know whether to continue with the wedding plans. What should I do about my bridal

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shower or the final fitting of my gown? I felt scared, abandoned and humiliated.”

“The night before he broke our engagement,” Amy went on, “Steve actually told my mother we were definitely getting married. Not long after, he talked on the phone with his sister. I sensed something in him had shifted. The next day, I was a nervous wreck. I went to work but couldn’t concentrate. My stomach was in knots.”

Tears poured down her face as Amy shared her memory of the breakup conversation just three weeks prior to the big day. “That afternoon, I went to a local bar and had several cocktails before gathering the courage to phone Steve. I had a gut feeling he was going to end it. Well, he did—over the phone! He spoke in a cold, distant voice. ‘I cannot go through with the wedding,’ he said. I let him know that I would make arrangements immediately to move out of his home. The relationship was over. I was in shock. I got in my car and headed to my parents’ home. On the way, I was sick to my stomach and had to pull over.

“Several days later”, Amy continued, “My mother accompanied me to Steve’s condo to help me pack up all of my belongings. I arranged ahead of time for Steve to be out when I arrived. I knew there was no way I could face him without completely falling apart. We were unable to fit a few boxes into my mother’s car, so I had to arrange a second trip back to Steve’s place the following week. When I arrived, I was horrified to see that the entire downstairs of Steve’s condo was completely redecorated! It was as if I had never even lived there with Steve; there was no trace of my presence left.

“It was clear to me that Steve had spent quite a bit of time shopping and decorating immediately after I moved out. There were new furniture, new rugs, stylish candles and accessories I had never seen before. I sensed a feminine touch, and I knew in my gut a woman was involved. I flew into a rage and tore all the sheets off Steve’s bed—the bed we had shared together. My mother screamed at me to calm down. Horrible is the only way to describe the situation. I felt completely erased from Steve’s life and his world, as if our life together in that condo had never existed.”

Amy wiped tears from her swollen eyes before continuing. “When Steve and I were back in contact following the breakup, I shared my experience with him. As usual, he minimized my feelings and invalidated my perspective. He replied that when I moved out of his place, I had left his home in shambles. He said he had wanted to clean up and redecorate over the weekend before Parker came

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back the following week. He said he enlisted the help of his mother and sister-in-law to help him shop and decorate the place.

"As was so often the case during our engagement period, I felt like Steve completely skipped over my feelings; instead, he was focused on his own perspective. He loved to paint a portrait of me as a selfish, immature, reactive baby while he and Parker were the innocent victims."

Amy looked deep into my eyes. "Can you imagine, Glenn, that the man I loved and planned to marry would hurt me so deeply? Quite honestly, I cannot shake the feeling that Steve is happiest when he is alone with Parker, safe in his bachelor pad without me there to interfere or mess up their comfortable routine. I imagine it is quite convenient for Steve to have me sleep in his bed and act as his life companion while maintaining a separate residence and never entering his life in any real way. With benefits like that, why ever get married?"

Now it was Steve's turn. In a sad and tired voice he said, "Amy called me from a bar to ask me if it was safe for her to return home. What could I say? Having spent most of the day in a fog, I had contacted our therapist. He told me to look at the evidence facing me. Then he said that the greatest predictor of the future was the past, and I should make a choice based upon what I felt was best to protect myself and Parker. After that, I spoke to my family. They all said it was my decision to make; they just wanted me to be happy. By the time Amy called, I'd had time to consider everything. That's when I told her that I had been thinking through things all day; I had decided that I could not marry her. Amy said she would be moving out immediately. I asked her if she would consider postponing the wedding rather than canceling it. She said that she could not. I was surprised at how calm she sounded. I had expected her to scream at me, but her voice was steady. I pretty much assumed that she knew I was going to call off the wedding. The bottom line was that she had given me the no-win choice of marrying her under impossible circumstances or ending the relationship."

"This was a horrible decision for me," Steve said. "I can in no way describe that. I loved Amy so much and tried so hard for so long to remain strong for her and us. In the end, I lost all hope. Amy made it impossible for me to trust and respect her, much less be able to continue to love her. I did not feel safe and I did not feel loved. I knew I had to protect Parker and me emotionally. There was no way I could walk down the aisle with the intention of spending the rest of my life with a wife who would be conditional with her love and explosive at the drop of a hat.

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“I also want to address what Amy said about the condo. When Amy moved in, much of the furniture and decoration in the condo was hers. After she moved out, the house was a cold and empty shell of what was. My mom and sister-in-law were sweet to spend the weekend helping me find some furniture and accessories. They wanted to help me return to a sense of normalcy in my life. I knew I needed to begin the process of healing. One step was to create a new, loving space before Parker came back the following week.”

Amy was ready to speak. “After Steve called it off, I immediately moved out of his home and in with my mother and stepfather. I felt lost, shattered, and completely abandoned. I could not eat, sleep or focus on my work. Nothing felt normal or right without Steve in my life. The man I had planned to marry, my best friend and soul mate, was suddenly gone. To make matters worse, I did not hear from Steve until two months after the breakup. He never called to ask if I was okay or if I needed help with anything. Maybe that comment sounds odd, but I still thought of him as my friend and protector. I could not afford my own place, and Steve knew I had no money. I was sleeping on a twin mattress on the floor of my mother’s home and had no privacy or space of my own. Forget about healing—it was enough to survive each day. I stopped wondering if Steve had stopped loving me and began to believe that he hated me!”

This is where the couple stood when they came to see me. I knew they had to make a commitment to understand the true nature of their dynamics and dramatically change their perspectives and behaviors if they would have any chance of achieving a peaceful, loving relationship. Their relationship was highly volatile, but slightly tilting the scales in their favor was that all-important element of love.

As traumatic as their relationship story sounded, it was also not uncommon. In fact, in the chapters that follow, you might find that some of the issues, problems, thoughts and feelings that Steve and Amy faced are similar to yours.

If you are involved in a conflicted relationship—whether dating, engaged, married, or separated—and looking for a way to reunite, I hope Steve and Amy’s story, along with the concepts contained throughout this book, will help you to gain the awareness, learn the skills, and practice the techniques to become each other’s...

***Best Friend during the Day,
Lover at Night, and
Partner for Life***