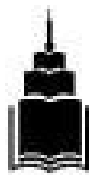


The Conversation



How Black Men and Women
Can Build Loving, Trusting Relationships

HILL HARPER



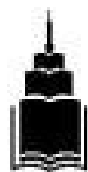
G O T H A M B O O K S

The Conversation



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G O T H A M B O O K S

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ALSO BY HILL HARPER:

Letters to a Young Brother: MANifest Your Destiny

Letters to a Young Sister: DeFINE Your Destiny

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G O T H A M B O O K S

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This book is dedicated in loving memory to my grandparents, Eugenia and Harold Hill and Lillie and
Harry Harper.

Thank you for showing me what love, happiness, partnership, and family look like. May you rest in
blessed peace.

It took 100 years to set Black women and men apart from each other, but it has happened and the question now before us is, What are we willing to do about it?

—*Susan Taylor, The State of Black America 2008: In the Black Woman's Voice*

Introduction: The Crisis of Our Shared Destiny

We are all tied together . . . in a garment of mutual destiny.

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., married to Coretta Scott King for fifteen years, until his assassination

I am in no way representing myself as an expert in relationships, but rather as a man on a journey attempting to figure it all out for myself. This book details a far more personal journey than I have written about in the past. I have been traveling lately through the inner territories of male and female relationships: love, partnership, asking questions about marriage and family. On this journey, I have looked inward, asking the same questions of myself that I am asking of my community.

I have kept a journal for years, but there is a way that the positive feedback of talking beyond yourself—sending a message out into the world in the form of a book and having the response come back to you as a human wave rising up to receive your message and listen and respond to you—really changes your perspective. As I researched this book, I started out with a few things that seemed important to say. I ended up on the receiving end of the well of human wisdom.

Blacks have been harder hit than other communities and ethnic groups by a handful of social, economic, and political problems that have led to a tragic dissolution of our community—and the integrity of our families—in the past four decades. The statistics are shocking, but you can see it in any Black community in this nation.

I'm very concerned about what is happening to the Black family. I'm worried by what my community feels like these days. We are regressing. We made huge leaps forward in the sixties and seventies, but somehow we are not holding it together anymore. We are not taking good enough care of one another, and this fact is supported by the divorce rate in our community; the levels of single parenting and fathers not taking care of their babies; and the disproportionate way that drugs and violence afflict our urban communities.

Discussions about the decline of the Black family date back to the 1980s. In fact, in 1985 the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) instituted their first annual Black Family Reunion Celebration in response to all the negative headlines and talk about the “vanishing Black family.” Dorothy Height, the chair of the NCNW, intended for it to be a celebration of the Black family traditions and values and an affirmation of its resilience. The NCNW's annual Black Family Reunion Celebration continues to draw hundreds of thousands of Black families from around this country and from all walks of life.

As Blacks, we have a proud and strong legacy of family. Historically, when there were obstacles to overcome, we relied on family. When there were victories to be shared, we brought them to our families. When there were wounds to be healed, we opened them up to our families.

Our families and extended families kept us connected to one another and kept us connected to a deeper part of ourselves. I am not saying that every Black family has become disjointed and no longer has a connection to their roots or their legacy. But if we take a look at the data about how few single Black men and women are building long-term relationships and creating two-parent households, the news is sobering. Whether we want to admit it or not, we are bearing witness to the extinction of the Black family. We are in the midst of a crisis.

In 1966, more than 84 percent of all Black children were being raised in two-parent households. In 2006, just forty years later, fewer than 33 percent of all Black children were being raised in two-parent households. That's a precipitous 51 percent decline. We could blame it on the change in attitudes about marriage over the past forty years, but that still would not explain why, in 2006, more than 80 percent of Asian American children, nearly 75 percent of White American children, and close to 70 percent of Latino American children were being raised in two-parent households.

This book is about me thinking out loud, but plenty of my friends—men and women—are asking themselves the same questions. These questions run in two directions: We look inward and wonder what we want and try to imagine the life that will make us happy, and we look outward and ask the question, Why is it so difficult? What is happening in my community that has made it so hard for women and men to find their way to each other? Why are there so few folks who manage to hold their marriage together even when they have finally found a person they love? I don't have a clue, but I am filled with the need to know. That is where you come in. I want to advance the dialogue between women and men. I know we can do much better than we have been doing. This book is my effort at raising the bar for us all. I am challenging all of you to ask yourself these questions.

I am going to take you on a journey, and I invite you to come with me as I do some soul-searching on behalf of myself and I hope our community. Now, maybe you will relate and maybe you won't, but I feel that this is an important endeavor. It has to start somewhere, so why not with me? I care enough to start this conversation.

Throughout this journey, I've been fortunate to connect with a variety of couples from many walks of life, each at different key stages in their relationships. They shared their most private, most intimate, most challenging experiences in the hope that their open discussions would inspire each of us to initiate and begin our own conversations. So with that said, if you don't like some of what you read, please don't shoot the messenger. I am going to be brutally truthful throughout this entire journey we are about to take together.

Now that you have been officially warned about the honesty you can expect, let me back up a bit and share with you how we got here in the first place. One by one, group by group, state by state, letter to e-mail, phone call to phone call, lunch to brunch, brunch to dinner, dinner to the club, I have gathered with men and women—some friends and some strangers; some married, some divorced, and some single—and with all of them I have had conversations: intimate conversations, personal conversations, revealing conversations.

My conversation partners have included men and women who trusted me enough to expose private struggles, past pains, emotional vulnerabilities, real concerns, and often unaddressed

misunderstandings that continue to plague Black men, Black women, and our relationships. They are not celebrities offering glamorized versions of their relationship successes and struggles, but rather everyday folks in real relationships, doing their best to live truly happy lives. As you will see, some are finding more success achieving that goal than others. Where I fit in that continuum will become very clear as you read on. Unlike the version of the book I first envisioned—me gathering information and sharing it with you—in this book you'll find that my life took an unexpected turn and changed that idea. You see, along the way I started to recognize myself in other peoples' stories and struggles and came to understand that like so many others, I am also in my own repetitive cycle.

As you read this book, you may at times gasp; you may be shocked, surprised, embarrassed, insulted, and otherwise offended by some of its content. I've included elements that push buttons because with male-female conversations in our community, it seems in many ways that it's what *we're not saying* that is contributing to the demise of our relationships. For all our sakes, it's time to make that push so that we can get unstuck out of our comfort zone and move back into the power position as a successful community. I want the book to follow in form and substance what needs to happen in our interpersonal relationships—no-holds-barred communication. That is truly what *The Conversation* is about. To have completely, embarrassingly honest conversations takes courage. *Courage* is one of my favorite words. The etymology of the word is *cor*, meaning “heart.” Speaking from the heart means truly being able to speak about *all* things that are in you, and then, in turn, living from your heart. Most people have been taught to live from their heads, which is what people who have had to survive have learned how to do. But at this point in our journey, if we stay in that place we will bear witness to our own destruction—all the while playing it safe and blaming one another.

When I talk with my male and female friends, one thing I keep hearing is just how angry and distrustful women and men are of each other. That really saddens me. I do not believe we are so far away from each other that we can't find our way back to peace. But I do not even know why the war started, so this book is also an investigation. It is questions mixed with thoughts and the answers I have been able to find as I try to get to the heart of the matter.

I'm sharing this journey, and the lessons I've learned while on it, in hopes of inspiring all of us to communicate with one another. In so doing, I hope we can reintroduce ourselves. I hope that in this conversation we can become friends again, because we are—all of us—the newest, best, most perfect model of human being. And we all deserve to be *unreasonably happy*.

In the course of this book, I am going to attempt to achieve a deeper understanding of myself and the world I am living in. I am calling this book *The Conversation* because my hope is that these words that originate with me at my laptop will find their way to the book in your hands, pushing you and inspiring you to talk with your friends and families. I hope eventually to extend that dialogue across the barricades that men and women have erected to protect themselves from each other. We are growing jaded, cynical, tired, and world-weary before our time. We are expecting less and demanding less, and those lower expectations are making us unfulfilled and taking us farther from each other. The walls between us do not serve us. I would love to see women talking to and asking questions of men and vice versa, to bring more clarity and peace to the way we deal with each other. Why? Because in some way, somehow, there needs to be communion between us. I want us to figure out how we got to this place so we can retrace our steps back to the time when there was trust between us.

What this book is about is plumbing our own depths and figuring out what relationship and love and endurance and commitment mean to all of us, and then planting our flag on that ground so we can

begin to live there and build our lives there.

If we can figure out for ourselves how to reach that destination, then and only then can we start to create large numbers of healthy loving relationships and two-parent families. This is no small thing. Our children will know enduring love because they will be born on this fertile ground. This is an invaluable gift we can provide to the next generation, and they deserve better than the landscape we are currently offering. If I can do this, and you can do this, then we can represent love in such an elevated and fierce way that everyone we know wants some of what we've got, and we can change what the past four decades of shrinking Black relationships suggests is our destiny.

I believe that finding good relationships means first giving good love to ourselves. And I believe that when we give good love to ourselves, we will not settle for less than a righteous and fulfilling relationship. So it is a circle. As you give love out, it's received and reciprocated—and it grows. That's the beauty of it. Love is an energy. You can feed it to people, and they, in turn, feed it to others, and eventually it comes back to nurture you.

I am stepping into the circle because I want to learn the lessons I will find there. In this circle, we must decide whether we are willing to have the courage to do battle for a new future, and in so doing realize that the battle is to tame our own hearts and to allow ourselves to be loved. We're going to reach down through the ages to the warrior-queens and kings of our African past and do battle. We will corral ourselves and fight with ourselves and train ourselves to be warriors for love who know how to commit, to follow through, and to raise strong children who speak the languages of love and family and emotional security. And when we win these battles, we will be better and stronger and the world will say, "Amen."

C'mon, jump into the circle. Your heart demands nothing less. Let's start *The Conversation*.

PART I:

THE CONVERSATION BEGINS



Man in the Mirror

We need more light about each other. Light creates understanding, understanding creates love, love creates patience, and patience creates unity.

—Malcolm X, married to Betty Shabazz for seven years, until his assassination

The simple yet profound act of holding a mirror up to yourself can truly be a frightening experience. It's as if you're seeing yourself through new eyes. While most parts may seem familiar, you begin to notice new things about yourself that are unrecognizable—utterly foreign—that make you feel like a stranger, though you're staring at a complete stranger.

That is what I wound up contending with earlier this year as I caught a glimpse of myself in my car's rearview mirror. I was in Washington, D.C., on a rainy night, driving back to my hotel after attending a party that had left me feeling somewhat confused and despondent about my life—more specifically, about the fact that I'm still single. I was making a mental list of explanations and excuses for why I have failed to maintain any sort of long-term relationship over these past twenty years of so-called adult life. Those reasons went from the petty to the profoundly inane, from "I honestly don't have the time to devote to a relationship" to "All the amazing women are already married." After each one I'd nod and hear myself saying, "Yeah, that's right," as if I was trying to convince myself that was fact, that the solution had to be out of my control because, after all, I wasn't to blame; I was a victim of circumstance.

I was stopped at a streetlight when I came to that brilliant conclusion. As the light changed from red to green I glanced in the rearview mirror, as I had done at least a dozen times already that night on my journey back to the hotel. For the first time since I don't even know when, I saw myself. I held my own gaze long enough for me to see past the deception, past all those clever excuses and disguises; I saw me. "Who do you think you're fooling?" I asked aloud. "Of course you're part of the problem." Then the driver behind me blew his horn, snapping me out of my honesty, forcing me to focus on the road again.

I start with this moment because for me it symbolizes both a beginning and an end. Seeing myself as my truer self, I didn't want to go back to that old vision—that old version—of me. It's like those optical illusions: Once your eyes settle on a shape in an image—the bird in flight, the clock with its hands at three P.M., the profile of a woman's face—you'll never again see that picture as a random

series of dots. You can't un-see what you've seen and return it to the way it used to be. You can only move forward and search for whatever else exists in the picture. But first, I have to explain what happened before. I have to tell you how I found myself driving down that street evaluating the state of my love life—or lack thereof.

Earlier that day, I delivered a keynote speech at a conference in Washington, D.C. My friend Don Watkins stopped by afterward. The two of us go way back; we've been buddies since high school. Though over the years we'd usually done a good job of staying in touch, Don and I hadn't really talked or seen each other in about three years. He'd heard that I was going to be in town and decided to show up and be that familiar face in the crowd for me. After my speech, we sat in a coffee shop talking smack, trying to catch up on each other's lives. The time flew by. We'd been talking for what felt like two minutes—it was really two hours—when Don realized he was late for a prior engagement. He and his wife, Robin, were attending a small dinner celebration for her parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary.

"Hill, why don't you just come along?" he asked. I hesitated for a second, but then said yes. I wasn't home; I didn't have any other plans, and besides, I couldn't very well say no without looking and feeling like a complete jerk.

Don and Robin got married right out of college. They'd met during freshman year, started dating, and fell senselessly in love. I remember when Don decided to ask Robin to marry him. I was home on Christmas break and a bunch of us guys were hanging out. When he broke the news, the whole room fell silent. Then everybody suddenly busted out laughing. We thought for sure Don had lost his mind. Marriage?! We were barely in our twenties. There was still so much more time. There were still so many more women. He hadn't even really dated anybody else—not since high school, and not for an impressive length of time. Now he was going to take a vow. He was going to promise to be with Robin forever.

"You do realize that forever is an unimaginable length of time?" I overheard Robin's father, Mr. Blake, asking as I walked into his wife, Hattie's, living room. There were fewer than two dozen people there, some of them standing by the bar fixing drinks. Most of them were seated near the fireplace on sofas and ottomans, engaged in what seemed to be a lively conversation.

I walked over to Robin's parents, Foster and Hattie Blake, greeted them, and gave them my gift, a bottle of champagne. Don brought me a drink, and Robin introduced me to the entire room. There were six couples: one was young, thirtysomething, and the other three were the Blake contemporaries, septuagenarians who'd been married for longer than I'd been alive. Scattered among all that wedded bliss were five unpartnered people—four women and one man, me.

"Have a seat, son," Mr. Blake said to me, holding his hand out in the direction of a vacant ottoman. I liked the way he called me *son*. Between the familial warmth of that address and the literal warmth generated by the fireplace, I immediately felt at home. "We were in the middle of talking about history, about how some of us here have learned that you should never say *never*."

"But you have to admit it *was* an unimaginable event," insisted Doc Mayweather setting his plate of food down on the coffee table. "I never would've even dared to dream it." His wife, Miss Brenda, who was sitting next to him, nodded. "Mmm hmmm," she added. "Who'd have thought we could even achieve something like that?" It took me a minute to figure out that they were talking about politics, not relationships. The older folks had been talking about how they still couldn't believe that our

country had elected a Black man as president. None of them had thought it would happen in their lifetime.

“And that wife of his.” Miss Brenda smiled. “She is quite a woman.”

“Says a lot about him that he knew not to just pass her by,” said a distinguished-looking man whose name I hadn’t caught. He and his wife looked so much like Ruby Dee and the late Ossie Davis, I kept doing double takes.

“Uh-huh,” his wife agreed. “Says a lot about her that she’s not afraid to stand behind her man.”

“That’s ’cause she’s confident in her own intelligence and education,” Miss Brenda added. “She knows it doesn’t take anything away from her.”

“You can say that again,” Mr. Blake said, reaching for Mrs. Blake’s hand. “That’s the problem with you young brothers and sisters today. It’s always me, me, me, me, me; always about the individual and so rarely about the community. No wonder the Black family is just falling apart.”

“Can’t see the worth in it enough to sacrifice for it.” Doc Mayweather frowned. Whereas before they were just having a general conversation, now they seemed to be talking directly to us, at us, the single ones in the group.

“I sure hope,” Doc Mayweather continued, “you young people . . .”

Just then, the woman who was seated on the ottoman next to mine leaned over and asked if I wanted to go with her to the dining room to fix myself a plate of food. I said yes, happy for the chance to escape the lecture that was clearly on its way.

Her name was Nichole, and she was drop-dead gorgeous. I followed her in a slow circle as we filled our plates with food from the several platters that had been set buffet style on the table. We chatted and we scooped. Once we’d each answered the obligatory “So, how do you know the Blakes?” question, we moved on to more personal topics. Nichole had majored in math at Howard and now taught calculus at the D.C. public schools.

“Calculus?” I asked in disbelief. It’d been ages since I’d thought of integers, derivatives, and L’Hospital’s rule. They were high on the list of things I was glad to forget once I’d graduated high school. Nichole just smiled. She was used to that response. She went and leaned against the wall where the dining room ended and the living room began. I followed and stood beside her, and we continued our conversation. Soon we had turned toward each other as we talked.

The energy between us was palpable. I don’t know whether it was because we’d been sitting in the room full of all those couples, but we gravitated toward each other in a way that was almost effortless. There wasn’t any strained laughter or shyness, and there weren’t any awkward moments, not even when she told me that she had an adolescent daughter. The conversation simply flowed.

“She’s with her father this weekend.” Nichole voluntarily explained that she and her daughter’s father had never been married and that their coparenting relationship was difficult and contentious at times. “Do you have any kids?” she asked.

“Not yet,” I replied. Before she could respond, Mr. Blake called out to me:

“Son, would you mind bringing me a few of those wings? The ones with the hot sauce . . . not the wimpy ones the May-weather’s brought.”

Nichole followed me back into the living room when I brought Mr. Blake the plate I'd fixed for him. The group was still talking about the state of the Black family. Nichole and I sat down and listened, stealing a glance or a smile at each other every now and then. I looked around the room at all the couples and how connected they were, literally. There were clasped hands, or hands resting on thighs, just above the bended knee, or gently rubbing backs and shoulders. I was filled with both an inexplicable joy and an immeasurable sadness. Both emotions led me to my grandparents, all four of whom would have fit in perfectly with this group. A group I admired but felt strangely at odds with.

"I should get going," I blurted out. "I've got an early day tomorrow."

"See what I mean?" Doc Mayweather chuckled. "These young'uns today. They're always running around, going here and there, doing this and that. How're you supposed to settle down into a life when you can't even sit still for a night?" Everyone laughed at that, even me.

Don walked with me outside. By the time we got to my rental car, the inexplicable joy I was feeling a few minutes earlier had all but disappeared, leaving only sadness and confusion. As I approached the car door, about to drive away from all that love and laughter, I think I felt lonelier than I had at any other time in my life. "Where is my partner? Where is my true love?" are the questions that were swimming around in my head.

"All right, then, tomorrow," Don said, referring to the plans we'd just made to finish our catch-up session. When I pulled the car key out of my pocket, a little slip of paper flew out with it. I shoved it back into my pocket, got into the car, and started to drive. I thought about the neat, cursive writing on the paper, and about the numbers and hyphens, all so perfectly aligned, as if they were a part of an equation.

"Will you call?" Nichole had asked when she'd handed me the paper. The vulnerability in her voice was endearing. It made me feel protective of her. I told her I would, and that was the truth. I probably wait until I was back at home, in Los Angeles, to give her a call. By then, we'd both be questioning whatever it was that had passed between us, whether it was real or imagined. Even if we decided that it was real, we'd be too far away from it for that to mean anything, or make any difference.

Nichole was the kind of woman that men dream of meeting. She was beautiful, inside and out, smart, witty, direct, and self-possessed, but still vulnerable underneath it all. She was going to make some man very happy—but deep down I knew that man wasn't going to be me. What I didn't understand was: *Why not?*

At that very moment, alone in my rental car, for reasons I can't explain, my mind flashed to nine years earlier. The memory was me sitting in the hospital, at the side of my father's bed as he battled cancer. I remembered him telling me, with tears in his eyes, that his biggest regret his entire life was that he didn't make it work with my mother. "We should have stayed partnered," he said sadly. Twelve hours later I cried, prayed, and held his hand as my brother and I helplessly watched him die. Staying partnered in my family has seemingly ended with his parents.

My grandparents anchored our family. They reminded us of who we were, where we came from, and showed us where we might go. Both sets of my grandparents were married more than fifty years. They were truly partners and invited the family into their circle. As a boy, I remember attending family reunions each year for both sides of my family, the Hills and the Harpers, in South Carolina and Iowa respectively. Each reunion was commemorated by a T-shirt bearing a photograph of the family, with

the day and year of the event printed below it. My grandparents hosted almost every family reunion.

Much like that evening at the Blakes', those reunions drew us together. I loved them, mainly because it made me feel like I was a part of something larger, a network of people. There were the cousins, some of whom were so far removed that it would take pen and paper to figure out exactly where and how our blood-lines crossed. And then, of course, there were the "cousins" who we knew were not related to us by blood, but were still kin. A lot of us grew up attending family reunions like those. They allowed us to connect, to know one another and experience why family is so valuable.

The Hill and Harper families no longer hold yearly reunions. Last year, through a family-wide email, we were all informed that the final Iowa Harper family reunion would take place in Forestburg, Madison, next to my grandfather's farm. As a child, I spent almost every summer at that farm. Even now I can close my eyes and recall every inch and acre of that land and the memories that they hold. When my grandparents passed, the farm was sold, making it virtually impossible to hold any more family reunions on that property.

A couple of years ago, I bought thirty-seven acres of land in Colorado, along the Roaring Fork River. I thought, in my own deluded way, that I was trying to address the problem. I envisioned myself building a house on that land, a place where my own family reunions could take place. I wanted to emulate, if not duplicate, for my future children and grandchildren, what my grandparents had given me. But the truth of the matter is that love is not about places; it's about people. If I can't get people together to create a family, there will be no family to reunite. Deep down, I knew that. My grandparents were such a powerful force in our family because of the love they shared with us and with each other. It was sustaining. I feel blessed that I was able to witness and share in the stability of their love and way of life because, in my family at least, it seemed to end with their generation. My parents divorced when I was six years old, and much to my fear and frustration, the older I get the more and more elusive marriage seems to become.

The elders at the Blakes' party weren't wrong when they talked about the demise of the Black family. Since the first slave ships docked in Jamestown, Virginia, Blacks have understood the connection between the past, the present, and the future. Without our history there's no path forward. Seemingly only the most recent generations have forgotten that you can't write your future without revering your past. There had never been a time when we did not realize that the basic foundation of the Black family was under attack. From the raping of women and the lynching of men, to Jim Crow and the Tuskegee experiments, through the passage of the "man-in-the-house rule," which denied welfare and social services to families that had adult men in the household—a law that basically encouraged fathers to be absent—Black men and Black women stayed connected. But sometimes during the past forty years those connections have frayed. Maybe we've decided that life would be less burdensome if we weren't tethered to one another. Some people say that it was because of integration. That once we were able to move away from the neighborhood, the physical community, we turned our backs on one another and on all the emotional commitments and responsibilities we had to our communities. What a painful idea to consider.

For so many of us, Barack and Michelle Obama are calming and hope-inspiring representatives of our future partly because they are reminders of our past, of the Black family's ability to survive, to succeed, and ultimately triumph. They provide hope that marriage of the sort that our grandparents and their grandparents had is not only within reach but can be free of the acrimony, abuse, neglect, dishonesty, competition, and professional jealousy we've grown accustomed to encountering in our

modern relationships.

Whatever their romantic struggles, neither of the Obamas set their eyes on the White House when they first envisioned themselves in a happy and healthy committed relationship. By buying the property in Colorado, I was putting the cart before the horse. I was thinking I could buy a property, house my memories and build a family before I had even done the work of creating relationships and experiences worthy of remembering.

I think we all know much more about ourselves than we care to admit. If we were honest, we would be forced to acknowledge we are not making the most of our present; or the best choices for our future. Most of us are addicted to our patterns. I know I am: relationships, food, friends, shopping, spirituality, credit cards, family, and on and on. We get habitual. I justify my patterned behavior by saying “Well, that’s just who I am.” Really? Talk about not looking in the mirror.

That’s why that moment in the car was so significant. In its rearview mirror I saw myself. I saw my patterns. I saw my fears that keep me in those patterns. I knew that if I didn’t want my relationships to keep going the way they had been, I would have to change. If I want just a little bit of what my grandparents had I would have to make different choices. The images of my father, my grandparents, the Blakes, Nichole, and Don and Robin kept swimming in my head.

There was a part of me that wanted to turn around, drive back to the Blakes’, and see whether Nichole was still there. I have no idea what I would have said to her but that’s not as important as the fact that I didn’t go back. As quickly as my newfound resolve came, my same old habit-filled excuses returned—in this case quicker than usual: “Come on, Hill, you’re too tired to go anywhere except back to the hotel room.” I had thought and felt myself right into exhaustion. I needed time to process it all, to figure out what it all meant and how to proceed. Only then would I be able to take what I knew would be the next step.

I’m ready now.

What We Say, Mean, and Do

Well, the truth about life is that we're all alone, but when somebody loves you, right, that experience is shared. Love is the only real connective tissue that allows you to not live and die by yourself. It gives you purpose beyond you.

—Will Smith, married to Jada Pinkett Smith since 1997

There seems to be an overriding belief among some people that men and women are so vastly different that it is almost impossible for us to truly communicate with each other. I was watching an old Chris Rock stand-up routine, and with his distinctive, singsongy voice, he said, “There are only three things women need in life: food, water, and compliments!” Now, Chris has been married to his lovely wife, Malaak, for a number of years, and, yes, he was joking, but there is always some truth in comedy. Is this how a lot of men really think? Or do men think the opposite: that women are extremely complicated? What do sisters really want and need? How can we as men begin to understand them?

Most of my friends—both men and women—fundamentally want the same thing. They want to be happy, healthy, successful, and loved. Now, there is no doubt that men and women tend to approach life in different ways. My guy friends are much more simplistic in many ways than my female friends. But that may have more to do with the way men and women are socialized than with what our true desires are. It made me wonder how couples manage to make it work at all, if we start off with such apparently uneven perspectives.

The first image that flashed through my mind was of me sitting on that ottoman in the Blake living room. I thought of all those couples and of how long they'd been married. The older couples were finishing each other's sentences, eating off each other's plates. That's the kind of companionship my friends always tell me they want to have. It's definitely the kind I hope to have one day. Looking at and listening to those couples, it's pretty easy to attribute their closeness and comfort with each other to the longevity of their relationships. But obviously it has to be about more than how many years they've been together. Time can't guarantee the growth of something that doesn't exist. The foundational elements for what they now share had to have been in place at the beginning of the relationship. You don't suddenly find yourself finishing your wife's sentences if you've been ignoring her most important feelings for the better part of fifty years.

I know that relationships take work. And I don't want to over-romanticize the fact that we are ~~always going to enjoy being around the same person day after day, year after year.~~ I wondered what the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Blake might have looked like fifty years earlier, when they first met. Had he always enjoyed listening to her? Had she known right away that he would be what she wanted? If their daughter Robin's courtship with my boy Don was similar in any way, then the answer to both questions is yes. When I finally met Robin, I felt like I already knew her so well. Every time I had talked to Don he'd tell me about something Robin did or what her perspective on what we were talking about was. At first I thought it was a little much, but after a few months, I began to really admire how important her opinions were to him, and how seriously he took her ideas . . . and vice versa. Don't get me wrong; it wasn't as if they were perfect. They disagreed, and they had their fair share of problems, but a lack of consideration wasn't one of them.

Nichole also came to my mind. Since I've committed to being honest in these pages, I'll go ahead and admit that thinking about the Blakes and the other couples prompted me to imagine myself with Nichole in fifty years. (Yes, I'm man enough to admit that guys let their minds wander to fantasyland too . . . though truth be told, our fantasies more often involve thongs and teddies . . . but I digress.) Nichole had been so easy to talk to, to listen to. Everything felt so comfortable. I'm sure that atmosphere had something to do with it. I liked the fact that the flirtation between us wasn't so over-the-top that it got in the way of either one of us being ourselves.

But then I hadn't called her that night. Or the next day. Or the next. Even though I really liked her, it took me a whole month to call her. That piece of paper she'd written her number on sat by the phone on my desk the entire time. I would look at it and ask myself, "What does she want?" Was she looking for a man who was husband material? What about her daughter? What relationship was the man in her life expected to have with her? Did she want more children? And then there was the obvious question of location. Was she looking for a man who would adjust his life to accommodate hers, or would she be willing to adjust her life and relocate if she met the right man? Or did she just want an easy, breezy affair with weekend rendezvous in exotic locations and the occasional movie premiere?

When we were standing there in the dining room talking, none of these questions came to mind. I didn't consider for a moment that she wanted anything other than what we had right there. We were becoming friends, getting to know each other, and that seemed to be enough for both of us. By the time I called her, just as I'd predicted (and maybe even wanted on some level), whatever connection we'd had between us was broken, betrayed by my lengthy silence. It was a surface-level polite conversation that ended with me saying, "Okay, great speaking with you. Talk to you soon." It sounded like I was saying good-bye to my accountant.

Why did I wait so long to call her? Fear? Self-sabotage? I don't know. I do know that when I get caught up, trying to figure out what a woman might want from me, I shut down: I get trapped in my head, and part of me becomes anxious and scared. I let my fears say, "Oh, it's not worth it. . . . She's probably not 'the one' anyway. . . . You meet tons of women, so what difference does it make? Maybe deep down, especially if I like her, I'm afraid I won't be able to meet her expectations. Or she won't meet mine. Or maybe I'm simply afraid of getting hurt.

I know I shouldn't, but in the past, I've put friendship and romance in two different categories. Friendships have limitations and expectations. When I know that I'm friends with a woman, I feel more at ease because I can trust those boundaries. With friendship, intentions, words, and actions are more often in alignment. In potentially romantic relationships, I feel like there is a greater risk

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