Final Analysis

River and her lover take their turn on the couch

June 1, 1998 By River Huston

Therapy. Been there, done that, got the t-shirt. But I'd rather put my hand in a blender than undergo the kind of counseling I got a few weeks ago. My boyfriend and I attended an intensive three-day couples therapy weekend with 12 other pairs. The big revelation: You don't have to be HIV positive to have a screwed-up relationship.

I know this is supposed to be a sex column, but since I am in a committed relationship right now, you'll have to excuse me—there is no sex. Thinking up 50 ways to leave my lover was beginning to bore me when I heard about the workshop from a friend who came back with glowing reviews (and an enviable glow on her face). Ever the optimist, I thought it would at least finalize things for us. My guy thought we were just going to the movies, so he was surprised, but cooperative nonetheless.

The workshop was in a motel in central New Jersey (that should have been my first clue). The therapist, the six-foot-tall, high-heeled Lela, began by introducing the group to "imago therapy." The gist of it is that your partner is a conglomerate of characteristics—lovable and loathsome—of family members who most affected your life. Through a series of imaging exercises, you can, at least in theory, break unhealthy dynamics by better understanding your partner. Lela went on to explain that when all else fails, homicide and suicide are options—both of which I've considered in detail: How to make the murder of my man look like a suicide.

When it was time for introductions, I was my usual frank self: "I hate him, I wish he was dead…but he's really a nice guy." Most people found this funny. My boyfriend did not. He did what he always does—pretended to be somewhere else.

The other couples were there basically to figure out how something so good could have turned so bad. Lela explained that we are attracted to people who exhibit the positive characteristics of our early caregivers, but what really makes us fall in love is the underlying negative traits that surface after the party is over—said shindig lasting anywhere from 10 minutes to about three years.

Day Two: Lela called for a volunteer, and I shot up my hand out of sheer boredom. But when she signaled for my man to join me in a mirror exercise, I felt the first flutters of trepidation. She asked him to share a minor complaint about me, and I was supposed to mirror it back. In no time, he

came up with “I think we should separate.”

Excuse me, minor? He then went on to say that I was impossible, critical, disapproving and no fun. What an eye-opener. I knew I was difficult, but up until then I had thought he liked my joie de vivre. I assumed he felt nothing less than undying love for me. Wrong.

We spent the next two days doing so much mirroring, letter writing, accepting and affirming that by the closing ceremony at the no-tell motel, I was back to my old ornery self. As I watched each couple perform the commitment ritual, I tried to tell who had really found love and who was too polite to admit that a little accident on the way home might be nice.

As painful as it was, I am glad we went. When my man said he was contemplating leaving rather than trying to figure out how to salvage our relationship, it made me take a long look at myself. All this time, I had been focusing my discontent on him.

What’s interesting is that HIV came up in not a single one of our negotiations and validations. What did surface for me was a fear of wasting time, a sense of urgency. I finally knew what was bothering me in this relationship: I am afraid of time slipping by. I am not in the moment; my mortality sticks its tongue out at me at every turn. It’s hard to be with someone who hasn’t had to drastically prioritize his life, who still takes time for granted.

I explained this as best I could, and my man mirrored it back. But I don’t know if he could really understand what it feels like for me to face my mortality. I don’t like working at a useless job, getting stuck in traffic or making an extra trip to the supermarket. These things may seem trivial to him, but HIV has put me and my relationship on the meter.

Gotta run, I’ve got a date. With my therapist.

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