

The Reason I Did That Was...

On Love, Disagreement, and the Need to Be Understood

"The reason I did that was..."

Most of us have said some version of this more times than we could count. Sometimes the explanation is necessary. We want to clarify what happened, correct a misunderstanding, or help someone we care about understand what was going on inside us. There is nothing unusual about that. The desire to be understood is one of the most natural parts of being in relationship with other people.

There are other times, though, when the explanation begins to gather momentum. We explain, then explain the explanation. We add context, revisit an earlier conversation, correct a detail, clarify what we meant by something we said three days ago. We become convinced that if the other person could only see the full picture, everything between us would settle back into place. Somewhere along the way, we may no longer be trying simply to communicate. We may be trying to make sure the other person understands us in the way we want to be understood.

That distinction can be difficult to notice because the desire itself is so reasonable. Of course we want the people closest to us to know us accurately. We want our intentions to be recognized, our motives to be seen fairly, and our inner experience to make sense to the people whose opinions matter most to us. Being deeply understood can be one of the most intimate and reassuring experiences available to us. The difficulty begins when understanding quietly becomes a requirement for feeling secure in the relationship.

For many people, this begins much earlier than adulthood. In some families, agreement and closeness become subtly linked. No one may ever explicitly say, "If you love me, you should agree with me," but the message can still be communicated through tone, tension, withdrawal, disappointment, or defensiveness. Different opinions may be treated as disloyalty. Questioning a parent may feel like disrespect. Harmony may depend on everyone seeing an event, a person, or a decision in roughly the same way.

A child growing up in that kind of atmosphere can absorb a powerful lesson without ever putting it into words. If we are close, we should understand each other. If you really know me, you should see why I feel this way. If you love me, you should be on my side. Those assumptions can remain with us long after we have stopped consciously believing them.

That is one reason an ordinary disagreement in an adult relationship can carry far more emotional weight than the subject itself would seem to justify. The conversation may appear to be about a decision, a memory, a family member, a boundary, or something that happened earlier that day, yet beneath the disagreement a more vulnerable question may begin to surface.

Do you still see me? Are you still with me? If you do not understand why I feel this way, does that mean we are not as close as I thought?

Once those questions enter the room, the conversation changes. We become more insistent. We reach for another example. We try a different explanation. We repeat ourselves with slightly different language and hope that this time the other person will finally respond in the way we have been waiting for. Maybe they will say, "I understand." Maybe they will tell us they finally see what we mean. Maybe they will reassure us that we were right to feel the way we did.

When that response does not come, it can feel strangely unsatisfying, even when the other person has listened carefully and responded with kindness. We may leave the conversation believing that we simply have not explained ourselves well enough. At that point, explanation can stop being communication and become pursuit. We are no longer simply offering another person access to our inner world. We are trying to control how we are understood within theirs.

This is not usually something we do consciously. More often, it comes from anxiety. If the other person continues to see the situation differently, we may feel unsettled about our own position. Their disagreement becomes difficult to separate from our uncertainty. If someone we trust does not see what we see, perhaps we begin to wonder whether we are allowed to trust ourselves. In this way, a perfectly reasonable desire for understanding can become exhausting.

The truth is that even very close relationships contain a great deal of incomplete understanding. Two people can love each other deeply and still remember the same event differently. They can disagree about someone's motives, assign different meanings to the same conversation, or have entirely different emotional reactions to the same experience. None of that necessarily means the relationship has failed. It may simply mean there are two distinct people in it.

Intimacy is not the elimination of difference. It is the ability to remain connected in the presence of difference. A relationship does not become secure because two people eventually arrive at the same interpretation of everything. In many ways, security is revealed by what happens when they do not.

There are moments when love sounds like, "I see it exactly the way you do." Those moments are beautiful and deeply reassuring. But there are other moments when love may sound more like, "I do not fully understand, but I am still here." That can be harder to recognize as love because it does not give us the comfort of agreement. It asks us to tolerate some space between ourselves and another person while allowing the relationship to remain intact.

For some of us, that is a much more demanding form of intimacy. It requires us to stop using agreement as the primary measure of closeness and to let the people we love have minds of their own. They may disagree with us without rejecting us. They may question our interpretation without questioning our worth. They may hear everything we have to say and still arrive somewhere else. We have to make room for the possibility that someone can love us deeply and still not think we are right.

There is an important responsibility on the other side of this as well. We are not only the misunderstood person in our relationships. We are also the one who sometimes fails to understand. There are times when someone we love explains themselves clearly and their position still does not make sense to us. We may believe their feelings are real while seeing the event itself very differently. Maturity does not require pretending otherwise in order to preserve harmony.

We can listen carefully without manufacturing agreement. We can remain curious without surrendering our own judgment. We can respect another person's experience without claiming it as our own. We can say, in effect, "I may never see this exactly the way you do, but I am willing to keep knowing you." That may be one of the more generous things we can offer another person.

It is also worth considering whether the person who does not understand us may occasionally be seeing something that we are not. The goal is not to become so self-assured that we dismiss every disagreement as someone else's limitation. Sometimes we do need to explain ourselves more clearly. Sometimes we need to listen again. Sometimes another person's discomfort is pointing toward something we would rather not examine.

The challenge is learning when we are still having a conversation and when we have begun trying to secure a verdict. A few quiet questions can help us tell the difference. Have I said what is true? Have I communicated as clearly as I can? Have I genuinely listened to the other person? Have I considered the possibility that they may have a point? If the answer is yes, then another question eventually becomes necessary: am I still trying to communicate, or am I now trying to make this person see me the way I want to be seen?

Sometimes the healthiest thing to do at that point is stop explaining. There comes a moment when trust in ourselves has to begin where explanation ends. This does not mean becoming indifferent to how we affect other people, refusing to clarify genuine misunderstandings, or hiding behind the idea that no one can understand us anyway. It means recognizing the boundary between our responsibility and theirs.

Our responsibility is to speak honestly, listen carefully, repair what we can, and remain open to correction. What we cannot do is determine what another person will ultimately make of us. No amount of explanation can completely control the picture of us that exists in someone else's mind. Even the people who know us best will hold an incomplete version. They will misunderstand some things, miss others entirely, and interpret some of our choices through the lens of their own histories, fears, hopes, and experiences. We do exactly the same thing to them.

There is something freeing in accepting this, even though it may initially feel uncomfortable. We can be misunderstood and still know what we meant. We can be disagreed with and still remain thoughtful. We can be challenged without losing confidence in ourselves. We can discover that someone else has a point without deciding that our own experience was false. We can even

allow another person to hold an imperfect picture of us without treating that imperfection as an emergency.

Most of us will probably never stop wanting to be understood, nor should we. Being known by another person is one of the gifts of a close relationship, and there are few experiences more comforting than having someone look at us and say, with sincerity, “I understand.” But love has to be larger than those moments.

A close relationship can survive misunderstanding. It can survive different perspectives and the discomfort of two people looking at the same situation and seeing something different. In fact, the capacity to remain loving and connected through those moments may tell us more about the strength of a relationship than agreement ever could.

Perhaps being deeply loved does not mean someone always sees the world the way we do. Maybe it means the relationship is strong enough to hold the space between two different ways of seeing it.

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