

Transcript of a Role Play

During a training session with Dr. Peter Pearson

A therapist in the Developmental Model training group requested help with a couple named Martha and Matt who had been severely battling for 7 years over how to parent their two kids. The following transcript comes from a demonstration consultation roleplay conducted during the training session.

Martha: He is just so mean, to our kids and to me. It just breaks my heart.

Matt: She'll just let them do whatever they want.

Martha: No, I do not. I'm gonna cry. I'm gonna cry.

Matt: I'm trying to wait like you say — wait for them to cry it out. And I can't take it. You just pick them up and cuddle them.

Martha: No. Everything shows that babies and children need to be loved. We want them to grow up to be nice people.

Matt: They're going to grow up to do whatever they want.

Martha: See what I'm dealing with?

Pete: Is that all that brings you here, is this collision over parenting?

Martha: That's the big one.

Pete: Other than that, is your relationship peaches and cream, rainbows and unicorns, sweetness and light?

Martha: We fight about this every day. I'm really sick of it, too.

Matt: Yeah.

Martha: My family is telling me I should pack up and leave, but I don't want to.

Pete: But other than this, the fighting over the parenting, co-parenting?

Martha: Well, we don't have any other conversations. All we do is run around the kids. It's all about the children.

Pete: Hmm. And there are no other conversations, not much of substance between the two of you?

Martha: Well, it always ends up in a fight.

Pete: Oh. So there's very little dialogue here between the two of you other than fighting over the kids.

Martha: Right. We've just really grown ...

Matt: Far apart.

Pete: Far apart. How long have you guys been together?

Martha: 11 years.

Pete: How old are the kids?

Matt: Four and seven.

Pete: So there's not a lot of other pleasant interaction between the two of you?

Matt: We don't go anywhere. We can't even go on vacation or do anything. There's no one to watch the kids.

Martha: Well, they could go.

Matt: Oh my gosh.

Martha: He just wants all the attention.

Matt: I don't want the attention. I just want well behaved children. This generation now, if we do what she wants they're going to grow up to be little assholes.

Martha: I wish you wouldn't call our kids assholes.

Matt: What do you call them? Angels. Little mean angels.

Martha: No angels, no assholes.

Pete: Let me tell you what I appreciate about you guys so far, in listening to your struggle. And it's really a struggle over your value system. You both care so much about how to raise your kids. You're both so much in integrity, that you will fight for your value system even at the cost of the distance in your marriage. That's how much people will fight for their values. People will fight and die for the values that they believe in.

And in listening to you guys talk, what I hear underneath the collision of values is a kind of loneliness and distance between the two of you. Maybe even a despair because you've been fighting over this for quite a while. And you wonder, can we ever find a way through this, where we can work shoulder to shoulder, together? Not just have a strong marriage, but a strong family. Which I believe you guys care about a lot.

Martha: A lot. Oh, I do.

Pete: I see how strongly you both fight for what you think is right. And that's so important. And it's probably something that's missing in today's society — being willing to fight for what's right and what you believe in instead of choosing expediency or the easy way through. And each of you is paying a high price for living according to your integrity and your value system.

What's missing is finding a way to work together. To have a stronger marriage, a stronger family. Right now it looks like you're having a Civil War in a foxhole. It's you against each other, instead of you against the many pulls that will try to wreck the kids and turn them into device addicted, drug addicted, alcohol addicted... all the temptations that pull kids away from doing the right thing. And that's what you guys care about. It's what you've been fighting about.

So that's what's underneath, as I listen to you guys talk. You've been really polarized for quite a while now.

Martha: Seven years.

Pete: And seven years is a long time to feel lonely. And when it feels like you're not making progress, after a while somebody starts to give up hope. Can we ever get through this? And if there is one emotion that's hard for anybody to tolerate, it's the feeling of hopelessness. When there is no hope, that's when we feel the most isolated, the most despairing, the most like giving up.

But the good news is, even though a part of each of you may have felt hopeless about making progress you're still in there trying to influence each other to try to create a better parenting team so that you can work together on this. That's what I see. And that's a strength you have. You haven't given up hope.

When someone gives up hope, they come in here and they're apathetic and they say, "I don't care anymore." You guys aren't there. No. In spite of seven years of disagreement, maybe there's a part of each of you that can respect that the other person's standing up for what they believe is right. I'm not talking about the content of the arguments. I'm talking about what you might have historically defined as just being a stubborn jerk, and I'm saying maybe what we're talking about is a strength. And if we could find a way to harness the strength of each of you working together, whoa! What kind of team do you think that would create?

Martha: Yeah. If our kids wouldn't play us off against each other.

Pete: Ah. You know an unusual gift parents can give their kids? It's a priceless gift but darn few parents would ever say this to their kids. But what if parents would say to their kids, "Kids, you want to know how to disagree with somebody? You want to know how to argue with somebody? Watch us. And you can watch us argue, disagree, and then come together and repair it. And things are good in the kingdom again."

Martha: That will never happen in our house.

Pete: Think about this. Imagine if you could say to your kids, "Watch how we disagree. Because you are not going to see people disagree very often and find a resolution and come out stronger on the other end." If your kids could actually see that, what would that be like?

Matt: It would be cool. I never saw that.

Pete: You never saw it?

Matt: No.

Pete: You would be breaking a chain. The buck can stop here. Talk about creating a legacy for future generations. What would that be like?

Martha: Fantastic.

Pete: What would that be like for you?

Matt: That would be great, believe me, to have our kids settle down.

Pete: How about if you could work together to make that happen? What would that be like?

Martha: He's not a team player.

Pete: Yet. How about if we add the word "yet"? And see, I respectfully suggest that applies to you as well. What do you think?

Martha: That I'm not a team player?

Pete: Correct. I respectfully suggest it applies to you as well.

Martha: It's just hard for me to go along with the way he wants to ...

Pete: That's not being a team player, that's resentful compliance. I'm talking about being a team player.

Martha: I guess I don't know what that looks like.

Pete: Thank you. And I guess your spouse doesn't know either. What do you think?

Martha: Yeah.

Pete: What do you think?

Matt: I have no idea.

Pete: Thank you. Thank you for ... wow, you guys are really cool. I appreciate your transparency. You're being candid, admitting that all you saw growing up was chaos and conflict. That's not a model. But we're talking now about you guys creating a model where you're together.

Martha: I don't want conflict though.

Pete: No. But you've got it.

Martha: Well, about this one thing but otherwise we don't fight about anything. Just this.

Pete: You might strengthen other parts of your marriage without feeling like you're going to get smothered, overtaken, or lose your identity. That could be interesting.

If you didn't have power struggles, that would be interesting wouldn't it? You guys might even be a world power if you were on the same team. What do you think?

Matt: We could have a good house.

Pete: Good might even be an understatement. What do you think?

Matt: I could imagine it if it were ...

Pete: You know what? You just said the key words. "I could imagine it."

Matt: If it were the way I wanted it to be.

Pete: It won't be easy, will it?

Martha: No.

Pete: No. Would you be interested in learning about that?

Martha: Yeah.

Pete: Yeah. Why? Why would you be interested in learning a better way?

Martha: Because I never wanted to turn out the way my parents were.

Pete: That's a hell of an incentive, isn't it? What else? Why else would you be interested?

Martha: Less fighting. I mean even if we're on the same team, that doesn't mean I'm going his way all the time.

Pete: That's resentful compliance, not a team. That's just knuckling under and hating it. Why would you be interested in creating a stronger team?

Martha: It would be better for our kids.

Pete: Yeah. And you've got them while they're still young and impressionable instead of rebellious teenagers. Then you don't know when they're going to come home. They're acting out. They're rebelling. You're not doing anything as a family. You're not enjoying the strength of a family. You're not imparting the values that you want to impart to them and seeing them grow up in a way that you feel proud of. Both of you.

Do you guys get tired of me saying already in a handful of minutes how much I appreciate what you bring to this marriage? Do I say that too often for you guys?

Martha: No.

Matt: No.

Pete: You know I'm going to make a guess that when you guys first got together there was a lot of sharing appreciation toward each other. "Here's what I like about you honey." "Well here's what I like about you." "And you're so cute when you do this." "And I love it when you do that." Have those appreciations kind of faded away?

Matt: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Pete: Yeah. That's sad, isn't it?

Martha: He doesn't like anything about me now.

Pete: That is really sad. To think he doesn't like anything about you.

You're living with somebody and you like nothing about them. What do you think that's like in the interior of somebody who says they don't like anything about their partner? What do you imagine that would be like on their interior?

Matt: Yeah that sucks.

Pete: It would, wouldn't it?

Matt: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Pete: And I'd say, "I don't believe it's accurate. Do you?"

Matt: No there's nothing. That's ...

Pete: Yeah that's such an awful, globalized, generalized conclusion. My partner likes nothing about me. That's painful to even think about, isn't it? That somebody would live like that. Thinking and believing there's nothing ...

Matt: I feel the same way.

Pete: Do you really?

Matt: Yeah.

Martha: There are things I like about you. I don't like how you parent but I like ...

Pete: Well wait, wait, wait, wait! I'm going to interrupt because a lot of couples in your situation would have trouble accepting compliments from each other.

I'm curious to see how well each of you can accept a compliment or two, or what the hell, maybe even three from the other person. Shall we? Go ahead, please.

Matt: Well, the other day when I was sick and I was laying on that couch, you let me have that day and you didn't give me any crap for that.

Martha: I just felt badly you were sick.

Pete: Say that again: "I just felt badly you were sick."

Martha: Well I did, I just felt bad for you. You were sick. I wanted you to rest.

Pete: Oh wow. Try saying it just one more time. If we say it three times, each time we say it, it goes to a different region of the brain, and we can start to take in the totality of that appreciation.

Martha: I felt bad for you, I wanted to help you.

Pete: And what do you feel when you hear that expression of care?

Matt: Yeah, that's nice.

Pete: That's really nice, isn't it? That's really nice. Wow. Then maybe express one now, because we're going both ways here.

Martha: I think it's my turn.

Pete: Okay.

Martha: I like it that even though we're mostly pissed off at each other you still say goodbye to me before you leave for work and give me a little hug and a kiss. And I appreciate that.

Pete: Let's try that again. Say, "I really appreciate that you ..."

Martha: I do. I look forward to that even though we had another doozy, I can count on you to say goodbye, and that's sometimes the only time we touch during the day. I appreciate that.

Pete: Wow. What do you feel when you hear that?

Matt: I'm glad you noticed. Thank you.

Martha: Yeah. I do.

Pete: And you know what's nice about what you're saying? It's that even in the midst of this tension, there's a part of each of you that can rise above it and find a way to connect. Is that cool or what? You don't get just mired down in the swamp throwing moss or slime at each other. You find a way to rise above it. That's pretty cool, isn't it? You don't let the fight just totally dominate how you feel. It suggests something about each of you.

So. You guys did pretty well on how rapidly you could identify something to appreciate about the other person. And your ability to let it in. Now frankly, a lot of couples who are in distress the way you guys are don't express appreciations and they don't let them in and they just stay stuck. And the distance, the loneliness and the hopelessness increases. And what they model for the kids? "We can't solve problems." Good luck to the kids trying to figure out a way to solve conflicts in their own marriages!

I want to say one thing before I ask you guys the toughest question yet, and it's an appreciation for both of you. Because what you're struggling with rips so many marriages asunder, and it leaves a trail of carnage and wreckage because people can't find a way to move toward each other a little bit. Unfortunately you have experienced what that's like. And you know what it's like when you watch adults

who are unwilling to give an inch, who probably are even unwilling to experiment with how to make things better. They just dig in. Rigid, immovable force. And you know what it's like to be in the middle of that household. It's war.

Martha: Like our house right now.

Pete: And what you saw too many times was two grown-ups who would not give one inch to experiment to see what would happen. And maybe the two of you could experiment. I'm not looking for a solution, I'm just looking for the possibility of doing an experiment to see what happens. Nothing that you're going to be committed to. But an experiment to see what happens, to maybe break a little bit of the log jam, or not.

Matt: As an experiment?

Pete: As an experiment!

I'm going to want to talk to one part of you that still cares, that's willing to see a bigger picture. I'm going to ask you a question, each of you, to see your response. And then if you want I will offer a suggestion of my own. But first I want to see your creativity, your flexibility, and how much you are willing to avoid that pain of the never-ending deadlock.

I'm curious what each of you would do to make one small step toward breaking the log jam for a period of time just to see what happens.

I'm not asking you to give in. I'm only talking about a step. One step. Not unconditional surrender. I'm only talking about one step that each of you could make as a goodwill gesture for some aspect of the parenting where you collide.

I don't care if it's brushing teeth, bed time, what they're having for dinner tonight, who has to pick up what around the house. I'm looking for one small gesture that each of you could make that you think might break a bit of the log jam as a goodwill gesture. What comes to your mind?

Martha: He wants you to support me.

Pete: And what else?

Martha: For me to support him.

Pete: Yes, give me five! Yes, we are on track! We are chugging this train along! Yes! Thank you! So, go first as a way of demonstrating ...

Martha: Do you want me to tell you something?

Pete: Yes, that you would do.

Martha: Oh, not something he would do?

Pete: No, because we're talking about you. Thank you.

Martha: Well I can't support every punishment.

Pete: Well of course you can't.

Martha: But I guess if he takes away their movie time as a punishment, I guess I could support that.

Pete: As a consequence, why don't we call it as a consequence. Or a logical consequence of not doing x, here's a consequence for not doing x. Instead of calling it punishment.

Martha: You're not at our house when it happens.

Pete: All right. Let's call it punishment. So take away TV time. Is that what you are saying?

Martha: That's one of them.

Pete: That's one? There could be others, but let's just go with TV time, okay. So how would you phrase it then? "Honey when you want to ..."

Martha: ... punish the kids by taking away their beloved TV time I will, I can support that instead of letting them go to the other room to watch TV.

Pete: Thank you, Martha! You know what? I cannot tell you how much I appreciate that. You're saying you're willing to support no TV. And we're not talking forever — just for a period of time until we meet again. Terrific. Yeah. Now let's find out what's going to happen over here, shall we?

Martha: Yes. Yes.

Pete: I cannot wait. I cannot wait to hear what he's going to do — go you one better, or not as much.

Think about one thing you could do differently. Something you could change that historically you'd fight about.

Matt: Right.

Pete: So let's think of one thing, shall we?

Matt: Okay.

Pete: Okay. Go ahead.

Matt: Well that sounded good. I don't know.

Pete: I'm waiting for an idea. Listen, would you like some help to come up with an idea?

Matt: Yeah.

Pete: I just want to say something here, just so we don't get into an unnecessary tussle. If Martha suggests a pretty good idea will you avoid saying, "Yes, but"?

Matt: What if it's too big? Hers wasn't that big.

Pete: Well we're going to test it out, but if it's too big, you're going to say, "I can do this much of it." How's that?

Matt: Ah, okay.

Pete: All right? Do you see how we got to work with whatever shows up? Okay.

Matt: You got to scale it.

Pete: Scale it. So okay. Should we get an idea from her, how she would like you to support her until we meet again? Remember that you're not committed forever, okay?

Matt: Okay.

Pete: This is a good will gesture from you. It's offering an olive branch, to break the log jam, and nobody's committed beyond our next meeting. It's only an experiment.

Matt: Okay, okay. All right.

Pete: All right. So you're ready for a suggestion now?

Matt: Okay.

Martha: So I'm going to tell this scenario.

Pete: Okay, something that could happen between now and the next time we meet.

Martha: So you get pissed a lot.

Matt: Yeah.

Martha: And I don't like you giving them punishment when you're so mad. And so if I see you getting really mad if I can just say, "Let me handle this one."

Pete: That's a big one! Oh I don't know. I don't know if he's up to it. Let's see what he says.

Matt: Well what am I going to do, go outside? I mean...

Pete: So in the interest of time we're going to modify it. Actually, let's ask for another one that's not quite so complex. Come up with another one. Because that's too big of a bite out of the apple.

Matt: I'd ... wait, you know I like to put them in the corner.

Pete: The corner?

Matt: Yeah.

Pete: All right. So, until we meet, in the corner for just, what? A few minutes. Okay? What would be a reasonable number of minutes?

Matt: Five minutes.

Pete: Five minutes. Who's going to keep track of the time? The kids or you?

Matt: I will keep track.

Pete: Okay and then when you go to the corner, know what you're going to say? What are you going to say when the time is up, the five minutes are up?

Matt: You can go now.

Pete: And, what else?

Matt: Five minutes is up.

Pete: And what else? There's a key phrase you're going to have to use.

Matt: I don't know.

Pete: I think it's important when you say time's up to add, "I love you." Otherwise, the punishment lingers and they start to see you as the enemy.

Matt: Okay.

Pete: And mean it. And you know something? They're not going to grow up fearing you. They might grow up respecting you, which I think you would like. What do you think?

Matt: I want them to respect me.

Pete: Yeah.

Matt: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Pete: So each of you guys has committed to experiment. Shake hands on it. All right.

Now what do you think, Martha?

Martha: Nicely done.

This transcript is a demonstration roleplay from a training session in the Developmental Model of Couples Therapy training program. To learn more, visit www.CouplesInstitute.com/developmentalmodel.

