Mr. and Ms. Communication. Pub. July, 16, 2013

Isn’t it a wonder that we can communicate at all. First there is what we are thinking we want to say. Then we say something that is an echo of our thoughts. The receiver then hears what they think we are communicating. And finally, laughingly, they think and interpret what they think they heard. All of this happens in the brief seconds of any conversation.

Don’t even mention how the argument about the same topic, two years ago affects what is said and heard. All of it can get so easily distorted.

Of course there’s the background, what you might call unconscious distortions. Maybe your mother used a tone of voice that is on the edge of your awareness, but not quite. Or your father would grimace or stand there in the kitchen just like what is happening now but that stuff is just logged away information that the brain is running programs and filters to clarify the message for our own convenience. Confusing!

Ultimately those few little words can be so lost in all the noise of past and present feelings, distractions and desires that it’s a wonder we get along at all.

Generally we are pretty selfish creatures. It takes a long time to truly understand what love is and communicate this in care for our partner. Oh, we really do love them early on; we just don’t know how self-serving this is.

Eric Erikson tells us that we truly learn about love as we experience the intimacy of early relationships in our 20s and 30s. This intimacy is about getting emotionally and maybe physically vulnerable in front of the other. This is really tough if you don’t know who you are and lack some confidence in yourself.

Early on we don’t really expect love to be so painful, but it is. It’s more than painful, love is destructive. But in the best kind of way. Love forces us to get beyond ourselves and try to experience that vulnerable, risky intimacy we both hope for and are afraid of.

This happens daily in the arena of communication. A couple comes into my office, “we have a communication problem” is their complaint. About halfway through they realize they really just don’t like what the other is saying or doing. Now, recognize, this is a selfishness problem. Loving or coupling is about getting self out of the way and remembering your devotion and passion for the other.

But then that darn communication thing comes up with all that noise we started off with. What’s a couple to do?

Simply put; love first. We do this by listening. You may need to start with the basic tool of “what I hear you saying is…” Practice repeating what you heard to clarify the message. Lots of times we don’t hear it right. Messages get distorted. Especially stay away from blaming. You can do this by making “I” statements, using “I” lots more than “you.” “You” puts people on the defensive and adds resistance to the listening.

Forgive the old saw, but it’s true, you have one mouth and two ears. Listen twice as much as you talk.