

Q&A

Nothing Bad Between Us

By Marlena Fiol, PhD

Question: Why did you write your book?

Answer: It sort of wrote itself, really. I felt compelled to write, to uncover previously hidden, recurring patterns controlling my relationships, and to finally begin to understand and be able to share my journey from brokenness to reconciliation.

Question: You grew up in a Low-German community in a South American country, and your parents were North Americans. How did you think of yourself?

Answer: That depends on the period in my life. Before age 10, while living on the leprosy station my parents founded and surrounded by Low-German Mennonite service volunteers, I considered myself a Low-German Mennonite. When I lived in Asunción, I belonged to a German Mennonite church and identified with that church community. But when I began attending a Catholic Spanish Paraguayan high school, I held both identities, pretending to be German Mennonite in one setting but more Paraguayan in the other. Now? I've lived in the States since returning in 1972. I can still easily morph into my earlier identities when I'm around people from those ethnic communities. But mostly I think of myself as a North American.

Question: Do you consider yourself a Mennonite? If not, what is your relationship with the Mennonite church today?

Answer: I tried to be a devout Mennonite when I was young. I loved the music, but at the same time I hated the rules and what felt like repression to me. I still have the Bible I owned when I was 9. It's full of underlined, highlighted, and starred sections, especially in the Book of Revelation, a book that deals with the destruction of the earth as we now know it and the Great White Throne Judgment when all the unsaved are judged and condemned to damnation. At the tender age of 9, I was clearly scared to death about burning in hell, but I was also the most rebellious of my father's eight children. I rebelled against, him, the church, and the whole community. By the age of 18, I was banned from participating in church services because of my transgressions. So, bottom line, I was a confused kid, and that confusion played itself out in some pretty painful and bizarre ways later in my life.

My relationship with the Mennonite church today? I have huge regard for what Mennonites do around the world to improve the lives of people in need. A major vehicle for that work is the Mennonite Central Committee, a global, nonprofit organization committed to providing love and compassion for all through relief, development and peace efforts. It's a truly remarkable organization that is the recipient of most of my husband's and my charitable donations. And few things touch my heart more deeply today than to sit in a circle of Mennonites, singing those glorious hymns in four-part harmony.

Question: You speak of transgressions. How do you define sinfulness?

Answer: Again, that depends on the chapter in my life. As a child, anything fun seemed like it was a sin. Like listening to lively music or daydreaming, wearing makeup or shaving my legs. Sometimes I wasn't even sure why something was a sin, like the V-shaped blouse I wanted to sew for myself. Mom told me that this was forbidden because the "V" line pointed down to my vaginal area and it would surely present a temptation for boys. At the age of 9, I didn't know what she was talking about. But because it was forbidden, I wanted it even more. Today? For me I think the greatest sin would be to refuse to keep growing and exploring the depths of what's possible in my life.

Question: Elsewhere you've talked about brokenness being an essential step toward wholeness and healing. Are you saying that healing is not possible without the anguish of brokenness?

Answer: My husband and I often wish we could find healing and growth without the pain. Don't we all? We all seem to love the status quo and prefer just about anything to failing or losing, even if the status quo isn't working so well for us. But like the late great Leonard Cohen wrote, cracks are how the light gets in. My story is just one case in point. My father and I had what one would have to call a tumultuous relationship. We hurt each other a lot. After Dad disowned me and the Mennonite church banned me from playing the organ and singing in the choir, I escaped to the U.S. and hid in a safe and stale marriage. When that ended, I fell into a brief disastrous second marriage to an abusive man. My father's journey was equally rough. He began as a willful and powerful hero who seemed invincible to the world and to me, and yet he ended a broken man crying out that he didn't deserve the love of his children. At the intersection of our brokenness, vulnerability and healing between us became possible.

I'm not saying healing is not possible without brokenness, but I'm afraid most of us are too stuck in our dysfunctional ruts to step out of them without the pain we endure if we stay.

Question: The title of your book, *Nothing Bad Between Us*, refers to something you and your father said to each other every time you parted for the last fifteen years of his life. What is the significance of this phrase and your repetitions of it?

Answer: It was 1988 the first time we said that phrase to each other. We sat side by side on my folks' worn dusty-pink sofa with squeaky springs that sagged in the middle. We just sat there, silent. I grabbed his hand—his hand had big, big knuckles and thick veins running across it, like lots of crisscrossing dark blue rivers. In that moment, I understood how far we'd come, my father and I. "Doa ess nuscht tsweschen ons (there is nothing bad between us)," I said in our native Plautdietsch. "Ne, doa ess nuscht tweschen ons," my father repeated. After that, we spoke those words to each other at every goodbye, a mutual affirmation of the reconciliation between us.

Question: You are now with someone you refer to as your soulmate, and you have written about "that skin thing" that you and Ed experience. Can you describe that?

Answer: I wish I could. That would be the most profound writing of my life. I believe it was 1995. Ed and I had been together for four years. We were just beginning to allow ourselves to be fully seen by the other, a scary thing for both of us at the time. One morning, as we were lying next to each other, he looked at me and whispered, “Do you feel that?”

“I can’t tell where my skin ends and yours begins,” I said. What a wonderful experience of deep peace.

Today our shorthand code for the experience is “that skin thing.” Most mornings we’ve been together since that night many years ago, our bodies do that skin thing where there is nothing between us. The experience has expanded to two or more hours each morning before rising. It’s become one of the most sacred parts of our life. It’s not sexual, or even a sensual. In fact, it’s more spiritual than physical. It often takes us into a serene state of floating timelessly, spacelessly, together as one.

One of our spiritual teachers, Richard Rohr, reminds us that our ultimate enlightenment will lead us to an experience of all creation as one. And that vulnerable openness to another might just be the key to growth and healing. When Ed and I do that skin thing, we’re often graced with tiny glimpses into the bliss that such an experience might entail.

Of course, it’s risky to live that undefended. It means each of us could actually be injured by the other. It seems that Ed and I were finally willing to take that risk, allowing the opposite possibility: that we each might know the other as we each longed to be known.

I think that when I give a long-winded answer like this, it means I really don’t have any idea how to put into language what I’m trying to say. Like I said, I don’t really know how to describe “that skin thing!”

Question: Do you have any regrets?

Answer: I regret the pain I have caused others on my journey. I don’t regret the pain I myself have experienced. It’s been an important catalyst for growth and healing in my life.