

Slow and Steady Settles a Fight

You know how it goes. One minute you're hanging out with your partner, having a great time, and the next minute you're in a fight. You feel as much in the dark as a police officer who arrives at the scene of an accident and asks, "What happened?"

The key to finding out "What happened?" is to slow everything down. Way down. If you ride your bike, you're going to see a lot more of the neighborhood than if you drive, right? And if you go on foot, you'll see even more. When you're trying to untangle one of those 'out of nowhere' arguments, the first thing to do is get out of the car and walk.

I got a chance to learn this lesson all over again in August, when my husband, stepdaughter, and I were driving up Highway 97, coming home from Sunriver, Oregon.

"You know what I'd like to do?" I said to my husband. "Get off at Goldendale and just drive down Main Street and take a look."

Why such an interest in a little seen-better-days farming town in southern Washington? Because my mother spent the best days of her childhood there, with her beloved Uncle Clarence and Aunt Emma. And I spent many happy hours of my childhood listening to her tell stories about visiting them. But I'd never seen the town.

The Goldendale exit appeared on the left, but we whizzed right past it. And the next thing I knew, my husband was mad at me. But why? All I said was:

"That was the turn off."

"You wanted me to turn there? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I thought you knew."

"We talked about it, but we didn't decide for sure."

And so it went for another five minutes, around and around. We had our wires crossed, that we established pretty firmly. But I still couldn't figure out why John was mad. Until he said:

"I didn't know I was supposed to turn. Don't get mad at me because I can't read your mind!"

And there you have it—the trigger of the whole argument. John thought I was mad when I was really just taken by surprise. Could be how the message was sent or how it was received. It doesn't really matter. What matters is to figure it out. To figure out what happened at that moment, no second, when one person felt hurt, dismissed, or misunderstood.

Nine times out of ten, the trigger will be a simple misunderstanding. But you won't find it if you're in a rush. You've got to get out of the car and walk, so you can really see the landscape.

Here are some things you can say to slow down a conversation:

"Let's try to understand what just happened."

"I can see you're upset and I want to understand why."

"I think we've just had a misunderstanding. Why don't you give me your take on it and then I'll tell you mine?"

And maybe the best way of all to slow down a conversation is to just listen. Resist that urge to jump in at the end of a sentence, or even earlier! Set aside that need to defend yourself. You really don't have to work that hard! If you slow way down, eventually the trigger will reveal itself.

We turned around at the next exit and went back to Goldendale. We parked the car and went for a stroll down Main Street. It was a little run down, but we could still pick up the atmosphere my mom always talked about. We could sense what it was like on a Saturday in the 1940's, when it bustled with farmers and merchants. There's always a lot to see when you take it real slow.

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