

Sabine Bösel · Roland Bösel

# Lend Me Your Ear and I'll Give You My Heart



The path to a happy love relationship

**Orac**

Sabine Bösel ★ Roland Bösel

**Lend me your ear  
and I'll give you  
my heart**

The path to a happy  
love relationship

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*This book is dedicated to all those couples  
we were privileged to work with as therapists,  
and from whom we were able to learn so much.*

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 **Thank You**

# A Matter of the Heart

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Each couple has what it needs to be happy. This conviction is one of the most important foundations of our work as couples therapists. Nowadays, partners have too little contact with each other and don't invest enough time to get to know each other profoundly. Many of us think love is a matter of luck.

The most important decision of our lives was that we stuck it out despite the many hurdles we encountered. We've been a couple for the past forty years and have been working with couples for the past thirty. For about twenty years, we have been integrating the Imago Method into our work.

We feel very closely connected with Imago, as it comes in right at the point where our society lags in terms of appreciation and mindful communication in relationships. The methods and practices we offer we have tried on ourselves and still maintain; if you stick to them, it's a win-win for you, your relationship, and your children.

This book offers more than just scenes from our relationship. There are many beautiful and challenging love stories about the lives of others, meant to show how to overcome obstacles and let love unfold. We changed the names of the people concerned—and if you see yourself in



their stories, it's pure coincidence and only proves that you are not alone in your problems.

Appreciation is another foundation of our work. We think it's wonderful that you are taking the time to read this book and that you want to do something for yourself and your relationship. We invite you to be appreciative of yourself and the important people in your life; this is especially true for your parents. Love relationships have a lot to do with our history, and specifically with our parents. However, this is not about blaming them for your present-day actions. We look into the past only to learn and grow.

Dear men and women, dear couples, regardless of your sexual orientation: our offer to provide you with the basis for a successful relationship and our many suggestions for how to achieve it—these come from the heart. We wish you many productive hours with this book, and the courage and persistence that will lead your love to a beautiful and happy future.

*Sabine and Roland Bösel*

# 1. Lend Me Your Ear And I'll Give You My Heart

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A visit to the land of the other

A long, busy day draws to its end. Sabine has studied with the children all afternoon, gone to see the doctor with the little one and done the shopping for the birthday party the next weekend. When the children are finally in bed, she still has to tidy the kitchen, hoping that Roland will be home soon.

Around ten o'clock, Roland comes home, obviously exhausted, and throws his bag into a corner.

"I'm completely done in, today was simply too much. I'm going to watch some tv."

"Come on, really? You want to watch tv now? But I so wanted to tell you about my day!"

"I'm exhausted - do you really think this is the best time for me to sit down and talk?"

In the end, they do sit down together with a glass of wine, and Sabine begins to talk. Roland listens, yawning from time to time. Soon she drops a cue that prompts Roland to talk about himself. He gets into his stride and ends up telling her about his whole day. Sabine, who has not finished her story, is becoming more unfocused by the minute.

"I thought you wanted to watch tv, and now you're telling me everything about your day."

"I thought you wanted us to talk."

"True, but I hadn't even finished, and now you're telling me your whole story."

"Actually, I didn't feel like talking, but I still made an effort. And now I'd like to tell you something, and you aren't listening!"

Roland goes to the kitchen to get a glass of water. "In the kitchen there are crumbs all over the place. You know I don't like that." "Now that's the last straw! First you don't want to talk, then you don't listen, and now you're accusing me of not doing the chores. Haven't you noticed how clean the apartment is? And you complain about a few crumbs!"

"And what about you? I come home completely done in, wanting to relax a little, and you absolutely have to talk. I'm talking all day anyway."

## A Voyage of Discovery in Each Other's Country

According to a study, couples usually spend no more than two to four minutes a day discussing personal concerns. The rest of the time is spent exchanging various types of information regarding organizational matters, arguments, or power struggles. So, it's not surprising that there are so many divorces and separations, even though we've known for many years now about the positive effect of active listening, using "I" messages in conversation, and communicating with respect and appreciation. In professional careers, these insights acquired through communications research became standard practice long ago. But what about love relationships?

Carla and Frederic are a couple. Whenever she asked him to do something, and he answered, "Sure, in a minute," they argued. The reason? In Carla's country, "Sure, in a minute" means, "right away." But Frederic never fulfills her requests "right away." In his country, "Sure, in a minute" has a different meaning. At their therapy session, he said: "I thought you knew when I say that, it's my polite way of saying, 'Not now. I'll definitely do it, but only when it suits me.'" Two different worlds, two different customs.

It's the many little arguments like these that cloud everyday life. How often does our partner react strangely or overreact to what we consider an innocuous statement, so that we are left wondering? But very seldom do we investigate the background for such a reaction. So, these situations are repeated again and again without being solved. In some cases, the misunderstandings become so vast that a crisis is inevitable.

Love is not a state but an activity. You don't have to leave it to chance whether you're lucky in love or not. You can take it into your own hands by actively shaping your relationship. These steps include engaging with your partner and trying to understand his or her world. In this book, you'll find many suggestions. Here is one of the most important: Take a trip to your partner's country.

### **Relationship tourism**

Just imagine you're taking a trip to a foreign country. How would you go about it? You'd try to make yourself familiar with the culture, language, and customs of that country. You don't want to act like a bull in a china shop or get in trouble with the law. In your country, if you carelessly drop a candy wrapper on the ground, chances are no one will react. If, however, you do the same thing in Singapore, you can be severely punished; different countries, different rules.

It's the same in your relationship. Your partner had different life experiences and learned different behavior patterns and views of life. Your partner had different parents and different caregivers than you did. That's how his or her character formed, distinctively and individually, just as your character is your own and no one else's.

If you don't want to act like a bull in a china shop in your partner's country, then why not take a voyage of discovery and learn about the culture, language, and customs? As we saw with Carla and Frederic, it's not a given that every word and behavior has the same meaning to all people. Why is that? Let's look at their background.

Carla came from a family that always made lots of plans, but no one ever took the first step to carry them out. Carla suffered through this, so, she subconsciously decided:

When I grow up, if there is something that needs doing, I'll do it right away.

In Frederic's family, every plan was carried out to the last detail. Each family member had to help, and even as a child, he had little free time and hardly any breaks. He longed just to let himself go. He discovered that if he said to his mother, "Sure, right away," he could at least take a short breather. He has maintained that behavior to this day.

### **Pushing the curtain aside**

The problem with conflicts and crises lies not in the issues themselves, but in the fact that they break the connection we have to one other. We wish that the other person would eventually turn into someone we'd like him or her to be, or that he or she would finally stop hurting us. But that doesn't lead us anywhere. Such demands only lead to broken communication.

Imagine two people sitting opposite each other, but there is a curtain drawn between them, blocking their view of each other. They could move the curtain aside to re-establish contact, but they don't do it. This is what happens in breakups. They don't occur because one partner has a problem with the other one, but because they have lost contact with each other. That's the fundamental realization you need to move forward. Lend each other your ear, even if sometimes it isn't easy.

Martina and Gregor went to an Imago Couples Workshop, and a few days later to couples therapy. They had already set a divorce date, but wanted to understand why things had gone the way they did. They had three children and wanted to navigate the breakup successfully. They wanted to utilize the time before the divorce properly,

or, as they said, spend the time having constructive conversations.

At the beginning of the session, both were quite tense, angry at each another, and desperate. We asked them to engage in a dialogue with each other. Martina expressed her great fear of divorce and of being treated unfairly. Gregor was irritated at first, but was eventually willing to listen. When Martina spoke about her childhood, how her father always demeaned her and she always felt like a fifth wheel, Gregor's eyes filled with tears because he now saw his wife in a different light. The connection was restored, and at that moment, there was no talk of divorce.

Half an hour later, we asked Martina to listen to Gregor. He told of his fear that Martina would throw him out if they kept arguing. That situation reminded him of his childhood, when he was sent to boarding school because his parents had major conflicts. There was no place for him in the family, and he still felt the same way.

"All I want is to feel safe with you and have my place. I don't even understand how the subject of divorce came up."

To travel through the other person's country and keep discovering new things requires a lot of attentiveness and openness to the fact that something surprising might arise at any time. Even if you have been married for twenty years or more, there's still a lot to learn about each other. We often think we know our partner well. On the other hand, we believe the other one knows what our needs are without having to say a word about them. Some people even think that not knowing your partner's wishes is evidence of a lack of love. But that's one of the biggest mistakes.

## **Dialogue as a Bridge to Your Partner**

Talking to each other in everyday life can have many facets. Sometimes you listen more closely, other times less so, and you've probably caught yourself letting the other one talk while your mind is somewhere totally different. Our world is full of communication. We're constantly giving and receiving information. So, we think: "Oh, I just can't listen anymore, I've already heard enough!" Or: "How many times do I have to say the same thing over again?"

While our partner tells us something, we are already thinking: do I agree with that? How can I argue against it? How can I answer? What story from my own life does that remind me of? In effect, we are only listening with half an ear. We're not visiting the other person's country, but remaining in our own while we look for answers. So, we're missing a lot of valuable information that could bring us closer to our partner's country.

Especially when we're distressed or when it's a difficult topic, it's hard to listen attentively. As therapists, we then ask our couples to be fully aware when attending to one another. We offer them a couples dialogue. Similar to a visit to a foreign country, the dialogue ensures the necessary openness and appreciation to get closer to one another. The dialogue is designed so that only one person speaks at a time, and the other one pays attention, without assessing what was said or considering an answer.

### **Invitation to the dialogue**

Actively shaping your relationship means that you keep extending invitations to each other: "Please lend me your ear for fifteen minutes, I want to tell you something." Or the other way around: "You look worn out. Do you want to tell me about your day?" Maybe you're thinking that's what you do regularly, anyway. But honestly, when your partner

starts talking, do you really listen? Or do you let her talk for a while and then say something yourself, without really responding to your partner's story? Of course, that's also an option, but be aware of the fact that at the time, you weren't actually visiting your partner's country. You might have heard about her experiences, but not about what she felt and why she reacted this way, and not differently.

## **Having a dialogue**

The most important thing in a couples dialogue is that talking, listening, understanding, and empathy are all separate from each other. As mentioned earlier, active listening, speaking in "I" messages, appreciation, and acknowledgment are the critical elements of communication. In couples dialogue, all of these elements are united.

The principle is as follows: the two partners sit opposite each other, as close as possible, and look into each other's eyes. It's agreed that one person speaks first, while the other listens. After a while, they can switch. The person speaking talks about an occasion, a problem, an irritation, a happy experience, or whatever topic arises. As a host in their country, they make sure that their counterpart understands everything well. The person listening is the attentive visitor. Their job is to listen and "mirror," that is, to repeat what was heard as precisely as possible.

The advantage of separating talking and listening is that one doesn't have to repeatedly change channels. The listening person only has to be in receiving mode. The speaker is solely in sending mode, which is a relief, as they each only have to concentrate on one thing at a time.

That doesn't mean that they have carte blanche. The person speaking is not allowed to verbally attack the



listener. They must be aware of being the host, and must use a language that the guest can understand and accept. The listener, on the other hand, should keep all their wisdom, interpretations, ideas, and adversities to themselves. They should be aware of being a guest in another country, where they can get to know other cultures and customs, maybe even learn something about themselves and break down their prejudices.

Having conscious couples dialogues takes a little practice. And when the issues are difficult ones, for example, when you are fighting or are in the midst of a serious crisis, you will probably need the assistance of experienced therapists to succeed in dialogue. We've provided some exercises for you at the end of this chapter, with which you can try out the dialogue.

## **The power of dialogue**

An essential part of Imago Couples Dialogue is active listening by repeating as precisely as possible what the other person has said. If you say to your wife: "I'm so frustrated that you have to go away for three days," and your wife says: "I heard you say that you're frustrated that I have to go away for three days," she mirrored you perfectly.

You might think it's a pretty strange way of speaking. Probably everyone feels the same way, the first time they are confronted with the principle of active listening. And it certainly would be strange if you asked your husband: "Darling, where did you park our car?" and your husband mirrored you by saying: "I heard you asking where I parked our car. Did I get you?" Such a situation requires nothing but a straightforward answer.

But if you want to address an important topic, then mirroring is an excellent tool for improving understanding and closeness. Brain research offers a good explanation of why this works. Researchers have discovered that someone being mirrored finds it easier to relax. It provides security and creates trust so that one is willing to dive deeper into the topic.

When Verena and Peter came to our office, Peter had severe burnout syndrome. He was head of a large company and thought it would be good idea to do couples therapy, as an entire workshop would take up too much time that he didn't have. At the session, we asked Verena to mirror him. Peter protested. "That takes too much precious time; besides, I'm the one paying the bill here, and what good is it if someone just repeats what I say?"

Finally, he agreed, and Verena mirrored what she heard while looking into his eyes. "Did I get all of that?" she asked at the end. "You heard most of it," Peter said. "I also said that I have the feeling my time is just running through my fingers, and with all the work, there's nothing for me. All I do is function." Verena mirrored his words, and suddenly, Peter's eyes widened. "I don't know why, but suddenly I feel incredibly sad, and I'm afraid to really feel it," Verena mirrored. "You got me," Peter said, "and now that I've said that, I also feel ashamed." He was silent for a while, and then tears suddenly ran down his cheeks. "I have no idea why I'm crying," he said, "but it feels good. I haven't cried for thirty years."

Weeks later, Peter told us that only through Verena's attentive listening did he feel the security he needed. It was the only way he could unpack his deepest feelings. Peter was so impressed by the powerful effect of mirroring that he even introduced this technique to his company.