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Why do fools  
fall in Love?

*Experiencing the Magic, Mystery, and Meaning  
of Successful Relationships*

With a Foreword by John M. Gottman

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# Getting a *Kick* Out of You

## The Jazz Taoist Key to Love

Peter Fraenkel



**T**o answer the question, What do you believe the key to relationship success is? I draw on jazz and Taoism. Although these two cultural traditions originated at different points in history and on different sides of the globe, they share much common wisdom. Both jazz and Taoism revel in spontaneity, in seeing things afresh, in immersing oneself in the creative moment, and in paring down life to its simplest core. And both apply this approach to life in relationships.

Let's take jazz first. I think the Cole Porter song "I Get a Kick Out of You" sums up the key to happy relationships.<sup>1</sup> We need to see and deeply enjoy the uniqueness of our partners—to really let go of self-involvement for a moment or two and enter fully into

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experiencing the other, our partner. Lao Tze, the founder of Taoism, put it this way: "From wonder into wonder, existence opens." We need to be filled with a child-like open wonder as we see our partners being themselves.

I'm not talking about appreciating the big moments—our partner's major successes and achievements in the world or great surprise gifts to us. These are nice but not essential. I'm talking about the small gestures: how they roll over in the morning when they first wake up; how they look when they're caught off-guard, sneaking some ice cream from the fridge (or wrapping one of those great surprise presents); how they frown when they hear bad news—even how they cry when they're sad. These are moments when they're just being themselves, not focused on us. These moments are so important because they give us a chance to see who our partners are, apart from what they do for (or to) us.

It's really important that we get a kick out of how our partners handle both the emotional highs *and* the lows. The sign that you're getting a kick out of the lows might be finding yourself laughing gently and kindly when your partner is upset about something. He or she might look up quizzically, with a scrunched forehead, maybe even with an expression on the way to hurt, and say, "What are you laughing at?" And your honest answer is, "I'm not laughing at you, honey. It's just that you're so cute, even when you're upset." The impulse to hug him or her shortly follows.

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## eorge and Barbara Bush

Professional, technical concepts such as *affect regulation*, *physiological soothing*, *conflict containment*, and *communication skills* are important, and I work with couples every day to develop these abilities. But it's all made much easier if each partner fundamentally *digs* the other—in the jazz, bebop sense. And that means digging the whole person—moods, reactions, and all. We're simply less reactive and frightened by our partner's moods when we see all of these as part of what gives us a kick.

Another important professional concept I value in my work with couples is the need for partners to achieve *intersubjectivity*. Simply put, this means they recognize and treat each other as truly *an other* consciousness and person rather than as *an object* to be manipulated into gratifying their own needs. This basically comes down to seeing the other with a sense of wonder—getting a kick from them as they are, free of distortions based on who we want (or fear) them to be.

The capacity to view one's partner with open wonder both requires and contributes to *acceptance*—another important concept in the contemporary couple therapy literature. In fact, getting a wonder-full kick from our partners often happens when we suddenly see and appreciate ways in which they are different from us.

GEORGE: Love is never saying you have to be serious.

BARBARA: Did you make that up all by yourself?

—LIFE, February 1999

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When I speak of wonder, I don't mean awe. I reserve the experience of awe for feelings about God. And even though I believe that each of us is one of God's works, it's a bit hard to walk around in awe of your partner—hard

on the neck muscles to look up all the time! Wonder (and its jazz affiliate, the kick) is an experience we can have looking (metaphorically speaking) straight ahead at our peer partner, on our level. Although it is important to respect our partners, respect without the wonder is like jazz without the swing, a lemon without the juice.

Let's face it. There are a heck of a lot of people we respect, but we wouldn't want to sniff their heads or jump in the sack with them!

While I'm on the topic of sniffing heads: there is no question that physical attraction is important in initially drawing us to our partners and in keeping that kick alive. But I'm far less impressed with the importance of the classic beauty criteria than I am with attraction on the intimate, sensual level—how our partners feel to touch, how they smell, how their mouths taste to kiss. Whatever researchers uncover about the role of pheromones and other biochemical messengers in attraction and love, on the experiential level I believe that digging the smell of our partners, and the taste of them, is a basic aspect of bonding.

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Indeed one of the great shames of modern society is what I call the homogenization of beauty, that is, the belief that everyone must look like the latest fashion models to be considered beautiful, just so a bunch of companies can convince us we need their products. Aside from being terribly unfair to people whose body types couldn't possibly fit into the sterile forms of today's fashions, it means we may miss seeing the ways in which our partners are truly beautiful. Take a good, soft look at your partner and at yourself. Aren't you both beautiful already, in your own way?

Once you find that partner who gives you a kick, the big question is, How do you keep love alive? First it helps if your partner gets a kick out of you, too! I believe that people need to find someone who loves them equally as much. One partner doggedly pursuing the other or trying too hard to convince the other to love, even if it results in marriage, puts the relationship at risk of falling apart once the usual pressures of life set in. Although relationship process is important, the person we pick (and who we are to them) is important, too. I can't imagine investing the time to learn problem-solving skills with someone who doesn't give me a kick!

I don't believe there's only one person in the world for each of us. The number of possible partners with whom we can get a kick depends on our general openness to life, to variety in experience, to wonder. Those with a narrower range of what excites them may find it harder to locate that special someone. Those with an aptitude for seeing the beauty in a number of people may have more

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possible partners but a tougher time sustaining an exclusive commitment. If you find yourself getting “kicked” right and left by the wonderfulness of others and then dreaming about what life could be like with them, turn back toward your partner; try to rediscover small and wonderful things about him or her, and work on the issues and tensions that block your ability to enjoy that person.

A big part of what keeps love alive is that these two people who get kicks from each other also get shared kicks out of some of the same things in the world around them. Although research would suggest that the differences are not as important as how couples talk about them, I believe that there needs to be a baseline of common interests, things appreciated and enjoyed, and sensitivities, values, and concerns that tie partners together. Otherwise, it’s hard to find reasons to spend time together and hard to imagine building a life together.

I believe that when we can get a kick from our partners and see them with a sense of wonder, every little thing they do is a link to our deeper appreciation of the universe.

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NOTE

1. Although Cole Porter was not a jazz composer per se, it’s the versions of his song by Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra that come to mind.