

Filling the Bucket:

An Opportunity for Love and Connection

An American Classic: About a hundred years ago, William Sydney Porter wrote a short story that was destined to become an American classic. It was about a young couple, Jim and Della. Although they were very poor, they were also very much in love. With the coming of Christmas, each wanted to give the other a gift that would not only reflect their love, but would also be deeply appreciated.

Della decides to buy Jim a gold chain for his most prized possession – a pocket watch given to him by his father. Meanwhile, Jim decides to buy Della a set of tortoise shell combs for her knee-length hair. To pay for their gifts, Della has her long hair cut off and sold to make a wig and Jim sells his watch. Although they are disappointed that their gifts can't be used, each is deeply touch by the gift they received – the gift of love. (The author was better know as *O. Henry* and his story was, [*The Gift of the Magi.*](#))

A Simple Difference: Many couples start out like Jim and Della. They love each other. They look forward to being together. They delight in each other's company. However, over time due to miscommunication and misunderstandings, they start to drift apart. Opportunities to connect are missed. Lives are lived in parallel. Divorce seems to be the only option. But, this doesn't happen with all couples. There are those whose relationships continue to thrive and flourish. In fact, researchers have now identified specific patterns that differentiate these two groups of couples (see the work of [John Gottman](#) and [Susan Johnson](#)).

One simple difference that has been identified between these two groups involves complaints or more specifically, the pattern of sending and receiving complaints. Many couples that drift apart often have a sending and receiving pattern that consists of what is called a ***Harsh Start-Up*** followed by ***Closed to Influence***. The sending partner will often start by angrily saying something like, "*How could you do something so stupid? Are you some kind of idiot?*" To this the receiving partner might say something like, "*Yeah ... I must've been an idiot to get involved with you.*" This pattern is a long way from the shared gifts of Jim and Della.

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A more effective sending and receiving pattern consists of a ***Soften Start-Up*** coupled with ***Open to Influence***. The sending partner might say something like, “*When you didn’t put gas in the car, I wound up being late for my appointment. I was so frustrated with you.*” To this, an effective responding partner might say something like, “*I’m so sorry. I meant to get gas for the car. I just got so busy that I forgot ... I won’t let that happen again.*” This second pattern is likely to keep the partners growing together.

Despite divorce statistics, the kind of love shared by Jim and Della can be sustained.

An Example: About fifteen years ago, my wife, Mary Jo, and I bought our house. It was a delightful old Victorian that was even older than O. Henry’s story. In our kitchen, there was an old side-by-side refrigerator. Because the freezer compartment was so narrow, we used a small plastic bucket to store ice for drinks.

One day, I opened the freezer compartment to get some ice for a drink. When I reached into the bucket, it was empty. When I mentioned this to Mary Jo, she said, “Yes ... I know.” There was something about the way she said it that let me know something was wrong. So, I asked her. She said that although I was the one who used virtually all of the ice, she was the one who almost always filled the bucket.

So, I asked, “Does that mean you want me to fill it?” She said, “Yes. And do you want to know why?” I said, “I don’t need to know. I can just do it.” She persisted, “But I want you to know.” Sensing that this was important, I said, “OK ... why?” She paused before saying, “You are the one who uses the ice. But, I’m the one who gets it. Because you don’t, and I do ... I’ve started to feel *disrespected and taken for granted.*”

When I heard those words and saw her expression, I was completely surprised. It had never occurred to me. It was completely off my radar. It was never my intention to disrespect or take my wife for granted. However, once I understood what the empty bucket meant to her, I could never see it in the same way. From that day on, I was the one who generally filled the bucket.

During the next month when filling the bucket, I often thought that what I was doing was an expression of my love. I know that if I had simply started filling the bucket without knowing what it meant to her, it would have been an empty gesture. However, I did know what it meant to her. So, whenever I found the bucket empty, I'd remembered that I loved her and I'd fill it.

Filling the Bucket

“The meaning of things lies not in the things themselves,
but in our attitude towards them.”

--Saint-Exupery

1. **Soften Start-Up:** When you present your concern take these four steps:
 - a. **Prepare:** Before you talk with your partner, two things are important: **Be Resourceful:** You will be far more successful if you approach your partner with love and compassion instead of anger and frustration. **Be Clear:** You need to be clear about your intention and goal. You'll be more effective if you focus on informing your partner instead of punishing him or her.
 - b. **Introduce:** Clear a space to talk by introducing your desire to talk. You might say something like, “I have something that I'd like to talk to you about. Is this a good time?” If it is then go to the next part. If it not, find out when would be a good time and schedule it.
 - c. **Focus on behavior:** Let your partner know what he or she is doing or not doing that concerns you. *“Although you are the one who uses ice in your drinks, you almost never fill the ice bucket.”*
 - d. **Share the Meaning:** Once you've let your partner know what your concerned about. Let him or her know what their behavior means to you. *“When you don't fill the bucket, I feel disrespected and taken for granted.”*

2. **Open to Influence:** When your partner lets you know that he or she needs to discuss a concern.
 - a. **Assess Your Availability:** Timing is very important. If your partner let's you know that he or she needs to talk, assess your availability. If you know that you're not in a receptive mood, let your partner know that and when you might be available. For example you might say, “I'm feeling really stressed out right now. What about giving me an hour or so? Then we can talk.”

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- b. **Seek to Understand:** View your partner's concern as *a gift to be opened*. You can do this by listening to your partner as he or she tells you about his or her concern. Focus on understanding not only the content of what is being said but also the emotions being expressed.
 - c. **Identify Overlap:** Look for any overlap between your partner's position and your own. *Both my wife and I would agree that the ice bucket was empty, that over 90% of the time that she filled the bucket, and that I was the one who used most of the ice.*
 - d. **Express Difference:** Once you've identified overlap, acknowledge any difference. *For my wife the empty bucket meant that I was taking her for granted. Although it wasn't my intention, it did reflect my lack of awareness.*
3. **Integrate the Pattern:** To integrate this pattern into your relationship, give yourself a month to practice it. With enough practice, it will become second nature to you
- a. **Review Pattern:** Review the process with you partner so that you're both on the same page.
 - b. **List Complaints:** In order to practice the pattern, make a list of small complaints that you and your partner can practice.
 - c. **Alternate Roles:** Select a complaint and alternate sending and receiving complaints with your partner.
 - d. **Discuss Results:** After each round of sending and receiving, discuss the results with your partner so that each of you can improve your skills.

Discussion: Although the primary focus of this article has been on intimate relationships, it is also applicable to many ongoing relationships – friends, colleagues, business associates, etc.

For example, a few years ago my friend, John demonstrated this pattern to me. When John and I would get together, we would often tease each other. At that time, I had gotten into a pattern of teasing him about being a little over weight. However, one day he said, "I know that you mean well, and that you want to help me. But what you're doing isn't. In fact, it discourages me." Once he told me that it bothered him, I never did it again. I truly viewed John's complaint as a gift. It not only preserved our relationship, but also led to my being able to be a better friend.

In Conclusion: In the future when you either need to express a concern or you need to listen to one, I invite you to *view it as gift - a gift of love or friendship*. Because in sharing your complaint, you are showing your investment in the relationship. You're helping to inform the other in how to be a better partner or friend. When you're open to the other, you're able to find out more about what to do, or not do, to express your love or friendship. Like the couple in the O. Henry story, this pattern is not only an effective way to deal with conflict; it is also a wise approach to preserving and enhancing your love.

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