

Letting Go May Be The Best Option

by Rebecca Stanwyck, LCSW

July 2012

One of my favorite concepts from John Gottman's book, "The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work" is that in every marriage or relationship there are a certain number of problems which cannot be solved. He says "happy" couples have determined which of their problems are solvable, and solved them, while simply accepting, or learning to work around, the unsolvable problems. I've found this principle can be applied to life in general.

When I introduce this idea in counseling, there's often resistance from my clients to the notion that maybe they won't be able to solve all of their problems, which I completely understand. It feels like you're quitting, or giving up, and for some of us that's simply unacceptable, maybe even un-American. I heard one client pronounce recently, "I firmly believe we can solve any problem we put our minds to."

Drawing on my training in mindfulness, I may suggest to my clients that they think in terms of "we can't solve this problem *right now*." This seems more palatable to them, as it does to me. But what does it really mean to accept that a problem is unsolvable right now - are you simply back-burnering it, only to re-visit it later? And how will that help?

Here are **four possible outcomes to accepting/letting go of an "unsolvable" problem**:

1. The problem will go away. This of course is what we all hope for, but it rarely happens.
2. We will change the way we view the problem, which allows it to be re-defined as "not a problem" or "no big deal". This change in perspective is more likely to occur after we've taken a long break from grappling with the problem.
3. After some period of time, we will acquire new skills or obtain new information which will then allow us to go back to the problem and solve it.
4. A savior will come along, or some act of divine intervention or magic will occur, that will either solve the problem or give us the power to do so. By "savior", I don't mean Jesus - really it could be anybody. Recently a longstanding unsolvable problem of mine got solved by this method, and my savior was a new colleague, who simply passed along a simple solution he'd learned, which neither I nor anyone else I'd asked for help had known.

My experience illustrates a couple of points about unsolvable problems - first, they may be unique to you. One person's mountain is another person's molehill. Secondly, as creatures of habit, we tend to get into ruts in our problem-solving efforts - doing the same thing over and over, even when it's not working, or seeking help from the same sources, even when they aren't helpful - leading us to conclude "this problem can't be solved".

But by letting go of the problem, or "turning it over" as they say in AA, we're not giving up so much as we're giving in - which may then allow a solution to appear, in its own time.