Brian & Marcia Gleason

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Brian Gleason, LCSW, and Marcia Gleason, LCSW are the co-founders of "Exceptional Marriage", an experience-based methodology for working with committed relationships.
Both trained with with relationship expert Dr. John Gray as well as in Core Energetics. Brian is now a senior faculty member of the N.Y. Institute of Core Energetics. Brian wrote a book on transpersonal psychology – *Mortal Spirit*. Brian and Marcia wrote *Going All the Way, The Heart and Soul of the Exceptional Marriage.*

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Relational Implicit* project (http://relationalimplicit.com).

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge Prengel: I'm with Marcia and Brian Gleason, who are both clinical social workers and Core Energetics therapists and specialize in doing body-oriented work with couples. Hi, Brian and Marcia.

Marcia Gleason: Hi, Serge

Brian Gleason: Hello Serge

S P: Hi. So, since maybe it's not such a common thing to do body-oriented work with couples do you want to say a little bit about how you came to this specialty?

B G: You want me to take a stab at it, Marcia?

M G: Sure, go ahead.

B G: Well, Serge, the long and the short of it I guess, I would say, is that we both graduated from social work school in the late seventies and really started working with couples in the early eighties and it was in the nineties we began working together and really started to look at developing a model for working with couples based on the fact that many of the couples, among our friends and families and even our colleagues, we saw people's relationships falling apart, and even when they were really working hard on trying to make them successful, something wasn't working. And it kind of reached a pinnacle, even when a member of my own family who had been married for thirty-three years got divorced and we really started to sit down and think about "Okay, what is it that makes it so hard for people to stay together?" And over the last five or six years we developed a model that relies heavily on the body work and the energy psychotherapy as part of the overall model for working with couples.

S P: So what is it that makes it so hard for people to stay together in your experience?

M G: Well, one of the things that we have found in working with couples for many years is that couples fall into ingrained patterns of interacting with each other and relating to each other and because partners mean so much to the other person, they actually fall into these patterns of relating

to each other in safe ways. So some of the ways that they learn to be safe in their own family is like holding back their feelings, protecting each other, they kind of recreate some of those patterns in their current relationship and they get stuck in these patterns. And the more they get stuck, the more distant they become from each other. Of course nobody teaches us any skills, really, on how to be deeply connected to one another in marriage. So our interest was really in helping couples to become deeply connected to teach each other and to be able to transcend, or move past, some of those very ingrained, safe patterns of relating.

B G: I think one of the things that we discovered, even in our own work as a couple, that a lot of what we were learning through therapy we were in, or books we were reading, was how to communicate better, and how to have a more conscious relationship. But what seemed to be missing was how you deal with the messiness of life, and that sometimes relationships are just damn messy, and strong emotions emerge. And there wasn't really a lot out there to help us and other couples to really learn how to work with that energy in a way that kept the relationship alive.

S P: So that's where I would love to ask you if you could mention some examples, of that messiness and how you deal with it.

B G: I'll start, and Marcia can chime in..

M G: Okay

B G: The way that we like to work with couples is to provide, really, a combination of talk therapy and consciousness where we work with the narrative, the story, what couples say about each other and how that relates to their history. But we want to tie that in, ultimately, within the framework of any session, to the experience in the moment between the couple, particularly on the emotional level. Now, by and large when a couple comes in, they are in a highly defended state, as Marcia said earlier. Because your partner matters so much to you, there's a higher level of threat. When you do a couples workshop, people are more anxious coming to a couples' workshop with their partner than they are when they come to an individual workshop; there's a higher level of threat. So they're in a defended place, and we generally see couples start with a lot of blame, and we help them over the long haul to move from blame down through layers of feeling that start on a very defended level and gradually move into more vulnerable and expansive feelings. In Core Energetics we talk about the lower self, we work with that destructive current and create states for that to happen and the silent demanding needs of the child, we make a space for that. Within the context of any session we'll make space for stronger feelings, and when they happen, the softer feelings begin to organically emerge.

S P: So for people who are not necessarily familiar with Core Energetics, do you want to talk a little bit about the lower self feelings that you make a space for?

M G: Yes, I can address that. What we have found is that lower self feelings, that hate and love are so closely connected in couples, and that in a sense, the more you love, the more the other person can hurt you, and trigger you, and push buttons, and therefore, the lower self, or that part of us that hates the other, wants to punish the other and some people carry out their lower self in a very loud way and other people can just get very silent and punishing and each is a kind of lower self energy. And we believe that it's important for the lower self energy to come out, because there's a lot of aliveness in that energy. So in other words, if there's a lot of aliveness and passion, people can

break through that if they have a positive intention to do that, and get to loving feelings. So we use the lower self but we like to use it with awareness and consciousness and we help people to have a positive intent to move *through* their lower self. We help them to understand that the lower self is only a part of them. The lower self is very threatening for couples because it feels like it's all of them sometimes.

S P: Yes, that they're in that energy of hate and thwarting the other and resisting.

M G: Yes, and it's usually either repressed or expressed in a way that's highly dangerous to the relationship.

S P: So could you maybe give us an example of a moment with some client you've had where it's either repressed or expressed in a dangerous manner, and what you do to help them accept it and deal with it and find the energy of it?

M G: Well, I think it's a process of helping people to express their lower selves. We have had situations in our office where we've had people—not a whole lot, but sometimes—be on the verge of kind of losing control and what we like to do is we like to provide a lot of education about the lower self. We normalize the lower self, we define it as an energy in the relationship that's very related to passion, and we have developed a process that we call the full self-expression process that helps people get from what we call the very charged feelings of blame and anger and intense lower self and move through other layers of feeling—through their fear, through their hurt, through their remorse, and then ultimately to love. So it makes it safer in a session if the other partner knows that the person isn't going to stay in their lower self energy—that somehow within the session, that energy will be transformed into more vulnerable, softer feelings.

S P: Yes. Plus you already have provided the container of normalizing it.

B G: And if I could just add a little bit to that, Serge, that typically the pattern that you're most apt to see in the expression of the lower self rarely comes across cleanly and directly, like "I want to get you," you know, that kind of energy that says "I want to get you, I want to hurt you, I want to punish you"—that hardly ever happens directly like that. And yet it's an undercurrent that's there between people, and it emerges often as criticism and judgment, sometimes to extreme levels where people are insulting and demeaning toward their partners. But oftentimes it's just kind of nagging and complaining and nitpicking. But underneath it there's an intent, oftentimes, and we help people to try to discover that intent, which is, "Some small part of me wants to make you feel small, to feel worse than I feel, make you feel as bad as you make me feel, wants to hurt you, wants to punish you" and owning that piece is vital. It's critical to kind of transcending the difficult patterns that people will get into. And, quickly offhand, the other way it shows up is through withholding. So oftentimes, again, if you ask them, "Why don't you come out and say what's going on?" it's, "Well, it's pointless, it won't help, why bother," but underneath it is a negative intent and that's to punish the partner by not giving to them, by not showing up. Once a person can claim that energy, Serge, it's liberating. To own that—"I really do want to punish you"—it's an aha! moment, and sometimes it does take a while for people to get there, but it is a really important part of our work.

S P: Yes, I can see that. And obviously a lot of it is insight, getting to one of those aha! moments, so what tools that might be body-related do you use in the process of doing that and how do you

interweave that with the talk part? I understand that it's not something that happens the same in every case, but can you maybe give us an example of how that might happen?

B G: You want me to go, Marcia?

M G: Sure, go ahead.

B G: Almost always, in the beginning of the session, the first thing we do is--well first off we arrange the seats so that people face each other, and what you invariably discover, because we have movable seats, people will come in and before we sit down they'll turn their seats to face us. So we're constantly saying to them, "Why don't you turn your seats and face each other?" Because energetically when they talk to us, they're talking about their partner almost like they're talking about each other in the third-person, they're not directing the energy toward the person. So when we have them face each other the very first thing we do is either have them close their eyes and go inward, and experience what they feel in the moment, and then open their eyes and look at their partner and notice the difference, like what happens when they receive their partner, when they take their partner in. So it's a very soft movement into connection to the immediate experience. And oftentimes we'll have a whole session that'll come out just out of what's going on when they look at each other. Because they want to come in and tell you a story, and so in the mentoring work that we do with couples, the story, the narrative is the part that they tell you why things are the way they are, and there's value in that, but ultimately it's helping them to be in the moment, to be in the experience with each other, where the greatest things happen. So we do a lot of what we call "leading by following" which means that we watch the energy between them and then we might say, "It looks like you're going away when your husband's speaking, what's going on right now?" or "I just noticed a look of concern come over your face, could you tell us about that?"

S P: So what you're doing as a part of your work is tracking the physical symptoms that are happening.

B G: Yes, and we're really ultimately teaching them to do that as well. But the other piece that relates to our model and also to the Core Energetic model we call "catalyzing" and it's really like prompting them to do things, giving them suggestions to say things, to express things, maybe to move into some stronger energy, to a louder expression, like letting the demanding child—we feel the child in the room that's saying you have to take care of me, you have to make lots of money, you have to keep me safe, you have to give me lots of sex—those voices that are there but unspoken, we might catalyze them by suggesting that they energize these voices.

S P: So when you say "energize these voices," is it saying it and hearing themselves say it, is it also, say, beating up on pillows if it's more aggressive? What's part of your toolbox in that area?

B G: Well, pretty much everything. I know there's a lot of controversy in the whole field of psychotherapy and even in the body-oriented field about the value of strong energy work. We tend to believe that there is a place for it. Human beings are self-regulating organisms, and if they're allowed to express their emotions, they return to a steady state, to an equilibrium. In couples, sometimes people need to yell at teach other. They can't just develop conflict-resolution skills on a flat level, there's a need for expression. So we will use big soft foam cubes and we have equipment that I got from my karate school, punching bags and things like that. We organize it in a way where there's a lot of consciousness because ultimately the person has to take responsibility for their

feelings. You know, we don't have somebody hit and blame, per se, I mean there might be a little bit of that but we quickly take them into what's going on underneath. But it can get loud at times—we have a big room, so people can move around.

S P: So really it's energetic work as part of the road to self-regulation.

B G: Yes. Again, if we look to children as our models, children maybe don't have high levels of consciousness and therefore an ability to have empathy, and altruism, and deep, full, mature love. But they sure know how to move their feelings—they cry, they throw tantrums, when they get scared they run for hugs—they let the feelings come, wash through them, and they're gone pretty quickly. And they can be screaming one minute and laughing the next. We have something to learn from them, because that's what the human body wants to do; it wants to regulate itself through emotional expression.

M G: We actually have a term for the feelings, the primary feelings we call them, which is anger, fear, sadness, grief, and we call them restorative feelings. And the reason that we call them restorative feelings is that when expressed with awareness and a positive intention to get through them, they actually not only restore the person to a sense of equilibrium but they restore the relationship to a sense of equilibrium. When we're little, it's not so much that our parents don't meet our needs that wounds us, I mean that's part of it, but it's that they don't hear the emotional reactions. They can't really take in and accept and hear those feelings so that the relationship can be restored. So we like to refer to those feelings as restorative feelings, that they restore us to a certain sense of equilibrium, and it happens in the relationship as well. And we see it over and over and over again, that people become more connected after they've done some deep expression, after they've allowed some of that tension to release from their bodies.

S P: So definitely this is a part of your work where it would be impossible to ever achieve the same result without using the body.

M G: Well, that's how we're trained. And that's how we've seen over and over again how much closer people get and how much more of a deep experience they have when we do use the body and the energy work. And it's not always big and loud, it can be very soft, it can be very joyous, and I can actually give you an example of that in the last couple sessions that we've lead, if you're interested.

S P: Absolutely

M G: Well, we've been working with this woman, and her husband refers to her affect as being flat, and unemotional, and she can't really give him her positive feelings. And recently we've begun to look at the source of that, which was that as a child, her mom was very jealous of her relationship with her father. So her mother actually made it scary and difficult for her to express positive feelings. So one of the things that we had her do is jump up and down and express the part of her that really wanted to love, we had to have the part of her that was afraid of expressing all of this positive stuff to stand back and let that joyous child express the love for her husband. And it was very, very beautiful and he of course received it very willingly.
That's beautiful, yes. So we not only work on the charged negative feelings but we also help to charge the positive feelings as well.

S P: And do you always work as a couple as therapists, or do you sometimes work with one therapist per couple? And if so, do you notice a difference or what's the logic for working as a couple?

M G: Well, we do work individually, and most of it's a logistical thing, because it's hard to get four people together. So we do work separately. Personally, I love working with Brian and there's definitely a positive aspect to having the male and the female, the mother and the father, the masculine and feminine energy, and it's just nice to have another perspective in the room.

S P: And what goes on in the workshops that you give?

M G: Did you want to talk, honey?

B G*:* Yes…I'm not quite sure how to put that into words. It's a more intense experience, Serge. What happens is, we lead beginning workshops for couples, and advanced workshops. And we just led an advanced one a couple weekends ago, and what happens is we keep the workshop small, and we try to make space for each couple to really be the focal point of a certain amount of time where they're getting the attention of the group, and we're helping them to work through, or to go deeper into, a process or a place where they're struggling in their relationship. So, there are some people coming in with sexual struggles, some people coming in with difficulty in dealing and managing conflict in their relationship, and any kind of problems you can imagine that couples have, and if you're in a relationship, inevitably you're going to bump up against difficulties, so it's all there. And we will use couples, we will use the people in the room to support something that might be happening. So, often we will use what is referred to as psychodramatic techniques, we will use people in the room as family members or as people that are part of a process, like friends or coworkers or something—generally family members—that would play out certain roles. We have people challenge their limits, basically, in these workshops, so Marcia and I use the term "control patterns" to describe the habits that people fall into where they avoid the primary restorative feelings. So people who are afraid to connect to their anger, or their fear, or their sadness and grief, they develop control patterns. And we will do things to challenge those control patterns. So typically somebody might use humor as a control pattern to avoid their partner's hostility, or they might be "the good girl" or "the good boy," or they use controlling behaviors—bossiness or demandingness or withdrawing behaviors, withholding behaviors. And all of these are challenged in the workshops, people are really the center of attention for the whole group and asked and invited to move beyond them and enter into some of these feeling states.

S P: Wow, that sounds like a very powerful situation, to have a space for mindfulness about this avoidance of the restorative feelings.

B G: Sometimes we'll even take a pattern that they use, like in the last workshop there was somebody who gets into this habit of pleading with their partner, and tries to convince them through pleading, "I *just* want this from you, I *just* need to understand…" and they kind of get into this really dramatic exposition of their needs to the partner and it's very pleading. So we will actually, in the session we have with them, we invited him to really exaggerate that pattern, to get on his knees and really get into begging her, and to feel the energy of that place. Because he didn't see it. Everybody in the room can see it, but he didn't see the level at which he was getting into that energy of kind of begging her for what he wanted, and it helped him to drop deeper. And we do it in a loving way, because we all fall into patterns of behavior that we're not really clear about, and we're human, and in our desire to hold onto our partner we'll do whatever it takes and we'll fall into

these patterns. And Marcia and I are not free of our own stuff, so we do this stuff very respectfully with people but we do challenge them.

S P: That sounds beautiful. So this was a really wonderful conversation. As the time ends, unfortunately, we have to stop it here but I wanted to say thanks for sharing some of your experience and practice and ideas with us.

This conversation was transcribed by Margaret Moore.

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