Your working model of love · About 4 minutes

The Rule You Bring to Love

Making an expectation visible without deciding where it came from

The gift is still in its wrapping, and the work of making the giver happy has already begun.

Nobody may have said this aloud. You can appreciate the gesture and still feel that admitting your preference would endanger something between you. Before deciding whether you want the gift, you are deciding how to remain easy to love.

Tessa and Arun are fictional partners. He buys tickets for an outdoor concert. She likes music, dislikes that venue and had hoped for a quiet evening. She considers acting delighted, then feels ashamed of being difficult. Arun has not yet heard what she would prefer.

The possible rule is that appreciation requires agreement. It is worth checking rather than accepting as the whole explanation. Perhaps Tessa is mostly worried about the wasted money. If so, the conversation needs to address cost instead of assigning her an unspoken fear of losing love.

Attachment theory uses “working models” to describe expectations about oneself and another person in a close relationship.[1] They help us anticipate what will happen when we need, disagree or turn toward somebody. These expectations can change through experience. They are not a complete account of a person’s identity.

One person may expect to remain useful. Another may feel obliged to want no more than they are offered. A third may believe that love requires matching the other person’s enthusiasm. Different histories can lead to similar expectations, and a single awkward evening cannot tell us their origin.

For Tessa, making the rule visible could widen the decision. “Arun wanted an evening together” describes his gesture. “I must like whatever he chooses” adds a requirement. Recognizing that addition allows her own preference to re-enter the discussion.

She could say, “I like that you wanted to plan something for us. This venue doesn’t suit me.” She could also choose to attend because sharing his pleasure matters to her. Generosity remains possible when she knows what she is choosing and what it costs.

Arun may be disappointed, accommodating or puzzled. His actual response will tell Tessa more than rehearsing an accusation in her mind. A kind reply would be a welcome event, without proving that all future differences will be easy. A difficult reply would require its own attention.

There are practical questions as well. Can the tickets be sold? Was anything already agreed? How do they want to handle surprises next time? A conversation about patterns should not overlook those ordinary matters.

You can try naming the rule in Tessa’s scene, then ask whether it is supported. If a different explanation fits better, use it. The point is to make an expectation available for examination, not discover a hidden childhood story on demand.

Tessa’s first thought about the gift lets us hear one of those expectations as it is happening.

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Arun can hear what she would actually enjoy. She can hear how he feels about the gift. Between them is a chance to make plans with two people in mind.

Companion reading · The Love We Expect, the Love We Can Receive

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Your working model of love (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Fraley, R. C. (n.d.). A brief overview of adult attachment theory and research. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Source.

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