Living With Difference · About 4 minutes

Understanding Without Wanting the Same Thing

Another person can recognise your wish and still have a different one.

Elin hears a piece of music and can already imagine singing it with Tomas. It takes a little while to learn that he imagines his evenings differently.

These fictional partners have reached a painful point that another explanation may not change. Elin initially thinks, “If he really understood, he would want to come.” But understanding her wish and sharing it are different experiences.

That can be hard to bear. Misunderstanding leaves a task: perhaps better words will bring the other person closer. Being understood and still hearing no can leave you with disappointment that has nowhere obvious to go.

Jessica Benjamin's account of mutual recognition preserves each person's separate subjective life.[1] In a relationship, this means allowing someone to take your experience seriously while having an experience of their own. They may change through hearing you. They may also remain different.

Of course, “I understand” can be said without much listening. The words themselves are not enough. Does the person grasp what you are asking? Do they understand why it matters? Can they hear a correction when they miss something? Those questions provide more information than whether their final preference matches yours.

For Elin, the wish might be mainly about the choir, or about finding a shared activity. It might be specifically about singing with Tomas. That last wish need not be replaced immediately with something easier to arrange. “Go with a friend” may be a sensible option and still miss what she wanted.

Tomas can care about that disappointment without promising membership. He can also choose to join if his own view changes. A generous choice is possible; compulsory enthusiasm is not.

The practical options remain open. Elin might attend alone, ask someone else or decide the choir is less appealing without him. They might look for another shared activity. None of these possibilities automatically resolves the sadness about this particular hope.

There is an important limit to this discussion. Refusing a choir invitation is different from abandoning a care agreement or controlling a partner's movements. Shared obligations and harmful conduct cannot be reduced to equally valid preferences. The actual history matters, including whether one person's wishes are routinely dismissed.

To think with the example, notice the distance between “He doesn't want to sing” and “My happiness doesn't matter to him.” The first is known here. The second may express Elin's fear, but the refusal alone does not establish it. A broader pattern could change what she concludes; it deserves to be examined rather than assumed.

Recognition can be valuable and still leave you wanting more. Over time, a persistent difference may become livable or reveal something consequential about compatibility. You are allowed to consider that honestly.

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Elin's wish to sing together gives that difference a sound.

He can understand what Elin had pictured. I would let the sadness of having to picture something else have its moment too.

Companion reading · If You Loved Me, Wouldn't You See It My Way?

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Living With Difference (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Benjamin, J. (2004). Beyond doer and done to: An intersubjective view of thirdness. The Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 73(1), 5–46. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2167-4086.2004.tb00151.x Source.

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