

HELLO AND GOODBYE

As a species, we are built for hello. Hello feels good, because it resonates with our deepest needs and instincts. Language itself is designed to achieve a meeting of the minds, a shared reality, a consensus, and cooperation: i.e., hello. Friendship, marriage, therapy, and most of human life are an exercise in hello: i.e., interpersonal contact. There are many, many good ways to say hello.

As a species, we are not equipped for goodbye. Goodbye is painful. Goodbye is contrary to our instincts and our nature. Goodbye never feels good. There is no good way to say goodbye—every way is awkward, foreign, painful. It is not possible to feel you said goodbye, i.e., terminated an important relationship, in the right, good, or best way. All ways feel bad.

Because of this, we often find ourselves trying to say hello and goodbye at the same time. We try to come to a meeting of the minds, to a consensus, over goodbye and the reasons for it. This makes us crazy, because we are trying to feel good about goodbye. We are trying to say hello as we say goodbye.

In order to say goodbye, we must first and foremost accept and endure the pain of it.

In situations when goodbye is necessary (like divorce), there are many ways of avoiding this pain. Intense conflict seems to be the most common. Arguing, blaming, resenting, and hating are very intense engagements. They give the illusion of goodbye while at the same time preserving an intense relationship. There is nothing like anger to keep grief at bay. There is nothing like blaming to keep self-doubt or a sense of failure away. There is nothing like hatred to avoid experiencing the loss of love.

We have many ways of promoting and achieving hello. We know how to go from being strangers to being friends, to being partners, to being joined and wedded. We have designed many processes and rituals to help with this. We converse, we chat, we phone, we party, we date, we kiss, we give rings, we engage, we marry, we mate. We bless hello. We approve of it, value it, and promote it.

When we have trouble with hello, we have therapists. Therapists or counselors know how to help with hello—with communication, with achieving a meeting of the minds, with mutual understanding. Therapy/counseling is essentially a hello process. It helps us to meet and to know ourselves, or an important other, or both.

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We have very few ways of achieving goodbye. We do not know how to go from being lovers to being strangers. We know how to engage but not how to estrange. We do not have processes and rituals to help with this. We do not bless it. We experience it as a failure and bad.

When we have trouble with goodbye, there are few places to turn for help. Only recently, in the last 25 years, have we developed a new process to help with goodbye. It is called mediation. While divorce mediators may not be aware of it, they are really doing two things. First, they are blessing the goodbye. They acknowledge that hello—a meeting of the minds—is not possible. This reduces tension and avoids trying to say hello and goodbye at the same time. They help to accept the painfulness and awkwardness of not being able to achieve mutual feelings and viewpoints. Second, mediators know the processes by which people who are saying goodbye can deal with each other. They promote negotiation and problem solving. They don't rely on trust and mutuality but on agreements and contracts. They know how estranged people can deal with problems. Mediators avoid trying to process the past but rather focus on the future. They know that people saying goodbye will always disagree about the past, because people who agree about such things tend to say hello not goodbye. They know that people saying goodbye can agree about future conduct. They know the past is full of blame and pain, but the future can gain the important but differing interests of each party. They know how lovers can become strangers. They know how once intimate partners can become third parties to each other.

Dr. Kneier works both in the area of hello and goodbye. He is acutely aware that these are very different processes that require very different skills.

It is not unusual to find ourselves so unsure about a relationship that we really don't know whether we want to work on hello or need to say goodbye. It is important at these times to tolerate the uncertainty, even though it is uncomfortable. It is wise to take sufficient time to become fully aware of the personal issues confronting us, so that our decision will more informed and solid. At such times, people often find it helpful to talk to a counselor. It is important that the counselor, also, be able to tolerate uncertainty and not need to push for a decision one way or the other.

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