
How to Dialogue Without a Coach

Thoughts of the Month: January 2008

The Intentional Dialogue is a wonderful tool for making better connection with our life partner, our children, or anyone who is present in our life. In fact, I think of it as a way of being in connection more than as a tool or technique.

While people are universally astounded at the power of dialogue in the workshop, most folks find it difficult to practice in real life.

Let me see if I can help with several tips:

- If your lizards have become activated to the point that you want to inflict some sort of pain/negativity on your partner, then the dialogue will not work. Better to step back, breathe deeply, run around the house, or whatever it takes for you to come back and send or receive a message from the newer part of your brain. I recommend telling your partner something like, "I cannot do this right now safely. Let me make an appointment to come back as soon as possible."

Real dialogue is just a series of visits back and forth to each other's world. If you enter someone's world locked and loaded with anger or too much fear, the visit will do more harm than good! Likewise, if you invite someone into your world but are waiting to jump him/her with negativity, he/she will likely leave and not come back.

- If your partner has already launched into a tirade from the reptilian part of their brain, then it's best to stay present and as calm and silent, (and curious,) as you can. Just contain with silent mirroring. At the end you can validate the outburst with "I get how angry/afraid/disgusted you are." Replace retaliation with presence and connection.
- If you want to have a dialogue with your partner but are afraid they won't listen, then the invitation is all important! "Would you be willing to come into my world for a bit to hear something important to me?" This always beats, "We have to talk!"
- Finally if you are with someone who does not know the dialogue process or refuses to use it, your best bet is to temporarily suspend what you want to say and just enter his/her world for a bit with the mirroring/validating/empathy skills that you know and that you wish he/she would use with you. I call this the "golden rule" of Imago. DOING FOR ANOTHER WHAT YOU WANT THEM TO EVENTUALLY DO FOR YOU. You'll be surprised how contagious the process is.

Happy New Year!

With great encouragement and hope,
David and Donna

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Eight Benefits of Dialoguing in Front of Your Children

Thoughts of the Month: February 2008

This may seem odd to many of you. You may be saying, "We don't even dialogue when we're alone! How can we do this in front of the kids?"

Maybe this is precisely the exquisite opportunity to begin. Think of your children as innocent sponges, automatically soaking in everything...every nuance of feeling in the family Space. Or think of them as silent Imago coaches, so wanting to have you each get validated and to actively love and respect each other.

Donna and I advocate using the Intentional Dialogue openly with each other and even with your children.

Here are eight reasons to commit to this:

- 1. Dialogue replaces hostility, cursing, and name calling.**
We know these things happen in many homes. It is deadly for the welfare of children. We are not faulting anyone. The reptilian brain is relentless in its pursuit of defense and survival! I've been there and done that myself. But there is a better way.
- 2. Dialogue increases the child's feeling of safety in the world.**
This benefit can improve your child's health, their grades, and their whole outlook on their future (and future relationships.)
- 3. Dialogue provides a great model for how to discuss anything, even conflict.**
What better experience can you give your children?
- 4. Dialogue automatically enhances the child's respect for both parents at the same time.**
"Do as I do, not just as I say!"
- 5. Dialogue normalizes a structure for talking about difficult things so the children will be receptive to the process when you are talking about difficult things with them.**
Kids love the dialogue even when they say they don't (even teenagers!) (And it is much more natural for them than for us! They're better at it!)
- 6. Dialogue will elicit the child's curiosity about the structure and process rather than the morbid task of having "to take sides" (even silently.)**
Children will often feel compelled to side with the "weaker" parent in a conflict. Dialogue "levels the playing field" because it is about connection and understanding rather than power (winning and losing).
- 7. Dialogue is a simple "rules of engagement" process that children of any age can understand and adopt.**
Children want to get along but they, like us, need structure and tools.
- 8. Dialogue gives children a way to validate different points of view.**
It is an in-home way of broadening your child's horizons.

You are probably saying, "Great, but how do we do this?"

Let me invite you to consider our parenting workshop, *Imago Again...a New Way to Parent*, March 8 - 9. We are going to be very practical and down to earth in helping parents apply Imago skills to the very difficult and most wonderful and rewarding experience of parenting.

With great encouragement and hope,
David and Donna

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Assumptions for Conscious Parenting

Thoughts of the Month: March 2008

Forgive me for talking about parenting a second month in a row. My passion for empowering people to connect with their children is working overtime.

Last month I gave eight benefits of using dialogue in front of your children. Upon reading my own thoughts, I realize that I may have placed the bar awfully high. Some of you probably thought, "I'm lucky if I can get my kid to put on their shoes, and he wants us to "dialogue" in front of our kids or with them." So let me back up...

ASSUMPTION 1:

Most of you reading this are already far better parents than you imagine.

--Your kids love you.

--Your kids need you to be strong parents for their guidance and their protection.

--Your mistakes are miniscule compared to the power of your connection with your kids.

--The universe has gifted you with a sacred and wonderful adventure of connection and nurturing of your offspring and growth for yourself.

ASSUMPTION 2:

Our parenting is heavily influenced by our own childhood story.

--Where we got stuck in our own development is where we get stuck as parents (Donna got stuck around the freedom to play and explore and had to stretch to allow our kids space to do so.)

ASSUMPTION 3:

We can become joyfully conscious parents that our kids will delight in.

--It's about seeing the places that are blocked in us...places of reactivity and fear...lost parts of ourselves (I grew up in a family of non-touching. I am just now feeling comfortable touching our kids.)

ASSUMPTION 4:

Our children desperately need to feel like they are enjoyed and valued by us.

--They need to feel celebrated and accepted for just being the amazing people they are.

--They need to feel our appreciation for the gift of having them in our lives.

--They need to feel protected rather than managed.

--CELEBRATED, ACCEPTED AND APPRECIATED, YES!!!! MANAGED, CRITICIZED, USED, NO!!!!

ASSUMPTION 5:

The best life model you can ever give your children is your own relationship as a couple.

--This means intentional time for just the two of you.

--This means more open affection.

--This means owning your mistakes and conflict.

--This means modeling the capacity for staying in connection with each other even when you are in conflict and do not agree.

It's not too late to come to our parenting workshop next weekend!

Two great books:

Giving the Love that Heals, Hendrix and Hunt

Parenting from the Inside Out, Siegel and Hartzell

With great encouragement and hope,

David and Donna

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Triggering Each Other

Thoughts of the Month: April 2008

Couples trigger each other all the time. We should expect it since we pick the partner that carries the positive and negative traits of our caretakers. It's the negative or hurtful traits that trigger our old memories and our old reactions.

Sometimes this triggering shows up as just bickering. Some couples seem to bicker at every opportunity. It seems to be the way their energy gets expressed. They don't mean to. They are just unconscious of how they trigger each other. And once we get triggered, our reptilian ("Lizard") brain is in charge and will defend itself as long, and as nastily, as it takes.

Other triggering is more like Donna and I who sort of politely (at first) start polluting the Space. Donna will say, "Didn't you want to turn on that road?" David says, "No, there are other roads we can take." Donna responds, "Which roads?" David answers, "I know how to get there!" Donna says, "But what road exactly are we going to take?"

It gets worse from there! Without knowing it, this common scene is a triggering scene. I am triggering Donna's fear (and childhood story) that things are going to fall apart soon. Donna is triggering my frustration and shame (my childhood story) about not being capable of doing things right. We are not addressing the REAL stories.

Triggering takes many forms. The antidote, of course, is to step into your partner's world to find out (mirror and validate) what is really going on with them. It is completely counter-instinctual and unnatural to do this. It's more natural to react just like it's more natural to step on the brakes when we hit a snow or ice patch.

I think it takes time to learn how we get triggered and to actually step away from reactive behaviors into generous, connective behaviors.

It only takes one to begin!

Wishing you joy during this growth season of spring!

With great encouragement and hope,
David and Donna

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The Safe Approach

Thoughts of the Month: May 2008

Have you ever seen one of those billiard trick shot experts make an eye-popping shot with ease? How can they make it look so easy?

I'll tell you-it's all in the set up. They take great care in placing the balls in just the right way to guarantee the success of the shot.

Now, what does this have to do with couples and families and the messy interactions we get into? My observation with many couples is that they lack the skill or consciousness of the safe set up or approach with their partner or their children.

"You never help around the house or with the kids and I'm getting sick of saying this to you!" UNSAFE APPROACH!!!

"Honey, I'm feeling overwhelmed with all the things to do. Would you be willing to talk with me about how we can team up and manage things differently?" SAFER APPROACH!!!

The first quote is a knee jerk reaction (probably stemming from a childhood story) that starts an age old battle with the couple. The second quote is an expression of need and a request for help rather than a complaint.

How about these...

"I can never talk to you about anything important! You just always do your anger thing and never listen!" UNSAFE APPROACH!!!!

"I would like to set a time with you to safely discuss something that may be difficult for us. Would you be willing to try that with me?" SAFER APPROACH!!!

The first quote is a harsh set up that rules out any productive connection. The second quote is a safer appeal to the genuine intention of staying connected around a difficult topic.

My tip for the month is this:

Spend some time and thought on your set up or your approach. Take a few deep breaths and move to a more conscious part of your brain (even a hailstorm like me has one in there somewhere.)

Then you can speak from a place of your core values, those things you value and want, like staying connected, being generous, having fun together, and being a team. This will take you out of the knee jerk reactivity (that lizard we all know so well) of speaking from your core hurts, like being discounted, rejected or unloved.

For a really good book on this subject, see *The New Rules of Marriage* by Terrence Real.

For a real treat to yourselves, sign up for our June 14 -15 *Imago Again...New Support and More Connection* which works on the day to day use of Imago tools and ideas.

With great encouragement and hope,
David and Donna

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New Method More Effective!!

Thoughts of the Month: June 2008

A recent scientific research study has produced the startling new truth that positive, forward looking energy is far more effective in treating couples' conflicts than dealing with past or even current frustrations and issues.

Okay...it's **not** really scientific...more like it is just using what works!

Okay...it's **not** really a study...more like just my observations!

Okay...it's **not** really research...there's no control group (whatever that is)!

BUT it **is** fairly recent. Yes, sir! I've been noticing that couples improve their relationship quicker and better with my new emphasis on positive language, abundant appreciations, and dreaming together about the future.

Now, this is not what couples come into my office wanting to do. They come in wanting, first, for me to "fix" their partner. If that doesn't fly, then they at least want to talk about their ISSUES. They want tell them who is "right" and what to do!

I've got to tell you something strange. I less and less thing issues are the "issue". I more and more think connection is the "issue". And my non-scientific, non-research, non-study is telling me that dwelling on past history or rehashing current issues contributes to disconnection and staying stuck in a hurt and confusing place in a relationship. Connection and communion (which is what we all want, right?) is achieved with a joyful celebration of the wonderful attributes of each other and rediscovering the potential of the relationship.

Imagine going to your mechanic with a poorly running engine and insisting that he or she remove the old sludgy oil or the burnt spark plugs and then have this conversation: "Let's see how we can get this old oil and these faulty plugs to make the engine run better again." Ridiculous!

As I'm writing this, I am just realizing what makes my new approach work better. DUH!

It takes the couple "back to the future". It puts the couple back in touch with that glorious time when the Impulse to connect was all positive, all about abundance, all about grace, and unbridled in potential for future success. It seems to me that is what we are all seeking, after all.

So...next time you have the urge to talk about an "issue"...*first*, take a breath, get in touch with something positive about your partner and your relationship...*then* say or do what you can do to fill your Space with that energy...and *then* see what you really need to talk about and how you really want to bring it up.

Speaking of glorious times, are you ready for a cruise, Imago Style on the very classy Celebrity cruise line?

With great encouragement and hope,
David and Donna

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The Loss of Rituals

Thoughts of the Month: July 2008

I'm afraid that you folks may not even know what I mean by rituals. Life is so scattered these days. Every member of the family is subject to CFI (Cell Phone Interruption) at any moment. The cell phone and the internet are basically individual and disconnecting in nature.

We are driving along having a wonderful family connected experience and someone's cell phone "goes off" and the experience of connection is broken; temporarily destroyed (because, of course, you *always* have to answer when a phone "goes off".)

The family dinner is interrupted by work calls, text messaging, or marketing calls. We take our kid to soccer practice and spend the time watching while lining up our next production meeting on a cell phone conference call.

I believe our couple and family connections are in competition with so many things these days, many of which are accelerated by technology.

Back in the day...a family had rituals that held them together. Many of these were survival in nature, such as gathering crops or hunting together. Some were religious in nature.

Even in my early days, we all had a cow to milk at the same time; we all hauled hay together and went swimming in the Shenandoah River together afterwards. I didn't always enjoy picking butter beans as a family or hauling manure as a family but I must admit...it bonded us together and was a meaningful time of connection. We also all went to church together *every* Sunday (even when it was a "strange" church along the road as we traveled to a Washington Senators ballgame on a Sunday morning.)

Couples (and families) these days are going to have to be very intentional about creating times of being together (which, by the way, is the definition of a ritual.) It can be as simple as having a meal together (doesn't have to be dinner...because we work so many evenings, our family ritual became breakfast...without newspapers or news) or playing miniature golf or any activity that includes the whole family.

Parents, be advised! Your children are **hungry** for these rituals....even when they may say or act like they don't ("I'd rather be with my friends!"; "Can't I bring a friend?"; "It's boring being with family!") They need regular, consistent and ritualistic connection with their family more than they need another swimming medal or another camp to attend.

Parents, take charge! First, develop your own meaningful, uninterrupted rituals as a couple and then pull your family into times of connection that everyone will love. (I loved the card games my family played all together on those snowy winter Sundays.)

Please stay in touch!

With great encouragement and hope,
David and Donna

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How About a Snack?

Thoughts of the Month: August 2008

Have you noticed the explosion of snack items in recent years in our society? There are hundreds of kinds of power bars and energy drinks available these days. Those gas station shopping marts are comprised almost entirely of snack products.

In a healthier realm, the 14 diet plans I have tried have all recommended eating smaller portions more often throughout the day...including snacks.

Now...let's talk about your connections with your partner..."How about a SNACK?"

Some leave our workshop and report that they cannot find the time for having dialogues with each other: "The kids need attention"; "The bills need to be dealt with"; "I am too tired"; "He/she is too tired"; "The cat peed on the rug."

How about providing sustenance to your relationship Space throughout the day with a series of **SNACKS**?

S - Small
N - Nectar (of)
A - Appreciation (and)
C - Connecting
K - Kindness

That's right! **JUST DO IT!** A small nectar of appreciation and connecting kindness is just what your partner needs to know they are cared for and that you want to be connected to them...regardless of what "opportunities" may be showing up in your Space! It will produce amazing results:

1. It will soften whatever negative feelings they (or you) may be having.
2. It will make your day go better...trust me!
3. It will prepare and soften you both for the tougher conversations.
4. It will provide something nice to remember when you are apart and trying to get through the day.

A loving Email...a five second kiss...a genuine hug...an "I love you" phone call...a small appreciation...making your partner a sandwich...a cup of coffee...

You get the Idea!

Now, I am not naïve here. I can hear some of you saying, "What if I don't feel like being affectionate and kind with the b..... or that as...?" OK...so what? That's life! You signed up for it...and ***hired your partner for it!***

You can always find some genuine way to connect if you give your lizard a coffee break! A polite "Thank you" is a good start. "Please" is always a nice word.

If you are not up for a kiss, then just look into your partner's eyes for a second and say, "Hi." Just putting your hand on your partner's shoulder can speak volumes and mend arguments.

Find your own acceptable and honest way of connecting...**BUT FIND WAYS TO DO IT AND ENJOY THE RESULTS!**

With great encouragement and hope,
David and Donna

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How Not to Have an Affair!

Thoughts of the Month: September 2008

It's easy to have an affair! **ALL** you have to do is expect your Partner to meet your every need... insist that your Partner see everything as you do...sweep your conflicts under the rug... get totally absorbed in your work or your kids or your lifestyle...and/or create a picture of your Partner as the source of your misery and convince yourself they are unwilling to change (or, even more effective, they don't care).

Most of this happens unconsciously or unmindfully as some people now say.

Let me use the rest of this space to be more positive. Let me remind you of what you already know...Imago tools not only help couples heal from an affair but can also prevent affairs and the soul wrenching misery that ensues.

First of all, we are quite clear in fundamental Imago theory that your Partner is not even supposed to meet your every need OR to see all things the same as you. These notions belong to the romantic phase and are supposed to give way to the challenge of real, committed love.

The more Donna and I grow and the closer we get, the more amazed we are at how different we are from each other. For instance, she gets so frustrated when I put wet dishes in the drainer on top of dishes that are already dry. I don't get it! They will all dry eventually, I figure.

Imago also encourages us to show up in a safe structure called "dialogue" to deal with conflicts before they are out of control...to become vulnerable and curious...especially at the times we least "want" to.

Then there is the idea that your complaints and frustrations with your Partner are 90% about you and your story and ONLY 10% about your partner. (Remember that piece from the workshop you didn't really want to hear?)

Of course, we also insist that couples pay attention to what is happening in their Space so exits do not grow into greater disconnection or even contempt.

As you can see, it would be pretty hard to have an affair take place if a couple is practicing these powerful relational Imago tools.

Maybe we should gift young couples with the "good news" of Imago early in their relationships. We have had a number of young couples who have come to our workshop as a gift from their parents or other relatives and friends. What a wonderful way to begin healing our planet. What a wonderful dream of reducing the occurrence of affairs and the unavoidable pain and devastation by 50% or even 80% in the years to come.

(I share this, knowing that an affair, although far too prevalent, is not a choice most of you would make. I share this not only to address affairs but also to lift up the experiences that lead many couples into "parallel" relationships, barren of the joy and connection each Partner really wants.)

Please share your thoughts with us.

With great encouragement and hope,
David and Donna

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It's Time to Play...Seriously!!

Thoughts of the Month: October 2008

We have two figures that we bring out at the end of our workshop that we present as a picture of vintage love. The figures are a man and a woman sitting close to each other. They are generic in that we know nothing about them except that they are engaged in laughter and obviously full of joy in just being in the moment with each other.

It may be that at other times they are in disappointing and vitriolic conflict with each other. It may be that they fight over how to best parent their children. It may be that one is or both are depressed or obsessed with the banking and credit debacle and their financial future. It may be that each suffers from a feeling inadequacy at work or as a parent or as a lover.

None of this do we know. We only know that in this one moment, captured by the creation of the sculptor, they are engaged in bliss.

We all need such moments with each other. We need to take charge and make such moments happen with our partner and with our family. Otherwise we can easily become captive to the conflict, business, fear and hopelessness that the world is trying to serve up these days.

I found myself falling victim to just such dark feelings this week. The economy is lousy; the future is murky; business is down. The concepts of generosity and abundance which we try to live by had become suspect in a corner of my mind. Even my Space with Donna began to feel dutiful and stale.

Then a funny thing happened. A FUNNY THING happened and we laughed together with a belly laugh that was impossible to dismiss. As we recovered, I realized that we had not laughed like that in a while. I realized that I can take charge and take control of my reaction to all the bad news. I can produce some fun, some affectionate moments, an appreciation, and a belly laugh.

We know your relationships may not be all you would want. Maybe it seems downright dreadful. But surely, there is 15% or 10% or 5% of your Space that is open to (and hungry for) fun, laughter, and appreciation. You each have to take charge of your own mood about things and to become a master of producing some joy, some fun, and some life for yourself and your partner.

Your partner and family (and the planet) will be very grateful! Trust me!

(By the way...the funny thing was that our pooch, Cujo, just unexpectedly jumped up on the bed one night just as Donna was going to sleep and just laid over her face like a blanket...you had to be there!)

With great encouragement and hope,
David and Donna

P.S. We can guarantee to help you with joy and fun if you join us on the cruise. Not only the experience during the cruise but with strategies for keeping it alive when you return home in your day to day experience with each other. Think about it!

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Learn to Cherish Your Partner

Thoughts of the Month: November 2008

Contrary to what many people believe, conflict and negative feelings do not ruin an intimate relationship. Imago Relationship Theory is not about sugaring up relationships to make it seem there is never an angry feeling or negative interaction. Of course, there are!

Why, just the other day I forgot a plan for the weekend that we had both talked about and Donna gave me "THAT LOOK!" You know, the one that says, "You imbecile....don't you ever listen?"

Negative interactions are inevitable, but it is the way they are handled that is all important. And what's really critical is that there is not a preponderance of negative feedback going on in a family. Researchers like John Gottman who observe couples have learned that if the positive communications far outweigh the negative ones, then the couple can be quite happy together.

So increasing the positive interactions is what I'm talking about!

Let's start with appreciations. Anyone can improve things in their relationship by actively expressing 3 - 5 appreciations for their partner each day. If you cannot think of any (or you don't "feel" appreciative) then go back to your romantic days: "I still think you have the prettiest eyes."; "I loved the way you handled that with our son." Pick something that is authentic and meaningful and you will immediately see the Space between you improve.

Learn to cherish your partner. This starts with the same courteous behavior that you would use with your colleagues or with strangers, for that matter.

To go further, make a search and discover mission to get clear about how your partner might feel cherished. Many women feel cherished when their partner spends undivided time with them, or when their partner does some act of service like cleaning up the kitchen or cooking a meal. Many men feel cherished when their partner touches them or expresses some word of praise or affirmation.

The important thing is to find out how your partner feels cherished and to learn how to supply that thought may not be what you would want. It may also not be what you feel like doing. Get over it! For help with this, get the book, *The Five Languages of Love* by Gary Chapman.

It was Gandhi who said, "You must be the change you want to see in the world." You can change your relationship for the better by learning to cherish your partner.

Hope you have a joyful and blessed Thanksgiving,
David and Donna

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From Reactivity to Dialogue

Thoughts of the Month: December 2008

Couples often confess to us that they really do not practice the Dialogue in their daily lives (in spite of their best intentions!) This is understandable since we know the dialogue is not an instinctive process. While we will always advocate the used of the actual tool of Dialogue, we believe the real shift that takes place is inside each of us as we live in a dialogical manner.

Dialogue is a respectful principle of human relations that honors the "Other" in a conversation or any interaction. Dialogue represents an override of that reptilian response that can grab any of us before we know it. People regularly respond to their partner or to their children with lightning fast negativity that would be mortifying to them upon seeing themselves on tape.

Dialogue, or thoughtful negotiation, is coming back onto the world scene as well. The reactivity and unilateral policies of the last while are giving way to a more dialogical approach to world problems. I believe the most historically relevant aspect of the recent election is not related to skin color. I believe it is a movement toward appreciation that all people are connected and that the way to bridge differences is...well...to bridge differences. How about that!?!

We have had the imagery and tools needed for peace in the world right in our own couples' workshop. I read an article recently where even one of our top terrorist interrogators revealed that understanding and respectful conversation was more valuable than brutal torture in gaining vital information.

Dialogue is the "road less traveled."
Reactivity is the easy, popular response.

Dialogue says, "You are a 'Thou!'"
Reactivity says, "You are an 'it'."

Dialogue is thoughtful and "frontal lobish."
Reactivity is chaotic and "base brainish."

Dialogue is mature.
Reactivity is childish.

Dialogue is healthy (physically, mentally, and emotionally) for both parties.
Reactivity is unhealthy (physically, mentally, and emotionally) for both parties.

Dialogue dissolves problems.
Reactivity exacerbates problems.

Dialogue transforms enemies.
Reactivity creates more enemies.

Dialogue produces bountiful wealth.
Reactivity produces perpetual cost.

Dialogue is a spiritual discipline.
Reactivity becomes an addiction.

Dialogue is a powerful response.
Reactivity is a weak response.

For those who have participated in a basic GTLYW Workshop, please consider our new workshop, "Conscious and Connected Parenting" in February. We teach you how to be dialogical and powerful with your children.

For an old classic try, *The Miracle of Dialogue*, by Ruel Howe.

Hope you have wonderful, joyful, and connected holidays with your loved ones,
David and Donna

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