The Power of Commitment: An Interview with Dr. Gay Hendricks

by Sharon Hall

What does it take to create conscious, loving, long-term relationships? As a child of a broken home, with two divorces behind me, I’ve often wondered if I simply lack the genetic make-up for happy pair-bonding. When The Whole Person Calendar provided a chance to interview Dr. Gay Hendricks, best-selling author, public speaker, psychologist, and founder of the Hendricks Institute, I jumped at it. Maybe I could get some answers from the relationship guru, just in time for Valentine’s Day.

Dr. Hendricks, along with his co-creator and wife, Kathlyn, wrote one of the most popular relationship books of all time, Conscious Loving. Together, they have helped thousands of people create successful, loving relationships. In his book, The Five Wishes, Hendricks describes how a chance conversation at a party revealed a path to his destiny. It all started with a question from a man named “Ed”:

If you were on your deathbed, and someone asked you if your life was a complete success, what would you answer? You might say yes, or you might say no. If you said no, the next step would be to ask: what is the thing that you wished had happened, that would have made it a success?

SH: Dr. Hendricks, I’ve had a chance to read The Five Wishes twice. Can you explain the process you discovered in that question and where it took you?

GH: It’s the kind of question that, whether it’s first time you ask it, or the thousand and first time, is still great. There’s an old saying that the quality of your life is determined by the quality of the questions you ask. If you ask yourself a big question, that question keeps growing and expanding inside of you. Asking yourself a question like the ones in the book takes you out of a negative mindset and puts you in a mindset that asks, “What can I do, in this moment, that will further my most sacred goals?”

SH: Since this is the love issue, tell me about your first wish; to have a loving, long-term, passionate relationship with a woman.

GH: At the time, it surprised me when that came up first. I realized it was what I really wanted — a lasting relationship with a woman that I could grow with over the years, because I’d never had that. I realized if I got to the end and had not created that, I would not consider my life a success. I was successful in other areas; I’d already written a couple of books, but what good is a PhD from Stanford in counseling psychology if I can’t get along with one other person?

SH: Indeed. You wrote about how hard you’d found it to commit to just one woman, and that your childhood upbringing had influenced that pattern. But you state the “aha” connection didn’t come until you’d made the commitment to Kathlyn.

GH: I think that’s an astute observation. You don’t really get the big insights of your life until after you’ve made a commitment to going beyond whatever you’re stuck in. It’s the commitment that liberates the insight. A lot of people try to do it the other way around, dig for the insights and hope for a great leap forward. I say, make the commitment to the great leap, and then let that bring up the insights about what’s been holding you back.

SH: I love that it didn’t happen as a mental decision; you describe it as a whole body, emotional sensation. You write about energy being released in your body—not as a thought but as sensations.

GH: I think that’s the key. One of the reasons affirmations often don’t work is because they’re mental rather than body centered. The conscious mind thinks a new thought. It’s a useful way to get started, but what really needs to happen is to harness the power of our body and heart consciousness. When those get integrated, things happen quickly. When you use affirmations, the first thing that happens is the opposite often comes up. The message is to love what you have, then manifest the next thing you want. If you’re sitting there hating your old car, then you’re just going to manifest more reasons to hate your old car.

SH: That’s an interesting insight!

GH: We think of our particular form of manifestation as Einsteinian rather than Newtonian. Newtonian is the idea of getting a positive thought out there into the future, with the hope it will have an equal and opposite reaction that will pull you into your desired life. The fine print is that it will also pull up all your fears and barriers. But that’s what needs to be loved and honored and explored in order to get to the positive future.

SH: Where does commitment come into this?

GH: Anything that is truly worthy of your commitment you might not initially know how to do. You need to make a commitment to something that feels impossible in the moment; you have to let go of knowing how it’s going to get done. Eleanor Roosevelt
said that all of us have one thing we need to do in this life, and it has to be something that’s impossible to do. Imagine Columbus and his crew sailing off from Genoa. The moment they left land behind there wasn’t anything to look back at. After two or three weeks on the ocean there wasn’t anything out there. That’s when you’re re-commit to.

SH: Can you explain the difference between a commitment and an affirmation? What makes a commitment in much-much more powerful?

GH: It comes from two Latin words — to bring together, and to stand. A commitment is where you gather your resources and make a sincere promise to take all necessary steps to get there. With an affirmation, there’s a thought about a possible future, but you really need a commitment to do what needs to be done in order to get there. A lot of time what happens is, like the Columbus example, everybody gets scared and starts looking for someone to blame. That’s why on ships, they lock up the guns and the liquor and everybody gets the 200-year birthday. A commitment to an automatic pilot on an airplane. It’s the re-commitment after you’ve drifted off that’s important.

SH: Sounds a lot like selling, you’re constantly adjusting the horizon.

GH: Yes. Say you’re flying from New York to Los Angeles. The pilot sets it in New York, in New York and then he’s drifting off on it’s way to LA. It’s like, okay, we’re drifting a little to the right; let’s make a correction to the left. You go to LA by being mostly wrong.

SH: That’s a great metaphor. In The Five Wishes, your first great commitment was made to Kathryn. You called and said, “I want to do this. I want to make a full heart/soul/body commitment to you. Do you want that too?” And she said, yes.

GH: When this article comes out, we will be starting our 32nd year together. Guess that too?” And she said, yes.

Wishes mostly wrong.

It gets you to LA by being mostly wrong. It’s like, okay were drifting a little to the right; let’s make a correction to there. It’s so timely and such an important commitment to an automatic pilot on an airplane. It’s the re-commitment after you’ve drifted off that’s important.

SH: You, Could this filter into politics?

GH: That’s what we’re trying to do. We have a lot of people from the political arena who will be joining us in this enterprise.

SH: It’s so timely and such an important aspect of moving onward — as a country, at humanity. I guess the question many people have is, how do we address problems without criticism or blame?

GH: We want to replace blame and criticism with appreciation and creativity. In politics we have gridlock; one party tries to do one thing and the other party looks bad, and we’re all sick of it. I think some of the people involved have the emotional management of seventh or eighth graders. You know, where the big amusement is popping the other guy’s butts with a wet toilet paper. If, when a politician opened his mouth, it was to speak appreciation and creative solutions. It’s an idea whose time has come. We have several million people in this country who find themselves not having anyone understanding or reassuring, I want to say, come on, guys, stop it up break it up.

SH: That would be a wonderful thing to see. It’s originally started at a clinical psycholo-

GH: My degree from Stanford was in Counseling Psychology. I was initially interested in individual change because I didn’t know anything about relationships! Then, Katie and I invented this incredible relationship program, and in it, we started writing Concious Loving and books like that. One magical day, Oprah Winfrey called and we went into hype space after appearances on her show. Thank you Oprah, for our current surroundings. We’ve been identified as the re-commitment movement for the past 20 years. What I love most about my work is watching people shift out of old patterns and invent something brand new. I’ve seen this happen with 20,000 individuals, about 4,500 couples and 800 business executives.

SH: Do you see the same model you use with couples?

GH: Pretty much. Everybody has the same communication problems. A lot of people communicate at the level of anger and blame; underneath it all is the shared perception of victim-hood. The important thing is to stop that vicious cycle and turn responsibility for creating something new. That’s where we all are; that’s where we are in part, that’s where we are as human beings and couples, too.

SH: How does a person start to do that in relationships? A moment where two people are blaming each other; you did this, you did that.

GH: One thing they do can is turn to the page in The Five Wishes where we talk about that first set of commitments. Start with a commitment to extending the upper limit of something. Go from self-sabotage kicks in. Because we’ve all got these mechanisms — it’s what I call the upper-limit problem. We get to a certain upper limit of how good we’ll feel ourselves, then we start a flight with your partner or something.

SH: You talked about this in the book. I read the section where you talk about getting closer to your wife, having a period of intimacy, and then a fight or conflict emerged.

GH: It’s the automatic pilot. You catch yourself self-sabotaging, then take a few deep breaths and get back to your commitment to feeling good and avoiding blame.

SH: In spite of what the other person says or does at that moment?

GH: Exactly. Because the other person is our hallucination, we’re seeing them. It’s like we see to Central Casting, send me a worthy challenge, that I can never get tired of it.

H: It’s a maddening little moment.

SH: Yeah. It’s a maddening little moment. I realized, oh my God — I’ve been dreaming up this whole history of relationships with critical women out of my need to be criticized!

GH: That takes a tremendous inward shift to accept that.

SH: Yeah, but it’s so exciting because you get your life back at that moment. Up until that point, you’ve farmed out all the power in your own life to other people.

SH: That’s true. We go back and forth blaming each other. It’s not about the other person responsible for our own unhappiness or happiness.

GH: It’s underneath everything. You always hear that 50% of all marriages will end in divorce. But what you don’t hear is that 57% of second marriages end in divorce, and 63% of third marriages is anybody’s guess.

SH: Well, at least there are people like you out there in the field, trying to help. Is there anything else you would like us to know about your work, your trainings and seminars?

GH: I’d like to encourage people to come to our live seminars, if they can. We do a lot here in Southern California, for a beautiful location on the beach. We also hold seminars in Canada, the East Coast, Boulder, and in Europe. On our website, you’ll see a full calendar. Also, Katie and I are committed to the democratizing of personal growth. There are so many people who would find it difficult to get to a seminar, so we’ve put them in online formats. One day I got an email from someone in the outback — say for example — who says — “Thank you. This changed my life.” I do it every day, but it’s still wonderful and I never get tired of it.

SH: Well, your work is obviously producing wonderful fruit. Are there any more books on the horizon?

GH: I have a new book called The Big Leap that just came out. That’s actually all about the upper limit problem. I also have a mystery novel I’m working on that’s part of a trilogy.

SH: Great! Can you read it? I love mysteries.

Thank you so much for your time today, Dr. Hendricks, for inviting The Whole Person into your beautiful home.

For more information about The Five Wishes please visit the website at www.FiveWishes.com. For information about Katie and John Hendricks, the other books, and seminars at The Hendricks Institute, please visit hendricks.com.

This interview was conducted and written by Shannon Hall for The Whole Person Calendar.

*Editor’s note: At the time of this writing, Rep. Gabrielle Giffords of Arizona is in critical condition from a rampage launched by a mentally unstable man who fired a gun on a crowd gathered to hear her speak. Six others — including a federal judge and a nine-year-old girl — were killed. Though many in the political arena are debating the effects of critical, blaming, and vitriolic speech in the political arena is now squarely on the table of our national conscience. 