

# Sledding on Thin Ice

By: Philip Mulford

[The following is based on a true story. The names have not been changed because you would have known who I was talking about anyway.]

Several winters ago my wife, Lisa, announced that she was coming out to join me and our boys sledding. I'd just come in to warm up and had told Lisa what a great time we were having sledding on a sheet of ice that the overnight sleet and freezing rain had layered on top of the several inches of snow that had fallen the day before. Lisa's announcement would be no problem under ordinary circumstances, but these were no ordinary circumstances. She'd had four surgeries on her knee over the past year and was still limping around as a result of the most recent one. At first, I thought she was kidding. Even walking was treacherous, but something about the look in her eye and the angle of her shoulders made me realize she was serious. For some unknown reason, despite the risk to her knee, joining us at that moment was important to her.

This is the sixth in a series of articles about relationship communication – how it works, why it doesn't, and how to make it work in our relationships. Thank you for your feedback on my past articles. Keep those e-mails and comments coming! I hope this article addresses some of the communication issues we all face.

As you might imagine, my immediate thought was to tell her, "NO! Are you out of your mind!?!?" But that thought never found a voice. I was guided in a different direction. Of course, being the good husband, I should have explained (as if any explanation were necessary) what a foolish decision it would be for her to take the risk. I should have made it clear that the boys and I were crazy doing what we were doing and we were operating on two good knees. I wasn't telling her how much fun we were having in an effort to lull her into the fray. I assumed she wouldn't even consider venturing out. And if that reasoned approach didn't work, I should have just told, "No, it's too dangerous!"

*SLEDDING continued on page 50*

But what would that have done for her – besides making her the victim of my angry fear? What would it have done for me; for us? I'd always thought that one of my responsibilities as a husband was to protect my wife – even from herself. But I had recently come to a new understanding about how communication impacts relationships. I knew that telling her, “No!,” as much as I desperately wanted to, would only send the message that she was incapable of making her own decision. (“Sounds like she was incapable,” you may be thinking.)

But if I had succeeded in convincing her not to go, a piece, perhaps imperceptible at the time, would have

never know at first, but then I'd notice that she was doing things that she hadn't consulted me about. I'd ask her why we hadn't discussed it and she'd say she thought we had. And I, all innocent like, would wonder what I had done to make her feel she couldn't talk with me about things. And a distance between us, one neither of us wanted, could grow.

She didn't need my permission to go sledding. That's not the relationship I wanted. She didn't come to me to discuss the risks, or get my thoughts on the conditions. She simply said she'd be out to join us in a few minutes. And I bit my tongue. At least I think I did. And she came out and joined us.

Despite my conscious decision to support her in her decision, I felt myself at once tense all over – worried about

strong enough to let one you love make mistakes; take on challenges they may not be ready for; even fail. In the process it allows us to experience and deal with the consequences – which can include getting hurt, physically and emotionally – and learn from those consequences. But it remains steadfast, unwavering, without judgment, regardless. The risk I may deem unacceptable for my wife may be exactly what she needs in ways I am not, and could not be, aware – nor should I have to be aware, or convinced that it's an acceptable risk. I'm not her. It's her decision.

If I want to love her, then I need to honor and respect her decision-making abilities, her decisions, and her. I do that not by telling her she shouldn't go sledding. I do that by helping her wrap

eroded from our relationship. She may have felt less sure about her decision making process in that instance and in the future. She may have felt somewhat foolish in my eyes for having had such a “silly” notion. She may have begun to question herself. None of those results would have been obvious. They would have been subtle, quiet, undetectable. Over time we might have created a habit where “we” felt she needed to check with me before she made decisions. I would assume the role of “Knowing What's Best” without even realizing I was doing it. At some point, that could evolve into a process where she excluded me from her decision making because she resented being told what to do. And that shift, too, would have been unconscious and invisible. I'd

her, but not wanting to tell her what to do. Not wanting to deprive her of something that was important to her – something I could not understand since it was not I who had been through the four surgeries and the associated time and effort to get to the doctor, adjust my life to the brace, then the cane, and the showers that always required her to redress her leg with its 30 some stitches – and maybe I would have chosen not to sled, but she's not me.

If I want to love her, what must I do? I think a wonderful guide when it comes to relationships is the concept of unconditional love; a concept often aspired to, but seemingly impossible to apply. I think it includes free will; giving each other the freedom to make his or her own decisions. It's a love that is

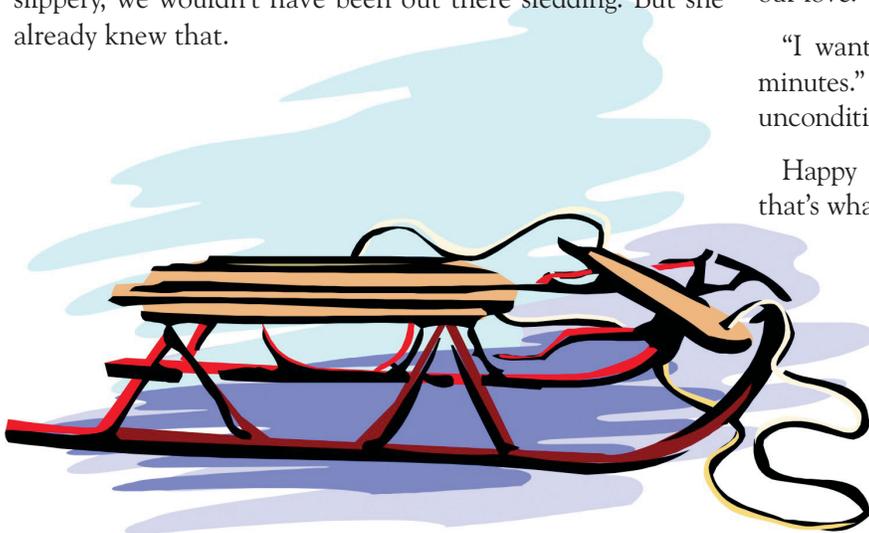
her wrist that has to be in a cast 4-6 weeks and by helping her do whatever else I can to assist if she wants assistance, but not takeover. It's so tempting to take over, to tell her what she can and can't do with her wrist in a cast, thumb ligament torn because she thought the sled was going too fast and she might hurt her knee. So she put her hand out to slow the sled down and her thumb wasn't a very good break. But the cast itself is not a problem, it's an opportunity: a physical reminder that loving someone doesn't mean protecting them from hurting themselves. It's a reminder that I am not responsible for my wife's decision to sled on ice, though I can tell you I had to consciously stop kicking myself for “letting her go sledding” as if it were my

SLEDDING continued on page 52

fault that she hurt herself.

Realizing that it wasn't my fault didn't mean it was her fault. Why is assessing fault so important anyway? We live in a world where blame assessment is so much a part of the aftermath. We also live in a world where if you are going to live, you are going to get injured at some point in your life. Some of us take more risks than others. I wasn't very good at it, especially at first. I blamed myself. My wife felt my anger, my anger at myself for not doing what I am incapable of doing unless I put her in a bubble. My anger at myself for letting her down, for not protecting her from her decision, for failing at my own expectation of being a "good husband" which included protecting my wife, even from herself. But that anger created a distance between us.

I want to love my wife in the way that she feels loved. Don't we all want to choose for ourselves how to live? Which of us wants any other person on this earth to be the one who decides whether we drive a car, prepare a meal using knives, boil a pot of water that may scald you, go to school, play a sport, walk up or down the stairs, go on a trip to a foreign land, walk outside our door – live our life? Not me. And I don't think my wife would have felt my love for her if I had told her she wasn't allowed to go sledding, or convinced her that she didn't know what was best for her by saying it was a bad idea. If she asked what the conditions were like, I would have told her, slippery, very slippery. If the conditions weren't slippery, we wouldn't have been out there sledding. But she already knew that.



As parents, we face these issues every day. How do we balance protecting a child while encouraging that child to learn to make his or her own decisions? We each parent differently, make different choices, but we share a common desire to love and protect our children. As a child, I never could imagine how my friend's sister must have felt every time her mother told her, "Now Becky, you get down off that wall before you hurt yourself." That, of course, being the same wall my friend and I had just climbed up and were sitting atop of proud with ourselves and our accomplishment. It wasn't just that wall for Becky, it was that way all the time. I can still feel the tension I felt then. It wasn't fair for Becky to be restricted in such a way – even if she might have fallen.

Who will decide what risks we each take? Who wants to be told what to do? How can we safeguard our children, our spouses, and all those we love without enfeebling them and making them feel weak, incompetent, powerless? Those are difficult questions. But what is the message we want to send – "You are incapable my child, my wife, my husband, let me make the decisions?" I don't think so. That message undermines our relationships slowly, invisibly, deceptively, until we don't want to be part of those relationships anymore. It's the same subtle message we send to our spouse who asks, "What shoes should I wear?" or "What tie should I wear?," if we presume to answer thinking that our own perspective is more important than hers or his. And yet we do this all the time. Instead, we can affirm our faith in the decision making of the one who asked. "Whatever you choose is fine," we say. In doing so, we express our love.

"I want to go sledding with you all. I'll be out in a few minutes." A thought I keep going back to, "How would unconditional love respond?"

Happy Holidays! May you find wonderful hills to sled (if that's what you decide to do).

Once a practicing attorney, Philip founded **Mulford Mediation** in 1990 and has mediated professionally for over 21 years. With offices in Fairfax and Warrenton, VA, Philip specializes in marriage, family, divorce, and family business mediation and communication. For more information about **Mulford Mediation**, please visit [www.mulfordmediation.com](http://www.mulfordmediation.com). In addition, Philip and his wife, Lisa, are the creators and co-hosts of a weekly radio talk show called **Communication360** where the topic is relationship communication. The show, with over 170,000 listeners per month, is available on the internet at [www.webtalkradio.net](http://www.webtalkradio.net). All shows are archived and can be listened to on demand or downloaded. For more information about **Communication360**, please visit [www.C360today.com](http://www.C360today.com). Coming soon, Philip will be offering a workshop called, "When You Speak, Listen: The Communication Connection." Philip may be reached at [pmulford@mulfordmediation.com](mailto:pmulford@mulfordmediation.com) or at (540)341-4615.

