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abcd27. Abandoning Our Pygmalion Projects
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Excerpted from The Pygmalion Project,
by Dr. Stephen Montgomery
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The Mirror of Fiction

It is not our purpose to become each other; it is to recognize each other, to learn to see the other and honor him for what he is. By Hermann Hesse

In Greek legend, a brash young sculptor named Pygmalion found the women of Cyprus so impossibly flawed that he resolved to carve a statue of his ideal woman, embodying every feminine grace and virtue. For months he labored with all his prodigious skill (and also with a strange compulsion), rounding here, smoothing there, until he had fashioned the most exquisite figure ever conceived by art. So exquisite indeed was his creation that Pygmalion fell passionately in love with the statue, and could be seen in his studio kissing its marble lips, fingering its marble hands, dressing and grooming the figure as if caring for a doll. But soon, and in spite of the work's incomparable loveliness, Pygmalion was desperately unhappy, for the lifeless statue could not respond to his desires, the cold stone could not return the warmth of his love. He had set out to shape his perfect woman, but had succeeded only in creating his own frustration and despair.

The premise of this book is that, in our closest relationships, we all behave like Pygmalion to some extent. Many of us seem attracted at first to creatures quite different from ourselves, and seem to take pleasure in the contrast. But, as we become more involved and start to vie for control of our relationships, we begin to see these differences as flaws. No longer satisfied with our loved ones as they are, we set about to change them, to transform them into our conception of what they should be. No longer able to appreciate our loved ones' distinctive ways of living, we try to shape them according to our own values or agendas. Like Pygmalion, in short, we take up the project of sculpting them little by little to suit ourselves. We snipe and criticize, browbeat and bully, we sculpt with guilt and with praise, with logic and with tears -- whatever methods are most natural to us. Not that we do this ceaselessly, nor always maliciously, but all too often, almost without thinking, we fall into this pattern of coercive behavior.

And like Pygmalion, we are inevitably frustrated, since our well-intentioned efforts to make over our mates bring us little more than disappointment and conflict. Our loved ones do not -- cannot -- comply meekly with our interference in their lives, and even if they were to surrender to our pressure, they would have to destroy in themselves what attracted us in the first place, their

individuality, their distinct breath of life. Our Pygmalion projects must fail: Either our loved ones fight back, and our relationships become battlegrounds; or they give in to us, and become as lifeless as Pygmalion's statue. In this paradoxical game, we lose even if we win.

In the legend, as it turns out, Venus took pity on Pygmalion and brought his statue to life, and he and "Galatea," as he named her, blushed, embraced, and married with the goddess's blessing. The rest of us, however, cannot rely on such miraculous intervention. Living in the real world, we are responsible ourselves for the success our relationships, and this means we must find a way to abandon our Pygmalion projects, by learning, if we can, to honor our fundamental differences in personality. For only by respecting the right of our loved ones to be different from ourselves -- to be perfect in their own ways -- can we begin to bring the beauty of our own relationships alive.

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