So how do the old and new paradigms play out in our relationships with others? For starters each paradigm has a different base for relationships. New paradigm relationships are based in reciprocity. Reciprocity is the free flow of energy that facilitates mutual giving and receiving.

Old paradigm relationships are based on need. The people who befriend me do so because they need something from me. I make friends with people who have something I need. As long as the need remains strong, the relationship stays intact. Sounds like a perfect recipe for codependence, huh?

It also sounds like old paradigm relationships are basically an agreement between two people to mutually use each other. Remember paradigms are a set of beliefs that become our operating principles and the way we see the world. Many of these beliefs are largely unconscious. If I’m operating from old paradigm beliefs I can genuinely like or even love a friend and still see the relationship in terms of what I can get from it.

Need can play out in subtle ways. Add in the old paradigm emphasis on how others see me and I may need to hang out with you because it makes me look better. You may need to befriend me because I have connections you could use.

Need based relationships give birth to both expectation and obligation. The saddest thing about this mess of need, obligation and expectation is that leaves no room for random acts of kindness. If I receive a random act of kindness, I am obligated to repay it in some way. If I am randomly kind to someone else, I expect them to repay me. Obligation and expectation negate the spirit in which random acts of kindness are given and received. These principles also make it very difficult to ask for help or receive help because that too creates obligation.

The old paradigm beliefs around the need for hierarchies and survival of the fittest also play in. In order to maintain a hierarchy in every relationship one person has to be above the other. So a relationship of equals isn’t possible. To keep the hierarchy going, I have to know where I stand in every relationship. Survival of the fittest says not only do I need to know where I stand, I have to make sure I’m on top…and to do that I have to keep score.

I have to make sure there are more chits on my side of the board than on yours. This principle is often unconsciously embodied by people who appear giving and selfless. One way to insure I’m at the top of the hierarchy with most people is to become a consummate giver. If I’m always the one doing for others or taking care of others then I’m continually upping my score and making sure others owe me.

Because our society looks favorably on givers, I take on the appearance of being selfless and a “good” person. People caught in the giving trap often have a hard time saying “no.” Even if they don’t want to do something, the fear of what others may think if they refuse can push them to do it anyway. If I’m really boxed in by what others think I may get angry at you for asking because I feel obligated and don’t know how to say “no.”

Most people cringe at the thought of keeping score in relationships. If your first thoughts when a friend says “no” or does something you don’t like are about how he should behave differently because you helped him move last year, you’re keeping score. If you do something for a friend when you really don’t
want to because she supported you through a rough time three years ago, you’re keeping score. If you’ve said or thought “After everything I’ve done for you”, you’re keeping score. Keeping score fuels the cycle of obligation.

The new paradigm simplifies all of this. If my relationships are based on reciprocity, there’s little room for obligation and keeping score. I’ll create an expectation or two because I’m human. Because expectations aren’t a part of the fabric of my relationships, I have the opportunity to own them and let them go. When I come from how I feel when I relate to others, keeping score makes no sense.

Conflict in relationships brings up another layer of the contrast between the old and new paradigm. The old is based on either/or. That principle, combined with hierarchy and need, pretty much require fault and blame if there’s a conflict. In an either/or there are only two options. The possibility of things just happening that are nobody’s fault can exist as an idea, but in a moment of conflict blame must be assigned.

Designating blame can be direct or subtle. The need to make the “right” decision also figures in. If I blame myself, it means I haven’t made the right decision about something which threatens my place in the hierarchy.

Under the old paradigm principles it’s virtually impossible to separate responsibility from blame and fault. Taking responsibility for my actions means blaming myself so that’s only permitted within limits. I can stay within those limits by saying “yes, I did that” and offering a long explanation for what happened. That position is very similar to accepting a compliment by saying “thank you, but” and then refuting whatever nice thing someone just said about me.

The old paradigm emphasis on public persona and not showing emotion also affects interpersonal relationships. The new paradigm values authenticity. The old does not. In the old paradigm it’s far more important to make sure everything looks good than to create real connection. So I can have lots of fun social friendships but the deeper soul-feeding ones risk violating my operating principles.

To some extent we all have a foot in each paradigm. How much we live from each varies person to person. We each have a choice about which beliefs we feed, nurture and let go of. There are times when the principles of each paradigm can be useful. In the bigger picture, the new paradigm welcomes more openness, interconnectedness, authenticity and creativity.