

# Love Lingers Here

Stories of Enduring Intimate  
Relationships

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Professional Psychology Press

Love Lingers Here:  
Stories of Intimate Enduring Relationships

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# Preface

During the past half century, the concept of adult development has become increasingly visible and viable in the United States. We have always known that adults change in interesting and often dramatic ways during their lives. Countless novels and motion picture screenplays have been devoted to the nature of changes in men and women during their adult years. Nevertheless, only in recent years have systematic studies been done concerning these predictable developments in the lives of people.

The shift in attention from developmental changes among children to developmental changes among adults has been slow in coming. Most of what seems interesting and significant in human growth and development has often been assumed to occur before adulthood or even before adolescence. Most social scientists and human service practitioners have gradually come to recognize that adults are capable of major reorganization in their lives after they have "grown up." The maturation process apparently is a lifelong task for all of us.

We must now begin to look at couples in a similar manner. Two people do not simply come together and "live happily ever after". As couples, men and women are constantly changing and maturing, not just because both individuals in the relationship are changing and maturing, but also because the couple, as a separate third entity, must itself undergo changes in response to varying conditions in the world. The couple, itself, must undergo maturation as the two individuals jointly gain more wisdom and understanding about themselves as a couple.

This book concerns this maturation process—especially among men and women who have formed long-term intimate relationships with another man or woman. Love does linger in the lives of some people in the dynamic and often challenging world of the mid-21<sup>st</sup> Century. What is the nature of these enduring relationships and how might we all benefit from the insights that these loving women and men have to offer?

## Acknowledgements

In preparing this book over several decades, I have benefited greatly from a cadre of colleagues who have helped me conduct interviews with couples who have lived

together for many years. Many of these colleagues were graduate students at the time. They were enrolled at the graduate school (The Professional School of Psychology) where I have served as president for many years.

It should be noted that these were not your typical graduate students who arrived freshly in their early 20s from an undergraduate program. Rather, these were mature adults (average age of 45) who brought extensive life experiences to their advanced studies at this graduate school—often having served for many years in a human service agency. In most cases, they were involved themselves in a significant, intimate relationship and could bring this experience as well as their life experiences to bear in the insightful analyses they provided regarding the interviews they conducted.

I also wish to acknowledge the nurturing setting in which I have been writing this book. I am blessed to be in an enduring intimate relationship myself with Katheen O'Donnell. Katheen and I have addressed many of the challenges and opportunities identified in this book and are still together after more than forty years. The foundation of our relationship is to be found not only in the values and interests we hold in common, but also in the love we share with our two children, Jason and Kate, and our five grandchildren. I am deeply grateful for the presence of all these people in my life and for the insights I have gained from each of them regarding how love lingers.

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Harpwell, Maine

December 2022

# Chapter One

## Couples in Transition: An Alternative Perspective

This book concerns the journey of people who have chosen to spend their life together with one other person. It is a book about love that lingers for many years between two people. A collective narrative is offered regarding enduring, intimate relationships that exist in the real world.

Insightful perspectives regarding these intimate relationships are to be found abundantly in fictional literature, movies, songs and theatrical productions. We find many narratives regarding ways in which couples endure—often in the face of challenging conditions in the world and in their own relationship.

People love one another in the midst of war and on a desert island. They take care of one another when poor, when grief-stricken, when warding off zombies, and when attending a state fair. Love is expressed and ensured through the sharing of food when little is available, through forgiving the transgressions of the other person, and while enjoying a bottle of vintage Bordeaux in a French café.

These fictional insights are wonderful and are often incorporated in the analyses provided in this book. However, sparse nonfictional evidence is available regarding an important question to be asked: what do successful couples have in common (if anything)? Accompanying this fundamental point of inquiry is an even more intriguing question: does the collective life and relationship that exists between two people who are in love change in a systematic way over time?

### The Therapeutic Perspective

The existing nonfictional literature does provide us with some preliminary answers to these two questions. There have been some studies that generate fruitful ideas regarding the nature of lingering love. Virtually of these studies about successful couples speak of the need for a relationship in which inherent conflict and differences can be tolerated. The general conclusion is that one can be "out of like" with one's partner, without being "out of love." These studies also often identify the need for trust and flexibility in contemporary relationships and about the requirement that a successful couple quickly abandon outmoded and unrealistic



expectations about the nature and purpose of contemporary intimate relationships.

In most cases, these challenges and requirements are being seen from the perspective of human service providers. The task of describing the developmental stages of couples comes from a therapeutic context. Conclusions are usually drawn from the frequent witnessing of failed relationships.

The key to a successful enduring relationship must be found in whatever is the opposite of what the failed couple is doing. This Pathological Extension strategy might help to sell books: a therapist who works with couples and has helped them “heal” their relationship must know what they are doing and are recommending. Yet, is this always the case? Do “ordinary” people has something to say if they have been with someone else for many years without the benefit of therapy? Can a Normalcy Extension sell books?

## **Is It All About the Beginnings?**

Many therapists focus on their client’s early life (especially if they have been influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud and other psychoanalytic theorists and practitioners). The same bias is to be found among those doing couples’ therapy. They tend to focus on the early life of a couple. They tend to focus on the ingredients that keep a couple together during the difficult early stages. Most of those who write about the dynamics of couples offer considerable encouragement, but little tangible guidance, for the couple that is struggling with the disillusionment that sets in after the romance is gone.

Perhaps, these authors are simply being realistic in describing early difficulties in a relationship. These problems certainly would help to account for the large number of failed relationships in contemporary society. Yet, there would seem to be more to contemporary relationships than most of these authors recognize. Their therapeutic perspectives may be limiting their vision.

There are good reasons to stay together after “the bloom is off the roses.” It is not all about pathological or passive acceptance of a post-bloom relationship. Something must hold couples together other than just a neurotic compulsion to avoid loneliness or a passive acceptance of societal expectations. We must pay more attention to ways in which “normal” couples hold their relationship together during these difficult periods. Insights are essential—and the stories told by “normal” enduring couples might be of great value in this regard.

## What About the Later Stages?

Just as many authors are rather pessimistic in their analyses of the early developmental stages, they tend to be quite optimistic in their description of the final stages. The old folks are settled in and enjoy being with their grandkids and playing card games together in their retirement condo—assuming that they have enough money in their pension and social security to afford the condo and that they have grandchildren who actually come to see them.

Are the grandkids (or even their children) living near them or have they moved several thousand miles away? And what about their physical and mental health? Is one of them facing the challenge of early Alzheimer? What if they are still working (because they like to work or because they still have to make a living)—no time for cards.

The seeming bliss of the last stages of development is somewhat and sometimes questionable. Are mature relationships really that stable? Aren't there new traumas, new stresses in a relationship that re-invoke old conflicts, transference and projections? Most of the authors note that there will be conflicts in the final stages, but one doesn't get a sense that these conflicts have any real substance.

While the couples in the early stages of most couple-development models are known to us and are sources of rich insight for each of us about where we now find ourselves (or have been in the past), the couples in these models who are at the later stages seem remote and unreal. We don't really seem to have much to learn from them and may even wonder if they really exist or are in some sense fraudulent. When faced with the complacent statements of couples about their all-too-perfect, liberated relationships, we are inclined to be skeptical—saying "I don't believe it one bit!"

We must look to those people who are still in an intimate relationship to teach us something about what it means to live with someone "for better or for worse" and "in sickness and in health." They might have something to tell us about lingering love that the couples' therapist can't tell us—that is if these people will be honest with us and not just collude in painting a pretty picture of a "happy ever after" life with another person.

## Conclusions: A Descriptive Perspective

The primary problem in most of the models seems to be that these models are prescriptive rather than descriptive. They tell us what a successful relationship should be like rather than what such a relationship in our contemporary world *actually is like*. Authors have trouble with their transitions from early to late stages because they are not really describing developmental stages but are instead describing the differences between "good" (early developmental stage) marriages and "bad" (late developmental stage) marriages. Many of the authors are successful in generating lists of positive and negative characteristics of modern relationships. However, they fall short when establishing a coherent pattern of change and development among couples.

We are about to provide an alternative model of couple's development that builds on the studies and books already written about the developmental stages of couples--but avoids some of the pitfalls. Along the way we will be requesting assistance from several guides. They come from diverse fields (psychotherapy, law, spirituality and music) and offer diverse (though often complementary) perspectives. In setting the stage for this presentation of an alternative model, we first examine the existing myths and images that influence (and even fully inform) the way in which most of us look at enduring intimate relationships. In association with this examination, we offer some unique ideas regarding the nature of loving relationships that exist in the "real world."

**Section One**  
**Myths and Images**

## **Chapter Two**

# **Couples in Transition: The Changing Nature of Intimate Relationships**

As we consider a new model of couple development that is based on examples of enduring relationships, rather than on the opposite of failed relationships, we must first look at the history of relationships in our contemporary societies and, more specifically, the dominant personal and collective myths we cling to about intimacy and enduring relationships.

## **Personal and Collective Myths About Intimate Relationships**

Why are we so easily disappointed and why do we hold on to old truths and old expectations? First, we tend to live through and are strongly influenced by a set of unifying assumptions that we hold about the world around us. This unifying set of assumptions is often called a "paradigm" or "frame of reference." Each of us enters a relationship with our own individual frames of reference regarding the nature of intimate relationships which we apply to the relationships we form with other people, as well as powerful paradigms that come from the past but continue to saturate our mid-21<sup>st</sup> Century world.

### **Collective Myths**

It seems that intimate relationships are not so much about somehow aligning with objective realities as they are about finding shared images and perceptions particularly regarding how two people should fall in love and live together for the rest of their lives. We also enter relationships with a set of assumptions that we acquire from the society of which we both are members (if we are from different cultures then this dynamic becomes much more complex). These are the collective myths that have strongly influenced the expectations and actions of couples for many centuries that, in somewhat modified form, continue to influence our notions

about being in an intimate relationship.

This collective cultural narrative is the compilation and distillation of messages within a specific society about how people are supposed to do things. It contains a mixture of beliefs, values, biases, myths, stories, "facts," observations, feelings and hunches. It is not so very important whether or not this narrative in any "scientific" sense accurately represents our world, it is only important that this cultural narrative: (1) have an objective quality (appearing to be based in our experiences of the outer world rather than our own inner world; 2) be consistent and internally logical and coherent; and (3) be of help in stabilizing or serving as an anchor point for our often turbulent world.

The dominant cultural narrative of our time with regard to intimate relationships consists of the story of a man and woman who meet, fall in love, and remain together for life. They solve all their problems, keep their love alive, live independently of their families [of origin], encourage each other's personal development, have healthy and happy children, and endure as partners and friends.

This dominant narrative certainly meets all three criteria. It appears to be external and is strongly reinforced on a daily basis in the popular media. It is also consistent, logical and coherent: If we are in love and work hard on our relationship, then it will be successful. Everyone associated with the relationship (including children) will be happy. Consideration and hard work, in other words, always pay off in the end.

Finally, this image of the perfect relationship does provide stability, particularly in a world which so rarely seems to produce successful and enduring relationships. We can always turn back to this ideal relationship and know that if we will only emulate this perfect couple, we too will be happy. Given the power of this dominant narrative, we look everywhere for relevant models and paths to achieving this ideal. Yet, we are rarely successful, in part because intimate relationships might not be all about happiness. Furthermore, events over which we have no control intrude on our relationships and disrupt our best intentions. Finally, this narrative (like all collective myths) tends to be immune to the influence of real life and contemporary experiences.

## **Personal Myths**

Our society instills many of these narratives as frames of reference that enable us to live with relative comfort in a specific society every day of our life. Other frames of

reference that guide our daily lives range from the ways in which we value and use money to the ways in which we see our universe. Yet not all of our narratives come from our specific society. Many come from our families of origins and the communities in which we were raised, while other narratives represent our own unique perspectives.

These latter narratives are often called self-biographies and constitute a central ingredient in our sense of a personal “self.” It would seem that some of the most influential frames of reference in our life are generated by and are deeply embedded in our intimate relationships. At this point, I wish to introduce one of the guides to intimate, enduring relationships that I will be looking to throughout this book.

This guide is Thomas Moore who wrote a book, *Soul Mates* (1994) that is filled with many insights about couples—especially as related to the deepest elements of a loving relationship. In this book, Moore indicates that the unique paradigms regarding “self” contain and are in part filled by the mysteries and magic of intimate relationships (Moore, 1994, pp. 49-52). We are entranced not only by the special nature of the person we live with, but also by the special world and narratives we have created for ourselves.

As we shall note throughout this book, the "couple's narrative" is often constructed in compliance with the dominant cultural narrative. At other times, however, the couple's narrative is constructed in direct opposition to the dominant cultural narrative or in a manner that tries to accommodate both the cultural narrative and the unique couple's narrative (“we aren't currently like the ideal but are going to work hard to achieve it!”). Thus, as we examine throughout this book the ways in which enduring relationships tend to function, we will be looking at the distinctive ways in which partners not only perceive their relationship, but also conceive of the world around them individually and collectively as a couple through their joint narrative

It is also important to note that the dominant narrative in any society regarding intimate relationship is defined primarily during our early life (ages 5-10). It is during these first years that we venture outside the family when we are most susceptible to the dominant social narrative and myths of the time.

The dominant myth regarding intimate relationships (particularly marriages) has been defined in most contemporary societies primarily through the stories that are conveyed in the popular media (film, radio, television, novels, magazines, newspapers). Furthermore, these images are chosen not because they challenge us,

but rather because they entertain and reassure us. These images, in other words, are themselves inherently dated and nostalgic. Yet, they are powerful and are worthy of some examination.

## The Early Twentieth Century Models of Intimate Relationships

As we find ourselves in the midst of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it particularly timely to look back over the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to observe the extent to which things have changed and the extent to which they have remained the same. As our world entered the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, many of its societies had just begun to move from the premodern to the modern era. Marriages were no longer arranged, nor were they primarily based on economic factors, as they were when families were the primary unit of production (agriculture and crafts) in our society. Romantic notions of marriage became more prevalent before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as people who were poor looked to a time through upward mobility when they could indulge in the finer and more tender aspects of life, including the love of their husband or wife.

### Marital Advice

As we look from the vantage point of the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, there certainly have been major shifts in the ways in which intimate relationships and in particular marriages are viewed. The advice that was offered in the popular media of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century about how to be successful in marriage now seems both very dated and ironically unchanged. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, everyone was expected to get married.

Women, in particular, were expected to find value in life primarily through their intimate and enduring relationship with a man. Writing for *Cosmopolitan* magazine in July of 1902 (p. 323), Rafford Pyke declared that "marriage is confessedly the most profoundly important event in a woman's life. It is an event to which she is always looking forward from the days of her very girlhood."

Yet, women were also assumed to be naïve and vulnerable to the guiles and passions of men. The young, pathetic and inexperienced woman, according to Pyke, is "credulous, confiding and utterly without experience." Hence, she must remain always on guard against the lure and destructive forces of sexuality, looking instead



for the presence of deep love. She must be able to distinguish between "the mere flutterings of girlish emulation, and the great elemental throb which reads the soul with the birth pangs of immortal love." In order to ensure this quality of love, it is essential that young women enter first into a platonic friendship with a man that they respect. This relationship eventually blossoms into love if there is a solid basis of immortal love.

A 1912 article written by Washington Gladden for *Good Housekeeping* (April, v. 54, pp. 483-491) similarly emphasizes the importance of friendship during the courtship period of a relationship: "marriage, at its best, is the sacrament of friendship." Married couples should be first and foremost "comrades." According to Gladden:

. . . if they were of the same sex they would find it a joy to live together. . . There are many families in which passion often flames and sentiment frequently flourishes from which a real friendship is sometimes sadly absent. These are husbands and wives who often convince themselves that they love each other dearly, who are not nearly so good friends as they ought to be."

Friendship, furthermore, held a spiritual characteristic, at least when conceived in the context of marriage. Friendship is based, according to Gladden and *Good Housekeeping*, not on sentimentality or passion, but rather on a "communality of interest in the realities of character." Intimate relationships that endure are based on shared values and rules (called "character" in 1912).

## The Rules and Roles of Marriage

What was the nature of these, shared values and rules? There was general agreement about certain values and rules at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in most modern societies. For instance, most of the writers about marriage – who were inevitably men – declared that marriage is intended primarily for the reproduction of children. In keeping with this purpose, young men should "decide whether he and [his prospective bride] are sufficiently robust and represent a sufficiently healthy heredity to warrant the bringing of efficient children into the world." (*Ladies Home Journal*, 31, p. 4, July 1914)

Women similarly should select a husband who can help her produce healthy, intelligent children. Even a liberal visionary like Scott Nearing (together with Nellie Nearing) proposed in 1912 (*Ladies Home Journal*, 27, p. 7, March 1912) that:

. . . it is upon that 'yes', or 'no' -- that selective choice of the woman - that depend on the mating of this particular man and woman and the possible transmission of a combination of their qualities to some of the children born into the next generation. Not only is it the man's future misery or happiness which hangs on the balance of the woman's choice: she also determines, in part, the characteristics of a new generation.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, marriage was also considered a moral commitment, a sacrament that was intended to further God's purposes and preserve the morality of society. A very young Winston Churchill declared in a 1913 *Good Housekeeping* article that happiness and unhappiness in marriage is linked directly to religious commitment. Churchill speaks of marriage being based in rebirth -- a process whereby we "find, by some means, the secret of our individual existence, to discover the work we were intended to do for the service of humanity."

Churchill suggests that while society and individuals may require legal protections, based on the laws of marriage and divorce, neither society nor individuals need protection from the spiritual established in rebirth and based in a spiritual succeed: "marriage is the supreme responsibility. A marriage commitment will be the most sacred undertaking of all." In a similar manner, other writers of the time speak of marriage as a social arrangement, a social duty, a religious sacrament "the greatest and holiest of adventures"; (Cabot, 1912, p. 834).

Clearly, there is no room in such a world for any alternative mode of intimacy that would neither produce children nor contribute to social stability. Life outside the bounds of matrimony was clearly forbidden—as was any form of homosexuality. Beyond these clear points of agreement, there is some dispute among the advisors of this first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century for many societies were in transition with regard to the appropriate role to be played by women in the family and world in general. There were also some strong differences of opinion regarding family values. Obviously, our current debates regarding these matters are not recent, but go back at least one hundred years!

From the perspective of Pyke in 1902 *Cosmopolitan* article the surest sign that love exists in a relationship is the woman's willingness to abandon her pride, so that she might rightly subordinate herself to the man she loves and admires. With the fall of pride comes the beginning of immortal love and the formation of a relationship that shall endure. One year later, in this same magazine, focusing in a chauvinistic manner on American couples, Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen declared that "there is

nothing more worthy of a woman's best thought and devoted effort than to create and maintain a true home. The first sign of the degeneration of a race is the gradual breaking up of the home-idea and the splendid mental and physical characteristics of Americans of today as a race are due more than anything else to the yearning of the American bride to gather these sweeter and tenderer influences around her."

Ten years later, from a more "liberated" perspective, Gladden suggests in the *Good Housekeeping* article that women must recognize their unique role in the family and recognize the important role played by their husband as the primary breadwinner. This does not, however, mean that women should be subordinate to men. Gladden made the following suggestions:

[with regard to] the management of the home, in business interests and in property interests there ought to be intelligent cooperation between the husband and wife. About many of the details of her husband's business the wife would not venture an opinion; but on the larger aims and purposes of it, on the principles by which he is guided, the judgment of a clearheaded woman might be worth much to him. Above all, the husband and the wife ought to be good enough friends so that they shall confer freely upon what is prudent and possible in the family economy.

It should be noted that Gladden's suggestions were already considered old fashion in 1912 (at least in women's magazines).

## Contemporary Images of Intimate Relationships

What has occurred since this time? Have there been major changes over the course of the past century? There has been a clear decline in the emphasis in marriage on reproduction and for many people the moral and religious obligations associated with marriage seem to be quaint, if not totally irrelevant. We have also witnessed the emergence (or at least more visible and acceptable manifestation) of alternative types of intimate relationships. We observe many men and women living together out of wedlock, and the gradual acceptance of both lesbian and gay relationships, at least in most urban areas of our contemporary societies.

Yet, intimate relationships continue to be a sacred or spiritual union for many couples (Moore, 1994). Furthermore, marriages continue to play a critical role regarding the preservation of the social fabric of our society. Other types of intimate relationships also gain greater importance. In many ways, intimate relationships are

even more important today than they were at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, for a majority of men and women in many societies now work at least part time outside the home. In many instances, men and women travel for at least a half hour to their workplace. This in turn means that many adults spend most of their waking hours away from home.

In many cases, we no longer know our neighbors and rarely have time to meet with friends other than at work. In many cases, the relationships we have established at work are the only meaningful connections we have with people other than members of our own family. The workplace, in other words, often serves as the new neighborhood for many of us. Given this relative isolation from other people, we become increasingly dependent on our partner and other members of our family. They must meet needs that in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century were often met by people outside the family, such as recreation, intellectual stimulation, humor, and drinking companionship.

While the nature and purposes of intimate relationships have changed dramatically during the past 100 plus years, many of our images of intimate relationships and expectations regarding the needs that these relationships will meet have not changed. The words about marriage that appeared in the magazines of 1902 and 1912 have hauntingly contemporary rings about them.

Somehow and in some ways, we still want our intimate relationship to be based on an eternal commitment, a moral force, a spiritual journey -- Churchill's "rebirth." We still participate in ceremonies that sanctify our intimate relationships. We are still deeply disappointed when our most cherished dreams regarding a rich, enduring relationship tumble around us in conflict, separation and divorce.

## **Intimacy and Media**

What then were the dominant images when you were very young—or when your parents were young? What were the sources of your own assumptions about intimate enduring relationships? For many of us, these images were first formed at the motion picture theater. The big screen and big-time actors and actresses left an indelible impression that remain with us for many years.

For those of us who are younger, these images came primarily not from movies, but rather from television. A smaller screen, but still characters, plots and actors who taught us how to be in an enduring relationship—or how to get out of a bad

relationship. There might not have been explicit sex displayed on the screen, but there certainly was passion, anger, reconciliation –and often abiding love.

## 1940s-1950s

For men and women who were children during the 1940's, common images regarding the "perfect" relationship may have been Judy Garland and -- (the boy next door) in *Meet Me in St. Louis* or perhaps a slightly more realistic Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn in one of their many movies together (or Spencer Tracy, Joan Bennett and Elizabeth Taylor in *Father of the Bride*). What did these movies teach those of us who are now in our 80s about the appropriate role for men and women in a relationship or about how to overcome conflict in a relationship?

Many of my older friends grew up during this era, as did a few of the men and women we interviewed. They suggest that these movies portrayed women as affectionate, family--oriented and conciliatory, while the men tended to be oriented toward the outer society and often acted a bit foolishly when confronted with family matters.

Popular radio programs of the 40s -- such as "Jack Benny" and "Fibber Magee and Molly" --conveyed similar themes. Popular novels (such as "I Remember Mama" and "Forever Amber") tended to portray women in relationships as either saints who are deeply embedded in family relationships, or prostitutes or seductive mistresses who have no permanent relationships at all. The independent woman was inevitably described as in some sense "fallen" or at least "tainted," while men were either in charge of their relationship or cuckold by a too-dominant female.

For those of us who were born in the 1950s and grew up watching Gordon MacRae and Doris Day on the big screen and "I Love Lucy" or "My Little Margie" on the smaller television screen, a compelling version of the perfect or at least sustainable relationship was portrayed -- though during both the 40s and 50s we find an emphasis on "father knows best" (though often in Dagwoodian fashion only thinks that he knows best) and on women as dependent and supportive of the male ego and initiative. We found the beginnings of a Hollywood-based image of women as independent (building on the models first offered by Mae West, Katherine Hepburn and, on occasion, Greta Garbo during the 1940s).

## 1960s

The 1960s saw a quite different image of the perfect relationship. Movies such as *The Apartment*, *Hud* and *Easy Rider* portrayed short term relationships that were intimate but never quite satisfactory, while other popular movies such as *The Graduate* and *Midnight Cowboy* explored intimate relationships that could by no traditional standards be called "ordinary." Not only did the "anti-hero" gain visibility in the movies of the 1960s, but the "anti-relationship" (the "couple from hell") also gains credibility -- sometimes as a problem to be addressed, but other times as a new type of relationship to be emulated.

Marriages were no longer made in heaven, nor did the contract read: "until death do us part." People were supposed to stay together as long as they still loved each other. Young men and women were to explore intimacy before settling down to monogamy if they were to be successful as a sexual partner and if they were to know "what they were getting into" when they married that perfect boy (or girl) next door. If we were young during this period of time or if our parents were living their impressionable early years during the 1960s, these more adaptable (or even "broken") images were dominant in the media.

While television, as the new medium of the 1950s and 1960s, tended to still portray the nuclear family in traditional terms (doting housewife and mother, 2.5 kids, and a bread-winning father and loving husband), people seemed to view these programs in wistful terms and looked at them for comic relief rather than for any penetrating view into the new late 20<sup>th</sup> Century couple. Movies also offered comic relief, yet marriage often was the butt of the jokes in American film, and the "odd couple" was found not just in a bachelor apartment but also in many late 20<sup>th</sup> Century homes.

## 1970s

What about those of us who were young during the 1970s? We were confronted with a mosaic of media images about love, relationships and marriage. On the one hand, there were the often-soupy romantic movies such as *Love Story* and *The Way We Were* (complete with wonderful music) and equally as soupy romantic musicals, such as *Fiddler on the Roof* (complete with a wonderful story). These movies drew us away from the ongoing reality of intimate relationships during this decade.

Other movies, such as *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *Coming Home*, took us straight into

the starkest of these realities, as did *A Star is Born*, a musical about alcoholism. Then we have the complex (and at times disturbing) portrayals offered by Woody Allen in *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan* and by Jack Nicholson in *Five Easy Pieces*. Of course, we could always run away from these challenging portrayals by purchasing a ticket for escape into *Star Wars* or *Rocky*—when men could be men and women could either stand by their man or stand alongside their man in galactic warfare.

What did this bewildering array of 1970s movies tell us about how we should build a stable, loving long term relationships with another person? Mostly, these movies told us that this not an easy task and that there are likely to be intruding events which challenge our relationships. These movies also told us that it is OK sometimes to escape into romance and fantasy—perhaps going to the movies holding our loving parent’s hand during the scary scenes or looking elsewhere during the “smoochy” scenes. If we are older, then we can escape to the movies with that person with whom we have chosen to spend a lifetime (or at least a few years).

## 1980s

Many of us had passed out of our impressionable youth during the 1980s; however, this was a decade when some of us were still young. In many ways the media portrayal of intimate relationships during the 1980s followed the lead of 1970s Hollywood. There were the super romantic movies, such as *Out of Africa*, *When Harry Met Sally* and (for the younger crowd, *The Little Mermaid*). For many of us, Robert Redford and Meryl Streep, or Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan, probably helped us remember (or at least believe) that love can be the real thing.

There was also the escapist genre, led by the continuing *Star Wars* series (and now the *Star Trek* series) along with *Princess Bride* (which in its own way was both extolling and gently mocking escapist films). There were also once again the movies that portrayed the challenges to be found in enduring relationships: *Terms of Endearment* and *Ordinary People*. Alongside these movies about real-life tragedies are those about relationships in the midst of real-life (or fantasized) triumphs—often portrayed in sports movies such as *Field of Dreams* and *Bull Durham*.

What I think is most intriguing about the Hollywood portrayal of relationships during the 1980s, are those relationships that are sustained with extraterrestrials (*E.T.*), a replica (*Blade Runner*), a woman who is actually a man (*Tootsie*), a movie theater (*Cinema Paradiso*) and even our own mother (*Back to the Future*).

I wonder if this is just another way to escape the real world, or if, at some level, Hollywood is telling us either that some relationships are not always what they seem to be (*Blade Runner* and *Tootsie*) or that it is safer to love and relate to something other than a human being! Finally, it should be noted that the 1980s brought us movies about relationships that were deeply troubling, either because we could get killed if we are attracted to another person (*Fatal Attraction*) or because the world is coming to an end anyway, so why fall in love (*The Road Warrior*). No wonder we should avoid human love!

Having offered this litany of movies over five decades, I propose that the images established during our childhood, reinforced by the dominant media of the time as well as our own parents and other significant adult figures in our lives, continue to hold a powerful (though often unacknowledged or even unconscious) hold on our lives. At some very deep level we look for the perfect relationship as it is defined by this old image, and are often depressed, angry or discouraged when we find that our own significant relationships fail to match or even come close to matching this image. We also tend to get quite confused when we inevitably mix together images of perfect relationships that come from different eras.

## Conclusions:

### The Four Dominant Images of Intimacy

The interviews we conducted over many years suggest that there are four dominant images that are widely shared by men and women of our time and, in particular, by men and women who were born in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century regarding the essential ingredients of a perfect, long-term relationship: (1) a stable, satisfying routine ("Let's live happily ever after"), (2) an escape from past history and personal limitations brought about by the relationship ("You make me feel brand new"), (3) a non-changing compatibility of style, values and aspirations ("Like what I like, be like I'm like") and (4) an exciting, always gratifying sex life ("Still great in the sack!"). We assume that if we only have stability, compatibility, a "new self" and great sex, our life as a couple will be wonderful!

Set against these four images are cautionary notes regarding potential false "love" and the probability that enduring couples will face challenges in their life together. Romance is to be savored but not fully trusted. Heroism is great as a vehicle for escape but probably should not be the foundation for a lasting relationship—after



all we can't spend our entire life hitting home runs or fighting off lions or aliens. Hollywood is telling us, however, that we can still find hope in our relationships with those we love and that this love is an important ingredient in the creation of a satisfying life for us as movie goers.

In many ways, these four images have changed very little from images that were dominant at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Marriage was assumed to be a stable, eternal institution in 1900, and was to be based on similar backgrounds and perspectives. Marriage in 1900 was intended to bring about a "rebirth" (to use Churchill's term), as well as provide an institution for procreation (the sexual dimension of marriage). In the following four chapters we will examine each of these images—cultural narratives - as well as accompanying challenges. I will identify alternative models concerning how long-term, enduring relationships really operate, at least as described by the men and women we interviewed.

## Chapter Three

### The First Image: Stability and Remarriage

In our aspirations regarding the formation of a long-term, enduring relationship we tend to look for stability and even tranquility – especially given the turbulence in virtually all other areas of our lives. Frieda and Vern, for instance, have lived together in remarkable tranquility for more than fifty years. When talking about their marriage, both Frieda and Vern were hard-pressed to identify any times when their marriage was in trouble even after having raised three children, lived through a bankruptcy together, and confronted (like all long-term couples) radical changes in the world in which they live.

One wonders if Frieda and Vern either are hiding their problems from the interviewer perhaps even from each other – or if they truly lived in a simpler place and time, in which couples truly could live happily ever after, with minimal need for soul-searching reexamination of their personal lives or their lives with one another.

When we look at Patrick and Mary Anne, one of the younger couples that we interviewed, we find a clearly articulated vision of stability and tranquility that seems to parallel that described by Frieda and Vern. Yet for Patrick and Mary Anne, this vision seemed quite out-of-keeping with the era in which they grew up.

Perhaps it was wishful thinking brought about by viewing *Terms of Engagement* (a comparison between couples at various stages in their relationship or a blue color portray of marriage in “The King of Queens”. Or maybe repeated viewing of T.V. shows about nontraditional relationships that still offered traditional reassurance—such as “Friends”, “Sex in the City” or “Will and Grace.” How did these images influence the way in which they think about their own marriage?

Both Patrick and Mary Anne were initially hesitant to talk about their mutual aspirations for “it’s too serious a subject.” Patrick, however, volunteered the following image:

I always think of [marriage] positively. I’m kind of idealistic about it.  
I always think of good things about it, like raising a family, how the kids will be, how they’ll look, traveling with her, being more

committed. This summer we did have some problems, so I see being married will be more intense because leaving (each other) will not be as feasible as before you are married. It's not an option until the fatal end (laughter). . .when all else fails.

Clearly, for Patrick, a 22-year-old male, marriage is both attractive and a bit frightening. He knows there is a way out (divorce, death) but hopes that this will never occur. He goes on to be somewhat more specific about his image of marriage exhibiting by word (if not deed) a more "liberated" vision of the male's role in marriage:

I see both of us working, going out, carrying equal responsibilities at home, like cooking, cleaning, laundry -- depending on who is overworked. I see us spending a lot of time together, but I think we will have other friends. It's hard to know -- once you get married, all things change. I feel comfortable in sharing and having a joint account, as long as she does not get out of control. She does not like me to spend money on her, although I enjoy it. It's fun for me to buy her things. I don't like the fact that she doesn't let me -- although I would be broke if she let me (laughter).

Mary Anne then articulates her own vision of their future together. She is somewhat more practical and "down-to-earth" (as Patrick already noted), She also offers an interesting shift when she talks about "I" at the point of having a baby:

It's like having a companion that you live with. You go to work, come home and have dinner together. Sometimes problems arise. I imagine after a while you get sick of the person sometimes, .and sometimes you need your privacy. Once you get married you wanna be sure you'll be together for a long time. Expenses should be shared. I think 50-50. Not like putting your names on milk cartons or keeping your receipts. There must be a joint account. You withdraw as you need it and put back when you can. I will have children after college, and when I can afford it. So, I can get toys for them, but I don't want to spoil them.

Patrick and Mary Anne hold an image of their future relationship together that is a mixture of both fantasy and reality. The reality of contemporary couples is that there are periods of both stability and instability. Patrick and Mary Anne seem to realize this, though they might not yet be aware as to the areas in which they are likely to experience the greatest instability. Our bet is that it will be in the areas of

finances and decisions regarding the best time to have their first baby. In our interviews we found that virtually all long-term relationships involved frequent, profound changes.

Alice and Tom, for instance, said that there "have been many major changes" in their relationship since they first met. Some of the changes that they enumerated include having children, becoming homeowners, adjusting to new living environments and cultures, raising children, and unanticipated pressures from parents and other relatives. These are rather standard changes that most couples confront over a lifetime.

In addition, Alice and Tom – like many couples – confronted several "intrusive life events" that profoundly impacted on their life. On several occasions, each of them lost their job or had to work at night to support their family. On one occasion, they also faced the very difficult decision to have an abortion. These events precipitated crises in their individual and collective lives. The couple's character was forged on this anvil of challenge and change.

One of the most poignant statements regarding this interplay between love, relationship and change was made by one of the people who conducted our interviews. Peter proposes that:

The issue of love is deceptively simple and realistically complex. If we-choose to love in others what we would well love in ourselves, then the nature of love – presuming that the individual, his notion of self, his self-image, his needs and his awareness of those needs are in a state of flux – must be in a state of flux as well. Love and the way it intertwines with a relationship is always in a state of flux and change. As a relationship develops, individual awareness and perceptions shift and change and, presumably, one's self-knowledge alters as well. One's needs for change. One's needs for and ability to request admiration, acceptance, approval, encouragement are all part of love, loving, and being loved.

Apparently, simple images are not sufficient to capture and guide a couple's long-term journey.

## **Three Models of Enduring Relationships**

Some of the books that have been written over the years about the ingredients of a

successful marriage are filled with optimism, A "successful" relationship is one in which each member of the couple has maximum freedom to grow and change. If there is strain and stress in the relationship, then the couple should reexamine and rework the relationship or break it up. If a couple's relationship does not yield a modicum of happiness and support, then it is unsuccessful. Several decades ago, Susan Campbell (1980) represented this perspective in *The Couple's Journey*:

. . . coupling [is] a vehicle for attaining psychological and spiritual harmony or wholeness for the couple. . . [C]oupling, like life, is a continually changing process. There are (almost) no insurmountable problems, since if we stay with a situation long enough it will change into something else (or at least our perspective on it will change).

Up to this point, Campbell seems to be following the Hollywood line. She soon shifts from this optimistic perspective:

Yet there are also (almost) no lasting solutions, since each "solution" sets the stage for the emergence of new problems.

The destination [of a couple's journey] (never quite fully attained) is wholeness: that ideal state in which all my parts are in harmonious communication with each other, with my partner and with the world beyond our relationship. it is that state when "everything's working together."

A second school of thought about the desired mode of development among couples is filled much more with existential despair. A good relationship is one in which there is considerable pain and challenge. Two members of a "successful" couple will encourage one another to learn and grow – often in spite of themselves. The spirit of this approach to the development of couples is captured in the following quotations by Adolf Guggenbuhl-Craig (2009) (from *Marriage: Dead or Alive*):

A marriage only works if one opens himself to exactly that which he would never ask for otherwise. Marriage is not comfortable and harmonious; rather, it is a place of individuation where a person rubs up against himself and against his partner, bumps up against him in love and in rejection, and in this fashion learns to know himself, the world, good and evil, the heights and the depths.

Guggenbuhl-Craig offers a quite pessimistic view regarding the future of this foundational institution:

The so-called happy marriage is unequivocally finished (in our society). Marriage as a welfare institution has no justification anymore. Psychologists who feel themselves committed to the goal of well-being would do better, if they really took their standpoint seriously, to recommend and suggest other forms of living together, rather than to waste their energy trying to patch up a fundamentally impossible institution with a lot of technical treatment modalities.

Another somewhat less gloomy representative of this perspective (who was influenced like Guggenbuhl-Craig by the work of Carl Jung), Thomas Moore (1994, p. xiv) suggests that: "pain and difficulty can sometimes serve as the pathway to a new level of involvement. They do not necessarily mean that there is something inherently wrong with the relationship; on the contrary, relationship troubles may be a challenging initiation into intimacy."

Other observers of the development of couples similarly suggest that neither the optimistic nor existential viewpoints are quite accurate—though each has a partial grasp on what seems to be a typical developmental pattern for couples.

McGoldrick, Carter and Preto (2015) offer a family life cycle model, proposing that couples (and families in general) move, as do individuals, through developmental "plateaus" and periods of "transition". The plateaus are "extended periods of relative structural stability" – they typically involve some change. This change is of a "first-order" variety, i.e. involving more or less of something, rather than something new and different. The Transformational periods involve "second-order" change, according to McGoldrick and her colleagues, in which some fundamental change occurs.

Sometimes, these changes involve "normative events", such as marriage, birth of a child or retirement. These normative events are the "givens" in most relationships. Virtually all couples can expect them to occur, for they involve the basic issues of life and death, love and work. Other significant, transforming events are labeled by McGoldrick as "Para normative" – they include conflicts (marital separations or divorce), illnesses (e.g. miscarriages), relocations of the household, changes in socio-economic status and external events, such as war, that can result in massive dislocation for the couple or family. At least one or more of the Para normative events are likely to occur in most relationships—and require that second-order transformation take place.

## The Process of Remarriage

In the study that we have conducted neither the optimistic nor existential viewpoints were quite accurate, though each has a partial grasp on what seems to be a typical developmental pattern for couples. As in the case of McGoldrick's family life cycle, our couples typically described themselves as moving through periods of relative stability and considerable contentment, followed by periods of significant stress and disillusionment, often accompanied by profound changes in the structure or goals of the relationship.

The information that we collected suggest that most couples go through these periods of stress and transition at least once during their life together. After a honeymoon period of relative stability and happiness, changing conditions in the relationship or in the outside world impacts on the relationship. The trust that has been established is eroded. Minor annoyances and complaints begin to accumulate. In many marriages, these are not voiced or given sufficient attention. The fantasies of the "ideal" mate and of "living happily ever after" are dispelled as a result of daily interactions. The accumulated experiences with one's mate, particularly related to the mundane issues of life, lead to disillusionment and disinterest.

While most couples repeatedly move through a series of developmental stages (that we will describe more fully in subsequent chapters) in which many of these problematic areas are repeatedly confronted, one or more major issues often begin to emerge that never seem to be adequately addressed by the couple. Central issues may concern time away from home, inequity in household work, allocation of personal funds, or any of a wide array of problem areas. The couple is faced with a decision which is often not fully acknowledged, but rather is acted out in an informal, often unconscious manner: do we remain together as we now are or do we attempt to change or disband this relationship?

On the one hand, it is usually less risky to keep doing what we have always done. We know each other and we certainly know how we feel about each other in these problematic situations in which we repeatedly find ourselves. On the other hand, our relationship is no longer satisfying either of us. We assume an even greater risk if we don't do something dramatic about our relationship. Namely, we risk either living the rest of our life in a stagnant, inhospitable relationship or losing everything we have built up by breaking off our relationship. Thus, we must risk our relationship if we want to save or renew it. Ironically, couples seem to change precisely because they want to remain in some sense un-changed.

Typically, the second path is chosen when one or both partners decide to work on

the relationship and perhaps to alter some major part of it. There is always a major challenge in doing so, for the alteration will inevitably force the two partners to change the accustomed ways in which they relate to one another. These changes may destroy the relationship. It is often even more frightening when we realize in the midst of this process that the change in our relationship with our partner may also force each of us to change some part of ourselves!

## **Perspective of a Movie Historian**

What is our model for such a dramatic change in an intimate relationship? This type of change certainly doesn't fit with the myth of "living happily ever after," nor does it fit with most of our other images of the perfect relationship. We looked around for help—and found it in several movies of the 1930s. Stanley Cavell (2005) writes about a process that he calls "remarriage" in his analysis of the romantic, "screwball" movies of the 1930s (for example, *Bringing Up Baby* and *The Philadelphia Story*).

Cavell suggests that these movies emerged not from the depression (as "escapist" movies to distract people from their personal misfortunes), but from an emerging women's consciousness (that became dormant again after the Second World War). Cavell believes that years in the thirties represent a time when women in many modern societies sought consolidation of their gains in the public arena by translating these gains into the private arena.

According to Cavell, the portrayal of remarriage in Hollywood always occurs among rich people—who have the "luxury" of reflection and dialogue. The remarriage is scripted in a specific manner. First of all, there is a running quarrel which is forcing apart two people who in some sense view themselves as people representing a much larger and eternal struggle between men and women.

In the midst of this ongoing (in some sense everlasting) quarrel, these two people confront the challenge and risk of examining their relationship in some depth and experimenting with an alternative mode of relationship. This examination requires that the two people leave one another for a period of time. There is often a divorce or at least a physical separation. This reexamination in the movie implies the risk that these two people may never get back together once they have begun the re-examination.

In order for both partners to take this risk, they must at some level (often unconscious) believe that their partner is capable of and willing to undergo the stress



associated with this period of testing and transition. Both partners must also believe that the relationship is worth saving. It is special enough to be worth substantial psychic investment. Cavell suggests that these 1930 comedies inevitably end with a remarriage (actually or figuratively) of the couple and with an accompanying new sense of relationship and a heightened sense of sexuality. The couple lives "happily ever after" — or at least until the next remarriage.

## **Perspective of Real-Life Couples**

The remarriage process in real life resembles that found in the movies of the 1930s. Two partners in a relationship get a psychological "divorce" from one another in order to take a fresh look at the relationship, to tinker with the relationship, and to try out radically new ways of relating to one another and other people. The two partners then come back together in a remarriage, often with a second marriage ceremony, or, at the very least, a second honeymoon.

If either partner is unwilling to take the risk of temporary divorce from the other person in the relationship in order to work toward a remarriage, then the couple must consider one of three other options. One or both partners may decide to assign the relationship less importance and invest their interest elsewhere — in their work, in their hobbies, in community service, and so forth.

Alternatively, one or both partners may decide to work on another significant relationship. He or she might have an affair, focus on a relationship with one or more of their children, or spend more time "out with the boys (or girls)". A third option is to get an actual, legal divorce, in order to disengage from one's partner and not work anymore on the relationship.

At some point, almost all couples find themselves in a profoundly disturbing and immovable impasse. No matter what they do, they cannot escape; there are no more areas of conversation to open up, no more strategies to try, no more activities to limit. They feel totally stuck. Many couples separate at this point. Many other couples stay together—perhaps only through inertia or devotion to children or to the idea of marriage. Most couples simply endure, emerging diminished but essentially unchanged after their ordeal. While the periods of stress and transition are very brief or of minimal intensity for some couples, these periods do seem to exist in virtually all relationships.

Most couples that seem to be successful in sustaining a supportive, yet growing relationship, have lived through and worked through these transformational periods

by means of some type of remarriage to the same partner. For some couples, there is only one such period of transition and recommitment. For other couples, these occur rather frequently, but are usually interspersed with intervals of relative tranquility. Among those couples who have not engaged in a recommitment, there is a strong tendency for stagnation to set in or for the couple to divorce, separate or live “alone together” in an unsatisfactory relationship.

We have concluded from our interviews that the concept of remarriage is critical in understanding the dynamics of contemporary intimate relationships that are enduring. Couples of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are facing complex, unpredictable and turbulent times. Their relationship is unlikely to remain viable and vital for many years without one or more of these significant readjustments of their relationship.

## **Perspective of a Therapist and Lawyer**

At this point I wish to introduce Julie and David Bulitt (2020) who are two of the guides I bring to this journey through the lives of long-term couples. I first invite Julie Bulitt to this conversation about remarriage. Julie conducts therapy sessions with couples. She seems to agree with our movie historian—there are remarriage dynamics at play with many of the couples she is seeing in her office. Julie Bulitt has written a book with her husband, David Bulitt (a divorce lawyer). They are focusing on the core conversations in which couples should be engaged (Bulitt and Bulitt, 2020).

Julie offers suggestions, based on her work as a couple therapist, that speaks to this remarriage dynamic and to the need for sustained renewal of the couple’s relationships. She engages a metaphor regarding the building of a structure as applied to building a relationship (Bullitt and Bullit, 2020, p. 2):

The work doesn't end once you have poured the concrete and put up the pillars. Building your relationship infrastructure doesn't answer the question: The foundation is sound, but will the two of you stay grounded? When your building first opened, it was spectacular and beautiful; it seemed solid. The ribbon cutting was a success, people came and raised their glasses and offered up toasts to the lovely couple. But what if the floors aren't kept clean? The plumbing and air conditioning aren't serviced? Filters aren't changed, leaks aren't fixed, and walls aren't repainted? We all know the answer; the structure starts to fail and break down. Years later the shine is off and in many cases the building begins to

tear down, leaving nothing but a remnant of the past.

I would move beyond Julie Bulitt in suggesting that the upkeep and repair often requires an occasional (or even frequent) rearrangement of the marriage. New roles must be assigned: who will repair the “filters” in our relationship and who will do the “repainting” of the way we interact with one another? What if major structural changes are needed. We can abandon this crumbling building (get a divorce) or decide to extensively repair or even rebuild the fundamental structure of our relationship. Remarriage is required!

Julie Bulitt offers the following description regarding how the need for a remarriage is often exhibited during her sessions with couples—and is an incentive (even if not acknowledged) for a couple to seek out a couple therapist (Bulitt and Bulitt, 2020, p. 2):

Many couples have come to me over the years, their relationship in a similar state of disrepair. One or both partners feel isolated, under-appreciated, and often lonely. They have not spent the time needed to keep their relationship intact, and as a result, it has become unfulfilling and empty.

David Bulitt now enters the conversation. He describes the state of a couple who chooses the alternative path. They are seeking divorce rather than engaging in a remarriage (Bullitt and Bulitt, 2020, p. 9):

People who have been together for years don't take care of themselves. How they dress, how they look. I see it all the time in my office. The person you got involved with a few years ago doesn't look like she used to, she doesn't take care of herself like she used to. But there is more to it than letting oneself down physically. It's paying attention to what the other has to say, put the paper down when your partner is talking, don't check your phone during dinner. People need to continuously be working on keeping the relationship happy and healthy. And what happens if they don't? Better be ready to spend several hundred dollars of your hard-earned money on someone like me sitting on the other side of a desk so that a stranger in a black robe can make decisions about the 'future of your family.

Even if, as David suggests, a couple doesn't continuously work on their relationship, they do need to stop every so often to declare: “hey, it ain't working for us right now. We need to step back and do some reflecting, re-examining and even re-

working of our relationship.” Otherwise, as Julie Bulitt suggests, there might be a bill waiting for couple therapy.

Or, as David Bulitt notes, the even bigger bill (emotional if not financial) required to complete work with a “stranger in a black robe” (who is mediating impartial justice—that often ends up being destructive for both parties). I would suggest, if nothing else, that couples view *Marriage Story*, a powerful (and often very painful) movie that displays what can happen when the legal system (insensitive to relationships) takes over from a domestic system (intimate enduring relationship). The pain of remarriage is usually much less intense and encompassing than the pain of divorce.

A somewhat different perspective is offered by John Gottman (2015), one of our other guides, Gottman is founder of the Gottman Institute and has run a “Love Lab” for couples that yields quite impressive results regarding the nurturance of intimate relationships (Gottman, 2015, pp.8-10). Gottman writes about something that he calls “repair attempts.” I would suggest that these are often mini-remarriages or at times full-bodied remarriages. A brief account is offered by Gottman (2015, p. 27):

In our research, we have a technical name . . . *repair attempt*. This term refers to any statement or action—silly or otherwise—that prevents negativity from escalating out of control. Repair attempts "are a secret weapon of emotionally intelligent couples—even though many of these couples aren't aware that they are employing something so powerful. When a couple have a strong friendship, they naturally become experts at sending each other repair attempts and at correctly reading those sent their way. But when couples are in negative override: even a repair attempt as blunt as “Hey, I'm sorry" may have a low success rate.

Gottman (2015, p. 27) is offering a distinctive insight when he noted that the foundation of any successful repair resides in an ongoing friendship among the partners.

The success or failure of a couple's repair attempts is one of the- primary factors in whether their marriage is likely to flourish or flounder. And again, what determines the success of their repair attempts is the strength of their marital friendship. If this sounds simplistic or obvious, you'll find . . . that it is not. Strengthening your marital friendship isn't as basic as just being "nice." Even if you feel that your friendship is already quite solid, you may be surprised to find there is room to strengthen it all the more.

I would add to what Gottman has observed by suggesting that the success of the repair and of remarriages resides ultimately in the movement of a relationship as I will note later in this book to the performance stage. The relationship will endure as the friendship endures—and the friendship requires the ability of a couple to successfully address their conflict and their ability to establish appropriate norms and shared important values and life purposes.

This might, in turn, require what Gottman (2015, p. 5) identifies as emotional intelligence (EQ). Apparently, EQ is central to this ability of a couple to engage in the repair: “The more emotional intelligent a couple – the better able they are to understand, honor and respect each other and their [enduring relationship]—the more likely that they will indeed live happily ever after.” I will explore the matter of EQ later in this book.

## **Perspective of a “Typical” Couple**

I return to our interviews. How do most couples operate with regard to remarriage if they chose not to get divorced or get stuck in a dysfunctional relationship? One of our married couples spoke of periods of relative tranquility in their lives together and of periods of considerable stress and soul-searching. They were not alone in finding marriage to be a mixed bag. This couple -- we will call them John and Evelyn -- identified a ten-year period in their life together when they shared many interests in common.

John and Evelyn both enjoyed horseback riding and other outdoor activities. During this period of time, their children were very young and (by mutual agreement) primarily the responsibility of Evelyn. John and Evelyn both worked but made relatively small amounts of money. They didn't seem to need much money, however, for their mutual interests (and small children) kept them at home or pursuing inexpensive outdoor recreation.

By the end of this ten-year period, things had changed dramatically. John seriously injured his foot and was unable to ride horses any more without considerable pain. Both Evelyn and John assumed new jobs with increased responsibility and salary. The children were moving into junior and senior high school, requiring the attention of both parents in new ways. The family moved several thousand miles to a new home, leaving behind their family roots and strong small-town community ties. Within two years, John asked Evelyn for a trial separation.

During the following year, John and Evelyn lived apart, though saw each other on

frequent occasions. They decided to move back together after this year long trial separation, and within a year had reestablished a supportive relationship. At the time when they were interviewed, John and Evelyn had decided to take a year off from their work so that they might live in a very different region of the United States, while both worked on projects of specific interest to each of them.

The children were off to college, so this seemed like a perfect time for John and Evelyn to reestablish their old, pre-children rapport, while working out a new way of living together. During this year of intensive interaction, John and Evelyn established more open communication with one another, while pursuing their individual areas of interest in new and vigorous ways.

## The Variety of Remarriages

In our interviews we found that remarriage takes many different forms, though there are certain common factors: a willingness to risk the relationship in order to make it work, a significant restructuring of the relationship with each party making some concessions and reframing the relationship in new terms, and a resultant revitalization of the relationship based on this new alignment.

David and Meryl exemplify the typical remarriage scenario. They had been married for twelve years and lived together a total of fifteen years when they were interviewed. Both of them are in their mid-thirties and they have two children, ages 2 and 12. Meryl indicates that she has always responded to David's temper by refusing to communicate, i.e. "clamming up," which was the strategy she also used around her stepfather when she was younger.

For David, anger took the form of verbal outbursts and Meryl was unable to believe that anyone who loved another was capable of treating them in such a manner. When faced with the wall of silence, David felt frustrated and unwilling to even try to change what was going on, thereby totally shutting off any chance of communication or resolution of the conflict. Eventually (perhaps a week later), Meryl would explode and David "couldn't see where her anger was coming from."

This unsuccessful process of resolving conflicts is a typical ingredient in most remarriages. For Meryl and David these unresolved conflicts culminated in a remarriage four years ago. Meryl reached a point where she concluded that she couldn't change David, so she had to determine if she was going to stay in the relationship. Like many couples, the break began in the bedroom. Meryl began

sleeping on the couch, while David retreated to the bedroom and would have no contact with Meryl. Eventually, after six nights, David came out of the bedroom and began talking to Meryl.

First, he asked if she wanted a divorce and eventually began to talk with her about their interaction and the lack of communication which brought them to this impasse. Both of them indicated that this was a major breakthrough in their ability to communicate. They both acknowledged that they were in trouble as a couple—a key ingredient in any successful remarriage—and that they both needed to change their behavior if the relationship was to survive. This acceptance of change is a second key ingredient.

Alice and Fred identify a period of time in their marriage that they label the "crying baby" episode as an example of their own remarriage. Alice describes this incident:

My second baby, all she did was cry. I would breast feed her and she would cry. We later found out she had severe colic. We were doing a major remodel of the whole house at this time. As you can see, we're still remodeling. It's been three years of it. But at that time, we had bare walls. I'd be up walking the baby all night and remodeling took place all day. The stress level became extreme. Plus, Fred couldn't get much sleep but still had to go to work each day. I became very abusive, both verbally and physically, especially toward the oldest daughter, Suzanne, who was four at the time. And then the hormones kicked in from Post Menstrual Syndrome. The thing that saved it is Fred never went into a fight or power struggle.

As is often the case with remarriages, the primary problem confronted by Alice and Fred, that is the crying baby, was exacerbated by the impact of other stressors that are either independent of or related to the primary stressor. This would include the remodeling of the house, concerns about the potential impact of loss of sleep on Fred's job performances and Alice's abusive behavior. Typically, the crisis in a relationship which brings about a remarriage is not caused by one, isolated stressor, but rather by the simultaneous impact or close interrelationship between a variety of different stressors that impact on the different domains (what we will call the "plates") of a couple's life.

Even more importantly, it is not so much the individual event, or even a series of events, that defines the critical stages of a relationship, but rather the interpretation that is placed on their events -- or more accurately the stories that are told about these events. In the case of Alice and Fred, the period of tending the colicky crying

baby passed. As Alice noted, her daughter "then became a happy child." But the long-term ramifications of the event -- the guilt and sadness that comes from how they treated each other during the incident -- are still being carried by the parents. Alice stated it this way: "ever since (our baby was crying so much) we've related worse. The harmony was destroyed."

Fred indicated that he responded to this multiple-level crisis in his life with Alice by "walking away" when his life at home got too tense. Alice observed that she "got into a 'box' for four days until he would approach me and then we'd normalize." Fred then cracks a joke: "The difference between PMS and a terrorist is you can negotiate with a terrorist." Alice notes that "Fred is a well-grounded person and a stable anchor." However, Alice went on to say that ever since this set of events (which happened two years ago):

the consideration for one another got damaged. . . . We are just now concentrating on ourselves again. I had to learn to let go. And stop pushing Fred to get done with the house. I put myself into a recovery program. A Twelve Step program . . . What is happening now is that Fred has had to learn to really hear me. And see value in what I have to say. I'm facing him with the whole truth. He has to accept that I'm changing and that's hard for a spouse and threatening. He must be willing to let me change. He must be willing to grow with me.

The interviewer then asked both Alice and Fred why they are still together -- what kept them together during this difficult remarriage process. Fred indicated that after their second child, Alice threatened him with divorce. Fred responded by telling her that "she didn't know how much this marriage meant to me." "And" according to Alice, "I started to feel that way too." She went on to conclude that "we both have a commitment, a dedication to the marriage itself, even during those times when we don't have that much dedication to each other personally."

The distinction between the two partners in a relationship and the couple itself is critical in this instance (as well as in many other remarriages). Alice and Fred didn't like each other very much during this period of stress and felt very little commitment to each; however, they both felt a strong commitment to the third entity--the relationship--and stayed together during the remarriage in order to keep this third entity intact. When threatened with the possibility of divorce, Alice and Fred looked toward their commitment to the marriage even more than toward their commitment to each other.



Alice believes that:

. . . trust is what's holding us together right now and will help us bring this marriage back from the brink. Neither of us would cheat on the other. Neither of us would purposefully hurt one another. Equally important is the freedom that we have that comes from being tolerant of one another. Also, the fact that we allow and encourage each other to grow.

Fred went on to indicate that their relationship "is the first sign of stability I've ever had in my life. It brings continuity to my life. It's an opportunity to experience family. An opportunity to create something bigger than ourselves."

## **Private and Public Remarriages**

Many of the couples we interviewed have gone through fairly difficult times. However, their difficulties are often only fully known to their close friends or therapist. Other people in their lives are often less cognizant of their difficulties. They may only sense that everything isn't "quite right" with this couple.

In other instances, the remarriage is quite apparent to everyone. For instance, Dora and Jim clearly went through a profound remarriage that was known to everyone in their lives. Literally everything was up for grabs. Everyone was aware that they were going through difficult times. Their remarriage was particularly visible because it centered initially around Dora's pregnancy. Jim and Dora weren't married at the time, having chosen to live together rather than make a long-term, formal commitment. When they announced that Dora was pregnant, all of their friends and family were outraged. Dora had already had two abortions and neither of them had either a job or money.

When Dora found out that she was pregnant, everything began to fall apart:

The night I got pregnant, I looked into the mirror, and I saw a purple ball hanging over my left shoulder. There was an intensity to the situation. I felt this energy inside of me so I couldn't do it (have an abortion) this time. Our friends thought we were insane . . . Our friends and families abandoned us. They thought we were crazy. . . . It was a nightmare for three years. I broke part of my pelvis during delivery, so I couldn't walk, even to get to the bathroom. We moved to a bad area of [the large city where they were living], because we

wanted to get away from the anger of those around us.

Yet, these hellish times were viewed much more positively by Jim:

I go up in the morning and carried Dora to the bathroom. Then I fed her and David [their son] and changed him and then went to work. All I could think about all day was getting back to Dora and David. I worked like a madman so that I could come home early and be with them. I was on automatic. Nothing else mattered. I wasn't unhappy at all.

Unfortunately, while Jim felt quite good about his role as parent (in many ways to both Dora and David) and as reliable breadwinner, this very stance caused difficulties in the relationship between Jim and Dora. Dora indicates that during this three-year period she felt very isolated, particularly with Jim going to work every day. Previously, Jim had been unemployed, which meant that he was around more often.

Now, he is working, and she is confined to her home because of a new-born child, because of her own broken pelvis, and because of the dangerous community to which they had moved: "I didn't like being pregnant and immobile for six months after. We became holed up, like hermits. I was in shock at not being able to get around, even if I could go outside into the bad neighborhood." Dora also suffered from a change in her perception of self: "Before the pregnancy, I was a size one. Afterwards, I was fat. This totally changed my self-concept. Jim was surrounded by these gorgeous women all the time. Maybe because I was in bed all the time, I was not very grounded."

The stage was set for a marital crisis. All the ingredients were there. Jim was annoyed. He had finally become a responsible adult and was loving his role, only to find that Dora resented his work and his time away from home. She felt lousy about herself and about the predicament that she and Jim had put her in. Dora recalls that she "was agitated about everything," Jim asked her if she wanted a divorce.

This is the critical point. Do they want to work toward a redesign of their relationship, or do they want to give up and turn to independent paths? Dora answered Jim by saying "no." She backed this up by deciding to return to school after her pelvis healed in order to mend her self-concept:

Jim paid for me to go back to school and earn my degree. He has provided everything we have ever had, physically. He bought us this

house, which brought us to this [much safer] town. I didn't want to move here, but he got a good deal. This put us in a major transition in our lives.

Thus, they were able to turn around Dora's envy, by coupling Jim's enjoyment in becoming a reliable breadwinner with Dora's interest in improving her self-image through further education. Rather than envying Jim's success, Dora was able to build on it by allowing Jim to pay for her education. In addition, rather than blaming Jim for their move to a new community, Dora went along with the move and found some real benefits in moving to a much smaller and safer town.

Rather than complaining about the isolation, Dora saw it as an opportunity to come closer together as a family: "this house isolated us. We began to clean up. We also stopped fighting as much." Jim noted that: "we moved away from the party crowd. We left the wild times, the bands, the drugs and alcohol." In getting away from the party life, according to Dora, the two of them "didn't have to try as hard any more to grow up. It solidified our growing up."

This process of remarriage was highly visible in part because they worked out their new relationship in the midst of complex family dynamics. Dora's family is upper middle class, WASPish and very traditional. They were able to accept Jim because he is a "nice guy" and hard-working. On the other hand, Jim's family is more "ethnic" having come from another country.

Jim has ten brothers and sisters, and his sisters especially took a dislike to Dora: "they would wait until Jim was out of the room and then they would attack me. I left the house in tears, many times." Jim: "I kept asking you to stay away from them." Dora: "I know, but I guess, coming from my background, I thought we should do 'the family thing' on holidays and such, but then they would isolate me and then rip me to shreds. My family had their difficulties with Jim, but they're more underground."

Thus, in the midst of their remarriage to one another, both Jim and Dora also had to redefine their relationship with parents and siblings. They both increasingly detached themselves from their families of origin and in doing so began to claim ownership for their own individual identities, independent of their family histories. Dora refused to adopt the old family pattern of helplessness and resentment. Instead, she went back to college and built on, rather than resented, Jim's success.

Dora also became more cognizant of imposing her own childhood fears onto Jim and now is creating a new relationship with Jim that is distinctive and nurturing:

Growing up, I always had a deep sense of aloneness. I thought that I would die alone. Yet, as close as Jim and I are, I don't know about that anymore. In any case, I don't have that feeling of aloneness any more with Jim. . . . Us together is different from me alone.

It is this sense of connectedness that has kept Jim and Dora together throughout the difficult process of remarriage. Rather than looking elsewhere for a new relationship, they both determined that it is better to work out a current relationship, with all its hardships. Dora puts it this way:

I am not looking to trade partners. I am not endlessly fascinated with other human beings. Why would I give up a deeply satisfying relationship for another face? I would rather spend my time with other things than to give up my center and go out looking for another human being. We are from the same light. I am convinced, after that first kiss. This is the best part. I have no desire for that alone feeling.

Jim and Dora represent one end of the continuum. Their remarriage was highly visible, for it was precipitated by very public events -- the birth of a baby, Dora's fractured pelvis, moving to a new community, fights with their families, fights with one another. Furthermore, the resolution of their conflicts was also public: Dora's return to school, moving to a new community, spending substantially less time with their parents and siblings. If we had interviewed members of their family and friends, they probably would have all agreed that Jim and Dora went through a major transition in their life together.

By contrast, Arlene and Kevin recently went through a much less dramatic remarriage that was probably no less meaningful for them than was Dora and Jim's highly public remarriage. Arlene and Kevin knew that their relationship was in trouble. As a result, they took a trip to an oceanside town near the city where they live. This trip gave them an opportunity to refocus their lives.

They both recall sitting by the fire in their room overlooking the ocean and talking for hours about their relationship and their future together. They describe it as a great experience that they don't usually have the opportunity to take, because of their hectic lifestyles. Like many couples undergoing a remarriage, Kevin and Arlene found a sanctuary in which to work on their relationship. For them, the sanctuary was a seaside inn. For others, the sanctuary is a supportive marital counselor, a week alone at home (with all the cellphones shut off), or a marriage enrichment weekend.

Early in the day, Kevin and Arlene took a hike through the hills and “just enjoyed time with each other.” Kevin said that the whole trip was really wonderful and that he “drove home feeling closer to Arlene than ever before.” He remembers feeling that Arlene understood everything that he was trying to communicate to her that weekend. “This is very different from friends who just hear what you’re trying to say to them. Sometimes it feels like we are so in-tune that we can see into each other’s heart and mind.”

It should be noted that Kevin is hyper-romantic and that the bloom may soon come off the rose of this remarriage, just as it did off the bloom of this couple’s initial infatuation with one if another. Nevertheless, brief remarriages of this type -- be they ever so simple and seemingly inconsequential -- can keep a relationship intact through many difficult periods of trial and tribulation.

Some couples, like Jim and Dora, go through a slow, often painful and very public re-evaluation of their relationship, leading to a gradual shift in the norms, rules and shared values of the relationship. By contrast, other remarriages seem to be precipitated by a single, defining event that is often quite private, as in the case of Kevin and Arlene. A single moment of clarity brings about the remarriage.

Tally and Kasha live in the United States, where Tally works with a computer firm and Kasha is a schoolteacher. They both come from well-established families back in India and seem to have made a successful adjustment to American culture. After some difficult years of transition, they are now happy with their life together and proud of the hard work they have done. The largest and most continuous cause of stress in their relationship has been their relationship with Tally’s mother. She was against the marriage from the beginning.

In fact, there had been a problem even before they met. Tally was alienated from his mother and was living on his own from the time he was sixteen. He didn’t invite her to the wedding and when she showed up, he ignored her. Soon after Tally and Kasha moved to the United States, his mother followed. Tally continued to ignore her, but he was becoming more and more consumed by his anger and resentment. This took its toll on the marriage.

The time that Tally and Kasha spent together was becoming routine. “Every night we would go through the same thing,” said Tally, “how was your day today? How was school? How’s so and so?” “We were talking,” adds Kesha, “but I never thought we were getting through. He was so angry and intense those years. He wasn’t mean, just fearful or domineering. Finally, I got a job. I felt he had stressed out so much that I had to leave the house. I couldn’t be around this person with all his troubles.

I spent more time with my friends and my children. I couldn't deal with him."

The problem for Tally went back to abuse that he suffered at the hands of his mother when he was a child. Tally was unable to deal with this directly. He talks about how this was finally resolved:

My whole personality had to change for me to finally learn how to deal with my mother. The funny thing was I had been doing all this work with other people with human development workshops and marriage encounters, but when it came to my mother, I would react so negatively. I think the fact that when we left India, Kasha and I had to depend on and trust each other made us able to work through this. It was when I was finally able to admit that my mother was ill that I began to feel healthy myself. While I was trying to deal with all this, my sister and my brothers all came over and came to me with their problems with my mother. I had to keep going through the whole thing again and again. But when I realized finally that I was not the only one abused by my mother, I was able to get a clearer perspective. That was the real turning point – when I was finally free from my mother.

Kasha marks the turning point in their remarriage not in terms of Tally's gradual reconciliation with his mother's abusive behavior, but rather as a specific time when she saw herself and Tally on national television:

Recently, I was able to see Tally again, as I had seen him that first time [when they first met.] We had become very involved in a parenting class. Because of our different approaches to parenting, we wanted to get some outside help. Tally was one of the few fathers, actually the only one, to stay with the class. When the producers of the [national daytime talk show] called around looking for couples for the show, we were asked to be on it. They flew us to New York. It was when I saw us on TV together – it was like seeing Tally again for the first time. Suddenly I realized I had been [in love] all this time, but I'd forgotten what he was like.

Tally and Kasha had some real strengths going into their marriage. They were a good match culturally and religiously. These values supported them and gave them a clearer identity as a couple in the larger, more heterogeneous American environment in which they had chosen to live. They were able to break through the barrier of Tally's childhood abuse by personal work and by working together.

Tally spent several years in therapy dealing with his relationship with his family. As a couple, they invested in some common tasks outside themselves, most notably their children and their parenting skills. This hard, daily work (the vernacular work of the soul) paid off, leading to a refocusing of the marriage and to a successful remarriage at the point when Kasha saw them together on TV.

## Frequency of Remarriage

Usually, a remarriage is infrequent in an enduring relationship. A couple may move through this painful and frightening process only once or twice in a lifetime. Most couples we know will acknowledge that they have gone through at least one remarriage, but usually they report no more than three or four. However, in some cases, remarriages frequently occur and are a regular part of the relationship because the partners repeatedly go through major conflicts, readjustments, and renewed vitality in their relationship.

A fabled celebrity relationship comes immediately to mind: the remarkable relationship between Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. They were married twice, but apparently went through a host of remarriages in between and after their two formal ceremonies. In this celebrity case, as in many, the remarriage process centered on substance abuse. Yet we suspect that many other issues were interwoven in their relationship.

What about in the case of a much more recent remarriage between Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez? What drove them apart in the first place and what has brought them back together? Is it the fame (and accompanying narcissism) or something more common for all of us—time away from one other, diverting interests, and perhaps someone else who attracts our interests. Remarriage rarely rests on a single problem (even if identified as such), addressing instead a broad range of problems for which both partners must assume some responsibility.

Delores and Bart are not celebrities. However, they reported during their interview that even though their current relationship was remarkably satisfying, they had, in fact, already undergone two remarriages during their time together, and were undergoing a third such transition at the present time (despite the apparent lack of major conflicts in the description of their current relationship). It seemed quite clear to the interviewer that the ability of Delores and Bart to weather these periods and to confront them honestly was in large part the strength of their relationship.

Early in their marriage, Delores and Bart confronted troubles powerful enough to

find them—like many other couples—considering divorce. Seeing a therapist, they discovered tools that allowed them to better communicate with one another. As Delores explains it, the two of them “decided to see if we couldn’t work better together. And we did and that made the relationship ten times better.” owed them to better communicate.

Five months later, they began to drift apart again, as Delores became more focused on her work. They seemed to have less and less in common and disagreements seemed more frequent. Largely at Bart's prodding, they sought out couples therapy again, and began to confront issues that had been building. The result is that, as Bart explains, “in the last couple of weeks we've made some major shifts about how we perceive the relationship and have undergone a kind of reevaluation of values that led us to enter into this marriage.”

While Delores and Bart are a very romantic couple, they describe their relationship in pragmatic terms. Bart suggested that:

marriage is certainly different from anything I thought it would be like when I was a kid. I always figured it was like, you know, in the fairy tales. You got married and if you were compatible then things would work themselves out and it would be real easy. And it's just not that way . . . I mean, you have to really make a commitment . . . and be willing to go through some bad times sometimes, for what is wonderful most of the time. When it's effortless it's wonderful, and when you have to work at it it's really hard . . . you have to really keep in mind how much you love that person.

Thus, a process of frequent remarriage need not reflect a bad marriage. Rather, this process may suggest that the two partners are committed to working hard on the relationship, despite its ups and downs.

## **Send in the Clowns**

In some instances, there are frequent or at least quite dramatic remarriages because the partners have adopted a lifestyle that includes frequent separations, independent life paths and periods of reacquaintance and readjustment. This seems to be the case with the two major protagonists (Fredrik Egerman and Desiree Armfeldt) that are portrayed in a musical written by one of my guides for this book. He is Stephen Sondheim, who writes both music that lingers and lyrics that require thoughtful reflection. The musical in which these two protagonists are featured is



called *A Little Night Music*.

In a now-well known song from this musical, Sondheim portrays two people who take turns swinging high on a trapeze and stuck firmly on the ground. The trapeze is set very high for Frederik and Desiree as two ambitious characters (one a successful lawyer and the other a successful actress). Thus, the transition from trapeze to ground is dramatic—especially as Frederik and Desiree pass each other on the way up and down.

If both members of a couple are always “on the road”, and are highly ambitious regarding their career, then the remarriages might be infrequent, but they are often filled with considerable trauma, inaccurate assumptions, and foolish decisions. Both members of the couple are truly “clowns.” Sadly, the “clowning” is not very entertaining for anyone and there are few reflective moments (or a poignant songs) to bring successful closure to this tumbling relationship.

The Bulitts (Bulitt and Bulitt, 2020, p. 161) identify a similar dynamic in what David calls the CraZanity ride. “People are strapped into a huge pendulum machine that swings from one side to the other. At the top of one, you are upside down, and at the top of the other, you are looking straight down from fifty feet up.” One of the couples we interviewed, Ted and Velia, exemplify this in-out and up-down clownish pattern in real life. They decided to own a home in Wyoming where Ted would live full time. Velia decided to pursue an advanced degree at an East Coast graduate school.

While Velia comes to visit Ted as often as possible, they spend as much as one third of the year living separately. According to Ted, “last year, we were apart for three months. . . . I didn't like it! It's difficult.” Velia added that their frequent separation “seems very unnatural. We can do it. It's not as much fun. Definitely lacking. Feel a need for the physical and emotional connection.” As in the case of other forms of remarriage, however, Ted noted that “when we do get together, it's like falling in love all over again like a honeymoon.”

Ted later notes that their marriage has remained vital precisely because of these separations and because of the new ways in which they relate to each other when they come back together. These are new ways both because they have had time apart and because every time that they are apart both of them go through their own mini-growth period. In offering advice to other couples, Ted urges partners to “try and create their own romance and not with props, etc., but to create circumstances that are romantic.”

Ted notes that "most couples grow tired of each other; they don't create new spaces for each other. One of the biggest reasons couples break up. . . they become used to each other. They look for new stimulation." As painful and disruptive as their life pattern is, Ted and Velia at least have the joy and challenge of constantly reinventing their relationship and going through a series of remarriages that keeps their relationship alive and never predictable or tiresome.

## Conclusions: Staying the Course

The most important common ingredient in successful remarriages appears to be a commitment to working within the relationship rather than outside it. The participants might act like clowns at times—but they are determined to make their relationship work. It is very tempting to simply leave the relationship and to either go it alone for a while. Or attention can shift to another relationship. We can either have a secret (or not so secret) affair while continuing with our current relationship or choose to separate from the current partner in order to begin building the new relationship. Our divorce lawyer, David Bulitt, tells us what it is like to choose divorce. The secret affair is no less painful—even if only one member of the couple is aware of (and living with) the betrayal

Glenda and Roy had been married for five years when their relationship began to fall apart. The symptoms are quite common in not only our interviews but in also many books about couples, as well as novels, movies and television soap operas. Roy was no longer spending much of his free time with Glenda. Instead, he was opting out for his male friends. Glenda felt like she was being "taken for granted and unappreciated." When she tried to get Roy to spend more evenings at home, he resented her interference and didn't want Glenda "telling me what to do." As a result, they began to drift apart, they fought "about everything", and could not get down to the real issues.

At this point, Roy and Glenda were at a choice point. Do they attempt a remarriage or shift their attention to other relationships? Glenda chose the latter course. She had an affair and, in essence, challenged Roy to catch and confront her. As in the case of many couples, Glenda and Roy tried to restore their marriage by having a child. This didn't help. Childbirth only exacerbated the problems. Yet, indirectly, their child did draw them to a different choice point. They decided to work on their marriage. Roy admitted that he knew of Glenda's affair and acknowledged his own role in bringing about this situation. Furthermore, he recognized that he was

committed to his relationship with Glenda because he was not willing to "let someone else raise my child."

So, they got to work on their relationship. First, they became more open with one another regarding the influences of external factors on their marriage. For instance, since Roy was an only son, there had been extensive interference by his mother. Glenda began to openly discuss this issue for the first time with Roy and found that he was willing to confront his mother regarding her behavior. Both Roy and Glenda also sought individual help during this remarriage process and discovered how their past histories were influencing their current relationship. They broke up some of the games that they played with each other, and they began to make more decisions together.

Their remarriage seems to have worked. Their sexual relationship has begun to blossom as never before. Furthermore, neither Roy nor Glenda is now willing to "give up what we have and go through all of that again with someone else." Thus, they have come to recognize the value of a central ingredient in successful remarriages: a commitment to the relationship and an unwillingness to be distracted from this relationship by either partner having an affair with another person. They choose to stay the course!

## Key Chapter Points

Enduring couples:

- Make conscious choices to work at preserving the relationship when enmeshed in trouble and chaos.
- Move through period of relative stability and considerable contentment followed by periods of significant stress and disillusionment resulting in profound changes in the structure or goals of the relations—remarriage.
- Experience at least one remarriage during the life of their relationship, either of a public or private nature.
- Believe consciously or unconsciously that their partner is capable of and willing to undergo the stress of a remarriage.
- Demonstrate a willingness to risk the relationship in order to improve it.

- Are committed to working within the relationship rather than outside of it.
- Find that restructuring the relationship with compromise and concessions results in a revitalization of their relationship.

## Chapter Four

# The Second Image: The "New Self" And Founding Story

The second myth that we are likely to embrace when we are looking for and establishing an intimate relationship concerns the sense of a "new self". We often, at least unconsciously, assume that we can be reborn in a good relationship and can leave our past behind. Alternatively, we embrace the opposite side of this myth. We assume that we are doomed to relive the lives of our parents. In one of her first popular songs of the 1970s ("That's the Way I Always Heard It Should Be"), Carly Simon sings about this second myth: her lover asks if they can move in together and start a family of their own. Yet, Carly's protagonist looks at the relationship that her parents have established and sees only pain. She's not sure if she can somehow overcome this legacy and live in a more gratifying relationship.

The reality of intimate relationships seems to lie somewhere between these two extremes. As many psychologists and psychoanalysts have pointed out, we bring our past lives with us. We live with the ghosts of failed relationships in our own past as well as the past of those who have played central roles in our lives (our parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, in-laws and so forth).

However, this doesn't mean that these "ghosts" must necessarily dominate our relationship. The theologian, Paul Tillich (as quoted by Moore, 1994, p. 42) has written lyrically about this potential in a loving relationship: "when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage, sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice was saying 'you are accepted. You are accepted.'"

## Ghosts That Linger

When Terrell was seven years old his mother ran off with another man and his father divorced her. Terrell and his brother stayed with his father. When he was a senior in high school, Terrell fought with his brother and went to live with his mother and half brothers and sisters. Although this living arrangement lasted only

a year, Terrell seems to have bonded better with his mother than his brother did.

Terrell's brother denies any relationship with their mother, saying "she wasn't there for me when I needed her; she doesn't need me now!" This early life experience has been replicated in Terrell's own marriage to Dorothy. After twelve years of marriage, Dorothy "ran off with another man." However, she kept the house and children. Terrell paid child support.

Over the succeeding years, Terrell "brags" of having been married two other times. He was married for three years to one woman and four weeks to another woman, ostensibly to give her unborn child a last name. The latter woman presumably went back to the father of the child and threw Terrell out. He continued to work at an Army supply depot until he was medically disabled at age 49—when it was discovered he had arthrosclerosis and the Army depot mandatorily retired him.

Terrell was alone for almost eight years when he met Bev, his present wife. Terrell and Bev met at a Parents Without Partners (PWP) meeting. He was in charge of the meeting. Bev was introduced to him and was impressed by his seeming strength and leadership abilities. That evening they danced together several times. She met him again the following week at the next meeting of PWP. He invited her to go out to dinner with him. After that they dated for several months seeing more and more of each other. Bev reported that "it seemed right to be together." After a few months he moved into her house, but she adds, "only after we knew we were going to be married."

What about Terrell's ghosts from the past? Did he bid them farewell when he married Bev? No. When Terrell moved into Bev's house, Terrell discovered that Bev's teenage son was making her life a living hell for her by not abiding by any of her rules. When Terrell moved in, he "rescued" her by forcing her son to move to his father's house, much as Terrell did when his own parents divorced (though he moved in with his mother, rather than father, after teenage conflicts with his brother, rather than father). Furthermore, Terrell seems to be trying once again to help a woman with domestic problems. Throughout the interview, Terrell presented himself as someone who is in charge, who women are inevitably drawn to, who can live lightly in life, coming to the rescue of damsels in distress.

Yet, the world has now changed for Terrell. His arteriosclerosis requires that he become more dependent on Bev. She claims that he became progressively "bitchier" after their marriage. When they were first married, Terrell and Bev did many physical activities together. They were riding bicycles, picking blueberries, hiking, camping and fishing. Now his "health problems" prevent him from being this active.

Approximately one year after their marriage, Bev had to rush Terrell to the hospital with what seemed to be a heart attack. It wasn't actually a heart attack, but warning signs which led to tests determining that he needed a quadruple coronary bypass because his arteries were blocked. Over the past eleven years, according to Bev, Terrell became increasingly aloof and sedentary. She believes that his health problems have caused his emotional problems. Bev indicates that "at least he doesn't beat me." She doesn't seem to recognize his emotional abuse.

This is not a happy story and certainly does not exemplify the quality of a successful, enduring relationship. Rather, Terrell and Bev seem to be wrapped up in reliving, at the very least, Terrell's early life experiences and previous failed relationships. We don't even know the other side of the story. Perhaps, Bev is living out old family histories: serving as the abused servant to a cold and punishing male. We do know that Bev is fearful that Terrell will leave her, and that Terrell uses threats of divorce as a weapon when they are in conflict. Bev's first husband surprised her with just such a request which sent her life into a tailspin.

Terrell appears to be living in a world that cannot be trusted, given that his mother left him, his brother became his enemy rather than his friend, his first wife supposedly "ran out" on him, and he did "a favor" for another woman who promptly turned around and abandoned him (as has every other woman in his life). Terrell seems to defend himself against other women leaving him by taking on a carefree attitude and appearing always to be in charge. He wants to be sure that he leaves the woman rather than the other way around the next time around. This carefree, in-charge appearance attracted at least one woman to Terrell, namely, Bev.

Without a whole lot of reflection, Bev decided to marry Terrell. He might either have found a woman he could trust or have left Bev in order not to get burned again. But then an intrusive life event impacted on both of their lives. Terrell became ill and was suddenly dependent on Bev. This not only exacerbated his fears regarding abandonment, but also shattered his sense of being an independent, carefree male who could take or leave women. Thus, Terrell is left with old ghosts that continue to haunt him, turning him into an aloof and punitive partner. He was unable to leave behind his punishing past. Bev has become a second victim of this past.

## Ghosts that Leave

We offer this one example of a very troubled relationship to illustrate how "ghosts" from the past can haunt a relationship. We can turn to a second couple to find a more positive example of confronting one's ghosts. As in the case of Terrell and Bev (as well as Carly Simon's protagonist), both Ricardo and Dottie grew up in dysfunctional families.

Neither Ricardo nor Dottie liked the ways in which their own parents related to one another. They have tried from their first days together to make their own pattern of relating to one another different. In fact, they both identified this effort to be different as a mutually supportive bond between them that allows each of them the freedom to make decisions that would be best for them as individuals and as a couple.

Dottie's parents were both alcoholic. Her father had "berated" and "degraded" her mother. Sometimes he "wouldn't talk with her" for long periods of time. Her parents were both mental health professionals but were competitive with one another in their profession. Dottie's father "used his caustic humor to distance himself from both his wife and daughter. Ricardo was the youngest of seven in a poor Mexican family. He also had an alcoholic father who would "yell and scream" and sometimes beat his mother. After long, loud and sometimes violent arguments with his wife, Ricardo's father would leave home for several days at a time.

Initially, Ricardo and Dottie began to replicate the patterns of their parents. Dottie had been married twice before and in each case her husband had abandoned her. With regard to their own relationship, Ricardo left Dottie several times over a twelve-year period, after very heated arguments. They had avoided making a firm commitment to one another, and only decided to make a solid commitment after ten years of turbulent interaction.

This commitment paid off for both of them. They spent considerable time learning how to communicate with one another without controlling each other. Their success required them to adopt a style other than the "constant fighting and yelling" that had formed Ricardo's early experience and the "coldness and criticism" that had formed Dottie's.

Ricardo came to recognize that he hates to argue with Dottie. In fact, until recently he tended to "shut down" when Dottie started to become emotional. Dottie, on the other hand, felt "lonely and rejected" in the early years of their relationship when Ricardo would "shut her out" and be unwilling to talk about his feelings. Dottie's



own father had been distant and critical. Dottie's first divorce was "messy" partly because of her sense of powerlessness when her first husband refused to communicate with her.

Over the course of Ricardo and Dottie's relationship, they have learned to accommodate each other's trigger points. They have learned that their initial reactions to each other's behavior actually amplify or escalate the problems in their pattern of communication. After considerable discussion and reflection, they have changed this pattern. If Dottie begins to withdraw in hurt and confusion, Ricardo becomes eager, sociable and cajoling.

When Dottie pushes him to "talk! talk to me!" and Ricardo begins to withdraw, Dottie says she now "gets a grip," acknowledges her own neediness. She tries to restore harmony. They both have come to "recognize the hurt child in each other" and when bad feelings begin to escalate, they can stop the escalation and return to a state of mutual respect, dignity and compatibility. In other words, they can return the ghosts of their past to the closet and get on with their own lives.

At the heart of the matter is what we choose to do about our ghosts and how we choose to define ourselves as individuals and as a couple, given these ghosts in our past lives. Furthermore, as we continue in our relationship for many years, we must also live with the ghosts that we have created within the relationship itself. We become the product not only of other relationships that strongly influence our life and our conception of an enduring, intimate relationship, but also our early years together as a couple. These latter ghosts are often to be found alive and well in the stories that we continue to tell other people (and ourselves) about our early life together as a couple and, in particular, our coming together initially as a couple (the "founding story").

While these stories often help to perpetuate old, outmoded and, at times, dysfunctional aspects of our relationship, they can also help us fight against the old ghosts from previous relationships, as well as set the context for the restructuring (remarriage) of our current relationship. In our study of enduring relationships, we found that the founding story and the role(s) which this story played in the relationship often helped to define the central and distinctive character of the relationship, as well as sustain the relationship through difficult times.

## A Couple's Stories

Many psychologists who study the lives of individual people have recently concluded that we tend to define ourselves through the stories that we tell ourselves and other people about the critical moments, founding, crises, triumphs and tragedies of our lives. In many ways, the only thing that tends to remain constant in our lives -- given changes in jobs, geography, marital status, and even the ongoing physical replacement of our bodies (our skin, organs, blood and so forth)—are the stories that we share about our past life. Furthermore, Barry Lopez, the author of *The Weasel and Crow* (1990, p. 60) suggests that stories “have a way of taking care of us.”

We found in our study of intimate, enduring relationships that partners have a set story that they tell themselves and other people about their life together as a couple. As we mentioned in a previous chapter, couples tend to have the *couple's narrative*. This narrative helps to define the expectations and norms (rules) that govern (or at least strongly influence) the ways in which the two partners interact—and determine what can and cannot be discussed by the partners with one another and with other people.

In our own interviews, several common ingredients were found in most of these founding stories: (1) how the couple first met; (2) how each partner felt about the other person when they first met; (3) when they know that they were in love with one another and what event(s) tend to bring about either the feelings of love or the open expression of these feelings; (4) what their first fight was about and how they resolved this disagreement; and (5) in what ways this relationship is different from other relationships they have known (often, in particular, their parents).

We also found that there were actually three stories. One of these stories was the "unified story" that partners tell other people when they are together in the same room. Often, one of the partners is designated either formally or informally to tell the story. In the case of heterosexual couples, we found that the female partner was most often assigned this task, with the male partner given the role of "counterpoint" -- filling in details, offering the "forbidden" part of the story (often with laughter, a sense of embarrassment -- usually for show-- on the part of his partner), offering corrections and amendments, or picking up the story at some point.

In a few cases we found that both partners share equally in the telling of their unified story, usually one partner picking up one segment of the story, the other party offering a second segment, then back to the first partner and so forth. In yet other

cases, the two partners offered us a variation on Lawrence Durrell's accounts in his *Alexandria Quartet* or a variation on the classic film, *Last Year at Marienbad*. Each partner offers their own version of the unified story, revealing a different perspective on the same events. There is a unified story, with agreed-upon events, as well as alternative interpretations of the meaning and purpose of specific events in the story.

We also discovered, however, that when we met with the two partners individually, each of them usually had their own distinctive story about their life together as a couple. Typically, this distinctive story offered an alternative starting point and, as in the case of the *Alexandria/Marienbad* variations on the unified story, an alternative set of interpretations of the events in the unified story which they agreed did occur. A key point often concerns the "punctuation" of events in the story. When did a particular story begin, and what was the primary cause of the event(s) described in the story?

Burt and Jill, for instance, talked about their decision to have a child. The unified story focused on a particularly special evening at a bed-and-breakfast inn where they made wonderful, spontaneous love. Their unified story tells of this special, romantic evening as the time when their first child was conceived. Both partners agreed on this segment of their unified story. Yet, when Burt talked about this event, he focused on the events that led up to the weekend.

He described a particularly painful argument that they had one week prior to their romantic evening, concerning their finances and his current job. Burt wasn't certain that they could afford to have a child, while his wife, Jill, was convinced that they could afford a child, if he would "get off his rear end" and find a higher paid job. The romantic evening was special for Burt because she began the evening by apologizing for pushing him too hard, while he made a commitment to her to begin a job-search. And that evening, their daughter, Allyson, was conceived. -- at least according to their unified story.

Conversely, Jill spoke of a conversation she had with her sister the day before her romantic evening with Burt. She described her sister's painful revelation that she had just found out that she and her husband could never give birth to their own children, and that they would have to look to adoption if they wanted to raise children. At this moment, according to Jill, she realized how fortunate she and Burt were. She decided then and there that she should become pregnant.

She needed to be supportive of Burt, so that he wouldn't feel under as much financial pressure and would agree to have a child. Jill speaks of her commitment

to working harder in her own job, in order to get a raise, and to scrimp and save at home so that she and Burt could have a child. For Jill, this was the critical moment, leading up to her romantic evening with Burt, and her pregnancy.

The story that Jill and Burt told us about the conception of their daughter was important to them and revealed much about the character of their relationship. Yet, this was not the only story they told us. They shared many other stories with us during their interview, as did most of the couples we interviewed. In fact, for Jill and Burt -- as was the case for most of the couples we interviewed -- the most revealing story concerned not the conception of their daughter, but rather the beginning of their relationship. Virtually all of the couples we interviewed had a wonderful story about their meeting and their formation as a couple. This founding story often established the basic norms and values of their relationship and continues to have a strong influence on the way in which they relate to one another.

For the remainder of this chapter, we focus on this founding story, examining the setting in which the founding story took place and the way in which the story is told and who tells the story. We then turn to the insights which the founding story reveals about the nature of the relationship, the attraction that exists and grows between the partners, and the similarities and differences that are to be found among the partners. Finally, we turn to the enduring nature of the stories that we heard. These founding stories seemed often to match the enduring nature of the partnership itself in terms of interpersonal flexibility and sensitivity, and a mutual appreciation of the special characteristics of each relationship.

## The Founding Story

While many elements of the founding story are important, the setting in which the partners' relationship begins is often particularly telling. In the "good old days" couples often met at local community affairs, at a church function or at school. Many of the older couples we interviewed met in these settings. The younger couples we interviewed were more likely to have met at work than in their local community or at church or school. Alternatively, they meet at a singles bar, through mutual friends, or, increasingly, through a dating service (or even a digital dating web site).

This shift in settings results from the loss of local communities as places where people meet. In many ways, with urban sprawl and the attendant commutes and long working hours, men and women are increasingly finding their mates not in

places where they live but rather in places where they work. As Kit indicated in describing how she met her husband, Dave, "I guess when you are looking around for somebody to be with, you look around where you normally are." In Kit's case, that place is work. If not at work, then perhaps at a virtual setting—a digital neighborhood that is visited in the evening after a long day of work.

## Setting the Stage

What difference does a setting make? First, the setting helps to define the common experience and value base that is shared by the couple right from the start. By going to the same church or attending the same school, partners begin their relationship with certain shared assumptions about what is important in life. Similarly, when they meet at work, partners begin to build their relationship around career-related concerns. This is often appropriate since couples are increasingly likely to be dual career for many years. The identities of both men and women are increasingly linked to job and career.

What about the identities revealed or exhibited in the digital neighborhood? Identities can be quite elusive in a virtual world. Stories are easily concocted—and artificial visual images of self (avatars) can be created. What is reality when it comes to a person's identity (as with most other aspects of life in a digital world)? What can be trusted? How does one decide to "date" someone who isn't really known? This is a long way from the community dance or Sunday church service of yesteryears.

Second, if the setting is a local neighborhood, then men and women are likely to know much more about each other before they start courting one another than is usually the case if they meet at work, through a digital dating service, or at a local bar. Kit describes how she met Dave when they were working in the same area of a large computer hardware company: "we were talking together just casually at work, and he asked me to sew a button on his vest. I don't know if that was to just get more acquainted or I said I would be happy to and gave him back his vest at coffee. We talked about how our divorces were going. I had just gotten divorced, and he was going through one. In fact, he retained the lawyer I had. It did not start out as a romantic thing at all."

Ah, the glories of contemporary romance! If two people are going to meet over the Internet, then great care must be taken. What are the "telling" digital signals that suggest it is "safe" to become acquainted to this "stranger"? For Cindy and Kurt,

the digital romance took place over a period of several months. They both subscribed to a digital dating service and relied on the safeguards offered by this service through its vetting process. They met five times virtually (using Zoom) and then decided to try out a lunch together in a busy restaurant.

This public setting provided additional safety. And a luncheon meant that there were no expectations of a “romantic” evening that could be spent together. Cindy was the first to broach the question of taking their relationships seriously. This was after five more in-person meals and a long walk together in a park. The fifth meal was in the evening and the walk followed this meal. It was a romantic walk with all of the appropriate ingredients: lovely tree-lined pathway, some birds singing and a calm breeze. What was not to like and not to love . . .

Kurt was delighted that Cindy brought up the subject of moving to a new stage in their relationship. He thought this was very “liberating” of her and a sign that she was willing to take a risk on behalf of their relationship. Kurt agreed that the relationship would be “cranked up a notch” (perhaps a bit too mechanical of a response to Cindy’s request). They ended the walk by agreeing to move forward (but move slowly forward) in testing out their relationship. They have now been “dating” for six months and moved in together two months ago. Everything seems to be working for this young mid-21<sup>st</sup> Century couple. We wish them enduring success as a couple.

What about romance not in the digital neighborhood but in the workplace? Kit and Dave typify the formation of many contemporary work-based relationships. If two people are going to meet at work, then they must be careful about shifting from a job-related to a more personal relationship -- this is particularly the case given recent concern about sexual harassment. Men and women must find new signals to indicate, in appropriate, non-harassing, ways that they want to shift from work to courtship. Dave did this by asking Kit to sew the button on this vest. Under many circumstances, this would be considered terribly chauvinistic.

Why do men go to women for their sewing and why can't they learn to do this themselves! Yet, somehow Dave made this an O.K. thing to do, and Kit interpreted his request as a potential statement of personal interest in her. They further pursued their common attraction through yet another indirect vehicle, a discussion about divorce. Unfortunately, this is an all-too-common basis for shared experience among people who are attracted to one another. In talking about their divorces, Kit and Dave once again moved away from work-related conversation to a more personal domain, yet in a way that preserved their independence so that neither

became too pushy or inappropriately forward in their advances to one another.

Work-related romances don't give either partner the benefit of long-term, intimate knowledge of one another in the local community, church or school. However, you often do have an opportunity to watch one's potential partner in interaction with other people, which gives one some idea about what they would be like as a long-term, intimate partner. Dave observed that Kit "treated people very fairly and had a way with people. You want to be with somebody you like. We started out with a pretty good friendship."

Similarly, many younger couples now tend to hang out in groups for quite a while before beginning to pair up as couples (remember the TV series, "Friends"). As in the case of Kit and Dave's work setting, this provides a safe opportunity for young people who don't grow up in the same community, nor attend the same school or church, to become acquainted and make an assessment of one another prior to beginning a courtship.

What about couples who meet in other settings, far from a local neighborhood or work? Robert and Fiona are just such a couple. Their founding story brought some laughter and embarrassment from both of them, especially Robert. According to Fiona, who was born and raised in England, she had gone shopping in London with a friend. The two of them got hungry so they went into a pub for lunch. She noticed a young American Air Force man at a nearby table who seemed uncomfortable. He looked like he was trying to get away from the woman he was sitting with.

This airman suddenly turned to Fiona and asked her to show him around the town. He said "please" in such a way she didn't have the heart to turn him down. Since the English were eager to welcome Americans in those days, Fiona said she would be glad to be an ambassador, and they took off to walk the streets of London, leaving the other two women sitting alone in the pub. They walked for hours and finally went to a movie house where they both fell asleep and never saw the end of the movie. At this point in their story, Robert and Fiona began laughing, and he said that now it was his turn to indicate why the story was so funny.

Robert indicated that he was a young Air Force officer stationed in Piccadilly who had gotten some R and R time to go to London with a friend. As soon as they reached London, Robert's friend joined up with another bunch of airmen, leaving him to fend for himself. Robert decided to get something to eat at the pub, but as soon as he sat down to eat, he was approached by a woman who invited him to a party. He soon realized that she was a prostitute.

Robert indicated that back then the military was very strict. He was scared to death that he would get into trouble if caught with a prostitute, so the only thing he could do was ask that pretty young English woman to rescue him. He quickly added, "and she walked my legs off!" Fiona hastened to add that there were so many things to show him in London that she just got carried away. When Robert said that the trip cost him 60 pounds, Fiona was quick to say that she contributed 15 pounds "because she wasn't going to let an American pay for everything."

Clearly, the pub represented a safe setting in which Robert and Fiona could meet, despite the fact that this was not initially a safe place for Robert, given his confrontation with the prostitute. The central message in this founding story appears to be that when Robert asked Fiona to "show me London," what he was really saying was "rescue me. I'm in a very awkward situation and I have no one else to turn to." Then there is Fiona's response: "I'm an ambassador for my country. I'll be glad to show you around."

Actually, what she is doing is agreeing to help him, but making sure that he has no chance to take advantage of her. She'll make sure they don't have any time to be alone. She'll just walk his legs off till he's so tired he can't do anything but sleep. Furthermore, she pays part of the bill so that she doesn't feel any obligations to him.

This type of protection is quite understandable, given that she had no idea about his background nor his character. As in the case of many men and women who meet at work, Fiona (and Robert) must be careful about their initial encounter. This care, however, often extends beyond these initial encounters. To this day, Fiona demands that Robert prove his commitment to her.

Again and again, she asks herself (and, indirectly, Robert) if the risk she took in meeting Robert in London (and later leaving London to join Robert in the United States) was worth it. There is often an ongoing concern on the part of one or both partners regarding the intentions of the other partner. Men and women who meet by chance as strangers often wake up in the middle of the night, look at the person sleeping next to them, and wonder if they have been insane in allowing this "stranger" (who they have been living with for many years) into their house!



## Who Tells the Story

Another critical dimension that is to be discovered in the retelling of the founding stories concerns the way in which the story is told and who tells the story. Rich insights regarding the couple are often revealed through decisions that are made by a couple concerning who tells the story or specific parts of the story, who is allowed to hear all or part of the story, and the extent to which the couple's joint story matches with each of the partner's individual stories.

In telling their founding story, John and Nancy decided (or at least John decided) that he would set the broad framework or title of the story: "We met at church youth activities and at youth camps." Nancy then began filling in the details. At this point, John took some papers out of his briefcase, which he began to shuffle around. Clearly, the job of telling the story fell in Nancy's lap. When asked about his seeming indifference, John said he thought he could do some paperwork at the same time he was answering questions. Then he added: "I'm not sure I want her to tell you this story."

Throughout the course of the story, John provided occasional commentaries on Nancy's narration, indicating at times that she had already spent enough time on a particular part of the story or correcting the information that Nancy provided. At one point, after being quiet for several minutes while Nancy was telling the story, John spoke up in frustration: "I don't remember any of this! Nothing! Nothing!" A few minutes later, he admitted that he readily forgets details about his early relationship with Nancy.

In telling their founding story, Nancy and John said much about their current relationship—not only because most of the telling was done by Nancy while John tended to fumble through papers, but also because the founding story itself suggests that John relies on Nancy for retaining the details of their relationship and for giving primary attention to the maintenance of their relationship. Thus, the content of their founding story parallels the process of telling the story itself—as we found to be the case with many couples that we interviewed.

At times, John gets frustrated about this role that Nancy has assumed in the relationship. He tries to diminish this role by attending to his "work" or by belittling her. Yet, at other times during the interview, John often expressed his appreciation for Nancy's abilities in a painful, self-deprecating manner. In their own unique manner, Nancy and John had struck a balance in their relationship. John acknowledges that he isn't very skillful in relating to other people—especially regarding intimacy or emotional issues. Nancy was responsible for negotiating with

the world regarding their relationship, while he was to negotiate with the world regarding career, finances and other traditional "male" matters.

In her interview of Alice (a thirty-five-year-old secretary) and Fred (a forty-year-old furniture maker), one of our colleagues began (as did many interviewers) by asking how they met. The two of them have probably been asked this question many times before. We propose that their answer (both individually and collectively) is important not only as part of the social convention, but also as a way in which they defined the central governing principles of their relationship for many years to come.

Alice responded first to the interviewer's request. She said to Fred: "Well you go first." Who is designated in a relationship as the story-teller—or at least as the one who tells the founding story? In many cultures, a central role is played by the storyteller. Status and role are often defined by the nature and purpose of the stories that one is allowed to share with other people. Similarly, in the case of couples, it is often quite revealing to note who is allowed or at least encouraged to tell particular stories about the couple. The founding story is particularly important. We found that this person is often the one who also takes primary care of the relationship (the third entity).

In the case of Fred and Alice, Alice asked Fred to begin. He indicated that "we met in Madison. I was living in Milwaukee, but I was in the Madison area visiting a friend and that's where we met." Frequently, in heterosexual relationships, the male plays the role of geographer and chronologist of the relationship. He identifies location and time but leaves the rich details of the actually meeting of the two up to the female member of the couple. This was the case with Fred and Alice. Alice went on to mention that:

I also was visiting someone in the Madison area and living in Milwaukee. When I met Fred at this mutual friend's house, I remember us playing a lot of checkers. And I'm really good at it so I was impressed with how good he was. What attracted me to him was that he was a very good communicator and a good listener. He was a contradiction. He had long hair and sold dope, just like my old boyfriend, and yet he was intellectually interesting.

Alice went on to mention that the two of them didn't see each other again after that night for quite a long time. Alice went to France (the country where she was born) for a while. She gave Fred a call when she returned to the Milwaukee area a year later. They ended up going out to dinner and then she moved in with him twenty-

four hours later, which Fred corroborated: "after spending just a little time with her, I decided 'this was it!' I was going to pursue this to the end of the earth."

Alice noted that Fred "didn't really know anything about my background, which is what surprised me the most. For example, the fact that I came from a family in France with quite a bit of money. Or even that much about me personally." According to Fred (and the writers of many love songs): "It was fascination." Alice countered that: "It was lust." Fred corrected himself: "It was fascination and lust"—and a strong dose of limerence! In their founding story, Fred and Alice clearly defined the feelings that were experienced by both partners in forming their relationship. Like many couples they spoke of fascination and lust. As in any good Hollywood movie, Fred and Alice interwove strong statements regarding their emerging passion for one another in their story of acquaintance and commitment.

There is a variant on the question of who tells the founding story: to what extent is the story the same whether told by one of the partners or the other partner? Has the story been told so many times that it has become the same for both partners? If there is only one story, then this is often indicative of the loss of any individuality in this relationship. There is no room for alternative perspectives or deviation from the prescribed story. We wondered about this issue in several of the case studies.

Reggie and Sara, for instance, offered very few corrections of the stories that either of them told, whether this was a story of their meeting or a later story regarding their children. As Sara was telling her stories, Reggie would nod agreement and provide encouragement by saying "yea, that's right!" When Reggie took the lead in telling a story, Sara provided several asides. While Reggie only told one or two stories out of the eight or ten that were told to the interviewer, Reggie would always look to Sara while telling the story, as though he was inviting her to step in and take over the story-telling function.

The founding story contains many important elements, the most obvious being what the two of them thought about and felt about each other the moment they met, the ways in which they first interacted with one another, and the immediate outcomes of this interaction. The process by which the story is told, however, often reveals much more than the content of the story about the governing variables (the "rules of the game") that determine the ongoing nature of their relationship.

## Attraction, Similarities and Differences

The founding stories of Dave and Kathy, a middle-aged couple both in second marriages, and Ben and Karen, a young couple in their first marriage, were filled with emotions. However, in both instances the feelings were initially quite negative. This was not unusual. We found that many founding stories begin with feelings of dislike or even disgust, often as a result of differences between the two people. These feelings later turn to attraction (precisely because of the differences) and eventually infatuation and love.

Kathy began her story of how she met and fell in love with Dave by telling the interviewer that she was a waitress in a local steak house when Dave, a truck driver for a local drug store chain, came in one day for lunch. Upon seeing him enter the restaurant, Kathy immediately asked another waitress if she would serve him. Kathy indicated that Dave resembled her first boyfriend with whom she was involved during her teenage years. He was later killed in an automobile accident while stationed in the Armed Forces. Dave, however, was persistent in pursuing Kathy. He continued to dine at the restaurant for the next week, hoping he would get a chance for her to serve him.

On the tenth day of his return to the restaurant she turned the tables and approached his table. They began to speak. Over the next few days, they would meet during her coffee break. Kathy had found in Dave a confidant to whom she revealed her ongoing struggles with her physically abusing husband. Like many battered women, Kathy felt helpless and afraid of her abuser, not knowing whom or where to turn for help. Slowly, Dave encouraged Kathy to leave her abusing husband and start a new life. Dave himself was suffering from an abusive relationship with his wife—only in this case his wife was the abuser. She was not physically abusing him but was neglectful of both Dave and their two teenage children.

Kathy and Dave found in each other empathetic sounding boards for their troubled first marriages and courage to form a new life together. In both cases, Kathy and Dave chose to avoid a remarriage by leaving their first marriages and forming a new relationship with one another. Dave and his wife filed their divorce papers just two months after he met Kathy.

Eventually, Kathy decided to leave her abusing husband and with Dave's help moved all of her belongings into a rented truck with the intention of moving in with her mother. When they reached her mother's house, Dave asked Kathy: "Why don't you just move in with me? We can give it a try and if it doesn't work out, I will

help you move your things again to your mother's house." Kathy accepted his proposal without hesitation and began thereafter living with Dave.

The process of moving in together was big for Kathy and Dave. It signified in their minds more than anything else their unity as a couple. They say they fell in love almost instantaneously after the first time they spoke to each other at the steak house. She said she felt secure in talking with him. Kathy was not at all afraid that he may turn out to be an abuser like her husband. He said he found in her someone who was sympathetic to his needs. Kathy took time to listen to him instead of taking his presence for granted.

The negative feelings associated with Ben and Karen's meeting were not the result of ghosts from previous relationships, as was the case with Kathy and Dave. Rather, the emotions were much more direct and immediate: neither Ben nor Karen liked each other very much when they first met. Ben recalls that:

I was going to play frisbee with a friend of mine and we were going to go out after school and I was meeting him in the student union at the college and he was talking to Karen and came over to me and said, "well, I'm going to go to the beach instead," and that pissed me off -- I mean with this hippie-chick sitting there on the lawn. . .

Karen notes that it was raining that day.

Ben:

Yeah, and Karen was like oh wow, I love the rain."

Karen:

I was reading in the rain, and I thought he was a big pig basically. Later this other guy asked me if I wanted to go to a party and then halfway, there he said "Hey, remember that guy Ben? Well, it's his party." Halfway there I flipped. I said: "Turn this car around." I did not want to go. I went though. . . it was at that moment.

Ben:

No, it wasn't that moment . . .

Karen:

It was at that moment we knew we could tolerate each other.

Ben:

I think that we fell in love at that party across the street from where I used to live.

Karen:

Oh yeah . . .

Karen and Ben's founding story reflected many enduring characteristics of these two people. Karen's serious, yet romantic nature is illustrated in her desire to read in the rain, whereas Ben's fun-loving nature is evident in frisbee playing and partying. Even though Karen and Ben are only about ten years younger than Fred and Alice, they represent a very different era and set of values. By the time that Karen and Ben went to college, it was no longer cool to get involved emotionally too soon with another person. It was alright to sleep with them, but one certainly wants to keep some distance, some autonomy. Sexual intimacy was no longer closely linked with emotional intimacy or mutual commitment.

Like many of the young couples we interviewed, Karen and Ben were better off because they were not initially attracted to each other physically. They actually found each other disgusting! This enabled them to gradually become friends, before they became lovers. Because they had a friend in common, they learned to "tolerate each other." Karen remarks that this was the first and only time that she had become friends with a man before initiating a romantic relationship. Ben found a new safety in his friendship with Karen that he had not found before with other women. The basis of their relationship in parties and mutual friends is indicative of the age when they first met and the era in which they were living. This highly artificial, social context, however, made it hard later for them to adjust to the real world and to each other in isolation from other people.

While Karen and Ben represent a different era than Fred and Alice, Mick and Sheila represent the interplay between two entirely different cultures and societies. Their founding story illustrates yet another central dimension of most founding stories. This dimension concerns the ways in which two partners discover differences as well as similarities concerning the way in which they live and think. There must be a delicate balance for most couples between similarities and differences if they are to remain attractive to one another yet compatible enough to be able to live comfortably together.

The founding story of Mick and Sheila in many ways reads like Romeo and Juliet's highly romantic struggle with traditional societal barriers and prejudices. Mick and Sheila met at a social gathering organized by the House of Poland in the city where

they both live. Sheila was supposed to sing at that event, but she didn't have an accompanist for the piano.

At the time in the United States, Mike was on a travel visa and was asked to accompany Sheila while she sang at the ball. In Poland, Mick was a musician playing drums in a band. At the time, Poland was part of the Soviet Union and had not yet broken off as an independent country. When his band was on tour in Finland, Mick defected with another member of the band. They went to Sweden and asked for political asylum. Sheila, by contrast, is an American citizen with parents of Polish descent.

As Mick tells the story, it took a short period for the two of them to fall in love and marry. Sheila adds to the story. When she heard that Mick was from Poland, she was very pleased, given that her own parents came from this same culture. Though she was born in the United States, Sheila was always attracted to Polish culture, hence participated with her parents in the House of Poland. She also shared a deep appreciation for music with Mick. During rehearsals, according to Sheila, she and Mick spent many hours talking about Poland. She found herself deeply attracted to him and immediately said "yes" when he asked her to marry him.

Mick had to return to Sweden, and they corresponded by letter for three months, which brought them even closer together. Having decided to get married in Sweden, Mick and Sheila took on a new, joint project: Mick taught Sheila how to speak Polish, while Sheila taught Mick about American culture. Sheila became fluent in Polish and speaks with very little American accent. Ironically, having moved to the United States with Sheila twenty-five years ago, Mick now speaks Polish with a slight American accent!

## **Conclusions: We Endure!**

Founding stories seem to live forever—perhaps because they are often repeated by the couple. Even though the stories may become less and less accurate over the years, they retain their vivid quality. Betty and George, for instance, have been married for forty-seven years. Their founding, stories clearly reflect the values and mores of an era that is centuries away from many of the younger couples that we interviewed, such as Ben and Karen.

Even today, values remain central to the relationship that Betty and George have established. George suggested that Betty begin telling the story of their meeting—

though he often interrupted once Betty began. They apparently met at a bus station, through a mutual classmate. According to Betty, it was love at first sight:

I got on the bus and sat in the aisle seat until I saw Daddy [Betty's name for George] coming and then right before he got to my seat, I scooted over. He sat down and we talked all the way home. We were both students. Never met anybody that I could talk with so easily. We had the same physics class.

At the point of their first meeting, Betty scooted over in her seat to accommodate (and attract) George. She has continued to meet his needs (often sacrificing her own) since this time. They were both studying to become dentists, yet it was George who became the dentist and Betty who worked behind the scenes as the manager of their dental office. She made a sacrifice once again that was typical of women during earlier times.

George noted that he had actually seen Betty earlier and had been very attracted to her (perhaps meaning that Betty didn't have to scoot over to get his attention on the bus):

I had seen her in the physics class. It was in an amphitheater. She sat down near the front on the left. I still remember. She wore a white dress and had blue rimmed glasses. I knew that's the gal for me. Hadn't met her, but I knew. I suspected she must have been a Williams because I knew Dennis [Betty's brother]. Burt [George and Betty's classmate] saw me always watching her and asked me if I wanted to meet her.

The interviewer then asked: "What did you say?" George: "I said yes." Betty went on to note that she thought George was the "most handsome person I'd ever seen . . . I've ever seen. You're still very handsome, dear." As they were relating their founding story, both Betty and George were blushing and laughing. They each seemed to delight in letting the other know how very attracted they were to each other -- how much they had "fallen head over heels."

Love is alive and well for George and Betty—even after 43 years of marriage. What a remarkable gift Betty and George were given as a couple! They can still taste and feel the wonderful quality of this remarkable defining moment in both of their lives. Like many intimate enduring couples, George and Betty can relish these early, passionate images of their partner as perfect in every way, as the epitome of what each partner needs to fill his or her life with hope and meaning.



Anyone who is fortunate enough to have created and now live in such a relationship can return to these memories and stories again and again during their life and will always find them to be deeply satisfying and renewing. The continuing vitality of the ever-present founding story is often particularly important during periods of conflict and transition (remarriage) in the life of a couple. The story provides continuity while also demonstrating dramatically and emotionally the reason why we got together in the first place, and the reason why we should keep investing ourselves in the renewal of this important relationship.

As two septuagenarians, Betty and George, continue their story, the expression of attraction and passion further intensified. Their interviewer asked: "When did you fall in love?" George answered first: "at the fraternity party. It was an initiation dance." Betty then added: "Daddy didn't know how to dance very well." George: "That's right. You taught me the two steps." Betty: "No, it was the one step." George: "Do you remember after the dance when we were walking out to the car, how we were practically running." Betty:

Yes, we started running to the car and we got in. Daddy gave me a kiss that burns me up to think about it. It was so seemingly passionate. That was our first date. There was nobody else. I was going to marry him, or I wasn't going to get married. I woke up my folks when I got home. They always had me wake them up when I would get in, and I told them "George is going to be your new son-in-law." My mother said: "But you've just met him."

This was a defining moment for these two lovers. Both George and Betty considered themselves to be a couple from this moment on. George began coming to dinner at Betty's house every Sunday from then on, and they spent every evening together studying.

In the second half of their founding story, George and Betty reaffirm one another's distinctive value. They both affirmed that they were "made for each other" and that no one else could have met their needs. This was the case for many of the couples we interviewed. This seems patently absurd from a less romantic perspective.

There certainly are other people who can meet our needs. There is never just one person for us. Those of us who have been married twice or more, or who have had several successful intimate relationships in our lives, know this to be the case. However, it is often hard for us to remember that this is the case when an important relationship comes to an end.

From a more romantic (and psychological) perspective, there is a good reason to believe that there is only one person for us and that many years later we can't even imagine living life without our partner. The reason for our sense of one person for us is that our relationship with this person has had a profound impact on our own sense of self and who we have become as mature adults. There truly is only one person for us, for we have become the person that we are today in part (and, in some instances, in large part) because of this relationship.

Betty indicated that she would not have married if George didn't want her. This probably would not have been the case. Betty would have found someone else and would have looked back on her definitive statement about George as just a humorous and perhaps wistfully painful remembrance of her overly dramatic youth. Yet, the Betty that exists today could not have married anyone other than George. She wouldn't even exist today, with all of her distinctive characteristics, if it wasn't for her relationship with George.

In this regard, the sense of fate that is central to many founding stories is quite understandable and points to the importance of these stories in defining not only the character of the couple, but also the character of each partner. Clearly, the content of these stories tells us much about the nature of the couple's commitments and interactions.

## **Key Chapter Points**

Enduring couples:

- Use their founding stories as a couple to help fight old “ghosts” from previous relationships and set the context for restructuring their current relationship.
- Retell their founding story to help sustain their relationship through difficult times.
- Relish the retelling of early, passionate images of their partnership.
- View their partner as the epitome of what they need to fill their lives with hope and meaning.
- Recognize the person they have become today is in part because of this

enduring relationship and their intimate interactions with their partner over the years.

## Chapter Five

### The Third Image: Compatibility and Covenant

A third myth concerns compatibility between the two members of a couple. Similarity is assumed to be critical to a long-term relationship. In the movies of the 1940s and 1950s, good, solid relationships were often based on shared upbringing (usually in a small town) and common values and backgrounds. The typical couple had been "childhood sweethearts" or even the girl or boy "next door." Certainly, the prototypic couple consisted of two people from the same racial background. Mixed marriages were obviously not going to work.

Members of the successful couple also came from the same socio-economic class and usually the same religion. Many tragic movies (borrowing from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*) concerned young men and women who fell in love with someone from a rival family or tribe. Other movies spoke of the struggle found among two people in love who come from different racial or ethnic backgrounds (the black man and white woman, the young Jewish girl and the young Protestant boy). A tragic tale might instead center on a love-torn protagonist who comes from above or below the class of their loved one (the prince and the showgirl, the princess and the valet).

While some of these movies told the message that "love conquers all" and that ultimately socio-economic class is unimportant (at least in a free society), they inevitably described a difficult courtship in which many barriers both internal to the couple and externally imposed made for a difficult (though usually very passionate and dramatically appealing) relationship. The reality concerning compatibility seems to be quite different from that conveyed in the movies.

#### Equitable Interests

First, as our couple's guru, John Gottman, has noted, compatibility and many overlapping interests might not be key ingredients. "It all depends on how you interact while pursuing those interest." (Gottman, 2015. P. 17) Compatibility can be based on the dominance of one member of the couple. Shared interests might not be the same thing as equitable interests. Gottman (2015, p. 17) puts it this way:

If a husband and wife who love kayaking are able to glide smoothly down the water together, their mutual hobby enriches and deepens their fondness and interest in each other. But if their travels are punctuated with “That’s not the way to do a J-stroke, you idiot!” then pursuing this common interest is hardly benefiting their marriage.

Secondly, the movies often don’t reflect the fact that most men and women describe themselves as being more different than similar to their mates. Those similarities that are reported by couples generally will refer to shared goals and aspirations not to current or enduring personality characteristics. Furthermore, there are shifts over time regarding similarities and differences.

Partners in an enduring successful relationship are likely to be different from each other early in their relationship, having fallen in love, in essence, with their opposite (what Jung calls the "shadow") or with the cross-gender image or "archetype" (identified as the male "animus" and female "anima," by Jung) that resides within themselves (Jung, 2013). We are inclined, in other words, to be attracted to someone who fills a psychological gap that we cannot ourselves fill.

Yet, partners begin to learn from each other later in their relationship and reclaim aspects of themselves that they have disowned. The Jungians would note that this move toward greater similarity is an important developmental shift. Left dormant for many years, partners become more like one another late in life as they seek to reintegrate all aspects of themselves (what Carl Jung calls the movement toward “individuation” and Erik Erikson calls the movement toward "ego integrity").

The issue of similarities and differences among partners seems to hinge on this intrapsychic change over time and the ways in which partners learn from one another—provided that the issue of dominance that Gottman mentioned is not prevalent. If one member of the couple seeks to control the thoughts, feelings and behavior of their partner, then this push toward compliance leads not to true compatibility nor to individuation or ego integrity for either partner. It leads only to psychic stagnation and a relationship that might be enduring—but certainly neither intimate nor enriching.

Information garnered from our interviews reaffirms the Jungian assumption that partners should complement rather than duplicate each other during their early years together. The partners must understand and honor these differences—without trying to mold their partner into their own image and likeness. As Jung suggests, they also must learn from each other (especially during later stages of relationship) and eventually become more alike.

## Shifting Relationship

We see this typical emphasis on transitions in difference in the relationship between Jeannie and Bob who were as different as they could be when they first met, but now are becoming more alike in certain respects. When they first met, Jeannie was very attracted to Bob's rebelliousness. He was the drinking, drug-using rebel that she would not allow herself to be. In her family, it was too important to receive approval and Jeannie saw her only chance at approval and love coming to her through being a good and obedient daughter.

Bob saw in Jeannie a hurting person from a cold and unloving family. He describes growing up with alcoholism in his own family. It may be that within his relationship with Jeannie he saw an opportunity to rescue and care for her and thus heal his own pain. Yet, as they have grown older together, neither Bob nor Jeannie has stood still. Jeannie became more rebellious. She began using marijuana and amphetamines with Bob for about four years. During this period, both described the times as good and the relationship as close.

Jeannie was "totally there" for Bob. The drugs helped to break down her inhibitions. However, she later felt that she had "abandoned" their children and her job by directing so much attention to Bob. As a result, Jeannie stopped using drugs and shifted much of her attention back to their children and her work. Bob "drifted a lot" as a result and was drunk seven days a week. He became more introspective, focusing primarily on his drugs and his relationship with Jeannie. Bob and Jeannie fought a lot during this two-year period of time.

Bob is now clean and sober and in recovery for the past 20 months. Neither he nor Jeannie are as committed to their relationship as they were previously. He used to live only for Jeannie and became socially isolated. Now in recovery, Bob has other interests and more balance in his life. He is now able to care for himself. Bob feels a great deal of resistance from Jeannie.

Bob believes that she is threatened with his growing independence, having become a man who is less fearful, more outgoing, and ready to take on a new challenge. Jeannie indicates that she is confused about the changes that are occurring in Bob's life. She feels excluded from his new world and can't find a place for herself in Bob's life. Although Jeannie says she is committed to the relationship, does not want it to end, and loves Bob, she has been considering separation.

Over a twenty-three-year period, we see three different versions of the relationship between Bob and Jeannie. Initially he was rebellious, and she was a good girl. Then

we see that she became more like him, and they both concentrated on each other, isolating themselves from other members of their family and their careers. In their third incarnation, Jeannie has once again returned to a more "respectable" lifestyle; Bob has also cleaned up and become more independent and outgoing. They started out quite different, became more alike, and now are trying to figure out how they can live with the changes that have occurred.

## **Shifting Compatibility**

Gwen and Bernard are very articulate about the strengths and problems associated with their compatibility. Early in their relationship, Bernard controlled their activities and the selection of their friends. Gwen has a history of dropping everything whenever a potential mate came along:

I did the same thing when [Bernard] came along -- wanting to please. I gave up road biking for mountain biking, pretending to like kayaking and made all his friends my friends too—simultaneously abandoning my own social circle. This worked. It got me a husband, but it has created some disappointments in [Bernard] when lately I have reasserted my own interests and goals.

Gwen seems to have entered adulthood with the same myth that many of us hold, namely that we can only be successful in relationships if we share common interests. As a result, the less dominant of the two of us (often the woman) abandons those life interests that are not shared by the other member of the couple. This is precisely the unequal bargain about which Gottman warns us. Bernard bought into this same myth. Apparently, he is unaware of or doesn't buy into Gottman's warning. In all of the intimate relationships that Bernard has had in his life:

. . . finding out if we would ultimately be compatible was high on my agenda. My desire and pressure to work toward this end was, perhaps, not the best of strategies. This seems especially so when combined with my equally high expectations for mutuality of our interests, i.e. my interests in mountaineering and kayaking.

Bernard made a commitment only to those women who shared his interest in these two sports; consequently, those women who were attracted to him had to either share his interests or somehow convince Bernard (and themselves) that they would like to acquire interest in these sports. Gwen fell into this trap.

In recent years, both Gwen and Bernard have abandoned the myth of compatibility, in part because of what they have taught each other. This is a sign of an intimate, enduring relationship. Members of a couple learn from each other (even if this creates new tensions in the relationship). Gwen observes that:

I am learning things about myself from [Bernard] and he from me. We each see ourselves reflected in the other person. It is a potential for growth not as available to single people -- whose actions don't always have immediate repercussions in the same household. Everything we each do or say comes back to us one way or another, immediately. I have undoubtedly changed more in the five years I have known [Bernard] than ever before. The good changes (becoming less rigid for instance) I am keeping. The less functional changes (like giving up my own sports or friends), I am trying to change back. I am reasserting more of my old identity, acquiescing less to [Bernard's] desires, sticking up for myself. I think it is healthy for me -- and in the long run will [increase] the longevity of our relationship.

Bernard similarly indicates that:

I have become more capable of seeing the difference between myself and others, and between my desires and expectations and my partner's. I have begun to appreciate other people for their inherent qualities, independent of their capacity to gratify my needs. For me, this has been a difficult understanding. I have in the past equated much of intimacy with a kind of fused relationship. This is also changing and is a significant development theme of our marriage.

These have been hard-won lessons for both Gwen and Bernard. "There has always been tension," according to Gwen. She begins to wax poetic and references their wedding vows:

. . . related to [Bernard's] need to have a woman who will share his passions. I love [Bernard]. That doesn't mean I love ice climbing or kayaking or skiing. I think he hits it right on the nose when he says: "I have in the past equated much of intimacy with a kind of fused relationship." It is a fairly recent occurrence that we have admitted we are really much more different than we thought when we got married. I would harken back to our marriage vows: "I promise that our love will consist of two solitudes, that border and protect and



salute each other . . . I promise that there will be spaces in our togetherness, to let the winds of the heavens dance between us.

For Gwen, differences that she observed in her parents serve as an important guide for honoring her own differences with Bernard:

We [Bernard and I] were, for several years, inseparable. Now we are establishing our own identities again. Admitting our differences can only be a good thing. Lord knows, my parents are as different as two people can get - and they still love each other. It's easy to find a climbing or cycling partner. It's hard to find someone you can live with, day in and day out, for 40 to 50 years. I believe we have put our finger on what really matters, the essential nature of our relationship that isn't affected by who shares who's sports or agrees on what toys to buy (if I may borrow [Bernard's] terminology).

It is certainly not easy to either appreciate or accept the differences that our partners exhibit in the ways in which they (and we) see and relate to the world around us. According to Bernard:

Our [Gwen and Bernard's] rhythms are very different even though we enjoy similar activities. My mind is full of symbols and metaphors and basic principles but few rules or details, while [Gwen] maintains lists and facts and a level of organization I could not approach. I have complementary attributes that together make a greater whole, yet we also argue over which world view will define our actions. On the deepest level it feels correct to be together. However, I feel pushed to understand the lessons we create for each other. At once I feel deeply loved, but not understood fully, at times alone in a struggle to understand our common context.

It is lovely to observe that Gwen, the realist in this enduring relationship, uses a poetic image in referring back to their shared commitment to difference (i.e. their marriage vows). Bernard uses his skills in creating and using symbols and metaphors (citing several lines of poetry) to further articulate his enduring commitment to Gwen -- and her differences:

Opposite walls of a deep canyon, facing

forever a different view.

Across the void a different self, a stranger

in the sky I know so well  
We are joined and divided by the ever-changing  
currents of the river,  
And by the common earth, the substance  
of our single being.

Bernard goes on to observe:

Perhaps it is the magnitude of our differences that have allowed us to recognize a deeper connection and the singularity of experience. Had we been more alike on the surface, perhaps we would have believed our commonality to be the substance of our bonding. In the past I evaluated my relationships and much of my experience by more superficial measures. Our marriage seems very different. Accepting the ways that we are different seems to bring us only closer. However, this is a difficult process. Each new insight is accompanied by sadness and a letting go of old attachments. Going through this I feel, at times, confused as to what might replace the old hope that another will make me feel complete.

Given this primary emphasis on the complementarity rather than similarity among contemporary couples—at least in their early years together – then it is essential that something in the couple holds together these disparate values, perspectives and skills. We have found in our study that the differences among partners are balanced in an enduring relationship with an integrative component – something that we have identified as the couple's "covenant."

## The Covenant

As I noted earlier, couples often help to form some of the paradigms or frames of reference that guide them in their interactions with other people and institutions in the world. One of the most important frames concerns the rules by which the two partners live with one another. Partners are influenced by their shared assumptions and frames of reference not only in their interactions out in the world, but also their interactions with one another.

Furthermore, these rules regarding the partners' interactions must meet all three of the criteria noted in Chapter One. They must appear to come from the external

world, rather than being arbitrarily created by the couple. They must be internally consistent, logical and coherent. And these rules must provide some stability for the couple as it faces unpredictable and changing conditions in the world. One additional criterion must be added to this list: the guiding rules for a couple are not subject to change.

What should we call this set of deeply based rules of conduct in a relationship? Some writers speak of a "contract" between the two partners. We think this is an inadequate term, for this set of rules is not a contract between two parties, as in business, with the assumption of modification and flexibility. Rather, the couple enters into a covenant, in the Biblical sense, that is assumed to be fixed and sacred. An intimate relationship is considered a sacrament with spiritual underpinnings precisely because it is built on a covenant rather than a contract between the two partners.

Another way to think of this covenant-based relationship comes from the world of behavioral economics (for example, Ariely, 2008; and Kahneman, 2011). They distinguish between an interpersonal process they call "market exchange" and a second process called "social exchange." In the case of market exchange, two or more people establish a relationship that is based on an agreement about payment for services or products by one party. This payment might be financial in nature or the offering of bartered services. Conversely, social exchange is established on the basis of a non-commodified sharing.

For instance, one might join a Thanksgiving dinner provided by Mom and Dad by calculating the cost of food per person sitting at the table. A check could be written to one's parent. The outcome of this check writing is likely to be disastrous. Disappointment and betrayal are deeply felt. The room is filled with emotional reaction by the "offended" parents: "Why don't you like us anymore?" "What is this act of anger all about—what have I (we) done wrong?" Market exchange is inappropriate and will provoke many fears about what has gone off the rails in this familial relationship.

By contrast, one can bring flowers, one of the "dishes" to be placed on the Thanksgiving table, a bottle of wine, or at least a hug and sincere words of appreciation for the food being served. Payment with a check is a matter of market exchange, while the flowers and contribution of food is a matter of social exchange. I suggest that a contract between two people in an enduring intimate relationship is rarely aligned with the market exchange—and is equally as inappropriate as payment for the Thanksgiving dinner.

The same thing occurs when we try to “buy off” a betrayal (such as having an affair) by offering our betrayed partner a string of pearls or season tickets to a favorite sports team. These relationships are intimate, and they endure because they are founded and repeatedly reinforced through social rather than market exchange. Love doesn’t linger in an economic marketplace.

What is the nature of the covenant that is established by intimate couples? A first “draft” of the covenant often exists in the founding stories that are told by partners not only for the edification of other people, but also for each other. It ultimately revolves around some kind of social exchange. The founding story is often repeated many times by couples, both for the sake of other people and for themselves, because it contains some important truth or a central set of social exchange commitments that have been made explicitly or, more often, implicitly by the couple.

Bea and Donald spoke of meeting during a blind date that was fraught with mistakes and a series of errors. However, this first encounter was also filled with many incidents that foreshadowed major commitments in their life as a couple. Donald indicated that he was “struck” with love at first sight when Bea walked down the stairs, whereas for Bea the moment of love was not so clear. After they first met, Bea broke several dates with Donald and dated other men. Now, years late, when asked about the most valuable aspects of their marriage, Donald speaks of love, whereas Bea talks about dependability. Bea needs space and freedom, while Donald is faithful and dependable. That is their covenant. It was played out during the very first days of their relationship and is still being played out.

If the founding story is a first “draft” of the covenant, then what does the mature covenant look like? Our interviews suggest that four key components are usually found in the covenants established in enduring relationships. These are key elements in almost any successful and sustained social exchange: (1) a stable pattern of interaction, (2) trust in one another (with regard to relying on each other and being open with one another), (3) clarity about who gets to start and who gets to finish conversations about particular issues, and about how the start and end of a specific sequence of events involving the two partners is defined, and (4) agreements about the ways in which differences between partners will be honored and used to strengthen the relationship. We will briefly describe each of these components, letting the stories of our informants lead the way.

## **Stable Pattern of Interaction**

Alice and Fred seem to be an effectively functioning couple, despite a number of difficult decisions (having an abortion when engaged, abandoning alcoholism) and life intrusions (ill child, loss of jobs). Their interviewer observed that they seemed to be quite comfortable with the positions that each hold in the relationship and were noticeably appreciative of one another. They seemed to have spent their energy during the interview on the subject matter at hand a description of their relationship -- rather than on issues of who speaks, who's correct, or who gets in the last word.

In reflecting on this interactive process, and in our analysis of the interaction among members of a couple throughout this book, I introduce another guide (actually multiple guides). I turn to the remarkable analysis offered many years ago by Watzlawick, Bavelas and Jackson (1967) Their analysis is still quite fresh and filled with insight. Watzlawick and his colleagues (1967, p. 52) suggest that "it seems that the more spontaneous and 'healthy' a relationship, the more the relationship aspects of communication will recede to the background. Conversely, 'sick' relationships are characterized by a constant struggle about the nature of the relationship, with the content aspect of communication becoming less and less important."

## **Trust, Reliance and Openness**

Stated in terms of a covenant, the couple that endures will spend little time reviewing or debating its commitments and underlying assumptions about that which is of value in the relationship. The covenant, in other words, is invisible. It is a matter of trust, reliance and openness. The issue of trust is often critical for couples. In many instances, relationships that are established in a spontaneous and highly passionate and romanticized manner do not stand the test of time, in part because there was never the gradual accumulation of shared life experiences on which trust can be built. In many instances, the couples we interviewed offered founding stories that are descriptive of gradually forming friendships rather than an explosive, immediate moment of attraction.

Like many couples, Bill and Betsy met in college. They were initially friends and only later began to date. Their founding story is filled with humor and reads like a TV sit-com. For example:

He [Bill.] was around the house all the time -- because there was no water at his house. So sometimes I would hear a knock on the door,

and I would go and look out the little window in the door, and there would be this guy standing there with his toothbrush in his mouth.

They both shared and elaborated on this story with considerable delight and laughter. When asked what they thought their stories about coming together as a couple revealed about them as a couple, Betsy indicated that sometimes she "thinks it's all luck, but other times I think we were very good at picking friends." She suggested that the most important element of their story is that they started out as friends and actually liked each other first, before becoming lovers. Betsy proposed that friendships last and that the romantic elements aren't always there after some time passes.

The issue of trust is likely to be especially important if the members of the couple have been in other intimate relationships that have not been very trustworthy. One or both partners feel that they were "burned" in their previous relationship, and don't want this to happen again. Kevin and Arlene met at work. They both remember seeing each other several times around the office.

Their first date was very casual -- a sandwich at a local deli. Arlene remembers being immediately impressed by Kevin's "depth." None of the questions he was asking her seemed to be superficial, which gave Arlene the feeling that this was not going to be another "pick up." Arlene was surprised by how interested she was in Kevin. Most of the men she'd dated in their early twenties had turned out to be much too immature for her. Arlene was also intrigued by Kevin's interest in rap music and "bizarre" night clubs. She was used to dating men with more traditional, conservative backgrounds.

Recalling their first date, Kevin and Arlene remember having a strong sexual attraction to each other. More importantly, they remember the good times that the two of them had whenever they were together. They seemed to find something to laugh about in everything. They both felt in the past that this was a sign of how open, honest and comfortable they were around each other. Now they realize that though they spent the majority of their time together, it actually took them years before they really opened up to each other or felt that they could trust in one another.

Kevin and Arlene each had been involved in prior "intense" relationships in which they had been hurt. Arlene was especially hesitant to become involved in a relationship with Kevin because she feared the intimacy. She found herself going back and forth between wanting to make a commitment to Kevin and not wanting to be involved at all. Part of this conflict was a result of Kevin's all or nothing attitude. For Kevin, the covenant must include absolute commitment and trust. Arlene

reluctantly agreed to this section of the covenant.

Kevin felt that his relationship with Arlene needed to be the deepest and most committed relationship that he had ever had. He admitted that he was totally infatuated with the relationship (rather than being specifically infatuated with Arlene). As they say, he was "in love with love" and was ready to "run away and leave the world behind." Kevin compared their early relationship to the novel and movie, *Wuthering Heights*.

He thought that this legendary tale of a dysfunctional relationship suggested that if the person you loved was not available, on a daily basis, "then life was miserable and not worth living." Kevin insisted that they spend every possible minute together. In fact, Kevin and Arlene almost eloped together, but Arlene decided that they may regret doing something so hasty. Thus, another provision was established in their covenant: it's important to be romantic, but there also is a time for practicality. Kevin will take primary responsibility for the romance. Arlene will handle the practicality.

## **Punctuation and the Pattern of Interactions**

An established pattern of interaction is often a critical (if unacknowledged) element of a covenant. An important element of this pattern is embedded in the way events are conveyed in the conversations between partners are punctuated. As I noted earlier, the "beginning" (and "cause") of some event is identified, as is the "end" of this event (and its "outcome(s)). For instance, the covenant established by Alice and Fred seems to call for one of two ways of punctuating their relationship. The first way is when Alice is willing to fight to get her own way (the beginning). In these instances, Fred refuses to fight. This, in turn, "defuses" Alice and ceases to push her point (the end).

The second, more common, way is when Alice is "stressed out and blows her top." (beginning) In these instances, Fred "walks away" and gets some "fresh air." Then, after things have cooled down, according to Alice, "he would approach me, and things would normalize." (end) For some couples, the sequence of anger (Alice) leading to disengagement (Fred) would result in further anger and further disengagement, in other words, an escalating war. By contrast, Alice and Fred have established a covenant whereby Fred's disengagement allows both to cool off and soon reunite.

Watzlawick and his colleagues (1967, p. 56) suggest that "disagreements about how

to punctuate the sequence of events is at the root of countless relationship struggles." One member of a couple, for instance, says: "I withdraw because you nag." The other member responds by indicating: "I nag because you withdraw." (Watzlawick, et al, 1967, p. 56). Alice and Fred have been successful in establishing their own rules, which enables them to effectively manage their disagreements and conflicts.

The specific actions that are taken by partners often are not critical in determining whether or not a relationship will endure. Rather it the manner in which both partners interpret the behavior and the ways in which they re-engage in and re-adjust the relationship during times of stress and conflict that make the difference. A couple's covenant often will define the nature of this interpretation among the partners in an enduring relationship.

As I have already noted, punctuation also plays an important role in a couple's founding narrative and in the identification of the moment of their "unification." While the couple might have settled on the punctuation of their joint narrative, each member might have their own punctuation in telling their version of the founding or unification story. It is all about the starting and ending points—and the periods. Not just the story's content.

## **Honoring and Using Differences Among Partners**

A final ingredient in most covenants concerns the role of differences in the relationship. In virtually every relationship, a choice must be made between what Watzlawick and his colleagues speak of as "symmetrical and complementary" interactions (Watzlawick, et al, 1967, p. 68). According to their interviewer, Fred and Alice have clearly established a symmetrical relationship in which equality and the minimalization of differences frequently are reestablished and reasserted in their relationship.

These two people exhibit in their relationship considerable respect, trust and acknowledgement of each other's position and worth. At the same time, each partner has his or her own areas of strength, where he or she takes the lead. The other partner seems to be quite at ease about that. Fred and Alice have established a dynamic, changing relationship that is long-standing and intimate.



## Conclusions: The Well-Spring of Covenants

What are the sources of the covenants that are formed between partners in an intimate relationship? Can we trace a long-term relationship back to the well-spring? Initially the covenant (as an unchanging set of rules) is influenced primarily by sources that impact on the couple when their relationship is first forming. Covenants may grow more complex, more expansive and clearer over time, much as a set of laws are subject to interpretation and precedent once they are codified. However, they rarely stray very far from their initial character.

There are four different sources that come into play as a couple's covenant matures over time. Initially, the covenant seems to take on a "magical." quality. Much as an intimate relationship in its early stages often seems to be directed by some external force or higher power, so the covenant is often assumed to be distinctive and very special for two people who are newly in love.

Partners in the throes of love often make very impressive promises that can't be kept in practice. They are kept only in spirit. One of the partners promises that they will buy flowers every day. The other partner promises always to be truthful. Both agree to talk through every disagreement without compromise or antagonism. These commitments are rarely abandoned (often being part of the founding story); however, they become more practical as they are translated into daily rules of interaction and interpersonal sensitivity.

Once this initial magical covenant is put into practice, couples typically look to other couples for models and inspiration. Typically, the expectations that couples form regarding the nature and purpose of covenants in their daily lives are formed by looking at and talking about other couples. Obviously, two of the most immediate and influential sources of influence and inspiration are the parents of the two partners. For good or ill, we tend to look to our own parents for examples of how a couple should (or should not) feel and behave.

Gwen indicates that:

. . . my parents have been married fifty years, and I entered into this relationship [with Bernard] with the belief that it is a lifetime commitment. I don't believe that a couple can always be in love, or always agree on everything, or always share the same goals. People change constantly and so must the relationship. One day we're in love and one day we're not. One day we agree on things. Another time, perhaps not. But marriage means the commitment to work

things out, no matter how difficult.

The covenant that Gwen and Bernard have established contains the key ingredients which Gwen learned from her parents: tolerance for the difficult times and sticking with the relationship despite many difficulties (including loss of their home due to a devastating fire). The role model and belief system provided by her parents have also led Gwen to "assume that things will work out in time and a disagreement today doesn't have to be settled immediately."

Gwen indicates that when she and Bernard fight, it greatly offends Bernard that she can go on about her business as if they weren't in the midst of an argument. Her experience of her parents as a couple has led Gwen to believe that things will work out eventually and that avoidance of problems and establishment of harmony is critical to a relationship.

Bernard's parents, by contrast, were divorced when Bernard was twelve years old. His parents and stepparent were vocal in their arguments and Bernard's life was often quite turbulent. However, Bernard shares with Gwen the assumption that relationships can be nurturing, and that he will be supported in life by other people who genuinely love him.

This forms an important building block in their shared covenant. Like Gwen, Bernard assumes that things will eventually work out alright. Hence, they have built a covenant that emphasizes patience and continuity. Bernard would like to fight more openly than does Gwen and is more likely than Gwen to bail out of an unsuccessful relationship (thereby replicating the decision made by his parents to divorce). As the old saying goes, they "are getting along so that they can get along."

Unlike Gwen and Bernard, Fred and Alice look to couples other than their parents as role models for their own, relationship and have adopted aspects of these other couples' relationships in the creation of their own covenant. Fred described a favorite uncle and aunt who "treat each other with respect, allowed space for each other to have their own personal endeavors, and were supportive of each other's growth."

Alice's favorite couple was a host family that she lived with when she was an exchange student from France. Alice described the traits in them that she appreciated the most. They "would kiss each other, were humorous, and they were supportive of one another." Alice went on to note that "they were very different from my family."

The attributes of this favorite aunt, uncle and host family were similar to those

shown by Alice and Fred. Did they model themselves after these other two couples, or do they admire these other couples precisely because they resemble them? We suspect that both are true. However, in the case of Alice and Fred, as in the case of many couples, modeling of other couples is common and very important, even if unnoticed or unacknowledged by the couple. Perhaps one benefit of attending a couples' weekend (such as Gottman offers) is to witness, first hand, how other couples have created and engaged their covenant.

The third stage in the formation of covenants among many couples concerns individualization of the rules so that they will be responsive to their unique collective needs and interests. Typically, a couple that sustains an enduring relationship will find its own distinctive covenant, rather than borrowing from other couples. As Moore (1994, p. 29) notes, our society (and in particular various self-help books on marriage and love) tend to lay down "impossible rules and expectations for a relationship.

We are told to be clear and forthright in the expression of our feelings. We are supposed to *communicate* [with] our partners. We are expected to be good listeners and to be full of patience and empathy. We are given the illusion that it's possible to understand ourselves and others." Yet, sometimes, the conflicts and tensions that couples experience in their relationship are not amenable to immediate solution. Nor is communication, *per se*, the answer.

Moore suggests that at these times the couple is doing "soul work." Put in more secular terms, the couple is working through a complex issue that often triggers very deep feelings, old ghosts--both from their own relationship with one another and relationships from their past (even childhood). Ancient fears emerge (even if only partially known or understood). Moore (1994, p. 29) suggests that "we may have to enter the confusion of [our partner's] soul, with no hope of ever finding clarity, without demanding that the other be clear in expressing [his or] her feelings, and without the hope that one day this person will finally grow up or get better or express (himself or] herself more plainly."

The covenant is re-invigorated and reestablished on the basis of "mutual vulnerability" (Moore, 1994, p. 30). During this final stage, we acknowledge our inability to fully understand someone who is deeply loved and acknowledge ignorance of our own personal needs and motives. Our shared re-invigorated covenant contains our continuing search for self-understanding along with mutual commitment to the relationship. The covenant becomes more explicit and discussable.

A couple can appreciate the important role it has played in their shared life over the years, having often served as a guardian of their relationship. Yet, the covenant is now often set aside or at least supplemented with a more flexible and consciously negotiated set of statements about what each partner and the couple (as a separate entity) needs for personal nourishment and growth—as well as the nourishment and growth of the relationship. I will have much more to say about this covenant review and renewal when describing the “norming” stage in the development of enduring, intimate relationships.

## Key Chapter Points

Enduring couples:

- Recognize the depth of their shared commitment.
- Honor this shared commitment by persevering as a couple through the difficult times (especially when plates collide).
- Acknowledge that their “differences” are actually a current (or potential) strength in their relationship.
- Identify and build on the actions taken in their relationship that holds their relationship together despite these often-stressful differences.
- Reflect on, talk about, and often shift their patterns of communication—recognizing that each of them might see (punctuate) their interactions in a different way.

## Chapter Six

# The Fourth Image: Sexuality and The Marker Event

Good sex is assumed to be at the heart of long-term enduring relationships. Sexual relations are often identified as the main problem cited by both husbands and wives when requesting help from a counselor or therapist. Julie Bulitt sums up the importance of sexuality with this definitive statement regarding the “hot” topic of most therapy sessions (Bulitt and Bulitt, 2020, p. 120):

One of the primary reasons . . . folks come to my office, sit in front of me often with a shopping bag full of bank and credit card statements in tow, is because of sex. The names and faces change, the stories vary, but one frequent commonality? Sex. No sex, not enough sex, boring sex, sex with someone else, sex with a man, sex with a woman, sex with both. Sometimes more than one of those boxes gets checked.

At an even more fundamental level, the label I use (“enduring, intimate relationships) contains the word “intimate”. It is assumed that this relationship is “consummated” with some sexual act. In this book we have chosen not to devote much attention to sexuality, *per se*, in part because so much has already been written about the subject.

Furthermore, we found in our interviews that while sex was important for some of the enduring couples that we interviewed, it was rarely the sole or even primary reason for these two people staying together.

### An Expanded Vision of Sexuality

In part, this lack of attention among our couples to issues of sexuality may have come from their reticence to talk about such “personal” parts of their relationship. It also comes from the fact that sexuality is a complex phenomenon that extends far beyond the act of sexual intercourse. In one sense, the couples we were interviewed were often talking about the domain of sexuality, yet it often was expressed in terms of very special moments in their life together: a beautiful sunset, a heart-rendering piece of music, a nostalgic dance, a moment of touching while

sitting in front of a fire, a poem that one of them wrote to the other, even the gentle moment of compassion when one of the partners holds the other in their arms while grieving the death of a parent.

These are all moments of sexuality, as it is (and should be) more broadly conceived. Julie Bulitt describes the variant on sexuality offered by one of her clients (Bulitt and Bulitt, 2020, p. 130):

She might need to relax, to be left alone, and to wind down after a long day. She's not ready to go to sleep. She needs a little time; time to herself, or even with Hugh reading in-bed also. That's fine, too. But just being together, next to each other. It could be talking or maybe laughing about something one of the kids did. It just needs to be simple, quiet, and easy. It can be as basic as their laughing about an event that may have happened during the day.

Our guide, Thomas Moore (1993, p. 164) addresses this issue of sexuality in an even more expansive and eloquent manner:

A person can live erotically every minute of the day by valuing deep pleasures, beauty, body, adornment, decoration, texture and color – all things we too often consider secondary or even frivolous. . . . try to imagine a world without . . . the lure of travel and exploration, without the beguiling beauty that entices us to look at photographs of enchanting places, without a desire for a rich experience of this life.

At a later point, Moore (1994, p. 183) notes that:

As long as we think of sex in a limited way, as a biological function or even as only a means of communication or intimacy, we will be mystified by its unexpected turns. It would be better to recognize from the beginning that sex is a profound, far-reaching aspect of the soul, bringing together body, emotion, and imagination in an intensive experience that can touch every branch of feeling and meaning, yet one we may never fully understand. It is by nature mysterious.

At this point, one of our other guides, John Gottman, enters the conversation. He suggests that “fondness and admiration are two of the most crucial elements in a rewarding and long-lasting romance.” (Gottman, 2015, p. 69) While sexuality might be at the heart of “romance” (and limerence) when the couple first meet, fondness and admiration might provide more of a lasting bond for the couple after the sex

becomes routine or infrequent.

## **The Broader Definition**

This expanded notion of sexuality is crucial in understanding the rather surprising extent to which we found that sexual intercourse, *per se*, was rarely identified by the people we interviewed as a critical point in the history of their relationship. We found that the first moment of intimacy infrequently defined the initial formation of the couple (what we have identified as the "marker event").

Nor were ceremonies that grant permission for intimacy (such as the marriage ceremony) usually defined by contemporary couples as the moment when they first identified themselves as a couple. Sexuality more broadly defined, however, often did play a critical role. A shared experience of a beautiful sunset may have been just as memorable and just as defining a moment in the couple's early history as the first time they made love.

Couples like Aaron and Becky talk about how sexuality often seems to take second place to other domains of their life together. As with many other couples, Aaron and Becky first noted that after having children, they found less time to be together in private so that they might make love. Even more basically, their first child "took the focus off of us," according to Aaron: "we took our love from each other and showered it on Deborah." Aaron did go on to note that they are out of this phase now, and "even did it [sex] yesterday."

They both laughed. "Once every two months, whether we need it or not," Becky added. Yet, Aaron also identifies their financial problems as very distracting and a barrier to their sex life: "we're so busy and preoccupied that sex is about the last thing on our minds." Aaron and Becky seem to differ from many other couples we interviewed or know personally only in the candor with which they talked about the problems of fitting their "sex life" into all of the other demanding and conflictual aspects of their life together.

## **Sex Complicates Things**

Sexuality is also a complicating factor in most relationships because it means so much more than just intercourse and sexual gratification. Even Ben, who initially declared that sex is what keeps him and Tina together, went on to indicate that sexuality for him means much more than just intercourse or ejaculation. For him,

it is the one way in which he believes that he can meet Tina's (and we suspect his own) needs for intimacy:

. . . we both enjoy [sex] and are very attracted to one another. It's the physical part of our relationship and all that goes with it. I guess, it is where I let down, become vulnerable, available, intimate, nurturing . . . you know all the things Tina craves, and gives in other ways as well as sexually, that I just give sexually.

Tina agrees (in part) with Ben's observations:

You know it's true. It is a place that I know Ben loves me. He is giving, kind, sensitive, unhurried, truly loving. So it is very important to me as well, though, unlike Ben, I don't think it is the most important thing in our relationship or the singular thing that keeps us together. What I think keeps us together is that I understand what Ben's experience of things are, and what that means to him. And I think to a somewhat lesser degree, but enough to satisfy me, Ben understands my experience of things and what they mean to me.

Thus, for Tina and Ben, sexuality becomes a meeting ground where mutual needs can be met. While this couple struggles with many different aspects of their relationship -- particularly regarding mutual commitment -- they find shared moments in their life, through their sexuality, where they can both be affectionate, caring and responsive to one another's most heartfelt needs.

## **Sexuality:**

### **“A Many-Splendored Thing” but also A Multi-Connected Thing**

Our world is filled with images of splendid sexuality. We make love on a hillside looking out over a vista of snow-capped mountains. We are passionate on a sailboat, at a cottage or on the backseat of a Chevie. Sexuality truly is a “splendored thing.” However, sexuality is often intertwined with other complex issues among the long-term couples we interviewed—where sexuality did play a central role in their ongoing relationship. These issues primarily concerned dominance, commitment and security.

Our guide, John Gottman (2015, p. 225), puts it this way: “Stop thinking that sex



is about orgasm and consider *everything positive that happens between you as part of sex.*" For Gottman, it is critical for a couple to redefine what they mean by "sex." He encourages a couple to engage in gentle, positive and patient conversations about their sexual life. Such matters as dominance, commitment and security require that conversations regarding sex do take place and that they are engaged with the kind of "emotional intelligence" that Gottman emphasizes.

## **Sex and Emotional Intelligence**

We can turn to the long-term relationship that has been established between Alice and Bryan, who have been together for fourteen years. They exhibit emotional intelligence. Their interview is richly textured with many references to sexuality, lust and physical attraction. Yet, in each instance, other interpersonal dynamics are involved as with most other couples. Alice and Bryan find each other desirable at specific moments in their relationship and these moments revolve around issues of power and acceptance.

From the first, physical attraction played a central role in the formation of Alice and Bryan's relationship. Bryan had obviously been attracted to Alice from the first moment that he met her in early June. Alice, however, was hesitant to go out with Bryan: "it wasn't that I didn't like him. But he seemed so pushy and so direct physically. I mean maybe I was put off by that . . . he really made a play for me, and I didn't know if I wanted to remain just friends working alongside one another or whether I wanted to get more emotionally involved with him or if I could fight him off!" She finally agreed to their first date in mid-August.

Bryan grinned at this point and said: "Yeah. I was really attracted to her. . . . I knew this was it right away." They both laughed. Alice: "Isn't it strange? After a few dates I got more comfortable, and I began to tune into my feelings for him more. and then I realized something very important to me: he was [to be] the father of my children and I was falling in love with him. Well, lust really! And it was because he was [to be] the father of my children."

Alice stopped and then quietly added, as though to justify the statement: "when he asked me to marry him [Alice turns to Bryan] he said, 'let's get married and have kids.' I knew that was exactly what I wanted, that he was the one." Looking at her, Bryan added: "I was really attracted to her sexually, and it was such a high going off with her every day. I knew that if I persisted one day she would have to agree with me. . . . I thought about her all the time."

## Patterns of Pursuit

As in the case of many couples, the basic patterns in Alice and Bryan's relationship is already firmly established during the first moments of their relationship. Furthermore, the story they have repeatedly shared about these founding experiences further reinforces these patterns. For Alice, it is clear that sexuality is both alluring (a combination of "lust" and procreation) and repulsive (with Bryan being physically "pushy"). By contrast, Bryan views sexuality as the central ingredient of their relationship, yet also (at least for Alice's sake) values sexuality for its procreative potential.

Even after fourteen years of being a couple and twelve years of marriage, Alice feels ambivalent about her continuing role as the pursued partner. She was indecisive in the beginning and is currently concerned about her boundaries within their relationship. Alice feels that sexuality has a reproductive purpose and justifies her "surrender" in terms of procreation. However, it is also clear that Alice retains power in her relationship with Bryan through giving or withholding sexual intimacy (often for several weeks at a time).

Typically, according to Alice, after withholding sexual intercourse for several weeks, she will decide that Bryan "needs it" and will then sexually pursue her husband. "This is when sex is best," Alice claims. Bryan agrees that these are some of their most erotic and satisfying moments together. Thus, when Bryan becomes the pursued, Alice feels best about their relationship and about sexuality. Afterwards, they slip back into the old roles of Alice as pursued, Bryan as pursuer. The cycle starts all over again, replicating their initial extended "meeting."

As in many other parts of their lives together (for example, defining the nature and extent of their relationship with parents), Alice "manages" the situation and establishes boundaries. Bryan appears to be content in his dependency on Alice, given that he tends not to manage boundaries very effectively. Bryan consistently tries to get closer to Alice, while Alice moves in and out of her intimate relationship with Bryan, thereby keeping control of the relationship, reducing her own anxiety about intimate, long-term commitment, and preserving her own independence.

This cycle of intimacy and distance has recently been disrupted as the children that both Alice and Bryan wanted became a reality. With the birth of two children, Alice no longer believes that sexuality is needed for procreation, though she still believes that Bryan "needs it." She also realizes that her children have "needs" that she must meet. Consequently, Bryan sometimes feels abandoned by Alice.

Alice, in turn, feels that she is overwhelmed with demands from both her children and husband, being the one who "everyone turns to for everything." She took a job several years ago, but the demands of her family "pulled her back." Alice decided then that when her youngest child was ten, she would reclaim her "identity in the world." Alice feels like she is wasted at home, yet feels guilty about taking time for herself, feels that any extra time should go to her family, and has come to realize that she is repeating many of the same mistakes that her mother made.

Characteristically, Bryan has offered to quit his job or move or do "anything" so that she will be happier, but nothing has come of these offers. Alice does consider their sexual relationships to have improved in recent months: "now the children know not to open the door and now they sleep through the night." However, she also notes that "sometimes Bryan and I just fall asleep in the middle [of making love.]" Bryan wishes Alice would stay home more often, but he also likes her need for independence. Thus, the cycle continues, moving well beyond the confines of their bedroom, yet repeatedly moving back to the basic issue of sexuality, intimacy, and mutual commitment.

In reality, affection, shared interests and the capacity to honor and build on differences are at the heart of good relationships. Snuggling and other forms of physical affection and closeness may be just as important over the years as intercourse. The defining moments for a relationship are rarely based in sexuality, though often these defining moments are celebrated or most fully enjoyed through a rekindling of passion, sensuality and sexuality. Thus, to better understand the role played by sexuality in many enduring relationships, it is essential to appreciate the nature, variety and dynamics of the marker events that help a couple to define and redefine their relationship.

## The Marker Event

It is critical to know and understand the circumstances and sequence of events associated with the decision of two people to become a couple. The defining moment in the life of a couple is critical as a way of defining a *difference that makes a difference*. In addressing the issue of formation, our interviewers asked the following question: "when do you think you really became a couple?"

The answers that our informants provided ranged from a traditional notion about engagement and marriage to very nontraditional and quite surprising marker events. We heard many stories regarding engagements and marriages, complete with

bungled proposals, jitters at the altar, and frightening wedding nights.

## **Establishing Commitment as a Couple**

In identifying the marker event in his relationship with Nancy, John indicated that he knew that he and Nancy were a couple "when we got engaged." He directly and candidly addressed the issue of traditional, public marker events meeting societal needs rather than necessarily the personal expectations or needs of the two partners: "you see, the way I was brought up, it was like, 'Murder, maybe. Divorce, no!' Also, once you said you were going to marry someone, it was a commitment, almost like being married."

We expected this to be a common reply. We almost didn't ask the question about "when you felt you were a couple," given the two obvious answers: when we became engaged or when we were married. Yet, we found in many instances that some other event of a more personal nature defined the start of the relationship.

Dave, for instance, allowed Kit, his future wife, to borrow his cherished automobile. She, of course, immediately crashed the car and offered to pay Dave off over many years. At that point, according to Kit: "[Dave] said I would never pay him off, so he was going to have to marry me!" Dave laughs. Kit: "You said that." Dave responds: "You know how things just jump out of the back of your head sometimes."

Similarly, Robert and Fiona might easily have identified the moment when Fiona decided to move to the United States and leave her English homeland as the key market event—yet this was not the case. Rather, shortly after she had scraped together enough money to come see Robert in the United States, he took her to an antique shop, which was one of her favorite hobbies.

While there, a shopper accidentally caught their hair on fire with a cigarette. Robert happened to see the smoke, jumped over a counter, and quickly put out the fire with his jacket. It was at that moment that Fiona knew they were a couple: "My hero!" Robert was a little romantic, believing that they only became a couple after starting to meet family obligations by raising three children. He did add, however, that "the day after I met her in the pub, I knew that she was the girl I was going to marry."

## Commitment and Consummation

Certainly, most modern society have traditionally designated the announcement of a couple's engagement as the formal acknowledgement. In some sense this is the beginning of the relationship between these two people and a marriage ceremony is the final, permanent sealing of the commitment. More recently, in many societies the sexual "consummation" of a relationship has been designated as somehow a marker event.

From the traditional perspective, a man and woman supposedly are not to be intimate until they are married; nevertheless, the engagement identified these two people as a couple and they could begin doing "couple-type" things, such as picking out silverware patterns and beginning to plan for their wedding. Movies such as *Father of the Bride* carefully document the pitfalls and delights associated with this phase of engagement, while the engagement periods for royal couples have been often periods of time in which there is extensive press coverage and. public adoration.

We did find some people who looked to engagement and marriage as the primary marker event. John (the husband of Nancy) suggested that a formal statement of commitment made through the announcement of an engagement, or the enactment of a marriage ceremony implies a lifelong commitment and should be entered into with great care. Other couples, however, often looked elsewhere for a sign of commitment.

Christine and Ruth suggested that the notion of commitment is the cornerstone of their relationship even though they have not participated in any formal marriage ceremony. A key marker event for them occurred at the point that they decided to give this commitment some real substance by putting some boundaries around their behavior. Specifically, in the seven years since Christine and Ruth began their relationship, Christine has been involved in many other relationships, including an open marriage with a man.

From a more contemporary, nontraditional perspective, sex does play an important role regarding consummation of a relationship. Movies that are more "up-to-date" than *Father of the Bride* tend to define the moment of commitment by directing the camera toward the bed and two naked figures pledging their love for each other while smothered in passion. Such a scene seems to be almost a prerequisite in classic European love stories (such as *A Man and a Woman* and *Cousin Cousine*). This scene was also common in dramatic American films of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century (for instance, *Coming Home* or *Witness*) and film satires (for instance, the *Pink*

*Panther* series). Yet, we found that the marker event is usually not sexual engagement. In many cases sexuality was actually a deterrent regarding commitment. One or both members of the couple wanted to avoid sexual relationships because they believe that sexuality interfere with establishment of a "long-term relationship".

For instance, Jim didn't want to consummate his relationship with Dora before they were married: "she was too good a friend . . . I didn't want to risk our friendship with sex. Sex complicates things, even though I knew I loved her from the start." Dora did want to consummate their relationship: "I was carnivorous. After he said no, I staged a seduction and even discussed it with other people." Jim was surprised to hear of Dora's conspiracy. They did hold off for a while, which helped Jim move more slowly and thoughtfully to their long-term commitment to one another.

## **Commitment and Boundaries**

Most often we found that the marker event is some special event that requires a mutual commitment of both partners. Or it requires a gradually accumulating set of small events that gradually bring the two partners to recognition of their mutual commitment. Many contemporary couples think that lifelong commitments require something much more distinctive and profound than either sexual relationships or a formal ceremony.

When Christine and Ruth decided to make a commitment to one another, each still had "business" to clean up with other lovers and casual partners. Christine had been dating two men at the time, one of whom she was particularly interested in letting down gently. She asked Ruth if it would be okay to have a "farewell f--k" with this gentleman. Ruth said no, or she would break Christine's legs!

This statement has become "forever, or I'll break your legs" and is one of the dominant themes of their relationship and covenant. It is manifest in a tangible -- though symbolically indirect way whenever Christine tends to withdraw from Ruth during a fight they might be having. Ruth literally breaks something of Christine's (not her legs, fortunately), and with this dramatic act the silence between them is typically broken and Christine re-engages with Ruth in their relationship.

As a result of this strong, sometimes violent component of their covenant, Christine and Ruth can talk about and monitor their own temporary attractions to other people. They know that they will never act on their attractions without risking the

"breaking of a leg" or, more importantly, the breaking up of the relationship.

Ruth mentioned that if she gets a "little crush" on someone, she comes home and shares the experience with Christine. She thinks this works because of their commitment to truth and to each other. Christine admits to jealousy. Christine successfully brings old lovers into her life as friends, but she can't always let Ruth do so—if she thinks that the third party has other than friendly interests toward Ruth.

Recently, Ruth had a dinner with someone that was not about business. Christine heard very little from Ruth about the outcomes of this dinner. She had a dream that night about the dinner which sent the message that it was alright if Ruth and her dinner partner necked, but if they had sex, she'd kill both of them. Then, Christine half awoke from the dream and decided to re-dream the conclusion of the dream: even if they necked, she'd kill both of them! Thus, the commitment is reconfirmed in many ways -- always with the hint of violence or at least some strong negative feelings about the outcomes of any betrayal of this commitment.

As in the case of Christine and Ruth, the commitment for many couples is often forged and expressed through some more informal and private event. For Curtis and Marilyn, it was the purchase of an automobile together—their first joint financial venture. As Curtis stated, "we knew we'd made a five-year financial, legal commitment and that did it!" Even Nancy, the partner to John (the man who shuffled through his paper while his wife spoke and identified their marriage ceremony as the marker event), identified a nontraditional, personal event as their marker.

Nancy had remained silent while John was offering his observations regarding a marker event. When the interviewer asked her about the point when they became a couple, Nancy remained silent for a short while. She finally indicated, "I don't know. Do you mean 'couple' in the sense that we thought alike? We still don't think alike." After some discussion, the question was clarified to mean when they felt bonded together. Then she readily answered the question:

I think there were two phases to it. One, when we started going steady, and that sort of flowed on into marriage. But the second phase, the real commitment, I'm ashamed to say, did not happen until we went into business together. That was after our last child was born. We were driving around, taking care of business together one day. I suddenly realized that he was my very best friend.

The difference that makes a difference among enduring couples can take many

different forms and can be identified differently by each partner in a relationship. It is clear from our interviews, however, that this marker event is important, both because it suggests a new level of commitment for at least one partner in the relationship and because the nature of the marker event often helps to create an identity for the couple and becomes part of the couple's psychological covenant.

## Do You Love Me?

Our marker event stories suggest that few of the rules regarding commitment that applied twenty or thirty years ago are at the forefront among younger men and women of the mid-21<sup>st</sup> Century. The whole concept of engagement and marriage now feels out of date and a bit formal for our current tastes. Yet, we still have the expectation of a couple's identity beginning with some formal announcement and the commitments that attend this announcement.

Most of the men and women we interviewed identified rather unconventional moments as memorable regarding the formation of a new identity as a couple: declaring love for each other for the first time, being identified as a couple by their friends, moving in together, buying their first piece of furniture together, moving to a new town (away from their parents), having their first child, sharing the death of a parent, sharing a major life success, or realizing after fifty years that dancing together is fun.

Tevia's inquiry to his wife (Golda), "Do you love me'?" seems to be moot in *Fiddler on the Roof* given that they have spent a life together. Similarly, the question of love and commitment may seem a given for many real-life couples who have forged a life together. While many of the marker events imply increased commitment of each partner to the relationship, they speak even more forcibly to the forging of this new identity – this new entity—the couple. It is in the daily activities of the couple that their shared identity is defined—not in formal ceremonies or public pronouncements of mutual commitment.

For Kevin and Alan, a couple who have been together for eleven years, the marker event was not a definitive point in time, but rather a short period of time, during which other people around them began to identify them as a couple. Specifically, Kevin and Alan were friends with a straight, married couple. Alan felt as though he and Kevin were a couple when they were with this straight couple. According to Alan, "it had to do with acceptance. I felt like a couple when we were with them." However, they both noted that they were not at that time identified as a couple by



their families or by other friends. This identity—and the accompanying acceptance—took quite a bit more time. A similar process was described by many of the other gay and lesbian couples we interviewed.

## **Finding Identity as a Couple**

For some gay and lesbian couples, such as Lita and Celia, there has never been a marker event—because they have never been able to disclose their sexual orientation in a public forum. They have their own private sense of being a couple—but have never had this status acknowledged or supported through a public event.

Unfortunately, in the case of Lita and Celia, this lack of public recognition impacted negatively not only on the two of them, but also on Lita's children. They had to directly confront their mother's orientation after Celia moved in with them (six months after she met Lita). Because there was no public recognition of their relationship and because of the hostility exhibited by Lita's children, Celia moved out within seven months and returned to her former lover. Celia hated confrontation and conflict. She tended to retreat or sulk rather than confront either Lita or her children.

Even after leaving Lita's home, Celia knew that she should be with Lita. They gradually began seeing each other again. After a long, stormy period of time, they found a way to live together, despite a lack of public acknowledgement or family support. Two years prior to their interview—and twenty-nine years after they started living together—Lita and Celia participated in a Holy Union ceremony at their church.

When asked why they waited so long, Celia replied: "we didn't know that we could until we started attending [this church.]" While Lita said that this really didn't make any difference, Celia painfully and emotionally recounted (after Lita left for a doctor's appointment) that this ceremony and public recognition was very important to both she and Lita. Through her tears, Celia disclosed that Lita's cancer may have returned (following two previous bouts with the disease). This public commitment was a way in which she could fully express her deep and abiding love for Lita.

## **Identity and Acceptance**

Clearly the issue of acceptance is an important issue for any couple. The real challenge comes when an interracial couple or very young couple are viewed in some sense as "deviant" by other members of our society. Given that the issue of acceptance may be a struggle for many couples, it is particularly poignant at the present time among couples who were faced with (and may still be faced with) the awesome problems associated with HIV status and AIDS. Kevin and Alan are fortunate in that both are HIV negative.

Many other gay couples (and other members of the LGBTQ community) over the past two decades have not been so fortunate. They may have previously ignored their families because they were never accepted by them. However, specifically in the Gay community, at some point couples had to confront their own possible, premature death from AIDS-related illness. While medications are now lessening this threat—the ghost of AIDS still exists. The haunting history of AIDS came with an unacceptable dilemma: these men wanted to reconnect with their family, but not at the expense of losing their loved one.

On the one hand, these men were asking that finally their families accept their Gay status and accept the presence of another man that they love in their life. Their families at this point could choose to withhold their acceptance, and risk losing an ir retrievable period of mutual caring and support with their sons. Instead, they could forgo their old prejudices and biases and come to a more realistic and hopefully joyful recognition that this person in their son's life is loved by their son and therefore should be loved, or at least accepted, by themselves.

On the other hand, the men who lived within a Gay relationship could choose to protect their family from AIDS by remaining isolated in their own community. While this may have been a very caring act on the part of these men, it also meant that the divide between themselves and their family of origin often remained in place. The love may linger with their partner, but it was often either put on hold, distorted, or lost regarding their relationship with parents and other members of their family of origin.

For many straight couples and some gay and lesbian couples the issue of acceptance revolves around each other rather than other people in their lives. They are not worried about their family's acceptance. They have more immediately concerns, namely: does this man or woman that I love really also love me and accept me? The marker event often is centered on some display or symbol of this acceptance.

Rebecca indicated that she felt like her relationship with Bart was solidified when he gave her a key to his house (about three months after they met). Bart thought they became a couple when he put down a deposit on the reception hall for their upcoming marriage. Any of these seemingly minor events can qualify as a "marker event" at any point in the history of a couple. These are defining moments, when one or both partners recognize (and often rejoice in the fact) that they are now a real couple.

Sam and Caroline met at a church function and Sam describes it as "love at first sight." Caroline just smiles and adds that her experience was quite the opposite. It seems that she thought herself to be a "homely" young girl. Caroline was told by her older brother that the only reason men dated her was that they "felt sorry for her." She was just coming out of the breakup of a two-year relationship with another boy who had suddenly lost interest in her and without any clear communication suddenly began dating another girl.

Still hurt by the breakup, Caroline was determined to go slowly at first with Sam "to see if this was genuine or not." Thus, with Sam's instant attraction and Caroline's caution, the moment when they did come together to make a mutual commitment was particularly important. It occurred on Valentine's Day, one year after they began dating. Sam took Caroline to an amusement park and gave her a single red rose. They both remember that as a wonderful evening together and both agree this was the point in their lives when they knew they were a couple.

## **Moving In Together**

Many of the younger couples we interviewed identified the point when they moved in together as the marker event. Typically, this commitment to live together comes prior to marriage, or even instead of a formal marriage ceremony. Glenda and Roy knew that they were a couple when Roy asked Glenda to move in with him. They soon bought a trailer, moved it onto family property and began to live together. To both of them, this "gradualist" strategy made sense.

Glenda, in particular, was cautious, having just stepped out of a failed marriage. For both Glenda and Roy, however, it also made sense to make things legal, so within six months they began to plan their wedding. By the time they were married, Roy and Glenda had been living together for about a year. Their story of a multi-stage commitment and "moving in together" as a marker event seems to be the new dominant narrative in many 21<sup>st</sup> Century societies, having replaced the traditional

story of courtship, engagement and marriage.

When asked about their marker event, Ben and Karen answered in unison, like Roy and Glenda, that they knew they were a couple "when we moved in together." The reason for moving in together differed for these two couples. Roy and Glenda's decision was described as a "logical" process and an expression of the caution both partners felt in moving to a stronger, more enduring commitment, i.e. marriage,

By contrast, an unexpected change in Karen's life precipitated their decision: "I came home (from the south part of the state) to find that my roommate had rented my room. Ben let me stay with him until I found a place and seven- and one-half years later I still haven't found one. That's how we became an official couple. I needed a place to stay, and I never left." This fortuitous event enabled these young people to make a commitment to one another without ever really acknowledging that they were doing so. This may be a rather common strategy among young people since the early 1970s.

### **Other Signs of Becoming a Couple**

According to Fred and Alice (a furniture maker and French-born secretary) the realization that they were a couple came when they were at a Labor Day party. As Fred said, "We were dancing our asses off." To which Alice responded: "We started picturing ourselves and knew we were in love." The marker event often involves this sense of a couple standing outside of themselves and recognizing that in some way they are a couple ("picturing ourselves as a couple").

At this point, I introduce two of my other guides for this book. They are Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein, the authors of many Broadway musicals. Rogers and Hammerstein identify the process of reflecting on market events in their musical *Oklahoma*. The two major protagonists in this musical, Curly and Laurey, sing about the fact that other people are likely to look at them and come to the conclusion that they love one another. In the case of Curly and Laurey, both are too shy to acknowledge that they themselves see that they're a couple.

A more contemporary version of this same theme is offered by Bonnie Raitt in "Let's Give Them Something to Talk About." Bonnie Raitt's lover is much less shy than Curly and Laurie. [As a side note, Bonnie Raitt is the daughter of John Raitt, who was one of the first actor to portray Curly in *Oklahoma*.] Following in line with Bonnie Raitt's lyrics, Fred and Alice were also less shy and knew at that

moment that they had just formed this third entity. They “pictured” themselves as a “couple.”

A second marker event in the lives of Fred and Alice further solidified their relationship. Not long after moving in with Fred, Alice's former boyfriend from France came over to try and win her back. However, after seeing Fred and Alice together, he told Alice to “marry him (Fred).” This was the “confirmation vote” that settled the issue for Alice. The critical, marker event often serves this confirming function.

In summary, the couple (as a third entity) is often confirmed by: (1) an external ceremonial event (e.g., a marriage), (2) a decision made by the couple (e.g. moving in together), (3) a third party (e.g. family members, friends or even a former boyfriend) or (4) a meta-level analysis (“picturing our self”).

## **Disagreement About and Absence of a Marker Event**

On occasion, the two people we interviewed could not agree on the point when they became a couple. They both identified critical marker events that for each of them indicated that they were now a couple. However, these events were quite different for the two of them. On other occasions, the two partners could identify no marker event that enabled them to identify themselves as a couple. These couples seem to be floating along in their intimate relationship.

### **We Don’t Agree!**

Gene and Margie identify very different times when each of them felt like they were a couple. For Gene it was about six months after they started dating. He felt it took him that long to believe that what was “too good to be true” had finally happened. Margie reported that it was two years before she felt they were a couple. She did not choose to elaborate too much on this.

However, the interviewer sensed that Margie was the one who would hold out and for whatever reason remains in a more judgmental stance on the relationship. It is she and her expressed discontent which has currently precipitated their decision to obtain marital counseling.

Neither Margie nor Gene could point to a single event that led to the sense of being

a couple. Rather it was a generalized sense of growing commitment. Perhaps, they have never really come together. Now in marital counseling they may be moving through a remarriage that will finally move them to a specific marker event when they will jointly make a commitment to one another. Margie's judgmental attitude may be serving a helpful function. It may keep the two of them from artificially declaring themselves a couple, when, in fact, they don't feel like they are a single, committed entity.

## **Dancing Around a Commitment**

Even when couples disagree about the marker event, they typically identify several possible moments when they became a couple. In some instances, however, this was not the case, especially among some of the younger couples we interviewed. There seems to be a virus called Commitment Aversion that is spreading throughout the world—especially among those in their early adulthood.

Two people drift into an intimate relationship without ever really confronting their identity as a couple or making a firm commitment to the relationship in which they find themselves. It is instructive to examine these distinctive relationships in some detail, for they teach us something about the value of a defining moment in most relationships—as well as something about the shifts that may be occurring in the nature of relationships formed in the 1990s and beyond. We will look specifically at two couples, Dave and Sheila, and Mark and Kitty. They were quite candid and articulate about their enduring, though very disengaged relationships.

In Dave and Sheila, we find two people who drifted into their relationship with one another. Initially, Dave was the pursuer and Sheila the pursued. They met at a local community college and Dave's attraction to Sheila was instantaneous. In fact, he borrowed a car from a classmate to offer Sheila a ride home. Sheila indicated that she had her own car and Dave, very resourcefully, asked if she could give him a ride home, which she did.

They dated occasionally for a short period of time. Dave describes himself as a "one-woman" man, who was interested in an exclusive relationship, while Sheila at the time was not interested in settling down. Dave tried to wait Sheila out, biding his time. Eventually, he relented in the face of Sheila's lack of real interest in commitment, and the two of them drifted apart.

One year later, Dave and Sheila ran into each other again. By this time, Sheila was less concerned about dating many men at the same time, and instead of "drifting

apart" they "drifted into exclusivity." This love at second sight took hold quickly and strongly. However, neither Dave nor Sheila can describe when he or she began to see the two of them as a couple. After three months of keeping constant company, they entered into the phase of living together at separate places.

The process was once again one of drift. Dave began spending more time at Sheila's, fixing things up and preparing meals. He was also taking karate classes in the area Sheila lived. He would come over after class in the evening to shower and change. Frequently, after showering and eating, Dave and Sheila would simply "find" themselves spending the night together. As Dave reports, "it just happened gradually. I got this really weird night job. . . so I would stay there sleeping over, but I wasn't really sleeping over because I'd get up in the middle of the night and go to work. Three hours out of the middle of the night I wasn't there."

Within a short period of time, this became virtually an every-night occurrence. Yet, the two of them were careful about never doing anything highly visible or abrupt that would signal that this had truly become a committed relationship. Much like a fisherman who is trying to reel in a fish, Dave did not want to "pull the hook" on Sheila too soon. He feared that she would immediately escape from the impending commitment. Sheila was reticent to even think of making a commitment, because it would force her to confront her fear of intimacy and loss of independence.

The story that Dave and Sheila share about their growing relationship doesn't differ much from that told by many other "contemporary" couples who seem to move into commitment gradually—with very little formal acknowledgement of a commitment. Dave and Sheila differed from most other couples, however, in that neither of them recollected that their relationship intensified at one point. During their interview, neither Dave nor Sheila could recall any moment or event that led to an increased commitment to the relationship.

The two were forced, however, to make at least a tentative commitment to one another within several months, when a wonderful job offer was presented to them. They were given a chance to become caretakers of an estate in a nearby community. The job was meant for a couple; however, during the interview they discovered that the owner preferred a married couple, which led them to represent themselves as a married couple. Fearing that they might be found out and lose their job as caretakers, Dave and Sheila decided to go to Reno and get married immediately.

They deepened their involvement and commitment to one another. Yet, they still were able to avoid acknowledging any real change in their relationship, since their marriage was consummated for expedient reasons. Even becoming married, Dave

and Sheila were able to keep one eye closed to what they were doing and feeling. They saw themselves as acting in response to external convenience.

Now that they were married, according to Dave, "our attitude at the time was "well, if it doesn't work out, we'll just get a divorce . . .so we didn't really take it too seriously." Sheila went on to note during the interview that "we didn't date normally. We didn't get married normally. We didn't have a normal attitude about it -- didn't take it too seriously. In a sense, that's what makes it work. We didn't have big expectations from marriage . . .at least I didn't."

Dave agreed with Sheila that this lack of formal commitment to the relationship was probably the best strategy for him:

I'm just not that sort of person. [Formal recognition of our marriage] would have given it a lot more symbolism. I would have felt a lot more pressure if it was a big official thing. As it was, we just sloughed it off: what the hey. If it doesn't work out, we'll just get a divorce. So, there wasn't much of a change in our lives. We'd already been living together.

It was clear for Dave and Sheila that this tentativeness was based, in part, on a lack of complete trust in one another.

## **A Matter of Trust**

When asked point blank, "do you trust your spouse" Sheila and Dave both indicated some uncertainty. Dave said: "Yeah, but not 100%." Sheila spoke of "guardedly" trusting Dave and suggested that: "neither of us likes to lose control. We both have to maintain the sense we're in control." Their caution regarding basic trust in one another and regarding the need for control in their relationship is probably not uncommon among many young couples. It may be a revealing symptom of our times. The fear of commitment and permanency engendered by mistrust and the need for control is painfully obvious in many contemporary relationships.

Several years ago, Dave and Sheila attempted to have a child, which resulted in a miscarriage. Since that time, they have danced around the issue. As Dave puts it, their decision regarding having a child is likely to remain "unresolved until after menopause and then we'll make a decision." Once again, they are letting external factors "make" their decision for them. Yet, from their statement, it seems fairly clear that a conscious decision has been made not to have children.



Sheila admits that children would imply commitment: "I think for me it has a lot to do with not being sure I want to make that kind of commitment, that lifetime commitment." Dave agrees, though (like many other young people) he introduces a financial variable into the equation that seems to fuse with his concern about commitment:

. . . Yeah, [not making a lifetime commitment is] strong for me too. In part I have not felt financially ready. Intellectually, it's a matter of birth control. But at a gut level it's different. To me it's centered a lot on a gut level of financial insecurity, never being ready to take that responsibility on, because if anything happens to me, she can take care of herself. I can take care of myself. But taking care of a kid is a whole different commitment.

I once again bring in our musical guides, Rogers and Hammerstein. Dave resembles Billy Bigelow—protagonist in Rogers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*. In his famous soliloquy Billy confronts the need for financial stability when his wife, Julie, announces her pregnancy. He doesn't feel that he needs money if he has a son, but "you've got to be a father [i.e. financially responsible] to a girl." For both Billy and Dave, money and commitment are intimately linked together. Billy accepted the commitment but went out and attempted a robbery to get the money, while Dave is trying to head this commitment off before it occurs by choosing (with Sheila) not to have children.

Sheila indicates that her concern about having children is more about "emotional" than "financial" commitment. When it comes to Dave, she still feels that she can walk out at any time and doesn't have to really commit to him. It's a different story when it comes to having children:

It takes a lot to emotionally commit to a child for the rest of your life! What if you don't like the kid, what if you got tired of taking care of someone all the time? You can't just walk away. What if the child has problems? These problems are always there. They don't go away. Things can go wrong. You have to live with that, and I don't know that I'm willing to take that chance.

The pervasive distaste for commitment on the part of both Sheila and Dave, as well as their mutual distrust and fear of dependency, also impacts on the way in which they perceive their lives together. They have a small group of friends, whom they rarely see. They get up together, commute together, eat together and shower together on a daily basis. Yet, they strongly insist that they spend much of their time

apart from each other and are actually very independent.

Dave suggests that "we go our separate ways a lot," while Sheila indicates that "we're not together that much." In a rather defensive manner, Dave suggests that "she's doing homework and I'm working on the house, so it's not like we do everything together." This perception of independence and autonomy was typical of their statements about themselves.

Yet, the way in which they live on a day-to-day basis, and the locus of conflict in their relationship speaks to a high degree of unacknowledged mutual dependency. It appears as if the basic caution and mutual mistrust that both partners carry makes it too threatening to allow conscious awareness of how much they do depend on each other.

### **Attachment Phobia**

Clearly, both Dave and Sheila are intelligent and educated. They are committed (like many young men and women) to autonomy, independence and freedom from the constraints of "typical" relationships. Attachment phobia reigns supreme. They describe their values in the same way that they describe themselves as a couple— atypical and nonconventional. Home becomes a haven where they can freely feel their "atypicality." Much as they have avoided making any formal commitments to each other, they have remained detached from the world around them. Ironically, this detachment, or even alienation, from the external world drives them closer together and toward more interdependence, this being the interpersonal condition they both fear.

Dave and Sheila are bright enough to be aware of the potential flaws in this type of relationship, but emotionally unable to transcend it at this time. Dave and Sheila collude in their intellectualizations, rationalizations and denials—which allows them to create a portrait of their relationship as innovative and mature. We still don't know if they can simultaneously sustain their strong interdependence and their mutual image of a highly flexible "drifting" relationship. Hopefully, they can hold both. But it won't be easy.

In the case of Mark and Kitty, the pain associated with the failure of this young man and woman to make a commitment is very clear. One of them (Kitty) does want to make a commitment, while the other (Mark) doesn't. Even after five years of living together, Kitty and Mark (who are both in their mid-30s) are dancing around their commitment. Mark is a rather shy person and had to muster up considerable courage before asking Kitty out on their first date.

This was truly a marker event for Mark and in many ways is defined by Mark as the most important risk (and commitment) that he has made in his relationship with Kitty. From the first, Mark has held back (as the person being chased), while Kitty has assumed a dominant role (as the person doing the chasing). She also is dominant in most other areas of their lives together. "It is the care-taker in me," states Kitty, "I'm a detail person."

Yet, the dynamics of their relationship goes much deeper than caretaking. Mark acknowledges that it ultimately boils down to the issue of commitment:

Commitment has been a constant issue in disagreements we've had and I've always felt I'm just . . . heavily committed to . . . to . . . the whole relationship and um, I . . . I will say that I have questions about getting married. There are fears and questions that I have and whenever it does come up, my response has always been I'm not ready to get married, so um anyway we discuss what commitment means, and what it means if we're not married or . . . that sorta thing. And I . . . I just don't think it can be a measure . . .

Kitty interrupts:

I don't think that it's a measure. I would like to be married. I'm getting tired of just living together and I want something more . . . Not that it is going to change the relationship. Only, I don't think that it's a ring. It's not that at all. It's . . . I guess, maybe I would probably feel better if he would even propose to me and we never got married. If he even said, "hey, I wanna marry you!" And that, you know, but I don't even get that. So, I feel kinda, like I'm being used . . . although I know he's very committed to me and to this relationship. But I think. God, you know. How long does a person have to stay with somebody before they say: "I would like to be married to you?" And I haven't seen that in five years. So . . .

Kitty and Mark share many common interests and have built a life together that is filled with wonderful moments. They have both been involved in the same business, own property jointly, and have shared time, money and energy while refurbishing the houses that they own together. Yet, they cannot come together with regard to the level and type of commitment that each of them needs of the other person.

Mark seems to be frightened by a formal commitment, perhaps because it would mean that Kitty exerts even more control over his life. On the other hand, Kitty

seems to need the offer of marriage from Mark in part because he is not very expressive in any manner (his "shyness") about his feelings toward Kitty. She lives with ambiguity about Mark's feelings, and Mark lives in fear of Kitty's intentions to control things. They have not yet found a way to meet each other's needs without feeding each other's fears. The dance of commitment continues, with Kitty still in pursuit and Mark in retreat.

## Conclusions: Orienting Differences

The marker event seems to be about differences in the activities or attitudes of a couple that makes a real difference. At this point I wish to introduce Gregory Bateson, another of our guides. Bateson brings to this book a wide range of observations about how people relate to one another. He often introduces findings from not only his own field of cultural anthropology but also psychology, sociology and philosophy. Bateson (1979) turns to the field of biology in identifying and describing something he calls the Orienting Difference.

Bateson offers an important observation regarding the formation of embryos in the uterus. He describes the function played by a critical intrusion in the early life of the embryo. Something has to touch the embryo from outside. This touch establishes the location (and formation) of the head and all other parts of what will be a human being. This intrusion is "the difference that makes a difference." Without the probe of the embryo there is no entity. An embryo that is protected from all intrusions (such as an embryo "grown" in a Petri dish) will never form properly.

In many ways a newly formed couple is like the new-formed embryo. Without the marker event there is no couple. Both the couple and embryo initially have no form or character. Not even the head or tail of an embryo is determined in its early life. Something must happen to the embryo. There must be some small event that sets the orientation of the embryo. As noted, the embryo will never develop if it is grown in a vacuum, with no external intrusions. Similarly, something must intrude on the couple to give it definition and character. This is the marker event.

In some cases, this marker event has a minimal impact on the character of the couple. It does nothing more than help to initially orient the couple. In other cases, this event significantly influences the way in which the two partners define themselves as a couple. In this regard, it is important to know if the two people are coming together for their own needs or to meet the needs or expectations of other

people (e.g. parents, friends). At what point are we a couple based on other people's expectations and at what point are we a couple based on our own needs, values or interests?

## Key Chapter Points

Enduring couples:

- Express the importance of sexuality versus sexual intercourse in the history of their relationship.
- Describe sexuality in terms of very special moments together often not even involving sex.
- Treat sexuality as a meeting ground where mutual needs can be met.
- Find each other desirable at specific moments in their lives together and these moments evolve around issues of power and acceptance.
- At the heart of their relationship maintain affection, shared interests, and the capacity to honor and build on their differences.
- Experience marker events that were either one special event or many small ones that required a mutual commitment of both partners to the relationship.
- Use marker events to obtain a new level of commitment and/or to create an identity for the couple which becomes a part of the couple's psychological covenant.

## **Section Two**

### **Stages and Challenges**

## Chapter Seven

### Forming of an Enduring Couple

As we move beyond the myths of couples living happily ever after in a life of tranquility and stability to the realities of complex, changing relationships, we discover profound and chaotic change. We also find some patterning and continuity in the changes that do occur. In general, we find that couples move through four general stages of development. The initial stage is identified as "forming," and the subsequent three stages are identified as "storming," "norming" and "performing" -- to borrow terms used by Bruce Tuchman (1965).

#### The Four Stages of Development

The "forming" stage is one in which two individuals decide whether or not they want to establish a relationship that is intimate and involves some level of commitment. This is the stage of expansive vision and a promising future. There is the almost mystical—even spiritual—quality of these first moments together. These early expectations also set the stage for the inevitable disillusionment that arrives. The concept of marker event that we described in a previous chapter resides at the heart of the forming stage. Our interviews suggest that relationships often are formed not as a function of formal events (such as marriage ceremonies) but as a function of events that have special meaning for the partners, i.e. the marker event.

The "storming" stage which usually follows the "honeymoon" stage of forming, involves conflict regarding control in the relationship and the role (s) that partners are to play in their relationship and in various social groups. Frequently, storming is associated with the process of remarriage that we described earlier. While this second stage builds on our fears and our suspicion of true intimacy, it is also clear that storming is essential to the establishment of a firm base of trust and flexibility in an enduring relationship.

The third stage is called "norming" because a couple must establish the norms (values and rules) that will guide their long-term activities as a couple. Typically, partners can't establish solid, working norms for themselves until they have moved

through the storming period and even a restructuring of their relationship (the remarriage process). This stage is closely related to the concept of covenant that we introduced earlier. The covenant conveys and reinforces the essential norms of any enduring relationship.

Once the norms are firmly established, a couple moves to a fourth stage of "performing" when conflict tends to drop off and the couple finds stability and tranquility in their relationship. Ironically, this stage relates closely to the founding story of a couple which we previously introduced. The founding story becomes the building block not for the forming stage of the relationship, but rather for its fourth, performing stage. The founding story provides continuity for partners in a relationship as they confront the ongoing changes and unanticipated intrusive events that influence and often disrupt their individual and collective lives.

These stages of development for the couple never reach an end point but are rather part of a recurring cycle of development, with each stage being reintroduced frequently (though hopefully with a little more insight and wisdom on the part of both partners). The developmental stages are often reactivated when a major shift occurs in the relationship.

This shift, for example, occurs when partners give birth to a child (or a new project), or decide to elevate their commitment (for example, get married). The shift also occurs when one of the partners confronts the death of a parent, or experiences a significant career transition (new job, loss of job). A couple typically moves through all four stages again, though may move through the forming, storming and norming stages more rapidly and effectively the second or third time the recycling occurs.

Furthermore, as we shall discuss, a couple will tend to move independently through these four stages in each of the major domains of their life. The recycling often occurs in part because of the emergence of new problems in domains of the couple's life that have not recently gone through the cycle. Thus, a couple may be moving through the forming stage as new parents, while they are moving through the norming stage regarding their personal finances and are at the performing stage regarding their home and household possessions.

At any one time there is a rich interplay between various issues that a couple is exploring in their complex and demanding world. At any one moment, one or two issues are likely to play center stage and overshadow virtually all other aspects of the couple's life together. Yet, these other dimensions of the couple's life must continue to be addressed. They will impact on and be impacted by those issues that are playing center stage.



This is a particular “way of being” to which they return and in which they generally reside as a couple. It is their “comfort zone.” Contemporary complexity and chaos theorists call this setting a “strange attractor” to which all complex systems return when at rest or in a stable condition. Some couples prefer to live in a state of conflict, while others prefer the romance of the forming stage, or the more mundane life of a performing couple.

Based on our own interviews, we suggest that couples also are inclined to stay in a particular domain of their life, focusing primarily on their physical possessions, their children, their shared values and so forth. Relationships often become particularly stressful when a couple is forced to address issues from the alien perspective of a “way of being” or domain that they would prefer to avoid.

Before we consider these more complicated interactions, we will attend to general ways in which the couples we interviewed moved through the forming, storming, norming and performing stages. We turn first to the forming stage.

## The Forming Stage of Couple Development

The forming phase of development defines the initial characteristics of the couple. What factors determine whether or not two individuals choose to begin the third (“we”) entity? Boundary issues, psychological projections and family history all come into play during this formation process. The formation phase in a relationship is often accompanied, in particular, by a cluster of fantasies and unrealistic expectations that are held in isolation by each member of the couple. As our guide, Thomas Moore (1994, p. 51) noted many years ago: “we are drawn into intimacy by possibilities rather than by realities, by the promise of things to come rather than by proven accomplishments, and perhaps by seductions that are darker than the bright reasons to which we admit.”

A newly married couple, for instance, will hold on to a host of fantasies about the ideal home, the ideal marriage and the ideal image that a couple should convey to other people. These ideals are often based on the two partner's own experiences with their parents or other salient partners in their lives. Media (movies, novels, television) obviously influence this ideal. These fantasies are further reinforced by the behavior of their new love, who is “on good behavior” during this initial courtship stage

An accompanying dynamic for many partners is their fear that their new-found

partner will "find them out" and recognize that they are neither the ideal partner that they initially perceive through loving eyes nor the "good partner" that they tried to be while on "good behavior." A major feature in the passage of a relationship from "forming" to the second phase ("storming") is a confrontation between the ideal state and the "good behavior," on the one hand, and the newly emerging reality of this relationship, on the other hand.

Typically, a couple repeatedly engages in forming activities in response to the emergence of a specific developmental task. A couple will engage in forming activities not only when they are first becoming acquainted. They often will revert to early and primitive interaction whenever they confront a crisis that leads them to a new developmental task and places them on a new developmental plate.

Two partners who have been living together for five years may go back to step one when they first decide to pool their income to establish themselves as a single economic entity. Similarly, a couple that has been firmly established for several years may confront old, seemingly resolved problems when learning how to live with their first child.

A public, marker event often signals the emergence of a specific developmental plate as particularly important at any one time in the life of a couple. A wedding may signal the start of several developmental plates ("establishing a home", "establishing socio-economic viability"), as will the purchase of a first home, declaration of community proper or the birth of a first grandchild. In the 1979 movie *Starting Over*, Burt Reynolds exhibited symptoms of stress (hyperventilation) not at the point of moving in with Jill Clayburgh, but rather at the point when they were purchasing furniture for their new apartment.

Burt is not alone. For many of us, purchases of major items are the first tangible signs of a long-term commitment to a relationship. On other occasions, a new developmental plate will emerge gradually, over a three to six-month period, or will emerge through a highly private event or series of events that are known only to the couple. This might be movement toward a new level of sexual intimacy or disclosure of a past indiscretion. In the latter case, the couple may experience a major transition long before other people with whom the couple relates perceive this change.

This discrepancy in perceptions can be an additional source of stress for a couple. One older couple told us they had been considered the "Ozzie and Harriet" of their retirement community by their mutual friends. They stunned their friends when they announced their separation and ultimate divorce. That simply does not occur

with Ozzie and Harriet.

If the "perfect couple" gets a divorce after many years of marriage, then what hope do their children and younger friends have in relationships that from the inside more closely resembles the "Simpsons"? This couple's divorce threatened the hopes of their family and friends, hence was greeted with little sympathy and a large amount of anger by people who this particular "Ozzie" and "Harriet" had considered to be close and supportive.

Later, I will discuss in more detail the "forming" stage in relationship to various development tasks that a couple must confront. For now, we'll describe the forming stage as it is played out in brand new relationships.

## **Falling in Love**

Obviously, the experience of falling madly in love is unforgettable and one of the great joys that anyone can experience in his or her life. Many books, plays, poems and songs have been written about this elusive phenomenon, ranging for the extraordinary analysis offered by Maric-Henri Beyle (Stendhal) to the homespun lyrics of Oscar Hammerstein and popular insights offered by Erich Fromm. For our purposes, in studying long-term enduring relationships, this first step in the formation of a relationship is important particularly in the creation of initial expectations about what another person can provide for us in our life.

Typically, when we first fall in love—or at least when we are deeply infatuated—our new-found partner meets virtually all our needs. As an old popular song suggest, "you're every woman [man] in the world to me." All our dreams and hopes are met in this one person They are someone in our life who can feel the hole in our heart or the gap in our life.

One couple we interviewed, Dan and Mary, talked about meeting at a large weeklong national conference in the Mid-West. Dan was an organizer of this conference and was heavily engaged in making it a great success. In part, he was using this conference to get over his recent divorce from a woman with whom he had lived for ten years and had been married for eight years. She was also the mother of his two small children and partner in a small consulting firm.

Mary was still married, though her marriage had fallen into disrepair during the past two years. She was vulnerable to a more exciting and passionate relationship. Dan and Mary met during the first evening of the conference. He was immediately smitten by Mary and lost all sense of his role at the conference. Mary was scared to

death of her own feelings as well as Dan's obvious attraction to her. Within two days they were making love and considering the future of Mary's marriage and their own relationship (living two thousand miles from each other).

It was crystal clear to both Dan and Mary that their newfound love met many if not all of their needs. Each pushed all other people and events in their life out of their new love's consciousness. The conference itself was only dimly remembered. I wish at this point to introduce Dorothy Tennov, who is our primary guide regarding the matter of preliminary love and infatuation. Tennov (1979, p. vii) offers these words to describe how both Dan and Mary were thinking and feeling:

I want you. I want you forever, now, yesterday, and always. Above all, I want you to want me. No matter where I am or what I am doing, I am not safe from your spell. At any moment, the image of your face smiling at me, of your voice telling me you care, or of your hand in mine, may suddenly fill my consciousness rudely pushing out all else.

Dan found in Mary a very bright, engaging, passionate and beautiful woman. He no longer felt lonely and dreamed of living forever with Mary. He thought that she would be a wonderful mother for his children (Mary had no children herself) and great professional colleague. Mary was immediately struck with Dan's visions, his energy and his humor. Dan would be a great lover and someone who could lead her out of a stagnate life in upstate New York. After their week together, Mary drove back home to dissolve her seven-year marriage and Dan flew back to California in order to prepare for Mary's eventual move to the Golden State.

Mary did move to California one year later. Dan and Mary did get married. And Mary did do a wonderful job of helping to raise Dan's two children. Yet, neither of these people were ever able to fulfill all the needs that surfaced at that conference. Dan continued to be a visionary, yet this often drove Mary nuts, especially when they confronted the harsh realities of finance, child-rearing, and home repairs. Mary has been a generous and loving stepmother, yet often resents the amount of time she must devote to the children.

Mary and Dan tried to work together in the consulting business but found that Dan's visions often conflicted with Mary's practicality. Despite all the distortions that come with the first blush of infatuation and love, Mary was quite accurate in perceiving Dan's enormous energy. She still loves and respects this energy. Dan similarly was accurate in perceiving Mary's passion and intelligence. He continues to love and greatly admire these characteristics.

As in the case of virtually all intimate relationships, Dan and Mary went through a period of disillusionment. They discovered inevitably that many of their most important needs could not be met by their partner. In many instances, these needs can never be met by any one person. It is very hard, for instance, to meet another person's need for self-esteem, or to offer them unfailing companionship. Each couple must come to terms with this disillusionment. Each member of the couple must decide which needs their partner can meet and which roles their partner can play in their life.

Both partners come to realize that these needs and roles may change over time, as each partner and the relationship itself change and mature. If this realization does not take place, then we may continue to expect our partner to fulfill all or most of our needs and play many roles in our life. He or she will inevitably fail in this task, leading to anger on the part of both partners. Even if our partner fulfills all our needs and roles (at least superficially), we will become absolutely dependent on this partner—which is ultimately even more destructive.

We see both failed attempts at meeting all needs and the absolute dependency on one's partner in the wonderfully romantic, but disastrous, relationship between Heathcliff and Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*. At various times in their relationship, either Heathcliff or Cathy expect their loved one to meet all their needs. They essentially take on the other person's identity (Cathy's statement that "I am Heathcliff") and demand that the other person become fully absorbed in meeting all of their needs (even those of which they are not fully aware).

Heathcliff takes on the image sometimes of being the perfect, absolutely devoted lover; at other times, he is a selfish, brutish and ultimately evil force in the world. Cathy, similarly, shifts from being a lovely and loving spirit in the world, to being a self-possessed, insensitive force of indifference and destruction. The images of both Heathcliff and Cathy regress to what psychoanalysts described as primitive "splitting" (he/she is all good or all bad).

### **Enmeshment and Disengagement**

There is another term that psychologists use to describe the relationship between Heathcliff and Cathy. Family therapists would identify the relationship between Heathcliff and Cathy as "enmeshed". This kind of relationship is contrasted with one in which there is virtually no interaction between the couple. The latter type of relationship is identified as "disengaged." Initially, most relationships are rather heavily enmeshed. In essence, when we fall in love we tend to move backwards in

terms of our own way of functioning in the world. Psychologists describe this as the process of "regression." However, this is a good form of regression (called "regression in the service of the ego") that parallels the regression occurring in acts of creativity, inspiration, spiritual reflection and many forms of psychological healing.

The initial enmeshment or regression helps build the fire and engage the mystery in any relationship, as well as providing wonderful material for the couple's founding story. We must always protect and feed the deep fantasies that are to be found in our individual recollections as well as joint recollections of these forming experiences.

Later, as a couple, we typically become somewhat more disengaged as the reality of their individual needs and differences set in. Boundaries must be established in part so that each partner can get on with their own individual life in conjunction with their life together. Some disengagement is inevitable—unless, of course, a couple wants to reenact Heathcliff and Cathy! This is not a very good choice given the closing chapters of the book and closing scenes of the movie (especially the movie).

The concepts about enmeshment and disengagement make sense when one is looking back upon a relationship that has gone through many different stages and transformations. We can look back with some detached wisdom and insight—and with wistful nostalgia—at the excitement, passion, infatuation and first stage of love. But what does it feel like when one is in the midst of this enthralling stage? I have already briefly quoted Dorothy Tennov.

We are now ready to fully enlist her assistance in describing something that she calls Limerence (Tennov, 1998). This is the experience of falling in love). I first turn to her analysis, as well as to research done on the preparation of our brain for love. I then turn to the stories told by the people we interviewed where several principal phenomena come clearly to the fore—many of which relate to what Tennov has described.

## Love, Limerence and the Brain

The nature of love has long been a topic explored by novelists, poets and even a few behavioral scientists. However, it has long eluded an adequate explanation. Frank Sinatra clearly articulates the elusive nature of love when he sings:

How little we know. How much to discover.

What chemical forces flow from lover to lover!

How little we understand what touches off that tingle

That sudden explosion when two tingles intermingle.

Actually, we do know a bit about what happens when two tingles intermingle. At least we have some names assigned to this tingling and do know something about when happens when chemicals flow from lover to lover. As just mentioned, the naming and insightful description came initially from Dorothy Tennov's (1998) exploration of something she calls *Limerance*.

### The Nature and Journey of Limerence

One of the authors of a book about love, mysterious called "Dr. L", builds on Tennov's work and offers the following summary of Tennov's original description (Dr. L, 2020, p. 11):

- Frequent intrusive thoughts about the Limerent object (LO), who is a potential sexual partner.
- An acute need for reciprocation of equally strong feeling.
- Exaggerated dependency of mood on LO's actions: elation when sensing reciprocation, devastation when sensing disinterest.
- Inability to react limerently to more than one person at a time.
- Fleeting relief from unrequited feeling through vivid fantasy about reciprocation by the LO.
- Insecurity or shyness when in the presence of the LO, often manifesting in overt physical discomfort (sweating, stammering, racing heart).
- Intensification of feelings by adversity.

- An aching sensation in "the heart" when uncertainty is strong.
- A general intensity of feeling that leaves other concerns in the background.
- A remarkable ability to emphasize the positive features of the LO, and minimize, or empathize with, the negative.

Dr. L adds one additional item:

- A desire for exclusivity in this special connection.

Dr. L (2020, p.18) goes on to offer a more vivid narrative account of limerence:

You want to declare your feelings to LO, to let them know how extraordinarily attractive you find them, and have them confirm your greatest wish: that they feel the same way about you. More than anything else, you long to consummate an emotional connection that feels so profound it must be evidence of some sort of divine blessing or true love. Maybe, destiny. The extraordinary power of that connection also triggers the idealization of LO—everything they do and say becomes witty and important, everything about them is desirable, even their flaws prompt feelings of affection. You can be charmed by their charisma, but just as easily seduced by the desire to save them from the insecurity that obviously explains their boorish or selfish behaviour.

At this point, in keeping with the book title (“living with limerence”), Dr. L turns to the aftermath of the initial moments of limerence (Dr. L, 2020, pp. 18-19):

Unfortunately, or perhaps inevitably, these intoxicating feelings don't last. If both you and your LO are free to act, and LO does reciprocate your feelings, then you can enjoy the ecstasy of mutual limerence. Over time, though, the limerence will fade and the euphoria settles into a new state (when you learn whether or not you and LO are actually compatible). Alternatively—and far more commonly—your limerence is not reciprocated or you are not free to act on your feelings, and all that limerent energy builds up behind an internal emotional dam. Then, the experience of limerence changes profoundly.

Dr. L now describes the feelings that are likely to attend this new state (Dr. L, 2020, pg. 19):

Persistent, frustrated, limerence is characterized by a transition to a sense of exhaustion rather than exhilaration. Where reverie was once exquisite



daydreaming, it now becomes constant rumination about LO, characterized by involuntary, intrusive thoughts. The mental processes that used to be rewarding become compulsive. It becomes impossible to concentrate on anything else, because thoughts about LO force themselves into the front of your mind.

It gets even worse (Dr. L, 2020, pg.19)

Your mood becomes increasingly unstable and erratic, and signs that LO is not interested in you cause devastation. Anxiety ramps up. Where once you used to enjoy LO's company, you now crave it just to feel normal. You isolate yourself from others, so as to have time alone to ruminate. You neglect other responsibilities, and your personal and professional lives suffer. And the worst part is that it is inescapable, even in sleep. Dreams are haunted by LO. You have a black hole of attraction in your life that feels impossible to escape.

That transition—from thrilling infatuation to disruptive obsession—is the point at which limerents realize that they have a serious problem. In our own work with enduring relationships, we discover that couples find ways to move past this disillusionment. If their relationship is to be sustained, they find ways to confront the anger that arises from this post-limerence phase (stage of storming) and to establish a working relationship that enables a new and deeper form of love to emerge (stage of norming). It seems that we are taking a big risk when becoming limerent. Why don't we just avoid this messy and potentially wounding experience. Does it have something to do what makes the tingles intermingles?

## **The Brain in Love**

Through the work of Tennov, Dr. L and others who have written about limerence we know something about the tingle that intermingles. What then about the chemicals that flow from lover to lover? Actually, we need to reframe the question. We need to ask about both the chemicals that are flowing when we are in love and the wiring of our brain that accompanies this flow.

First, we can note that there are actually three chemicals which elevate our experience of limerence and love. One of these chemicals (dopamine) is associated with our receipt of a chemical reward. We get a squirt of something that feels wonderful—and can readily get addicted to this neurochemical (via certain drugs and other addictive behaviors). The second drug is noradrenaline.

This will increase our attention to what is occurring in front of us and help us focus in on what is important. The third chemical is oxytocin, which along with vasopressin tends to increase our desire to bond and nurture. (Dr. L, 2020, pg. 30) Thus we find that limerence is a lovely and compelling mixture of pleasure, attention and affection. The bottle of Limerence reads: “Hard to beat!! Well worth the risk!! Can be addictive!!”

There is one additional chemical reaction that enhances limerence and can sustain it even after the disillusionment sets in. This is the dose of dopamine “hit” we get not just when the limerent object is physically present, but also when we simply bring LO to mind and when we remember a special time we were with them. (Dr. L, 2020, p. 32) It gets even more interesting and complex.

The “hit” doesn’t come each time we remember our lover. It comes only occasionally and often in a surprising manner. Psychologists identify this process as Intermittent reinforcement (Dr. L, 2020, p. 37). We know that this reinforcing process is particularly resistant to extinction. It is not a matter of “hit” or “no hit”. Rather it is a matter of uncertain “hits” (Dr. L, 2020, pg. 61) It seems that love is not just a very splendored thing. Love is also a very elusive thing when it comes to chemical reinforcement.

What is the foundation of this inducement to love that is brought about by the neurochemicals of our brain? It is all about what neuroscientists, psychologists and social anthropologist call the Social Brain. For a variety of reasons, human beings give birth to an infant who is much less prepared to cope with the world than the newborns of virtually any other animal.

Image the helpless child trying to survive on the sometimes-hostile environment of the African savannah. The newborn human child can’t even crawl, let alone wander out in the world to find a meal. There must be a devoted caregiver for the child to survive. This often actually means that there has to be several caregivers to tend the ongoing needs of the newborn child. This is where the trifold chemical inducement to pleasure, attention and affection come to the fore.

Far from being a waste of time or incidental to the human experience, the connections we form with other people—especially children—are quite literally the reason we exist as a species. There is far more to this story! It should go without saying that it is nice that we are taking care of the newborn child, but we must remember that two people must create this child (there was no invitro fertilization on the savannah). Thus, we must find ways for people to be attracted to one another. Once again, it is the trifold production of pleasure, activation and affection

that create the limerence, which in turn creates the conditions for intercourse and fertilization.

## **The Social Brain**

This is still not enough. The couple must be able to sustain their relationship and their caring for a child—preferably over a span of many years. The Social Brain plays a central role in this regard. The social brain serves a vital function in not only insuring the successful (and often shared) nurturing of the helpless infant, but also in supporting our health as we grow older.

A healthy socially attuned brain helps to build and sustain healthy and enduring intimate relationships. Love is more likely to linger with the assistance of this social brain. Specifically, there are certain human behaviors that are associated with the social brain: (1) gratitude, (2) reciprocity, (3) altruism, (4) choice, and (5) enjoyment. - in other words: **GRACE** (Cacioppo, 2022, pg. 136). These are all amplified in our relationship with someone we love. Our gracious social brain is in overdrive when limerence washes over us.

It goes both ways: when we build healthy relationships, we are also building healthier brains. This brain will, in turn, stave off cognitive decline, spur creativity, and speed up our thinking. At this point I introduce another of our guides—the neuroscientist, Stephanie Cacioppo. She offers the following observation: “not only is there evidence that people in healthy relationships reduce their risk of harmful diseases and promote healing, they also literally feel less pain when their significant other is touching them or is even just in the same room.” (Cacioppo, (2022, p. 128) There is frosting on this wedding cake. It seems that there is no more powerful social activity; no better way of realizing our brain's full cognitive potential, than by being in love.

Cacioppo cautions that the chemical wiring of love seems to be similar (or even identical) to the wiring for lust. According to Cacioppo (2022, p., 88): “love and lust might rely on a single interdependent and unified brain network. And this network capitalizes not just on basic mating drives or cravings, which all primates have, but also on complex cognitive energy from areas of the brain that are uniquely human.” This leads us to consider not just the chemicals that flow from lover to lover, but also the tingles that intermingle across the neurons of the brain.

When considering the Neural wiring associated with limerence and love, we can look first at the impact which “falling in love” has on the area of our brain which is

distinctively human (in size and complexity). This cortical area supposedly enables us to be rational (“homo-sapient”) beings. It is called the “Prefrontal Cortex” (PFC). Specifically, the PFC provides what is called “central processing.” This is the primary source of deliberative thinking (weighting pros and cons). It usually results in the kind of attitude change that is long-lasting. The functioning of PFC relates to what Daniel Kahneman (2011) describes as slow thinking. It seems that the PFC, as the youngest part of our brain, can easily be overwhelmed. This seems to be the case when we first fall in love.

Limerence produces a reduced role for the prefrontal cortex (or at least a different role). PFC functioning might come in later, but not initially. The PFC can remain dominant when we encounter someone about whom we care—but only if the PFC is messing up our life (for example, if we suffer from obsessive-compulsive disorders). Cacioppo (2020, p. 103) notes that it is hard to fall in love under these conditions. We are more likely to fall into a frequently repeated ritual (such as always having only one date with a person).

By contrast, sub-cortical centers provide what is called “peripheral processing” which usually involves emotions, intuition (“gut feelings, assumptions, biased”) (Lehrer, 2009). These functions relate directly to Kahneman’s fast thinking. This is where much of the limerence action takes place—except among those (such as those afflicted by OCD) who find it hard to establish long-term attachments. There is a major challenge here. While these sub-cortical processes provide us with powerful emotions and allow us to make fast judgements (including about someone to whom we are immediately attracted), this source of persuasion, according to Cacioppo (2022, p., 70) is less likely to last than the slower formulated persuasions of the PFC.

We find that love and limerence might involve even more complex wiring. The tingle might relate to something called the activation of Mirror Neurons. Research that is cited by Cacioppo, 2022, pp. 112-113) suggests that we can read the intentions of significant others in our life much better than those of strangers. Furthermore, we can make faster and more accurate predictions about their behavior than is the case with strangers.

These findings relate to the broader matter of times when we can trust our “intuition” (Lehrer, 2009). While Kahneman’s slow thinking might be preferable in most cases, there are times when fast thinking is appropriate. Furthermore, when this fast thinking concerns the relationship with someone whom we love, then it might be assisted by our mirror neurons. Cacioppo summarizes these intriguing

findings: “When we become significant to another person, when we share an identity on a deep level, we can harness the power of the brain’s mirror neuron system (MNS) to anticipate their actions and even their intentions.” (Cacioppo, 2022, p., 74)

## Peremptory Ideation

I wish to introduce one other perspective regarding the nature of limerence and the first “hit” of love. This perspective builds on an intriguing psychoanalytically based model of intra-psychic processes offered by George Klein. This eminent researcher and theorist brought together psychoanalytic theory and cognitive psychology—producing an integrative perspective known as “ego psychology”. Many years ago, Klein (1967) described a process he called Peremptory Ideation.

In essence, Klein proposed that in our internal world (psyche) we create a specific idea or image that begins to “travel” around our psyche (head and heart) picking up fragments of unconsciously held material (memories, feelings, thoughts). This process operates much like an avalanche—and other forms of what chaos theorist often label “strange attractors”. This train of ideation becomes increasingly rich and emotionally powerful. Everything is pulled into the “attractor basin”.

At some point, this ideation begins to pull in material from outside the psyche. External events suddenly take on greater saliency (more emotional power and vividness)—and it is because they are now connected to the internal ideation. Klein suggested that this ideation now takes priority with regard to what is valued, attended to and remembered in the external world. It assumes a commanding (“peremptory”) presence.

A positive (reinforcing) loop is created, with the external material now joining the interior material—all clustered around the original (often primitive) ideation. This is perhaps the “black hole of attraction” that Dr. L assigns to limerence—and that is difficult (if not impossible) to escape. As declared in a soulful ballad about this fatal attraction: “Down and down I go. Round and round I go. In a spin. Loving the spin I’m in. “This is the old black magic called love.

Klein chosen to demonstrate the existence and power of peremptory ideation by introducing the concept of Subliminal Perception. In one of his experiments using subliminal perception, Klein had subjects look up at a wall where a picture is flashed on the screen for 1 second or  $1/10^{\text{th}}$  of a second or  $1/100^{\text{th}}$  of a second. This picture

portrayed a silhouetted tree in which a duck was embedded (shown in the black outlined by the white tree).

One week later he had his subjects return to his lab and take a “projective test” (the Thematic Apperception Test) in which they were to create stories from a series of pictures that they were shown. Klein found that two of the groups produced a significantly greater number of stories involving waterfowls than did the third group. Which were these two groups? They were those who saw the embedded duck image for very short periods of time (1/10 and 1/100 of a second). They had viewed the duck at a “subliminal” level of awareness.

Klein conducted a second experiment in which the word “cheese” was projected on the wall at the same three speeds. Once again, subjects came back a week later. They were given a memory test that required them to recall a list of words after an appropriate interval of time. In this case, those receiving the word “cheese” at a subliminal level recalled cheese related words (such as cottage) at a significantly greater level than did those viewing “cheese” at a liminal (1 second) level.

Klein proposed that the subliminal duck and choose activated an ideational chain which influenced their later creation of a story or recall of words. Both the embedded duck and word cheese would have been anomalies. We don’t see embedded ducks or the word cheese on a wall very often in our lives—so an “alarm bell” went off and the ideational train left the station.

While Klein focused on the internal dynamics of the peremptory ideation, we propose that this internal ideation might find alignment with a similar external ideation that is found in the person to whom we are suddenly attracted. We can envision the external subliminal image related to our LO “hooking on” to the ideological “train” that is passing by inside us.

In the state of limerence, we hitch an external fleeting image of our LO to our own internal train of thoughts and emotions about such matters as attachment, dependency, search for identity, or simply a feeling of longing... Our subliminal duck and cheese may be the LO’s eyes or their laughter. Or perhaps it is the glance that captured our peripheral attention. There is an “enchanted evening” when we happen to look across the crowded room and see someone we immediately “love”. An external image meets an internal emotion.

The image that is enhancing the internal ideation might be internal; however, it could initially come from an external source. It could be a memory of something that initially occurred outside of us—something to which our limerent object can

readily be attached. Our musical guide, Oscar Hammerstein, offers an example of this alignment in the lyrics to “All the Things You Are.”:

You are the promised kiss of springtime.

That makes the lonely winter seem long

You are the breathless hush of evening

That trembles on the brink of a lovely song

Hammerstein relates our memory of a lovely spring day and a special evening to the feelings of love for another person. Much as Hammerstein’s lyrics suggest, we can envision ideation elicited from this memory “hooking on” to the ideological “train” that is passing by inside ourselves. In the state of limerence, we hitch our own train of thoughts and emotions related to the limerent object to a cherished memory—be it remembrance of springtime or of a lovely evening that “trembles on the brink of a lovely song.”

Irrational external ideation (limerence) can be particularly attractive, given that the internal ideation is likely to be quite primitive. The internal ideation is often swirling with attachments from our own childhood as well as mythic (and contemporary media) images of love, passion and romance. With this powerful alignment of internal and external, we become benefactors of collective peremptory ideation. Attention is demanded by this new coalition: we are obsessed, passionate and driven to bonding.

I bring in this notion of peremptory ideation and subliminal perception because Stephane Cacioppo has been exploring a similar process and using a similar research tool. She proposes that love is engaged through what she calls an “ancient pathway” (what Klein and other psychoanalysts would call our unconscious mind). Cacioppo devises a subliminal research tool, that she calls the Love Machine, to test out this proposition (Cacioppo, 2022, p. 59):

The "Love Machine" was designed to find out if [the proposal of an ancient pathway] was true. Here's how it worked: A participant, say the student who visited me that day at Dartmouth for dating advice, would supply the program with the names of the two people she was interested in. Let's say: Blake and Shiloh. Then the test would begin. Her screen would flash. She could see the flash but could not detect that she had just been subliminally primed with the name of Date #1, Blake, which appeared on the screen for twenty-six milliseconds. That is not enough time for the brain to consciously perceive the word, yet it is enough time to relay a subliminal

message that activates the amygdala and triggers whatever emotions are associated with the name Blake.

At this point, Cacioppo employs a strategy that is similar to that used by Klein (Cacioppo, 2022, p. 59):

Once this subliminal association is triggered, the participant then completes a series of lexical tasks—sorting out real words from fake ones. By carefully tracking her response times, we can measure tiny differences that statistical analysis revealed to be significant and meaningful. When the student was primed with Date #1, Blake, she recognized the real words almost 20 percent faster than when primed with Date #2, Shiloh. And randomizing the order—so that Shiloh appeared first—still showed the same speedy reaction to Blake.

According to Stephanie Cacioppo (2022, p. 81), findings from her “love machine” suggests that “love as an emotion, might be more complex—which is to say: *smarter*—than anyone previously expected.” I propose, further, that the relationship between Cacioppo’s Love Machine and Klein’s peremptory ideation indicates that love is not only complex but also tied to a powerful, unconscious process of attraction and amplification. The pleasure, activation and affection found in Limerence’s neural chemical cocktail may further advance and sustain this process.

I wish to take this analysis one step further. The process of remembrance and uncertainty of intermittent reinforcement that was identified by Dr. L might be interwoven with peremptory ideation. When we think about and savor our past meeting with someone we love, these thoughts and emotions will link to the ideational train that is steaming along in our unconscious. Dr. L’s behaviorism meets George Klein’s psychoanalysis.

Once again, we find a two-way street. We are more likely to remember and feel wonderful once again about our loved one if the ideation is tied to our loved one. The reinforcements become less uncertain if they are triggers by the ideation coming around to the loved one. We should also note, however, that the departure of a loved one or disillusionment follows the moment(s) of limerence is likely to be that much more painful and persistent because the love train is still operating in our unconscious. The train stops running long after the limerence has faded away.

This is enough speculation and sufficient lab time for now. Love, after all, is never completely captured in an experiment or in theories about human unconscious



processes. Love is indeed a very splendored and elusive thing.

## The Interviews

Back to what we have learned about falling in love from the interviews we conducted. First, when we fall in love, everything else takes a back seat. Dan was unable to concentrate on the conference he was to lead after meeting Mary. Second, we long for the other person's affections when we fall in love. We are highly vulnerable and tend to be guarded in displaying our own feelings of love and our own true self. An elaborate dance of hide and seek takes place.

Old ghosts tend to be resurrected when we fall in love—especially in our adult years. We enter each relationship (hopefully) with greater wisdom, but the experience of falling in love becomes increasingly painful, for it evokes images of former loves, both successful and disastrous. The act of falling in love is accompanied also by a great intensity of all feelings: sexual, aesthetic, emotional, spiritual. Everything become more vivid and intense, especially when we are in the presence of our loved one.

We were fortunate to find two partners to interview (Patrick and Mary Ann) who were still very much in the throes of early love. In a short period of time, Patrick and Mary Anne have established a wonderful pattern of communication that keeps their relationship vital and alive. Though they have not yet made a commitment to marriage, Patrick and Mary Anne regularly talk, like many young couples, for two to three hours on the phone. Patrick writes Mary Anne open letters which she can read and reflect on when she is in the mood.

At the early stage in almost any intimate relationships there seems to be much about which a couple can talk! Many of the couples we interviewed wistfully recounted how they had so much to say to each other in these early days and months. Yet, they also noted that they had to be guarded about some of their most important thoughts and feelings, especially those related to the person they now loved.

Ironically, the forming stage in a relationship is a time of both intense communication and profound guardedness. It is a time for great hope and expectations, and a time for intense fear and vulnerability. Like most peak experiences in life, the process of falling in love involves a subtle balance between challenge and support.

Early love swells in a distinctive threshold—called the "flow experience by

Csikszentmihalyi (1999). Flow is to be found in the threshold between intense anxiety, on the one hand, and stupefying boredom, on the other hand. Given that Patrick, is 22 years old and Mary Anne is 18, they are able to use this intense relationship to explore their own identity, while also helping their loved one explore his or her sense of self.

In *The Art of Loving*, Fromm (2019) suggested that one cannot love another person until he or she loves himself. In *Soul Mates*, our guide, Thomas Moore (1994), similarly speaks of the love for self (soul work) as a condition for the love of another person. Such a model is certainly in keeping with the masculine notion that self-identity must be forged before one can be intimate with other people.

However, later studies of a more feminist orientation (for example, Chodorow, 1999; Gilligan, 1982; Belenky and other, 1985), and some long-ignored insights from therapists (e.g. Sullivan) suggest that self-identity and self-love tend to build simultaneously with the establishment of intimate relationships. Patrick and Mary Anne have much to talk about because they are not only busy building their mutual relationship but are also building their own senses of self and their own love of self, particularly in relationship with one another.

This sense of self-love comes in many forms. At one end of the spectrum is the modest appraisal of one's competencies and one's acts of kindness. We walk through life with an abiding sense of self-worth and self-esteem. We are able to love other people because we are not consumed in attention to self. Other people are likely to love us because this quiet self-assurance is evident in what we say and do. They love us in part because they can see that we are capable of loving them. This would seem to be what the therapist and developmental theorists are saying about self-love and the love of others.

At the other end of the spectrum is a self-love that is all consuming and that offers no room for the love of another person. All psychic energy is directed toward oneself—there being none left over for anyone else in our life. This form of self-love is often referred to as “narcissism.” It is important to note, however, that narcissism of a less virulent form might be associated with first love. Some of the psychologists who have tried to describe and explain the first stages of love talk about this less severe and often temporary form of “narcissism.”

Both the virulent and temporary forms of narcissism derive their title from a Classic Greek legend. This legend tells of a handsome young man, Narcissus, who happens to pass by a still pool of water and, seeing his reflection in the water, immediately falls in love with his own reflected image. Sad to say, Narcissus spends the rest of

his life (which is quite long in old Greek legends) staring at his own reflection. The ultimate portrayal of self-love.

## **The Tale of Narcissus: Love of Self or Love of Other**

In some ways, the process of falling in love with another person, at least initially, resembles the story of Narcissus. First, we don't really have much information to go on when we fall in love at first sight (or even second or third sight) with another person. Rather, we are falling in love with our own internal image of this person. This image is a composite of the real person we see along with previous people in our lives (including our parents, siblings, and past loves), idealized images of our "perfect" mate or lover and deeply embedded (some would even say, archetypal) images of beauty, sexuality and seductive allurements.

We have fallen in love (like Narcissus) with an image of love that is largely of our own making. When we are enthralled with another person, we tend to become very confused about boundaries. We don't know what comes from inside us and what comes from the other person. We think we love another person, but are, in fact, falling in love with something we helped to create.

There is a second potential impact that might be even more serious. The tale of Narcissus contained another character who is often ignored. This mythic figure, Echo, falls in love with Narcissus on first sight—but is rejected by Narcissus. Echo remains forever in love with Narcissus (and even later feels sorry for him). The cost of this love for Echo is a life spent alone in the forest and a body that is falling apart—leaving Echo only with a voice (though in some versions, Echo's voice is also lost). When we fall in love only with an image of our own making, are we likely to fall apart as did Echo?

What happens if we shift the legend of Narcissus and Echo a bit. What if Narcissus is just as enamored with Echo as Echo is with him. What happens to Echo at this point. First, it might be very hard for Echo to accept that this marvelous Narcissus has fallen in love with such a lowly and unappealing character as Echo. It might take some time for Echo to come to terms with this quite dissonant realization. Echo might believe that Narcissus isn't seeing the "real Echo."

There is an important discontinuity here. On the one hand, we often don't acknowledge our distortion of the person with whom we are smitten. We don't see them clearly through the distorting lens of first love. On the other hand, we might

be quite realistic (or in denial) about the love one's distorted perceptions and feelings regarding us. The discontinuity and resulting sense of dissonance might even be resolved by Echo finding Narcissus to be less attractive than was originally the case. If nothing else, Narcissus obviously has "poor taste" in the people (person) to whom he is attracted.

There is, of course, a more positive outcome. We come to a remarkable realization that this wonderful person also finds us to be wonderful. There is the very romantic song that is sung by Nat Cole (and in a later version by Nat and his daughter Natalie). It is called "Unforgettable" and culminates with the recognition that this "unforgettable person finds me to be unforgettable too." This a moment to be cherished by both partners. Does it last? Do enduring, intimate partners continue to be blessed with the recognition that this unforgettable person who I still love (even knowing all of their flaws), still loves me too and finds me unforgettable (with all of my flaws).

We might find that this shared appreciation plays a key role in our own personal sense of self-regard and in our own positive self-image. Unlike Echo, we are not shocked into silence, but are instead dancing and shouting with joy about our shared love with Narcissus. And perhaps Narcissus grows up a bit and become less self-involved given that a genuine mutually caring relationship existing in his life. We might leave Narcissus and Echo dancing together a long distance away from Narcissus's pool of water.

Which narrative is more likely to exist in the real world? Is isolation and physical decline a cost we pay for love without an outside source—as in the case of the original legend of Narcissus and Echo? Do we find new life and a new image of self when attraction (and ultimately love) is shared – as in the case of our revised legend? In either case, do we trade some personal protection for love?

Do we become exposed when in a state of limerence? Do personal growth and establishment of an enduring, intimate relationship always require at least a temporary state of personal risk? Is lingering love always mixed with a dash of the "mutual vulnerability" identified by Thomas Moore (1994, p. 30)? It seems that vulnerability has often shown up in our review of keys to successful enduring relationships among partner who are intimate.

## Love and Vulnerability

In his musical, *Passion*, our guide, Stephen Sondheim, explores the complexity and distortion of love. In a song that opens this musical play happiness is associated with blissful (early) love. Yet, as he often does in the midst of beautiful songs, Sondheim offers a bit of often-painful insights regarding intimate interpersonal relationships in this song. The protagonist's beautiful (and naked) lover declared that she is fully in love. In the midst of this declaration, she realizes that love doesn't have to come with shame. There is such a thing as shameless love. This is a powerful insight for her.

I would suggest that this "shame" is associated with vulnerability that is found (both good and bad) during the early moments so love. Imagine what it is like to be naked with another person for the first time. And imagine the nightmare of somehow being made fun of while naked. Our "lover" laughs at our small or sagging breasts. Our "lover" points to our blubbery belly or worst yet, our silly looking and small penis. This would be the most horrible of all occasions. Why? Because at this moment we are maximally vulnerable.

The vulnerability also relates to our investment of everything in the person we newly love. As Tennov and Dr. L inform us, limerence comes with a singular focus. We tend to lose touch with (or at least withdraw attention from) other people in our life - including members of our family and even our own children (from a previous relationship). The vulnerability is particularly apparent in our disengagement from other possible intimate relationships (that might have been "serious"). Lorenz Hart, the colleague of our guide, Richard Rogers, puts it this way in the song "You Took Advantage of Me". The forsaken lover declares: "Here am I with all my bridges burned." This is quite a state of vulnerability. No options. "It is all up to this other person . . . and I really don't know much about this stranger. I only know that I love them with a singular, passionate focus."

Yet, with all of the vulnerability, this is a potential moment of "bliss." We are naked and vulnerable—yet our lover accepts us. They even admired us and feast on our beauty. We are dedicated to them and no one else. In return, they declare their undying devotion to us. What a remarkable moment! Some psychoanalysts suggest that a particularly important moment in the forming of a relationship comes when we have a way of saying: "I see you." When we are "in love" we "know" (or hope that we know) verbally and non-verbally that they see us as we "truly are." In fact, of course, they see through the lens of love—and these lenses come with guaranteed

distortion. As I will soon note, the warping forces of anima and animus reign supreme.

Nevertheless, even with these distortions, this is quite a moment for each of us. No wonder “falling in love” is remarkable. It might even be that “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) is being experienced in its own right. We have entered the threshold between boredom on the one hand (“Oh well, just another relationship with no chemistry”) and profound anxiety on the other hand (“Oh my God, what have I done!”). Is it worth the risk when trying to find this moment of flow.

This risk is vulnerability. We stand there naked and wish (hope) that our partner seeks us as beautiful – or at least enticing. We hope that they see us as “beautiful” even if this is related to the “beauty” of mind, spirit or soul rather than body. Even if this is the “beauty” associated with some vague or elusive spiritual connection. We will take whatever we can get—because this moment is filled with limerence and enhanced with neuro-chemical rewards.

## **Images of Anima and Animus**

Carl Jung (2013) and his associates offer a complementary though slightly different version of this narcissistic process. As in the story Narcissus, the Jungians propose that we tend to project a particularly powerful aspect of ourselves onto our new love object. We then promptly fall in love with that aspect of ourselves that we have just projected onto this other person.

The Jungians go on to note that men are typically inclined to project onto their new love object those aspects or forces in themselves that are feminine (what Jung calls the "anima." ). Women are inclined instead to project out the masculine aspects or forces in themselves (the "animus." ). Initially, we are inclined to project only the most positive aspects of our opposite gender characteristics onto our new love. At a later point, we become disappointed because our loved one can't live up to this idealized and projected image of the perfect love. We then tend to project the less agreeable aspects of these gender-based forces onto the loved one.

Women suddenly change from being beautiful, erotic nymphs (positive anima archetype) to cunning and evil-tempered witches (negative anima archetype). Heathcliff certainly perceived this transformation in his relationship to Cathy. Men (like Heathcliff) who are caught up in the anima spell often project their own personal mood swings (and, in particular, their anger and depression) onto women. These men assume that they are feeling this way because of the way their loved one

feels.

Women, in turn, find that the men they love as saviors, heroes and spiritual guides (positive animus archetype) become clumsy and insensitive trolls or violent, belittling demons (negative animus archetype). We need look only at the changing reactions of Cathy to Heathcliff to illustrate just such a shift. Women, such as Cathy, project their own harsh judgments about the world onto men. These women assume that they are being fair in their own judgments. However, the world is inherently unfair because of their male counterpart.

For a heavily enmeshed couple, such as Heathcliff and Cathy, there is no way out. They are both bound up in their projections onto the loved one. Neither can recognize that they have given away powers that exist in themselves. Hence, they are always dependent on the presence of the other person for a sense of being a whole person. Unfortunately, they have also projected their negative images of the opposite gender on to their loved one, hence they are simultaneously in love and in hate.

We know of some unfortunate real-life relationships that have lasted for many years, playing out this highly destructive cycle of projection, infatuation, disappointment, anger, rejection, fear, reconciliation and, once again, projection, and so forth. Heathcliff and Cathy finally joined together as one, in death, finding this to be the only way in which they could be in union without pain and conflict. We wish greater success and alternative solutions for our real-life Heathcliffs and Cathys.

In their musical, *Cinderella*, our guides Rogers and Hammerstein, describe this same type of confusion. Prince Charming declares that he doesn't know if he loves Cinderella because she's beautiful or if she's beautiful because he loves her. Does he love her because she's wonderful or is she wonderful because he loves her?

Like all princes, Charming doesn't know what the sources of his feelings are with regard to this remarkable person that he met at the ball. He only met her for a brief moment, in a very artificial and romanticized setting (the ball) and knew very little about her background or lineage (very important for a prince). Yet, he fell deeply in love with her or, more accurately, with his image of her.

Probably the fleeting nature of their acquaintance made his internal idealized image of the feminine (anima) much more prevalent. As a result, Cinderella becomes more alluring. After all, he already knew the other eligible young women in his kingdom (it wasn't a very big community). He knew more about them than lie

probably wanted to know. Cinderella was someone new, who was an unknown.

What better object on which to project one's fantasies and wishes! I would suggest that Charming has a strong train of highly romanticized and anima-based ideations racing through his body and mind (amplified by a dose of neurochemicals). His peripheral image of Cinderella hitches on to his peremptory ideational train. Limerence springs forth!

And what about Cinderella? What does she really know about her Prince Charming other than what she reads in the local newspaper (or local gossip) and the little bit she found after one dance? We know that Cinderella is inclined to daydream quite a bit, hence we might anticipate that her Prince Charming is composed primarily of her own fantasies and dreams—her own masculine (animus) projections. She may have a strong ideational train herself that is moving fast—especially when she sits “in her own little corner” by the fireplace.

When does she find out who the real Prince Charming is? After the wedding? After their first child is born? After he begins spending more time with his friends and with affairs of state than with her? Perhaps, Cinderella should read some of the accounts of Princess Diana prior to her death (which are themselves mostly fantastic projections rather than realities), before signing on with the prince.

This is one of the most remarkable features of this initial period of infatuation. Our new lover occupies a central position in all aspects of our life. We can't get this person out of our mind or heart. Like Nellie Forbush in Rogers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*, we try to wash him or her “right out of our hair”—but they continue to haunt our every thought and feeling.

As our other musical guide, Steven Sondheim, has observed in the song “Losing Our Mind” (from *Follies*), we feel like we're going mad: standing there in the middle of the floor, not knowing what to do with our life! Neil Diamond took this sentiment to an even greater extreme. In “The Story of My Life” he sings of a lover whose life story started the day his beloved came into his life and ends the day she leaves. For Diamond's lover, there is no life either before or after meeting the person he now loves.

The forces of Jung's anima and animus play a central role in defining who we are. Ultimately, these internal forces are life-giving—at least as portrayed by the super-romantic Neil Diamond. Not only does this person fill a central space in the life of Diamond's lover, there simply is nothing in life other than the object of his infatuation. Rogers and Hart similarly describe the strong impact of love on our



very being. In “Nearer” they describe (in song) a physical enmeshment. We are closer to the person we love than ivy is to the wall. Putting Diamond and Hart (the lyricist) together, we find that an extreme level of embeddedness is being portrayed. Anima and animus reside deeply in our psyche and soul. We are “inhabited” by and are inhabiting eternally the person we love—now that’s limerence!

Back to the reality lived by the women and men we interviewed. During the summer of 2010, Jane was a second season mountain climbing guide and one of only two women guides among a bunch of male guides. At 28 years of age, with solid skills, Jane was the “queen” of the mountaineering company and the focus of much attention. She was engaged to a fellow back home but spent the summer “looking around” to see what other kind of men might be out there: “if I hadn’t met Steve, I would probably have married the guy I was engaged to.” Steve was also on a break from school and was spending the summer in the mountains. He met Jane while working part time as a guide. Both Jane and Steve describe a period of intense attraction that summer. As it turns out, however, the underlying theme of their attraction differed in kind and durability.

Jane’s feelings of intensive love for Steve were wrapped up in her exploration of a new world and her exposure to values that were quite different from those of her protective Catholic school upbringing. As in the case of Cinderella, her love represented the beginning of a profound reorganization and redefinition of basic beliefs—a “coming out” or expansion into a new world. Part of Jane’s later understanding of her attraction to Steve was consonant with an idea offered by our guide, Susan Campbell (1980): “such feelings can give us a real sense of our possibilities, of how it might be if we really actualized our highest potential for loving.”

In this light, Steve offered a distinct contrast to the fiancé from whom Jane would soon break off. For Jane, narcissism was displayed in her love for the new image of herself as an adventurous, desirable and unique woman. We offer the old cliché: there is nothing more desirable than another person who finds you to be absolutely entrancing. Like Cinderella, Jane looked at a reflection of herself and saw herself in a new role and with a new image; furthermore, beside her in the reflection was a man who admired this new person she had become. She loved this state of being!

For Steve, part of the attraction was his image of Jane in her special role as “queen” of the mountaineering company. Like Prince Charming, he gloried in the fact that the most desirable woman at the Ball (or climbing on the mountain) was attracted to him. He had become the sole object of her love. He is becoming attracted to and

wants to be with women he imagines others desired.

It is a common theme among many men of all ages. It was a way of making oneself more desirable and of covering personal insecurities. Steve's narcissism thus shows up in his love for his own successful wooing of a desirable woman. He looked at the reflection and saw himself glowing even more brightly in the presence of a beautiful woman!

## Romance Across the Ages and Societies

Our interviews suggest that the processes of temporary narcissism are neither confined to the youth of our society nor to western cultures. Many of the older couples we interviewed who met when they were already past midlife describe an enthralment that is as romantic and as basically unrealistic as the stories told by younger couples. Similarly, the few couples we interviewed who came from nonwestern cultures often spoke with great eloquence of their initial infatuation.

For instance, Kasha and Tally are an East Indian couple married for twenty years. Tally indicated that he had been working at a personal development camp in which Kasha's sister had been a participant. Through her he met Kasha's father. Kasha was eager to tell the story of their meeting:

We had a very large family back in India and we had a lot of domestic help. So, there was always a lot of people around. But one day there just happened to be nobody home except me. I looked out the window and saw Tally in the backyard. He was looking for my sister. I invited him in and we sat for two hours just talking. Something happened during those two hours. We just looked into each other's eyes. We understood everything each other was saying. There were sparks between us. I knew then and there that we would be married someday.

This is certainly a lovely and loving story of first meeting. As with many couples, the primary conveyer of inner truths (or projections) were the eyes of the man Kasha loved. Do our eyes somehow tell an "inner truth" because we are particularly attracted to this extended gaze shared with another person. Perhaps it is simply because we expect other people who like us to keep eye contact with us.

The force of looking into one another's eyes is universally powerful. Neither Tally nor Kasha had seen each other prior to the day they met. Their families were

"westernized" and would have allowed them to meet without a chaperone. Nevertheless, the enthrallment was no doubt intensified, as with Prince Charming and Cinderella, by the unknown nature of the person to whom Kasha and Tally were suddenly drawn.

They talked enough to learn a bit about each other, though one wonders to what extent they truly understood one another. Most of us aren't thinking very clearly during these moments in our lives. We can barely understand our own thoughts and feelings, let alone those of another person on whom we have projected a considerable number of fantastic images. It is probably more accurate to suggest that Tally and Kasha heard their own words (whether actually stated by the other person or not) and assumed that they understood these words.

What happens after this initial infatuation fell away for Tally and Kasha? Were they successful in adjusting to the realities of their relationship? They have, in fact, been quite successful in adjusting to realities, though they had to go through a major remarriage process. The memory of how they first met is still very clear and compelling. It serves as a stable foundation for their changing relationship.

The two hours they spent "looking into each other's eyes and understanding perfectly" stood as an inaugural experience to be repeated frequently in their life together. This "first time" became the touchstone against which later times together would be tested. This was a marker event for Kasha and Tally.

Tally spoke of the daily ritual of sitting together in the evening after work, sipping tea and looking out at the nearby ocean. These are daily celebrations of their growing bond and covenant. When later they could only speak of superficial things or found themselves avoiding each other it was clear that something essential was missing. Finally, years later, when they saw themselves on television, it was the old ideal images of themselves.

This reflection back on an old (now somewhat dim) image revived the hopes and dreams upon which their covenant had been founded. Now, as they reconfigure their relationship and engage the process of remarriage, it is more realistic than during their early years together. Yet, it is still faithful to the original, founding vision of themselves as a couple.

## Conclusions:

### They Can't Take That Away from Me!

The enthralling, romantic texture of the forming stage may last for a remarkably long time. Clearly, Tally and Kasha continue to reflect on and renew the intensity of their first meeting through their daily rituals. Among many of the other intriguing and reassuring couples we interviewed, romance was still very much alive. Delores and Bart met in a Texas bar.

Out with respective friends that evening Delores spotted Bart across the room, as in "Some Enchanted Evening" and many other wonderful love stories (true and fictional). Perhaps subliminal perception and Stephanie Cacioppo's love machine are both in operation. Delores eventually approached Bart (this is where their story breaks from traditional sex role stereotyping) and asked him to dance. They spent much of that evening together, parting later in the parking lot.

On the way home that night, Bart remarked to his friend, "I just met the woman I'm going to marry." Bart and Delores often met again during the ensuing week. By the following weekend they were inseparable and already considered themselves a couple. They never again dated other people. One year later they were married. In the eight years since they met, Delores and Bart have had no children.

Perhaps because of this, they aren't lacking for romance. They speak of their great respect for and great honesty with one another. They focus in particular on the romance that still exists in their lives. Candlelight dinners are the norm. "I love you" is often scribbled in lipstick on the bathroom mirror. They call each other at work several times a day.

The interviewer initially suspected that Delores and Bart were stuck in some primitive level of development—one that is dominated by idealized and fanciful notions of each other. They seemed overdue for a profound period of disillusionment, as they finally began to suspect that they were not each other's ideal. Their fantasies would soon come tumbling down, and they would discover each other's bad breath! This was not, however, the case. From the start, we were struck with how genuinely and authentically Bart and Delores presented themselves—and how committed they both are to holding on to their love.

Surprisingly, their individual personalities weren't buried within this very loving, merged picture, but seemed strong and very much in evidence. They spoke of

passions not shared and of individual pursuits. They teased one another over these obvious differences, often agreeing with the other's statements of frustration. Delores and Bart laughingly point out what they particularly found most irksome about the other. They often checked in with the other (asking "is this right?" or "did it happen like this?") to verify that their portrayal of events was accurate.

Delores and Bart shared a common vision, a deep sense of attunement with one another, a genuine respect and fondness for each other, and a remarkable ability to communicate openly and caringly with one another. All the while, they balanced this off with a clear presentation their own personal needs and an understanding of where their needs were and were not being met within the boundaries of their relationship. There was no stary-eyed romance. It was a mutual love maintained by hard work.

I am reminded of a refrain from the George and Ira Gershwin songbook: "They can't take that away from me!" It seems appropriate. Delores and Bart might declare that skeptics and the pressures of contemporary life can't take romantic love away from either of them!

## Key Chapter Points

Enduring couples:

- Decide whether or not to establish an intimate relationship that involves some level of commitment.
- Weather a recurring cycle of four stages throughout the life of the couple labeled as forming, storming, norming and performing.
- Learn to roll with the inevitable disillusionment after the initial magic and intensity of the relationship wears thin.
- Engage in forming activities when they confront a crisis that leads them to a new developmental task and places them on a new developmental plate.

- Protect and even feed the deep fantasies each partner holds about their forming experiences.
- Establish boundaries that allow each other to get on with their individual lives as well as allow the couple's life to grow.
- Experience simultaneous intense communication and profound guardedness during the forming of their relationship.
- Clearly present their own personal needs within the boundaries of the relationship.

## Chapter Eight

### Storming in an Enduring Relationship

The second phase that characterizes most developmental plates involves conflict about what the relationship is and should be. It is about the relative influence which each member of the couple should wield in working on specific developmental tasks. As our guide, John Gottman (2015, p. 14) has noted: “Even happily married couples can have screaming matches—loud arguments don’t necessarily harm [an enduring relationship].” It is virtually impossible for a couple to avoid conflict and if conflict is avoided, the relationship is likely to be ruined. (Gottman, 2015, p. 18)

In many cases, couples confront the unreality of their idealized images of the relationship. One or both members of the couple try to make the other member conform to their unrealistic ideal. Then, when unsuccessful in this endeavor, they attempt to “get even” for the other person’s impertinence, stubbornness or ignorance in not understanding, acknowledging and/or abiding by this demand for ideal performance.

At yet another level, this confrontation may be engaged in different ways by each member of the couple. These differences might not be revealed (or at least not acknowledged) during the forming stage of the relationship. Avoidance might be the preference of one partner, while frequent and direct confrontation might be the preference of the other partner. How likely will it be that one member likes to “talk out” the conflict, while the other likes to “act it out.” Thus, we find that conflict can operate at multiple levels—making it that much “stormier.”

### Narcissus and Reality

Returning to the story of Narcissus, one could describe this second stage as the draining of the pond beside which Narcissus sat in admiring his own image. Suddenly (or gradually, depending on the couple) there is no longer an idealized mate on which one can project unacknowledged or unacceptable strengths and desires. We are standing there like Echo—having given up everything on behalf of our own idealized Narcissus. If we still have a voice, we might cry out in despair or anger.

We have been betrayed by that horrible fraud—and are unable to see (let alone accept) our own collusion in the creation of this fraudulent love of our life. Having been completely disillusioned, do we return to the forest, look for a new pond and love-interest, or fight it out with our Narcissus. And if we chose the third option, do we still feel sorry for our Narcissus and recognize that they are just as disillusioned and desperate as we are. Does compassion get mixed with anger? Does a dynamic (and sometimes destructive) mixture begin to brew?

As we depart from the world of Greek myth, we find that our real-life partner has become a real person, with real strengths and weaknesses. And with real needs. He or she is no longer on "good behavior." Our partner now exhibits all their psychological warts and blemishes. Each partner must find a way to accommodate their new love to the life they led before meeting this person. They must re-shift their attention back to work, back to their children by a previous marriage, back to their favorite hobbies, or back to their old friends and family members. We are no longer the "one-and-only."

In addition, the two partners must now face several important issues together for the first time. These issues revolve around several different domains or plates (to which we will devote considerable attention later in this book). Many couples find that the new home they purchased, which is supposed to bring contentment, actually heightens tensions in their relationship. The house has several flaws that were not noted before the house was purchased.

Each member of the couple blames the other for this oversight. Similarly, a new child brings not only joy, but also new stress. Who will take the baby to the doctor? Who will stay up with the baby when they have a fever? Who will change the baby's diapers? Both partners get a double dose of anger when changing the diapers. First, they hate dealing with the diapers. Second, they wonder why they are changing the diaper rather than their neglectful spouse.

For other couples, conflict may surface regarding finances, careers, political preferences or family relations. It often seems that several areas of conflict emerge at the same time, each exacerbating the other area(s) of conflict. I would suggest that this point of convergence often resides in the nature of control that exists in the couple's relationship. It is to be found in the distribution of power between the two members of a couple.

One of our guides, John Gottman, notes that there is a traditional (and often still compelling) distribution of power that favors the male (in a heterosexual relationship). If this is the case, then Gottman suggests that the male should begin



to share power in a more equitable manner. According to Gottman (2015, p. 116): “the happiest, most stable marriages in the long run were those in which the husband did not resist sharing power and decision making with the wife. When the couple disagreed, these husbands actively searched for common ground rather than insisting on getting their way.”

There is a broader observation made by Gottman that might apply to any couple (straight or gay):

Perhaps the fundamental difference between [those members of couples] who accept influence and those who don't is that the former have learned that often in life you need to yield in order to win. When you drive through any busy city, you encounter frustrating bottlenecks and unexpected barricades that block your rightful passage. You can take one of two approaches to these impossible situations. One is to stop, become righteously indignant, and insist that the offending obstacle move. The other is to drive around it. The first approach will eventually earn you a heart attack. The second approach—which I call yielding to win—will get you home.

If we follow Gottman's advice, then we “yield to win” when agreeing to change the baby's diaper or do the repair that is needed on our new home. Rather than blaming our partner for their “fault” in suggesting we buy this “damned house” and refusing to raise a hammer, we grab the hammer and begin fixing that “damned” loose board on the deck. Energy (and anger) are directed toward immediate action. At an important level, the couple has negotiated an equitable distribution of power regarding childcare and home repair. Partners are yielding to win.

## **Falling Out of Infatuation**

Our guide, Stephen Sondheim, offers a musical fairy tale called *Into the Woods*. In this musical we discover what happens when the prince and princess (be she Cinderella, Snow White or Sleeping Beauty) are living “happily ever after.” Among other things, the handsome prince loses interest in his attractive princess, despite the fact that she continues to look very beautiful. First of all, he no longer has something to dream about, to fight for, to snatch away from others who also desire her. The fair princess is now his alone. He has won the battle. There is little joy in the victory. Sondheim's two Prince Charmings (one married to Cinderella, the other to Snow White) sing a duet about their painful discovery that the chase may

be more interesting than the prize.

Our contemporary princes also discover that their beautiful brides have much more to offer than just a lovely countenance. Sleeping Beauty has something to say when she wakes up. Neither Cinderella nor Snow White are interested in spending the rest of their lives doing housework for an ungrateful and often untidy man. Contemporary Cinderellas want to return to school. They are too tired or too busy with schoolwork to attend grand balls.

Many Sleeping Beauties return to successful corporate positions that they held before going unconscious (falling in love). Snow White becomes active in community programs to eliminate discrimination against short people. Prince Charming is often not very charming at this point. He must adjust to the realities of his princess's new (or renewed) vision. Hopefully, he becomes just as enamored with these aspects of the princess as he was with her beauty or whatever characteristics (intelligence, wit, physical skills, etc.) originally attracted her to him.

If we can set the fairy tales aside for a few minutes, what happens in the real world when disillusionment sets in? Bessy and Bill found that they went through very hard times when the "newness" of their relationship wore off. Having been friends for quite a while before becoming lovers, Bessy and Bill found that the transition to a more formal, intimate commitment was not easy. Bessy acknowledged feeling very jealous and possessive of Bill. She had been very cranky and guarded during this stage.

Bill remembered the hard times that Bessy was having during this transitional stage. However, his primary memory was of the struggle to survive the financial problems they were facing. Bessy said that her jealousy was caused by the life they led. Bill was playing in a musical group and came home from work at 3 in the morning. They would eat "dinner" and Bill would get some sleep, waking up late in the morning. Their waking and sleeping hours never seemed to match.

The interviewer noted with considerable interest that Bill and Bessy seemed to soften up and speak more slowly when discussing this period in their life together—even though both saw it as a hard time. It seems to be a period when their true intimacy was forged. Like many other couples, a full commitment is only manifest when Bill and Bessy survived and worked through a period of crisis. It is often ironic that couples speak with greatest tenderness and mutual understanding about the most difficult periods in their relationship—and, in particular, the period when they are falling out of infatuation and into truly committed love.

During the power struggle in the life of a couple's development there is often growing recognition that 'you're not who I thought you were!' The illusion of unity is replaced by disillusionment. While Bill and Bessy went through their disillusionment after a transition from friendship to intimacy, Steve and Jane found out about disillusionment after going through a highly romantic courtship. They were never "just friends." They became lovers following their first summer together in the mountains, a school year of long-distance romance, and another summer together in the mountains,

Jane moved upstate to live in the same town as Steve. Steve found that Jane was no longer the queen of the mountain. While he was initially attracted to her as one of the first female mountain guides in the business, the goddess of the mountain was becoming a "Plain Jane" when he began relating to her in-person and in his own mundane backyard. In response to this disillusionment, Steve became involved with other women who more closely fit his imagined ideal.

Both Steve and Jane recall this time as "a year of hell." For her part, Jane was able to sustain a longer-term vision of the potential of their relationship even in the face of conflict and inequality: "I didn't want to break up!" The issue of creating a broader understanding of the world around her (a central ingredient in her initial attraction to Steve) remained-powerful for Jane. She saw herself as "still very naive."

## **Communications and Conflict**

We can assist Jane in her effort to become less naïve about her relationship with Steve by helping her understand why communications are so difficult and why many relationships break down precisely because of the communication challenges. We will specifically focus on four communication issues (or axioms) by returning to the insights offered by our guide, Paul Watzlawick and his colleagues (1967). These issues are: (1) the impossibility of not communicating, (2) the importance of both the content and relationship levels of communication, (3) the punctuation of event sequences in a relationship, (4) the important role played by different types of communication and (5) the important differences between symmetrical and complementary interactions.

We will briefly examine each of these axioms as they relate to the conflicts experienced by the couples we interviewed. Hopefully Jane (and Steve) are listening.

## Trying to Not Communicate

This first axiom suggests that no matter how one tries, he or she cannot avoid communicating. All activity or inactivity on behalf of the individual influences another in his or her presence.

Heather and Marianne fully recognize the communicative power of silence and address it before it gets out of hand. Marianne puts it this way: "I sometimes harbor things. Heather's better about getting stuff out in the open. But we always end up talking about it."

Heather adds her observations:

Yeah, we always do. If Marianne gets quiet, after a while I'll ask: "Are you alright?" And she'll say, "No, I'm not." And then we talk about it. We play this stupid game of Marianne being silent for a while. I know right away that something's going on but that seems to work for us. I give her a bit of time to be silent. It works for me to talk about it right away and I think that it would be better for Marianne if she'd talk about it right away too, but she thinks about it for a while in silence which is probably better.

Marianne chimes in: "and she flies off the handle more, which is probably better!" These two women have forged an effective, complementary relationship and an effective conflict management strategy. They appreciate the destructive role played by unacknowledged and unaddressed silence.

Virtually all the couples we interviewed communicated only a small portion of their messages through words. In general, the longer a couple has been an entity, the greater the percentage of total communication that seems to come through nonverbal modalities. Men and women who live together simply can't shut off their communication with one another.

As much as they would like to, they continue to communicate. Move to another room to get away from one's partner, and this communicates something. Find a few moments to get away from everything, and our partner gets a message (be it accurate or inaccurate). Snuggle up with our beloved and we communicate something to them without having to say anything.

## The Content and Relationship of Communication

The second axiom is closely related to the first. Any communication implies a commitment (of some form) to a relationship and thereby defines the relationship. Communication is used by all animals (including humankind) not only to transmit information but also to influence the behavior of other members of the same species. Gregory Bateson (1979) referred to these two aspects of communication as "report" and "command" functions.

Bateson used a neurophysiological analogy in defining these two critical functions. He described the linear firing of three neurons in the brain. According to Bateson, the firing of the second neuron is both a "report" that the first neuron has fired and a "command" that the third neuron also fire. The response (verbal or nonverbal) of Dave to the initial comments of Kathy provides an indication ("report") that Dave had in fact heard Kathy and is concerned enough about his relationship to respond to her statement. Dave's response is also an inducement ("command") for Kathy to respond, in turn, to him -- either verbally or nonverbally.

The "report" is synonymous with the content of any communication. The "command" aspect of the communication contains within it "information" as to the manner in which the communication is to be taken. The report obviously will have a direct effect in setting up or maintaining a particular relationship between the sender and the receiver. There exists an important relationship between the content (report) and the relationship (command) aspects of communication. Together, the report and command say something about the relative distribution of power in a relationship. Who offers the most information (report) that is influential (command)?

In their commitment to one another, Dave and Kathy have devised effective as well as ineffective ways of communicating together. When they are effective, Dave and Kathy can communicate about something outside of their relationship—for example, their work, their career interests, their avocations. They can also, however, communicate about their own relationship and, in particular, about their processes of communication. This ability to communicate about one's own processes of communication, is called "metacommunication". This process of metacommunication is based, in turn, on the concept of the couple as a third entity. Once two partners recognize that this third entity exists, then they can discuss their relationship as an identifiable and changeable entity.

In the case of Kathy and Dave, we found out that Kathy assumed a very passive, secondary role in her first, abusive marriage. In her second marriage (to Dave),

Kathy has assumed a much more dominant and controlling role. Perhaps this is one of the things that Kathy found attractive about Dave in the first place. Alternatively, this pattern of dominance may have developed later in the history of the couple when Kathy attempted to establish a safe relationship with Dave that would not be abusive to her.

The content of Kathy and Dave's communication is about many different things, the relational aspects of the communication, however, is mostly about Kathy's need for control and dominance in the relationship. She needed more than half of the power in order to feel safe. For this pattern to change, Kathy and Dave must be willing to "meta-communicate."

That is, they must be willing to talk about this pattern of control and dominance. They must talk about safety and be willing to consider the establishment and carefully mutual monitoring of an alternative pattern of communication. Such a change is not easy and is often the central point in a major remarriage process. This communication-focused remarriage often must occur if a couple (such as Kathy and Dave) is to endure and hopefully thrive.

## **Punctuation**

Paul Watzlawick and his associates identified a third axiom in all relationships that tends to be essential in the initiation, continuation and ultimately resolution of conflicts. This axiom, titled "punctuation", concerns the assignment of one-way causality to a sequence of events or behaviors.

To start, I will focus on the role played by punctuation in the Blame Game. Typically, when we are assigning blame, we assume that the other person took some action (or didn't take some action) that caused us to feel a certain way or act in a certain manner. Our partner in the relationship is likely to identify a different event or behavior that started things off in a conflictual manner and led to our current predicament. What one partner perceives to be their justifiable response to a stimulus evoked by the other partner may just as accurately be perceived by the other partner as a stimulus to their own subsequent response in a spiraling chain of events.

Delores and Bart's interactions illustrate this phenomenon. Punctuation plays an important role in ongoing conflicts regarding Delores's dramatic outbursts. Delores and Bart agree that Delores' personality tends toward the volatile. She is often loud and demonstrative. Her feelings are very much on the surface. By contrast, Bart

appears to be more reflective and quieter. His emotions are not so visible. Both attribute their current styles to their early family settings.

Delores had more or less adopted her family style, which she sees as loud and exuberant, but at the same time warm and loving. Bart, on the other hand, remembers his family as smoldering with unspoken hostility. When conflict was expressed, it was unleashed in a torrent of rage. In response, Bart places importance on the ability to disagree, but to do so in a reasoned, calm and quiet fashion. Their conflicts often center around these varying styles and how they are interpreted by each partner.

Delores indicates that "when I'm angry, you tend to take it personally and you shouldn't." Bart agrees:

Yeah, I do, because like I say, I think it goes back to earlier days when people had those feelings, usually they were expressing feelings they had about one another, and not just a personal conflict. . . I interpret the yelling and the screaming and the slamming of things with not just a casual, "This is how I'm feeling right now. Just leave me alone," but with more of a deep-seated moodiness . . . anger.

Delores and Bart have worked hard to overcome these differences in interpretations of Delores' anger. Delores suggests that he is getting better at understanding her anger:

Delores: like, the other night, when I was trying to get the defuser on the hair dryer and I was [growling] and you just . . .

Bart: I just watch her do her things and make some suggestions . . .

Delores: I think you're getting better at dealing with that.

Bart: Well, sometimes it seems a little less personal. It seems a little less directed at me. That was something that was very obviously directed at the hair dryer, and it was apparent you weren't angry at me.

Delores: That's something you do . . . tend to do quite a bit, is when I'm angry.

Bart: I take it personally . . .

Delores: You take it personally and you shouldn't.

Bart: I've come to understand that is the way Delores communicates . . .

Delores; But I've taken on some of your style too. Like when I go home and I'm around my mother and my sister. God, they seem so loud . . .

Bart: But you were as loud or louder years ago. You were spunkier than them both combined.

Until recently, Delores's anger, though not actually directed at Bart, was interpreted by him in a personal manner (in part because anger in his own family was often disguised and expressed indirectly). He reacted by becoming defensive and often sarcastic. This, in turn, provoked Delores toward further anger, this time truly directed at Bart. The conflict escalated, each seeing the other as being responsible for starting and fueling the fire.

Delores and Bart can escape this angry embrace in part because they have developed the ability to communicate with one another about their communication (meta-communication). These have been difficult skills to acquire. Early in their relationship, Delores and Bart's differing backgrounds and styles of communication caused them some major discomfort. Delores recalls that:

Especially when we were first married, we used to just go to opposite ends of the spectrum. Bart would just completely clam up and say "I'm fine, everything is fine" and I'd be just screaming my head off, saying "No, it's not, goddammit!" We got to kind of a crisis situation, where we were just fighting all the time and I came home one day and said, "I think we better go see somebody."

At this point, Delores and Bart went through their own remarriage process. They visited a therapist for about four months and continued to go back when they felt the need for "a tune up." This experience helped them refine the tools they needed to more effectively share how they communicate and how their personal styles of communication shaped their interactions.

By learning to recognize and talk about their respective styles, by learning to break an escalating chain of events, by taking "time out" when either partner requests (in order to pursue their discussion after emotions have calmed), Delores and Bart learned to step outside the invisible constraints of their interaction. They cease to be ruled by unspoken assumptions and emotions. Delores and Bart communicate (and often "meta-communicate") in a more mutually satisfying manner.

In many cases, the partners in a relationship will disagree about the punctuation of their communication pattern. Like Delores and Bart, the partners will have to find ways to "meta-communicate" about these differences in punctuation. Other couples



agree completing on the punctuation of their communication. In this agreement, however, one often finds a conspiracy of silence—for the agreed upon punctuation hides some of the underlying and often times destructive aspects of their communication pattern.

When describing their life together, Dave and Sheila describe the "meltdowns" that sometimes occur in their relationship. The process begins when things are going bad for Dave. He indicates that he copes by just "hunkering down." Like many men we interviewed, Dave becomes focused on a goal ("tunnel vision") and is emotionally detached from Sheila.

At this point in time, according to Dave, Sheila (like Delores) often becomes emotionally upset, sometimes crying, without directly speaking to him about her concerns. As Sheila puts it:

Well, I have to kind of buckle myself down to cope when I don't have him to talk to, don't have my usual outlet for frustration and satisfaction. And I can only do that for so long. I can keep myself really well controlled for a while. Then I can't do it anymore. That's when I melt down and get real emotional.

In reaction to Sheila's emotionality, Dave becomes even more focused and detached. He feels guilty because Sheila's "meltdown" is his fault. Yet, he also seems to be resentful of Sheila's lack of support for his own personal problems. While Dave sees his coping strategy as pulling in and focusing, Sheila sees it as an emotional withdrawal from her.

It is important to note that the couple seems to have agreed upon the punctuation of this process: Dave hunkers down, Sheila melts down, conflict arises, and reconnection is made. This sequence of events does serve to alleviate conflict. Dave expresses his sense of guilt about causing the meltdown and Sheila responds by accepting his responsibility.

Sheila indicated during the interview that she does not see herself as responsible for Dave's "emotional withdrawal." Dave indicated that: "whereas, often times, when she gets like this [meltdown], I feel like it's my fault. I ask: what did I do?" This agreed upon punctuation serves a reconciling function for the couple and thus helps to keep the couple together.

However, it is not at all clear from the description Dave and Sheila offer that this sequence is always what occurs. It is just as likely that Dave's hunkering down is a response to Sheila's mounting emotional demands. Much of the reason for the

agreed punctuation lies in the differing levels of responsibility that are assumed by each party. Dave and Sheila seem unwilling to acknowledge Sheila's own culpability in the precipitation of their conflict.

## Digital and Analogical Messages

Humans have two ways of communicating. They can define things precisely in terms of yes/no, good/bad and right/wrong categories. Much of the content aspects of communication is conveyed in this *digital* manner: "It is cold today." "You should wear your gloves—if you're going out in this weather." "I think that we shouldn't go out to dinner with Fred and Tamara tonight, given that it's so cold outside." These are digital statements that speak to facts in the world. Typically, digital statements are verbal, verifiable (you said so and so, didn't you?) and subject to confirmation (is it really cold outside and should this influence my decision regarding glove or evening activities?)

A second type of communication is much subtler. Meaning is conveyed through tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions, posture and so forth. These statements usually concern the relationship itself rather than the content of the communication. This *analogical* type of communication gives one a sense of more or less rather than distinct notions about what is or is not the case (digital).

We speak a little louder to add emphasis to a statement we have made. A loud declaration, "It is cold today!" is quite different from a statement made in a matter-of-fact manner that "it is cold today." Similarly, my request that you wear your gloves today can be conveyed as a casual recommendation or as a forceful command solely as a result of the tone of voice and related nonverbal cues. Power is often conveyed analogically.

All of our interviews, of course, were conducted in a digital, verbal medium. I have quoted the words spoken by both members of the couple. Only occasionally have I commented on the tone of voice or gestures that accompany these words. Yet, this is certainly not the full story. In the case of Kathy and Dave, the interviewer felt that Kathy's voice was very demanding and often quite "whiney" whereas Dave conveyed a clear sense of resignation with an underlying expression of exasperation and strained patience.

Do Kathy and Dave hear these messages in each other's voice? Have they ever heard these messages? What do they do about these messages if they are heard? Many couples retain the *status quo* by choosing to ignore these messages, or at least

never commenting to one another (meta-communicating) about what these messages seem to be saying about the relationship. An examination of this rich, analogical information is quite risky. A remarriage process often is needed to precipitate this type of discussion.

## **Symmetry/Complementarity**

The final axiom of communication concerns the nature of the relationship between two partners. This is another area of communication where our guide, Gregory Bateson (1972), has something to say. In this case, Bateson turns (as an anthropologist) not to two people who are relating to one another but instead to the interaction between two societies. He uses two fancy words to label the way two tribes might interact. They might engage similar behaviors. As one tribe becomes more assertive or even aggressive, the other tribe also becomes more assertive or aggressive.

This reciprocal pattern is called *Symmetrical Schizogenesis*. We find it operating in more “advanced” civilizations when two countries counter each other’s belligerent rhetoric with their own belligerence, or counters each other by building more missiles or tanks. Escalation is the name of the game. Positive feedback loops prevail. Each increase on the part of one party is met with an increase on the part of the second party. A positive feedback loop can’t be sustained: explosion and mutual elimination is inevitable.

By contrast, Bateson identifies an inter-tribal interaction that leads one tribe to do the opposite of what the other tribe has done. One tribe becomes more assertive or aggressive. The other tribe becomes more submissive and placating. Rather than an arms-race, there is a series of peace offerings or sacrifice of land, property or esteem on the part of those who placate. The placating tribe often hopes that the “mean and evil” tribe will be satisfied and will go away with its newly acquired treasures and leave. Perhaps the placating tribe will then be left alone.

This process is labeled *Complimentary Schizogenesis*. Like the dynamics operating in a symmetrical relationship, the complimentary arrangement is also unlikely to hold up for long. The submissive party loses everything and ceases to have an independent identity. Conquest and occupation take place. However, there is often a second act to this narrative of victory. The submissive party will often eventually absorb the intruding party. While the conquerors might occupy the territory of the other party, they will never truly capture the minds and hearts of those whom they

have vanquished. Typically, the skills needed to win battles are unrelated to the skills needed to govern and convert.

We can turn from the world of intertribal and international warfare and politics to the warfare and politics to be found within enduring, intimate relationship. We find that similar dynamics are operating and there are similar outcomes (though, of course, at a much smaller scale). In symmetrical interactions, partners tend to mirror one another. Emphasis is placed on minimizing the inherent differences between the two partners.

Conversely, in complementary interactions, partners attempt to achieve a maximization of differences. One assumes the superior ("one-up") position, while the other adopts the inferior, secondary or "one-down" position. Neither the symmetrical nor complimentary relationship is likely to hold up for long. Conflict is likely to break out. A remarriage might take place. Alternatively, the relationship becomes stagnant and most of the energy devoted to the relationship by both parties goes into preserving this stagnation—at the expense of any remaining vitality, pleasure or intimacy.

Kathy and Dave's relationship is clearly complementary in nature, with Dave serving in a one down position to Kathy. Ironically, both of these people seemed to have also created a complementary relationship in their first marriages, with both Kathy and Dave serving in "one-down" positions. Both parties typically help to build the symmetrical or complementary relationship. It takes "two to tango" and two to form either kind of relationship.

Kathy must not only assume a "one-up" position. Dave must also agree to assume a "one-down" position. Furthermore, he must find some indirect gratification for this "one-down" position. Otherwise, they would both be competing for dominance and a symmetrical relationship would be formed. Alternatively, neither might wish to be dominant and a relationship of mutuality and partnership might emerge.

We found that some enduring couples seem to relate easily to one another in stable complementary or symmetrical relationships. Other couples have found ways to be together than are more flexible. The partners will shift the nature of their relationship depending on the issue being faced. Power shifts based on each partner's ability to do something about this issue. One of the partners, for instance, might be particularly skillful in managing the social calendar while the other partner is fully qualified to manage home repairs and improvements.

## Learning How to Manage Conflict

Rebecca and Bart are very clear about their style of fighting and see both advantages and disadvantages in the way they have decided to get angry with one another. Rebecca begins by offering her perspective:

Oh, we talk. Usually one of us gets mad, and then we talk about it. Sometimes, the one that is mad will keep it inside for a while and then there will be an explosion and then we talk about it. And then, sometimes after the explosion, we won't talk until the anger has worn off a little. The rare situation is when I get too involved in something. I have to write Bart a letter because when I try to talk to him, I get so emotional that I can't say all the things I want to say.

Bart is somewhat more quantitative in his analysis of their fighting behavior:

78% of the time I persuade her to agree with me. 14% of the time she persuades me to agree. 8% of the time we agree to disagree and 1% of the time we disagree and smolder and smoke for a while.

Rebecca then points out that she often gets mad at Bart (as was the case with many women we interviewed) precisely because of the way in which he gets mad:

There may be something bothering him, but he will hold it in and then fly off the handle at the first thing that frustrates him. I want to tell him to just go for a walk! We both are fatigued because of the kids and that is what seems to precipitate most of the fights -- our fatigue. Sometimes, the kids just get out of hand and neither one of us wants to deal with it, but we have to. We get really tired of not having an out.

### How Do We Fight With One Another?

The description offered by Rebecca and Bart resonates with the descriptions offered by many of the other couples we interviewed. Typically, they use a variety of fighting tactics—ranging from silent treatment to time off from one another to outright warfare. Frequently, as in the case of many couples, their fights result in part from (or are at least amplified by) other people and situations in their lives—often their children. Finally, as with many couples, we find that many of the fights between Bart and Rebecca concern the process of fighting itself (the

metacommunication processes that I previously identified)

In essence, Rebecca was getting angry about Bart's anger and, in particular, the way in which he expresses his anger. This "second-order" anger is particularly destructive in a relationship because it rapidly escalates. First, Bart gets angry and hides his anger only to express it later in an indirect way. Rebecca gets angry because Bart never expressed his anger in the first place.

Bart is likely to be very confused about Rebecca's anger since it isn't directed at anything that he can see or feel. Its anger directed at a process rather than any specific content. Given his confusion, Bart is likely once again to get angry. Yet he is even more likely to hide this anger because he is afraid of receiving even more of Rebecca's anger. Thus, the cycle begins again, typically at a rapid and volatile level. Bart's later, indirect anger fuels Rebecca's renewed anger regarding Bart's inability to immediately express his anger.

Fortunately, Rebecca and Bart seem to have sufficient trust and flexibility in their relationship that they can shift to other modes of fighting. For example, Rebecca writes a letter rather than talking directly to Bart. Or Bart takes a walk to "cool off". In this way, they defuse the escalating condition. Other couples are less fortunate, having no other modes of fighting in their repertoire. They have little trust in the willingness or ability of their partner to monitor their own feeling; hence, they can't enter into a thoughtful and detached period of deliberation or negotiation regarding the sources of their anger and fighting.

Arlene and Kevin talked about how difficult the first months of their relationship were because of Kevin's insecurities. They were not sure whether the relationship was going to survive the first year. Arlene said that it was really horrible because it seemed like they were fighting all the time: "Kevin was so insecure and possessive concerning my time and who I spent it with, that I almost ended the relationship several times. I just felt like I was suffocating." She says that their emotions were so strong then that it was a bit frightening. One moment the two of them could be so happy and the next moment they were screaming at each other. The arguments almost always ended with both crying and apologizing to each other for the terrible things that had been said.

Arlene is still amazed when she reflects on how petty the were arguments—yet how much emotion the two of them put into them. For both Kevin and Arlene many of the "petty" arguments may have been fueled by their mutual falling out of infatuation. Kevin had compared their relationship during its early months to *Wuthering Heights*. Surely, no real relationship could hold up under this kind of

super romantic pretension. In addition, they had to acknowledge and work with major differences that exist in their interpersonal needs. Kevin wanted romance, reassurance and commitment. Arlene needed independence and she wanted realism in their relationship.

## **What is Working for Us?**

With time, Arlene and Kevin have come to better understand each other and the source of each other's "triggers." The two of them still argue, but now the arguments are much more constructive. They are better able to recognize when they are upset because of a specific situation and when they are upset with one another. Now that they know themselves and each other better, it's much easier to understand and deal with frustrations and disagreements.

Arlene has learned that when Kevin is upset, it is better to give him his space so that he will have the opportunity to solve his own problems. In the past, Arlene has always wanted to rush in and make everything okay. Today, their arguments are more likely to end in a compromise rather than degenerate into pettiness. This is not to say that Kevin and Arlene don't still fight about trivial things, but now it is easier to recognize when this is happening. They usually end up joking about it.

The relationship that existed between John and Nancy during their early years together was just as turbulent as Arlene and Kevin's. According to John: "one of the big problems in our early marriage was that I would say things to Nancy that would hurt her, but she wouldn't tell me. She would just withdraw." Nancy agreed: "Yes, I would have to stand back and sort of lick my wounds, whereas for him when it was over, it was over."

"Now," John continued, "she's learned to say, 'I have a headache,' when she doesn't feel well. And I say, 'You poor dear, why don't you go to bed, or take an aspirin or something?'" While this still keeps John and Nancy in traditional masculine and feminine roles, Nancy is at least describing her needs and disclosing that she feels ill. Previously, she wouldn't communicate to John that she had a headache and John would perceive her as being lazy or inconsiderate of his own needs.

After a marriage seminar, Nancy became more open in her communications. John now has more information and can be more considerate of Nancy's needs. Remnants of the old, traditional pattern in their relationship remain. Nancy often still feels she is being ignored by John and he often still tears her down in front of other people, despite efforts at more open communication:

I constantly criticized myself, Nancy and our relationship. That criticism tore down her self-image. But she never said, 'Hey, you're destroying me,' Now I've learned, and I can usually tell when my kidding or comments are hurting her. When her self-image is high, I can tease her and say, 'You're no good,' and she can laughingly reply, 'yeah, but I'm twice as good as you are.' We both know it's a big joke and everything is okay. But if her self-image is low, she believes every negative word. Sometimes I misjudge where she's at and she will tell me, 'that hurts' and I'll back off. So, we have both grown.

Communication seems to be a critical factor in helping this couple move through their storming stage. John was comfortable in being sarcastic and critical of other people. Nancy was not comfortable, but rarely told John of her concerns. With more open communication, John began to modify his behavior. He also began to express more positive feelings, along with his usual negative feelings. Nancy indicates that he now lets her know every day that he loves her: "I'm afraid that before I was like that guy who said, 'I told you when I married you that I loved you, and if anything changes, I'll let you know.'"

### **Fighting About How to Fight: Establishing the Contest Rules**

As I have already noted, some of the most difficult conflicts engaged by many couples concern the very process of conflict itself. Two warring tribes come together to negotiate a set of rules regarding the way in which they will combat (or at least compete with) one another. These are the "terms of engagement" and "rules of warfare."

Similarly, couples must find a way (at least informally and often tacitly) to battle with one another. How are we going to fight and about what is it legitimate to fight in this relationship? The rules of the contest must be established if each partner is to feel safe and acknowledged in the relationship. This is the part of meta-communication we discussed previously. It is often associated with the remarriage process.

Frequently, as in the case of Tina and Ben, the real, underlying issue is the very existence of the relationship itself: "is this relationship worth fighting for or can either of us simply run away if the going gets tough." If the relationship is worth fighting for then it is also worth determining how the fighting should occur—and about what it is worth fighting.



For instance, when asked: "who makes the decision in this relationship," Ben indicated that he makes "decisions about things that are very important to me -- the kids, about my life and myself. Everything else Tina decides. I don't feel very strongly about most things, just the kids and myself." Tina disagreed: "I think that Ben makes most of the important decisions and I get to make most of the trivial ones. Ben has decided that I shouldn't go to [the Midwest] with him to visit his kids and that we shouldn't get married. I decided where we went to dinner last night and I picked the last movie we went to."

Ben offers the key to understanding their relationship (or non-relationship) at this point: "Some decisions you can't make mutually. There are decisions that I need to make for myself, whether it is about my children or about getting married." Tina agrees in part, but offers a very insightful comment about their failure to establish equitable rules of conflict:

About the marriage thing, you are right, you have to decide what is right for you; [however] you so often make unilateral decisions that affect me. I just wish you would talk to me about what is going on more, so that we could negotiate things out. Same old stuff -- you focus on the content. I'm more interested in the process, and you draw me into the content. So, I end up arguing with you on your turf.

Tina goes on to offer several specific suggestions concerning the problem she is having with the way in which they fight (or don't fight):

Sometimes, Ben, I don't even disagree with your decision about something, like inviting Steve and Betty to join us for dinner the other night. I just get upset that you make unilateral decisions that affect me without discussing them with me first. But you kept on focusing on whether or not I liked Steve and Betty and wouldn't I enjoy having them. That wasn't the point, and for some reason that is so hard for you to see.

Part of the problem for Tina and Ben concerns the sequencing of actions leading up to a conflict. A couple's interpretation of each other's action (the process of punctuation that we discussed above) is often a critical first element in any successful resolution of conflicts. If the two partners can't agree on the origins of their conflict or at least agree to disagree on the punctuation, then they are unlikely to get very far in either managing the conflict or solving the problem(s) underlying the conflict. They are also unlikely to reduce the chance that this conflict will frequently reoccur.

For Tina and Ben, punctuation problems center on Ben saying that Tina wants "to push things and talk about the process which I don't care about and want to drop. Because you push it, I drop it." Conversely, Tina notes (with some humor, fortunately) that "because you drop things, I push them."

For Ben, "dropping things" usually means disengagement from Tina. In response, Tina says: "You know a lot of the time I just choose not to communicate at all. I just go into the study, close the door and am alone." As we noted above, it is impossible not to communicate in an intimate relationship. Ben is communicating to Tina when he disengages and Tina is fully aware of this: "Well, you may think we're not communicating because you aren't speaking and I leave you alone, but your communication is clear. You want to be left alone and I respond by acknowledging that and don't come in the room or talk to you."

Ben's detachment, however, is also communicating to Tina about his unilateral decision-making. Ben chooses to isolate himself, leaving Tina to adjust to his way of dealing with conflict—much as she must deal with his unilateral decision to see his children without her and to invite guests over for dinner. As Tina notes, it is not the content of the conflicts that is so disturbing to her; rather, it is the way in which conflicts are addressed (or more accurately not addressed). Ben's unilateral decisions regarding his disengagement from the conflict is disturbing, Ben's actions are inherently unfair to her and their relationship. Power is unequally distributed.

Betty and George exemplify many of the same problems with conflict that are experienced by Tina and Ben, as well as many of the other couples we interviewed. Betty and George have lived together many more years (forty-three) than have Tina and Ben, yet they still struggle with rules to govern their own storming periods of conflict. When asked how they handle their disagreements, Betty mentioned that if George has a number of things that he needs to get off his chest, she just lets him blow off his steam, so that he will simmer down.

George, on the other hand, indicates that when they disagree, he tends to "give in" to Betty: "I try to irk her a little sometimes. But I give her whatever she wants." Betty disagrees with George's assessment, indicating that she tends to back down when in disagreement with George because her mother told her: "Don't ever get mad at the same time." Betty claims that she tends to get silent when she is very angry and remains silent for a long time. When asked how he deals with this silence, George indicated that "I just let it roll off my back and wait." This, in turn, makes Betty even more angry: "He doesn't even get bothered by it."

Clearly, Betty and George get trapped in their own escalating conflicts. He tends to

express his anger, but she, simply lets it pass and then doesn't remember what she was going to do anyway, which might further anger George. She tends to stop communicating when she is angry, which leads George to withdraw from her. This makes her even more angry. What keeps these escalating conflicts from blowing apart this long-lasting couple?

Like George and Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf*, this couple has constructed certain control mechanisms that bring escalating conflicts to an end. Typically, Betty will give in to George's wishes, unless there is a financial issue, in which case Betty's acknowledged expertise (and George's expressed fears about money) takes precedence over George's need for control. Betty acknowledges that George "is in control. I was brought up that way and that's the way it is."

Outside the interview, Betty disclosed that in the past, there was another control mechanism that she employed when conflict got out of hand (and George became physically abusive). She warned George that if he ever hit her or the children, she would leave him. In their early life together, they both had an absolute commitment to their children's happiness and would find life without the children to be intolerable. Thus, the threat of leaving George without any access to the children was strong and helped to bring escalating conflicts to a close.

These two governing mechanisms -- the man's right to have a final say and the woman's right to leave with custody of the children--were quite prevalent among many heterosexual couples during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. Today, these mechanisms tend to be dysfunctional. Women do not automatically defer to their husbands, nor are women automatically given sole custody of their children. Thus, new ways must be found to terminate escalating conflict--or the couple must find a strategy for resolving conflict that cuts off the escalation before it begins.

### **The "Twenty-Four Hour" Rule**

We will leave this world of sometimes unresolved conflict and turmoil by turning to one couple that seems to have done a very effective job of managing their conflicts. They taught us their "twenty-four hour" rule. When asked how they have been able to maintain harmony and happiness in their marriage, Chuck and Terry point to their commitment to discuss things together (Terry: "we have a rule of not going to bed pissed at each other") and, in particular, their "twenty-four hour" rule. According to Chuck:

We . . . have a twenty-four hour rule. If you're angry about something but don't bring it up within 24 hours, then the issue is

dropped. It's not fair to store up things that you are angry about and expect to deal with it two weeks later. Being able to communicate is real important.

While Chuck and Terry are both rather youthful idealists (being in their early 30s) and have only been together for eight years, they offer a very intriguing rule. Each partner is required not only to recognize that a problem exists, but also to decide whether or not this problem is important enough to discuss with their partner. They know that they can't store up their grievances, nor can they simply hold off in deciding whether or not to bring up the problem.

We might all be able to benefit from the wisdom of this young couple and devise our own ways of surfacing our conflicts, deciding what is and is not important, and playing fair in the fights that we do have. While there is no cookbook recipe for one ideal method of communicating in the storming stage of relationships, many of our enduring couples demonstrated an ability to articulate their feelings, needs and desires. They often shift patterns of managing conflict and emerge from a storming stage with a negotiated set of behaviors that will better serve them in the future as they face new challenges as a couple.

## **A Therapist's Perspective on Storming**

I have focused on communication when asking for assistance from our guides. I do this because I believe that communication provides the foundation for all effective relationships. It is what gets us connected to other people and what gets us in trouble. While Watzlawick is not primarily involved with couples' therapy, he and his colleagues (members of the so-called Palo Alto Group) do offer an important form of "strategic" therapy that was strongly influenced by the work of Gregory Bateson, one of our other guides for this book. I turn to one of our other guides, John Gottman, for his own views on the nature of conflict in an enduring relationship and on ways to address this conflict.

## **Solvable and Perpetual Storms**

Gottman (2015, p. 142) first draws an important distinction between problems that are solvable and those that are not ("perpetual"). He (Gottman, 2015, p. 139) offers a succinct statement: "Marriages are successful to the degree that the problems you choose are ones you can cope with." For Gottman (2015, p. 139), successful couples "intuitively understand that some difficulties are inevitable, much the way

chronic physical ailments are unavoidable as you get older. . . . We may not enjoy having these problems, but we are able to cope by avoiding situations that worsen them and by developing strategies and routines that help ease them.”

This means that one of the first steps to be taken in managing the storms in our enduring relationships is to discern which storms will inevitably swirl around our relationship during our entire life and which can be addressed and resolved immediately or over a relatively short period of time. Gottman (2015, p. 142) suggests that solvable problems tend to be those that are less painful, gut-wrenching, or intense than storming issues that are perpetual.

Put in more immediate terms, we might find that solvable storms are “no big deal” and are nothing “to lose sleep over.” That doesn’t mean that these solvable issues can be deferred or resolved by sullen silence. They can become perpetual storms if allowed to swirl around us in an unabated manner. The swirl might lead to the collapse of trust and caring. “You don’t really give a damn about this matter—meaning that you don’t really care about me!”

The swirling might also lead to the formation of what I have identified as an attractor basis in the couple’s relationship. I previously introduced this concept of strange attractors and attractor basins when seeking to understand what occurs when two people are falling in love (“limerence”). This same dynamic might be operating in a couple’s later encounter with a deferred solvable problem. A whole bunch of solvable problems that have been ignored come together as one big perpetual problem. “There you go again!” “Suddenly, I am reminded of the time when you were just as stubborn about xxxx.” “You are doing it one more time! I’m sick and tired of the way in which you xxxxx!”

At times, we avoid addressing a solvable problem because it always leads us as a couple to what Gottman (2015, p. 140) identifies as Gridlock. Here is his graphic portrayal of gridlock and its destructive outcomes:

In unstable marriages, perpetual problems like these eventually kill the relationship. Instead of coping with the problem effectively, the couple get *gridlocked* over it. They have the same conversation about it over and over again: They just spin their wheels, resolving nothing. Because they make no headway they feel increasingly hurt, frustrated, and distrustful of each other. The four horsemen [criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling], become ever more present when they argue while humor and affection become less so.

I would add to what Gottman has observed that the gridlock is likely to attract other issues with which the couple is grappling. As in the case of solvable problems that are ignored, a set of perpetual problems can come together and help to create the gridlock. Much like an avalanche that pulls in rocks and snow from surrounding areas when crashing down a mountain slope, so does gridlock pick up surrounding grievances and examples of dysfunctional communication.

In this case, the gridlock moves nowhere but instead remains stubbornly immobile while attracting negative feelings and memories. Scientists who study chaos and complexity identify this as a stable attractor basin. The gridlock might even, as with limerence, tap into a peremptory ideation that has been activated by some other moment of tension and disfunction in the relationship. The gridlock could itself be the initial source of this peremptory ideation. The storm becomes a “perfect storm” which grows in intensity and longevity. The gridlock must be broken or “all hell with break loose”.

I return to Gottman (2015, p. 140), who describes the growing intensity of a gridlock:

[The gridlocked couple] grow all the more entrenched in their positions. Gradually they feel physiologically overwhelmed. When a couple face gridlock, they may attempt to improve the situation by slowly isolating or enclosing the problem area—for example, by tacitly agreeing not to notice or discuss it. They may say, "Let's just agree to disagree." They shove it under the rug, but it becomes, in the words of our great poet Robert Creeley a place where "the rug bunches." As much as they try to remember to sidestep that place on the rug, they trip over it again and again.

Elsewhere in *Seven Principles*, Gottman (2015, p. 45) introduces the concept of feedback loops. This concept certainly applies here with regard to gridlocks. Entrenchment increases because of a tight positive (intensifying) feedback loop involving physiological overwhelm, isolation, frustration and anger. The lump in the rug grows exponentially larger and the stumbles by both partners over the lump becomes more frequent—as does the anger directed at one’s partner for “causing” this lump in the rug. And the anger is sucked into the rug so that it might be added to the lump. The storm intensifies. The avalanche grows larger. Perpetuity sets in.

## **Puzzles, Problems, Dilemmas and Mysteries**

To further assist this process of discerning between solvable and perpetual storms, I will offer a distinction between what I call puzzles, problems, dilemmas and mysteries (Bergquist and Mura, 2011). Puzzles are those stormy issues that have immediate answers. In other words, they are solvable problems. We only need to skirt the “blame game” (Watzlawick’s punctuation issues) and find the solution. For instance, we might get into an argument with our partner about why the keys to our car(s) are always missing. “Where did you leave them! But you drove the car last! No I didn’t!” The answer might be something as simple as installing a hook where all of the keys are placed—or at least a bureau top or spot in the kitchen where keys are always to be found.

There is always a recognizable solution when an issue turns out to be a puzzle. We can both agree that the puzzle has (or has not) been solved. Are the keys always easy to find? If not, then the issue might be something more than we originally thought was the case. Why do we keep forgetting to put the keys on the hook? A new puzzle (or problem) has been identified and must be addressed. It might be that we are facing a problem rather than a puzzle. A problem differs from a puzzle in that there are usually multiple levels to the issue being addressed. Furthermore, it is often unclear about when the problem has been solved. A problem does belong in Gottman’s solvable category—but it might take a little longer to solve.

For instance, it might be a matter of possessing only a single set of keys for the car. Perhaps, a second set of keys makes sense. The issue might now reside at a deeper level. Who gets “ownership” of the car at any one time of day or for any one purpose? If there is only one set of keys, then it is only a matter of grabbing the keys before our partner snatches them!! With multiple sets of keys, the matter must be resolved via negotiation rather than “brute force.”

Many of the important issues we address with our partners turn out to be problems rather than puzzles. We must acknowledge this fact and uncover the multiple levels at which this problem resides. Furthermore, we must recognize that gridlock can occur at any one level of the multi-tiered problem. When this gridlock occurs, it is hard to work at any level, for the gridlock usually spreads to all levels. It seems that gridlocks can rarely be avoided by moving to another level. They must be addressed head on.

What about dilemmas and mysteries? These big stormy issues typically reside in

Gottman's perpetual category. They are never solved. They must be endured—like Gottman's acute illnesses associated with growing older. Dilemmas are to be found when couples are in conflict regarding priorities. Struggles regarding the use of an automobile might finally be attributed to the priority assigned by one partner to their personal health (I need the car for my trip to the gym), while the other partner thinks the health of their child is more important (I need the car to take Jimmy to the playground).

Perpetual dilemmas often reside at an even deeper level. Maybe it is just a matter of how precious end-of-day time is being spent: "I want to spend time with you talking about my workday and you just want to watch television." Even deeper is the matter of life priorities: "Is your career advancement more important than our marriage?"

We often find that polarities reside at the heart of a dilemma. This means that we keep swinging back and forth between one side of the issue and then the other side (Johnson, 1996). "I set aside time from my work (career advancement) so that we might find time for a vacation (marriage). However, I find that I am spending all of my time during the vacation worrying about the work that is piling up and the mess I will be facing when I return home." On the other side, is the partner who looks forward to the vacation. They immediately begin to feel guilty about increasing their partner's stress about work. The vacation is ruined for both partners, the work suffers, and the marriage is worst off.

The key to addressing these polarities is setting aside some time and directing attention to the positive side of each polarity. We must acknowledge the benefits for both partners in the career advancement of one partner (or perhaps both partners). We must also acknowledge the many benefits associated with a nurturing relationship. Rather than dipping into the negatives inevitably associated with each polarity, we focus on how to ensure that each priority is maintained. New ways might even be found to jointly support each polarity. A focus on the negative will inevitably lead to Gottman's gridlock. And this gridlock can ruin vacations, increase work-related stress, and send an intimate relationship into a tailspin.

For instance, can we set aside time for concentrated focus on work (perhaps at home) followed by a wonderful dinner at a local restaurant where work-related accomplishments can be celebrated? A vacation might then be planned that is preceded and followed by some uninterrupted time when each partner gets their work ready to be set aside or when they can catch up on their work upon return from the vacation. As in the case of puzzles and problems, the key is to avoid the



“blame game” and to engage in conversations that are constructive (using the axioms that our guide, Paul Watzlawick, has offered).

We turn finally to the mysteries we are facing in our enduring relationships. These range from the challenges facing us with our newborn child to the challenges facing us as we prepare for the aging process and eventually the death of one partner. Mysteries cannot be solved. They must be endured. Sometimes they bring great joy (the birth of a child) and at other times great sorrow (the death of a loved ones). We must together acknowledge that there is nothing to solve here. Yet, we must also recognize that these mysteries create a whole lot of puzzles, problems and mysteries that can be solved.

## **Gottman Calms the Storm**

Having identified the nature of the conflict and the issue being addressed, there should be no problem in calming the storm. Right? Wrong. The conflict has to be addressed through what Gottman writes about as emotional intelligence—which women often seems to have more of than men. To assist in this application of emotional intelligence, Gottman (2015, pp. 160-194) offers a six-step process.

*Step One: Soften your Start-Up:* The difference between most women and men is apparent at this first step. Gottman (2015, p. 162) notes that women (wives) are “far more likely than the husband [men] to bring up a touchy issue and push to resolve it. [Men] are more likely to try to distance themselves from hard-to-face concerns. “We men like to hide in a cave and the women are likely to come in after us. Gottman offers we men a bit of compassion. It seems that men are likely to experience emotional flooding than are women.

Gottman suggests that the woman should leave the four horsemen at the entrance of the cave. Criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling are not welcomed in the cave. Gottman offers a standard list of constructive statements to start the conversation. The woman (or an emotionally intelligent man) should offer a description of their current undesirable condition (and accompanying feelings) as well as what is needed to resolve this undesirable condition.

They should not be in the business of assigning blame. Disclosures such as: “I feel . . . “ or “I need . . . “ are appropriate. Statement should begin with “I” rather than “You”. A description of what happened rather than evaluation or judgment is essential—and remember Watzlawick’s warning about punctuation. A description might be accurate—but it might not tell the whole story.

There is an even more fundamental set of guidelines for the start-up. These include the simple act of being polite and clear about your needs. It includes the non-storing up principle: don't let the snowpack grow too large or there will be a major avalanche (and remember that an unresolved issue can be a strange attractor that recruits other grievances).

In my opinion, there is something that is even more fundamental. This is appreciation. As Gottman (2015, p. 168) notes: "If your partner has handled this situation better in the past, then couch your request within an appreciation of what your partner did back then and how much you miss that now."

*Step Two: Learn to Make and Receive Repair Attempts:* In the earlier chapter on remarriage, I brought in Gottman's concept of repair attempts. I mentioned that these attempts can lead to a mini remarriage or to a major remarriage. Gottman (2015, p. 175) is suggesting that during this second step one should become a bit formal—especially because repair attempts tend to be "engulfed in negativity."

We should write down our grievances and identify phrases to use that are clear and non-defensive. This list should include statements about what I feel, about how I can feel safe in discussing this matter with my partner, about my own personal regrets (and a recognition of my own role in contributing to the conflict), and recognition of what my partner is saying that seems both accurate and useful (an appreciative perspective).

It might also be important at some point in this process to take a break. The man's (or woman's) return to the cave for a short while might make sense—as long as dwelling in the cave isn't prolonged. Most importantly, as Gottman has suggested, breaks in the action should be accompanied by an appreciative appraisal. What have we done that has worked as we seek solution(s) to this issue? Let's give each other credit and see how we can continue to "do it right."

*Step Three: Soothe Yourself and Each Other:* A touch of limerence doesn't hurt at this point. I mentioned in the chapter on remarriage, that there is often a second honeymoon following this restructuring of an enduring relationship. Even if there is not a full-blown remarriage, the time has come for a mini honeymoon. Each partner must find a way to nurture themselves as well as each other. For men, this need for soothing might be less readily acknowledged. However, as Gottman notes, it might be even more needed (given the emotional flooding).

Even if the conflict has not been fully resolved, there may be the need for a nurturance break. As just noted, a moment of appreciation can be of great value.

According to Gottman (2015, p. 176) “when one spouse does not ‘get’ the other’s repair attempt, it’s because the listener is flooded and therefore can’t really hear what [their partner] is saying.”

The flooding can be reduced by self-soothing: finding a place to relax (a sanctuary) and a process of relaxation in which to engage. Partners can soothe one another by providing massages. This soothing might simply be the act of sharing a beautiful view, a warming fire, or a favorite piece of music. I often point in this book to the role played by rituals in the lives of many enduring couples. This might be a good time to enact one of them.

*Step Four: Compromise:* Gottman (2015, p. 184) makes the case for compromise: “In an intimate, loving relationship, it just doesn’t work for either of you to get things all your way even if you’re convinced that you’re right. This approach would create such inequity and unfairness that the marriage would suffer.” While I agree with Gottman that it takes a lot of give-and-take in an enduring relationship to sustain this relationship through the storming period, I would suggest that this compromise must be carefully deployed for it can often serve only as a temporary deferment of the conflict and storm.

A compromise is often made when a problem or dilemma is being addressed. In these cases, polarization often emerges during the attempt to resolve the issue. Before there is compromise, a sustained attempt should be made by each partner to fully understand (and appreciate) the position taken by each other.

Often this means that the outcome of this polarity management process (Johnson, 1996) is not a compromise but instead a new solution that takes into account both needs and perspectives. Gottman (2015, p. 184) is making the point that enduring relationships should always be based on the foundation of Mutual Influence (his fourth principle). Polarity management allows for (and actually encourages) this mutual influence.

*Step Five: Dealing with Emotional Injuries:* At this final point in the conflict-management process, Gottman is providing an insight that relates to the strange attractor and peremptory ideation processes I have introduced in this book. As Gottman (2015, p. 187) notes, people tend to ruminate about the scars left by conflictual relationships with a loved one: “If emotional injuries aren’t addressed, they tend to become constant irritants—like a stone in your shoe that you keep walking on. “

These injuries become not only inert, irritating stones—they also attract related

injuries (forming an attractor basin). They might create or contribute to a powerful and destructive ideational stream that continues to infect, distort and ultimately destroy an intimate relationship. An avalanche of negative emotions can dash all hope of reconciliation. This failure will itself be added to the accumulating list of interpersonal injuries. A new snowpack of resentment begins to build.

Gottman (2015, pp. 188-194) offers a seven step process for addressing these injuries: (1) choose a specific incident to work through, (2) decide who will speak first, (3) say out loud what you were feeling then, (4) share your subjective reality and what you needed, (5) identify and explore your triggers, (6) acknowledge your role in what happened, and (7) look ahead by building constructive plans.

I recommend that you read what Gottman has said about each of these steps—and note that each of these steps is directed toward not just healing the wounds but also preparing for conflicts that will inevitably occur repeatedly in the future. The process of metacommunication that Watzlawick introduces is fully in operation if Gottman's seven steps are engaged. With hope for less painful encounters in the future, there is less likely to be the ongoing festering of grievances that can create an attractor basin and spin off peremptory ideations.

## **Trauma and the Storm**

I have focused primarily in this chapter on ways in which two people in a long-term, intimate relationship can communicate with one another in order successfully to traverse the often-dangerous terrain of Stage Two Storming. I have also focused on Gottman's distinction between solvable and perpetual storms and ways in which to address the seemingly intractable issues which most enduring couples face.

### **Personal Trauma**

Before leaving this stormy stage, it is important to acknowledge that the conflict will at times involve something much deeper on the part of one or both parties. These will often become perpetual storms. There might be a trauma in the past of one party that has never been addressed in a satisfactory manner. As Levine and Frederick (2009) suggests, an incident from early in life can often be traumatizing because it was never met in a manner that brought about resolution.

As a child we have neither the strength, emotional resilience nor cognitive resources

to confront the mental or physical abuse of a parent, relative or stranger. This was certainly the case with Tally—one of the people we interviewed and have already referenced and quoted several times in this book. Tally was abused by his mother when living in India and only came to some resolution of this abuse after moving to the United States and discovering that his siblings were also being abused. He came to an important realization that it was his mother who was ill and not himself who was deserving of the abuse.

The trauma might also come later in our life. We have been driving a car and turned the wheel in the wrong direction or simply froze while our automobile was spinning out of control. Our child fell off a wall and broke her nose—we weren't paying enough attention. As adults we are not helpless when confronted with a traumatizing experience. We are no longer children. This often makes the resulting trauma even more severe for we feel guilty about our carelessness or neglect. We repeatedly review the traumatizing event and feel once again the remorse. Our partner might have nothing to do with this event, but they are still caught up in what I have previously referenced as the dynamic of a "strange attractor."

## **Inherited Trauma**

The trauma can even be carried over from one generation to another. In his remarkable account of trauma, Resmaa Menakem (2017) writes about trauma associated with multiple generations of racial abuse and disabling toil in the fields and factories. He begins with an inquiry as a child regarding his grandmother's calloused and crippled hands. His mother informs Resmaa that his African American grandmother had worked in the cotton fields of the American South. She had often been cut by the thorny cotton bolls. His mother also pointed to his grandmother's feet, noting that they were also deeply wounded. Resmaa's grandmother had worn no shoes while picking cotton. As Menakem illustrates, trauma can exist in physical as well as psychological form and can be passed on in our body as well as our mind.

In his own study of inter-generational trauma, Mark Wolynn (2016) notes that these inherited traumas can profoundly disrupt the flow in our life. I would add that these inherited traumas can also disrupt flow in our relationship with the person in our current life whom we love and with whom we wish to spend the rest of our lives.

Wolynn (2016, p. 63) identifies four ways in which traumas are passed on. We merge our personal identity with that of our parent and inherit their trauma.

Alternatively, we reject our parent—but take on their trauma in a manner that is often tucked away in our unconscious. Wolynn suggests that a third kind of transmission occurs when we have experienced a break in the early bond with our mother. Finally, transmission might occur if we identify with a member of our family system other than our parents.

These are all relational transmissions. I would suggest that they are particularly inclined to intrude on our current relationships—especially that with our life partner. These intergenerational traumas, along with those occurring in our own personal life, can rear their ugly head in the midst of our relationship with another person. The intrusion takes place even though our partner has played absolutely no role in either the cause of intrusion or unsuccessful resolution of the traumatizing intrusion.

What do we do about these ghosts and goblins that intrude in our intimate relationships? First, it is important to note that resurrected trauma will inevitably trigger anxiety—and it is the kind of anxiety that enters our relationship with someone we love. Typically, this anxiety is addressed by our partner in one of three ways. It can lead to withdrawal. Our partner retreats into their psychological cave (or an actual room or location of safety). A second response can be seeking out support. They ask for a hug or spend time taking about what is happening in their life. The third option is anger. Our partner finds a reason to be “pissed off” about something we have done or something that someone else has done that they don’t appreciate.

If our partner retreats, then we have to decide whether to enter their cave—or at least knock on the door of their cave. “Can I come in?” “Do you want to talk about what has happened?” “I would be glad to wait, if you need some time alone.” It is important for us to respect our partner’s wishes; otherwise, their retreat might transform into anger: “Leave me alone!” We need to appreciate the ways in which our partner processes their anxiety, grief and re-playing of the trauma.

However, we also need to remain appropriately engaged, for our partner might get stuck in a repeated loop. The tiger returns again and again—never to be tamed or repelled. It might even be appropriate for us to gently encourage our partner to receive some professional help. Repeated unsuccessful encounter with a traumatic event or repeated traumatic events can chew up our body as well as our mind and spirit.

What if our partner is asking for our support and care? At one level, this is quite wonderful. We like being wanted. However, it can also be quite nerve-racking and

eventually quite unpleasant if the support is constantly requested and if nothing of much benefit seems to be emerging from our caring behavior. It ends up feeling like “whimpering”—a whole lot of “poor me.”

It is often tempting to lash out and offer some aggressive advice (“damn it, just do xxxx”). Alternatively, we eventually chose to decline the request for support. As in the case of the partner who wants to be left alone, our partner may, in turn, transform their request for support into an expression of anger directed toward us as “uncaring”, “unfeeling” and “not there when I most need you!”

## **I Am Not the Target**

This leads to the third option—which is very common and usually least desirable. Our partner transforms their anxiety into anger—and we are immediately available as the recipient of this anger. What do we do? Strike back with our own anger? Escape into our own cave? Try to appease our partner by “hugging them to death”? Laura Huxley (2021) suggests that we first declare to ourselves that “I am not the target.” If we, in turn, declare to our partner that “I am not the legitimate target of your anger and refuse to accept this anger”, then we are likely to immediately escalate the situation.

Huxley suggests, instead, that we should reach out in support of the other person as they grapple with their ghosts and goblins. We must first discover together that each of us has, to varying degree and in distinctive ways, the power to make one another feel better. Laura believes that this capacity to care for one another is there to be surfaced in any relationship.

A second discovery is that in making someone else feel better we are likely to find great joy. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) might even suggest that there is “flow” when we are helping another person address their trauma. We are helping them find a way to successfully resolve the challenges associated with this trauma.

For Huxley, there is a third discovery. We are likely to feel better ourselves when we make someone else feel better. Our guide, Gregory Bateson, might enter the conversation again. He is offering his anthropological wisdom. We are engaging in a very positive form of symmetrical schizogenesis when we ask how we can help rather than how we can hate when our partner is besieged by ghostly trauma.

We might begin by acknowledging to our partner that we appreciate the pain they must be experiencing and by expressing our own wish not to exacerbate the pain by

pushing back against them. We can then begin to just listen to our partner. We don't have to be their therapist, nor should we be giving advice. We just need to be their loving and caring life partner.

## **Conclusions: Yielding to Win**

As we bring this account of storming and conflict in our relationship with the significant other person in our life, it is critical that we retain our own identity, but also find a way to bring attention and compassion into our relationship with this other person that we love/hate. At times we have to “yield to win” and we have to listen more carefully than usual to what our partner is saying to us—even if the message is being delivered in a screaming manner. We must be able to discern between the problems that are solvable and those that will be with us (often couched in mystery) throughout our lifetime. It is ultimately a matter of appreciation for our partner and commitment to the relationship—while in the midst of a storm.

If the conflict is particularly stormy—stirred up at least in part by trauma in the life of our partner—then the challenge of appreciation is great. The key point in addressing our partner's trauma is to retain our own personal sense that “we are not the target” - assuming that we really have had not part to play in the trauma.

We don't need to convince our partner that we are not the target. We just have to convince ourselves and then focus not on our own pain as an object (target) of our partner's wrath and anxiety, but instead on their pain. As Laura Huxley proposed, the act of being empathetic, appreciative and helpful when our partner really needs our loving and caring support can be a source of great pleasure for us - and eventually our partner as well (a positive symmetry).

We bring this exploration of the Storming stage of couple's development to a close by returning to appreciation and recommitment. These two ingredients of an enduring intimate relationship will lead us to the third stage—which is establishment of a long-term set of norms regarding how we will consistently treat one another with care and appreciation—given our lifelong commitment to one another.



## Key Chapter Points

Enduring couples:

- Face a storming stage as a normal part of a couple's on-going development.
- Experience reoccurrence of storming stages with movement to various stages and when two developmental plates collide.
- Weather cyclical storming since this stage is one of four developmental stages that occurs in each of the developmental plates to be discussed in Section Three.
- Engage in a remarriage or recommitment from unabated storming.
- Develop increased resiliency to brave new storming stages with each remarriage.

## Chapter Nine

### Establishing Norms for an Enduring Relationship

If the couple has chosen to face the conflict and storming associated with the developmental plates head on, then the couple typically will move toward the third phase of development. This phase focuses on establishing norms. These are the rules by which people live and work with one another in an effective and interpersonally gratifying manner. Enduring couples make conscious choices about norms in their relationships. They are able to articulate their needs or their boundaries and flexibly learn from each other to end up with a set of rules workable for them during their developmental stages.

Ted and Velia have lived together for eleven years and have been married for eight of these years. Yet, in this period of time, Ted and Velia have often had to live apart; As an artist, Ted resides in their Wyoming cabin; Velia attends graduate school in the East. Perhaps because they have limited, highly valued time together, Ted and Velia have established clear norms by which they live and relate to one another.

First, they like to have fun together and suggest that their greatest strength as a couple, according to Velia, is "our ability to play together." Velia fondly recounts their trip to Alaska, when they swam nude in a lake at night and warmed up around a campfire. Ted adds more: "I remember swimming with trout after a nine-hour hike! It was a high mountain lake. The trout were jumping all around us." For many couples, these special moments of joy and fun provide the glue that keeps them together through many of the tough times. In Velia and Ted's case, these memories keep them going through their long separations.

Second, Ted and Velia support each other in their own individual growth. They are willing to spend time apart because each respects the other partner's individual aspirations in life. Ted wants to remain in Wyoming as an inspiration for his artwork, while Velia wants to obtain a graduate degree.

Third, Ted and Velia respect and value each other and their differences. Ted easily identifies Velia's strengths as different from his own:

I appreciate the solidity of her person, her personality, straight-

forwardness, her body. Mostly, it's her strong center; she gives me a lot of strength. I know that I will never be embarrassed that she is my mate.

Velia is similarly at ease in reflecting on Ted's strengths:

I appreciate his sense of humor, spontaneity, creativity. I admire his ability to "take in" but not take "on." His ability to listen to me. His flexibility, intuition and his physical fitness. His strength and agility. And his health: spiritual and emotional. His bald head, hairy ears [playfully stated] . . . His genuine interest in people and his alive connection with the natural world [becoming more serious again.]

Fourth, Ted and Velia have established a norm of trust. They trust each other, even to the point of talking openly about being tempted to have an affair when they are apart from one another. Ted reports:

Sometimes I do feel tempted. But if I really thought about it . . . I could never do it [have an affair.] I could never hurt Velia. It would complicate my life so horribly. I would never do it.

The quality of trust is particularly important in the case of Ted and Velia (as well as other couples involved in frequent separations); they must trust each other if they are willing to live with considerable independence.

In addition to trust, Ted and Velia point to frequent and open communication as a fifth norm in their relationship. Once again, this norm is particularly important given the extensive period of time that they live apart from one another. They become skillful (emotional intelligence) in talking with one another over the telephone and increasingly by email (and sometimes Zoom)—without the many nonverbal clues that inform so much intimate, face-to-face communication among most couples).

Velia and Ted also must be particularly thoughtful in their communication with one another during those precious moments that they do have together. Their clarity of communication begins with their acknowledgement of the value each holds for the other. Velia observes that she:

came from a family of divorce. . . I think a lot about how these people didn't know each other! I think about our being together and what it means to me. If we ever did separate, the communication would be different. I value you so much [turning to face Ted]. I wouldn't poison what you mean

to me.

Sixth, Velia and Ted share a norm concerning money. Whereas money is a troubling and often destructive issue for many couples, it is not a major issue for Ted and Velia. According to Velia: "money is not a big thing with us. We use it when we have it and don't get weirded out about not having it." Ted confirms this conclusion: "I had become accustomed to the insecurity of an artist's salary . . . Learned to hustle when I needed to pay bills. I keep the faith that something will come through." Velia: "For me, it's more frightening to become possessed by money or possessions. Certainly, our love is more important than money. We have a lot of strengths to survive and do it well. I'm thankful that we're both comfortable with that. We are not status seekers!"

While at first blush, Velia and Ted seem to be a throwback to the late 60s and the hippy disdain for money and security, we find a quite different picture when we look at what they do on a daily basis. Velia is going back to graduate school in part to prepare herself for a more lucrative career. Ted remains active as an artist in Wyoming in part because he has a market there where he can sell his work and make some money. He also can live on a modest (and unstable) income in his Wyoming cabin because of lower living costs. When Velia is able to once again live in Wyoming, all of their expenses will drop down, leaving them in a better place to put love ahead of money in their lives.

Seventh, Ted and Velia each take responsibility for what they need and not assume that their partner knows what they want. Ted indicates that they both have learned that it is critical "to communicate at times when you feel like closing up to make an effort." Velia adds: "to not assume that your partner knows what you want or need . . . to own your mistakes . . . own your own stuff." They seem to be living by this norm. They have managed, for instance, to keep their own disappointment in not having yet had a child from overwhelming their relationship.

They talk openly and candidly about their disappointment. They share these feelings rather than letting them corrode their relationship through anger or the assignment of blame. Ted also noted that he has a mother who is very depressed and suicidal. It is easy for Ted to get wrapped up in her problems and bring these problems into his own marriage. Yet, they both are aware of this potential area of conflict and are vigilant in not bringing the issue of Ted's mother into their own relationship.

Finally, Ted and Velia place romance at the heart of their relationship. This is not a business that they are creating together. It is an intimate relationship that requires

special moments together and constant nourishment. During their interview, Ted and Velia always maintained body contact with each other in some way and maintained constant eye contact. They were speaking to each other as much as they were to the interviewer.

They turned this experience of being interviewed about their relationship into a special experience that itself became romantic and a reaffirmation of their special relationship. Ted and Velia may not live "happily ever after." However, up to this point, they have fashioned a remarkable relationship and should take great pride in what they have created for themselves and hopefully the children they will someday raise together.

An enduring couple like Ted and Velia cannot rest of their laurels. They must establish new norms for each developmental plate. The norms or rules that a couple lives with regarding the task of parenting may not necessarily be appropriate when the couple is discussing the family's financial conditions. Similarly, the ways in which two people relate to each other while dealing with the "nuts and bolts" of establishing a new home or financial base, will often be inappropriate when they are dealing with the subtle and conflictual issues associated with preparing for death.

In this chapter, I will focus on three different set of norms that are established formally or informally by most couples: (1) ways of living and working together, (2) dominance and mutuality, and (3) discussable and non-discussable issues. I then provide an example of the way in which one couple has made their norms explicit. They produced a relationship-based charter!

## **Ways of Living and Working Together**

Norms often are not set by a conscious effort. However, in the process of establishing norms in an enduring relationship, the two partners discover and consciously negotiate practical ways of living and working with one another. In his study of love, relations and the work of the soul, Moore (1994) labels this process the "vernacular life"—the particular place, family, friends, and neighborhood that are part of our daily lives."

Moore suggests that the work we do as couples in this vernacular life is the work of our soul, whereas the work of our spirit concerns loftier matters regarding ideal states and future plans. It is in our daily interactions with our partner and attention to the minor details of our life together that we forge the enduring structure and

dynamics of our intimate relationship.

Mary and Ruth have lived together for the past fifteen years. They own a home together and have established a rich, enduring and vital relationship in which the norms regarding daily routines are clearly defined. Mary (a social worker) comments on these norms:

We can talk together easily. We've learned how to successfully argue. We respect each other's privacy. We have space and we give each other space. We have our own rooms . . . our own activities outside our relationship. We do two different kinds of work [Ruth is in a technical/scientific field], so we have totally different kinds of things to bring into the relationship.

This recipe for an enduring relationship was concocted by Mary and Ruth only after some difficult struggles concerning the distinctive differences that exist between the two of them. Typically, the initial versions of the rules of a couple's relationship are the primary focus of the conflicts that arise during the storming phase. The norming phase for Mary and Ruth, as for most other couples, consists of the day-in and day-out refinement of these initial agreements (whether these agreements are explicit or tacit). In essence, the couple is trying to establish a long-term, enduring commitment. During this phase the two partners build a shared history or common memory which can sustain them through many hard times.

## **Dominance and Mutuality**

During the storming phase, partners often struggle over and eventually define areas of dominance for each partner in the relationship and areas of shared mutuality in the relationship. As I noted in the previous chapter, some relationships consist primarily of negotiated areas of control and dominance—it is about the distribution of power. Other relationships consist of minimal amounts of dominance and a large proportion of mutuality. Neither type of relationship is better than the other. The key is: do both partners agree to and support this norm?

Frequently, the issues of dominance and mutuality in a relationship evoke old memories and images for a couple. Resolution of these issues often occurs only after both partners acknowledge the continuing and often inappropriate replication of old family patterns. Erik Erikson (Erikson, Erikson and Kivnick, 1986) notes that the major task in the latter part of our lives is coming to terms with our own parents. Oftentimes, this coming to terms begins much earlier in life with the

establishment of a good working relationship between our self and our partner.

We move beyond old, traditional patterns. These ways of relating may not be very successful for couples who are addressing the complex problems of 21<sup>st</sup> Century life. In a few cases, couples we interviewed actually identified the appropriate use of old patterns that were often ahead of their times. David and Meryl, for instances, have replicated David's parent's pattern of shared childcare and housework. David's father was a police officer with an early morning beat who came home in the afternoon to take care of the children and cook dinner, while David's mother worked to supplement the family income.

One of the key marker events in many relationships is the moment when other people start referring to two partners as a couple. They now have a name as a couple: "let me introduce you to Cindy and Bob." "Where will Steve and Donna go on their vacation?" "Why don't we invite Bev and Elizabeth over for dinner?" With this naming process comes a very subtle but often critical decision related to dominance and mutuality. What is the ordering of the names? Will it be Cindy and Bob, or Bob and Cindy? Steve and Donna, or Donna and Steve? Bev and Elizabeth, or Elizabeth and Bev?

This sequencing of names in some instances is imposed from the outside. The names of the two partners in a couple simply begin to be sequenced in a certain order by friends or relatives and the sequence sticks. In other instances, the two members of the couple themselves implicitly establish a sequence, through the messages they leave for other people and on their own phone answering machine, the way they sign their joint emails, Birthday cards and Christmas cards, and so forth. In either case, the sequencing often says something about the distribution of authority and influence in the relationship.

Couples know that the sequencing of names can be important, but also know that this is an irrational issue. As a result, they often speak about the ordering of their names with humor and a touch of embarrassment. Bob and Rita spoke about the critical moment when their friends begin to refer to them as a couple. In referring to this point as a marker event, Rita states: ". . . you know, it's when people start referring to you by one name, like Rita-and-Bob." Bob interrupts and nods agreement: "Oh, I see, Bob-and-Rita." He concurs with Rita about the importance of this event--but slips in a shift in the sequence of names. Other couples also kidded about the name sequence, often in a manner that identified this as an important, but not discussable issue.

## Discussable and Non-discussable

Name order is only one of many areas in a relationship that may not be discussable. It is critical for a couple to identify those topics that are discussable and those that are not. This norm takes on two different forms. First, there are a series of decisions made (explicitly or implicitly) by the couple regarding what is or is not discussable in their own relationship. Second, there are a series of decisions, often quite explicit, regarding what they will and will not disclose about themselves as a couple with other people.

Regarding the first norm of disclosure, many couples define explicitly or implicitly certain issues that can be discussed—such as the food we eat or who takes out the garbage. Other issues may be highly loaded and can never be discussed—such as one of the partner's weight problems, finances, sexuality or the excessive consumption of alcohol. Many couples we interviewed spoke of their emerging sense of commitment to one another or the sense of intimacy they first experienced in their relationship as related directly to the disclosure of important matters with one another. Often, they have never disclosed these matters to anyone else in their life.

Jessie speaks of her first encounter with Dick and notes that while he "was tiptoeing into the relationship," she "proposed to him six months before he proposed to me." She told him that if, at some time in the future, he wanted to propose to her, the answer was "yes" and she just wanted him to know that if he ever started thinking about it. Six months later, Dick did propose and, true to her word, Jessie accepted.

Jessie offers a lovely example of how at least one member of a couple sets the norms early on for discussing the "undiscussable"—in this case her interest from the first in being married to Dick. Nothing coy. No beating around the bush. The flat-out truth of the matter for Jessie! The strength and openness were to serve their marriage very effectively in the years to come. Dick noted that Jessie "provided strength and stability" at the point when he began to confront a drinking problem. Jessie indicated during the interview that: "I'm a very consistent person and I wanted to support him. I was real easy. I have a lot of respect for him [because he stopped drinking]."

Her strength and candor also came in handy when both of them confronted problems with their parents. In her characteristically straight-forward manner, Jessie reported that both of their "parents have screwed up their own relationship so you don't need them to help to fuck up your life; you can do that on your own!" In their commitment to each other and their willingness to discuss the undiscussable with one another, Dick and Jessie present a unified front to their parents (and his



children by a previous marriage).

For both, their partner is more important than the maintenance of any other relationships. "This is us," Jessie told her mother: "take it or leave it. We're in love. This is who we are and we're not going to change." While Jessie seems to offer strengths and candor, Dick tends to "calm things down" in the relationship. He explains that "we work on supporting each other's weaknesses. The strengths are easy." These wonderful words of wisdom would seem to be appropriate for most couples. They certainly help to open the doors for candor and discussions of those things that are usually not discussable—namely, our weaknesses.

Benita and Darrell had an on-again, off-again relationship for nine years. They talked frequently during their interview about the initial ambivalence they both felt toward making a commitment to one another. Benita reports that the marker event in their relationship after all of these years related directly to their willingness to disclose important feelings with each other:

. . . we would go out a couple of times and then he would disappear and that was that. . . The most notable thing about the relationship is that we would separate and come back together again and separate and come back together again and that happened several times after college [as well as when they first met while attending the same college.] .

Benita identifies the restrictive nature of their sharing at this point in their relationship:

We could talk about going to a movie, but we weren't able to talk about our feelings for a number of years and the only point at which our relationship became serious was after we were able to talk about our feelings. So I don't think it's worth anything to talk about all those years we were sort of in and out of relationship because those were years in which he was important to me, in some ways, but certainly there were other people who were important. There were actually two other men that I was interested in marrying. But when it really started to jell was when we could talk to each other and that was when we developed the kind of relationship neither of us had had with anyone else. . . . We (pause) started saying things that we felt were unspeakable and that made a lot of difference, and it was pretty terrifying, but it sure as hell made a big difference.

The second part of the norm about discuss-ability concerns what a couple is willing to share with family, relatives, friends and strangers. This second norm is particularly important for Daniel and Ben, a gay couple who have been together for ten years, and for Mary and Ruth, a lesbian couple who have been together for fifteen years. In fact, most of the lesbian and gay couples we interviewed indicated that this second norm regarding discussable and non-discussable issues outside the relationship was particularly important and often troublesome. Gay and lesbian couples must individually and collectively decide when and where they will reveal that they are lesbian (or gay) and are a couple.

This issue is often a source of major conflict for gay and lesbian couples because of the anger it tends to evoke in both parties regarding general societal prejudice. It is also a source of conflict because there are frequent differences of opinion between the two partners regarding how open they will be with their own families and friends, as well as strangers.

Many couples must determine when they will disclose to others (particularly, parents, relatives and close friends) that they are a couple (or have become intimate, moved in together and so forth). However, there is typically not the strong stigma and judgment that unfortunately often attends the disclosure of a gay or lesbian relationship. Hopefully, this stigma and judgment is becoming a thing of the past—but it was not for many of the gay and lesbian couples we interviewed who “came out” individually and as a couple many years ago.

For Daniel and Ben, the issue of disclosure resides at the very heart of their relationship, as defined in their founding story. When asked how they met, Daniel's reply was that they met at “a club.” That was as revealing as he intended to be. Ben, however, was more straightforward and indicated that they in fact met at a bath house. This was a significant disclosure for Ben, given that in the early era of AIDS, bathhouses had become symbols of gay promiscuity for many members of the “straight” world and as a painful reminder for many gays of their prior years in practicing unsafe sex.

The differences between these two men in their willingness to disclose to a stranger (the interviewer) may relate to their own upbringing. At 35 years of age, Daniel was still living at home with his Eastern European-born mother and his brother. While he has now been living for many years with Ben, his strong cultural background is evident in his reluctance to discuss such private matters. Daniel's strong need for privacy is also manifest in his decision for many years to live apart from Ben so that he would not have to reveal to his family that he was gay. Until his mother died in

2008, Daniel slept at home every night, no matter what was happening in his relationship with Ben.

It is truly remarkable that their relationship has existed for more than twenty years. Daniel did indicate that he "likes seeing Ben more, in the daytime"—now that they are living together. However, he went on to reveal that his need for privacy extended beyond his reluctance to reveal his sexual orientation to his family. Even today, Daniel believes "that it is important for us to give each other their own space." Fortunately, Ben's own need for free time away from Daniel to do his own thing is quite compatible with Daniel's need for his own "space." Thus, Daniel and Ben find time together on their days off, but still devote much of their free time to independent pursuits.

While many other couples must confront differences in cultural background and, as a result, differences in comfort level regarding public and family disclosures, the dilemmas faced by many gay and lesbian couples have been exacerbated and were particularly poignant for many gay couples during the 1990s and early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Particularly during the 1990s, one or both partners may have faced premature death through the intrusion of AIDS-related illnesses. Daniel has tested positive regarding the HIV antibody, while Ben is HIV negative. For many years they had to face AIDS, as have many other gay couples in America. Fortunately, both Daniel and Ben are still living. Complex issues regarding disclosure have been inevitably raised by this disease—regardless of whether or not it resulted in the death of one or more of the partners.

Like Daniel and Ben, Mary and Ruth reported that they often struggled over the disclosure of their relationship to other people. One of them wants to get out in the open and get the issue of sexual orientation "out of the way," while the other wants to be more cautious. Issues regarding disclosure of gay and lesbian identity are certainly now less daunting than they were ten or twenty years ago, but they still play a major role regarding disclosure norms for many couples.

Early in their relationship, Mary and Ruth established specific times for being together and other times for being apart. Vacations served as a safety valve for revitalizing their relationship in a positive, fun-oriented context—away from external, discriminatory influences. While many couples find vacations to be a renewing experience in which they rediscover their earlier, more carefree relationship, lesbian and gay couples often find their vacations together to be particularly renewing, because they can travel to locations where homosexual orientations are

readily accepted, if not pervasive. These precious periods of time together in a gay or lesbian "sanctuary" may be critical to the preservation of special relationships such as we find with Mary and Ruth.

## **A Couple's Charter: Establishing Long-Standing Norms**

Stephen and Kristen were struggling in their marriage—having been together for more than 30 years. They were arguing with one another while driving through a beautiful area of Cape Cod (Massachusetts). Kristen noticed that they were paying very little attention to the scenery even though this was the reason they took this trip from their home in a New England city. Stephen suggested that they pull over in a small parking lot to savor a lake side view. Kristen noted that the lake was called "Long Pond" (there are quite a few with this name in New England).

While they were enjoying their view of the lake, both Stephen and Kristen began to relax and quit their argument. Kristen then suggested that they do a little "prevention therapy" (as she would call it, having for many years served as a social worker). Stephen suggested that they identify some new "ground rules" for the way in which they interact with one another—especially during times of stress and uncertainty. Kristen found a pad of paper in the glove department. They started talking.

Both of them identified some painful times when a conflict was either never resolved or resolved in a manner that didn't hold up for very long. They then spent some time identifying ways these conflicts might have been successfully resolved. Stephen asked Kristen if he could take the notes. This was quite a change, since she usually took on this task.

While Kristen eventually took the notes, she appreciated the offer of Stephen to break away from their usual way of "doing business." Stephen offered a joke (as he often did when the two of them are feeling good together). He suggested that they call their agreement, "The Long Pond Charter." They both laughed – and this title stuck.

They were laughing not only because of the solemn tone of the title "Long Pond Charter" but also because it was a very formal document. John Gottman would applaud their effort and suggest that formality is often of great value when dealing with sensitive issues in an enduring relationship. The formality "ensures that you

will use the type of words that work well for putting on the brakes” (Gottman, 2015, p. 175) if the charter is not being observed. Second, according to Gottman, the words and phrases being used in the charter “are like megaphones—they help ensure that you pay attention” when the charter might be in trouble.

I now offer the charter that Kristen and Stephen wrote with some embellishment and exemplifications offered by myself and some of the couple-relationship experts I have cited in this book—especially David Bulitt and Julie Bulitt in their candid exposition of *The Five Core Conversations for Couples* (2020).

Kristen and Stephen focused on their relationship. Their children were already grown, had gotten married and were now raising their own children. While the relationship with our children continues to impact our life with a partner, we will concentrate (as Stephen did) on the couple itself.

**1. We will encourage one another to have friendship-based relationships outside of our relationship.**

A colleague of mine, who is a successful couples therapy, puts it this way when advising both members of the couple: “you should have multiple affairs. Just don’t make them sexual.” My therapist colleague is suggesting, in essence, that we shouldn’t rely on our partner for everything. If we do, then we will never get all our needs met (and will blame our partner). Or we will get all of them met through our partner and, in doing so, will drain them dry and build a dependency relationship with them that is damaging for both of us.

We should find other people in our life (of both genders) who share our personal interests (especially those that our partner does not share). We go with them to a concert, a ball game, a bridal shower. They might be a colleague at work who is also a friend. They might be someone we have known since childhood—who knows all about us and what we are “really like!”

We might even be a bit in love with them—but engage these amorous feelings in ways that are energizing but non-sexual (engaging what psychologists call diversionary “sublimation”). These other people in our life can serve many different (and important) functions. They can be listeners, advisors, critics, advocates, mentors, defenders, playmates—and those who fulfill our own need to be helpful to others.

Another therapist, our guide Julie Bulitt, offers a somewhat different observation.

She writes about the diversity of perspective that comes with broadening our social network (Bulitt and Bulitt, 2020, p. 181-182):

I can only talk about my experiences with my friends, it really is not too much on the real-life side. There are times, particularly when one of us has something going on that is difficult to deal with, a parent dies, a kid is in trouble, business is bad, that we might talk for a few minutes about those types of things. . . . Having girlfriends, knowing what is going on in their lives; it's like taking a picture on your phone using the panorama setting. You can see something with a wider lens, maybe in a way you did not look at it before.

In keeping with Julie Bulitt's perspective, I would suggest that we cherish and spend special time with these people in our life who are not members of our family or "clan." They enable us to cross the boundaries between generations, socio-economic class, gender-preference, culture, race, differential abilities - and even political outlooks! In other words, we can learn and grow. This is important regarding not only our continuing life-long process of maturation, but also the ongoing maturation of our relationship with the person we love and with whom we have chosen to spend the rest of our life.

One final point regarding this first Long Pond statement. As members of a couple our relationships with other people might differ quite a bit. We need to acknowledge and even appreciate these differences in the way(s) we interact with other people and the needs we seek to meet in these relationships. For instance, there are traditional male roles that often influence the way in which we, as men, seek support from other men (or from women). As men, we might be inclined to spend time pushing against other men (sports, friendly political debates, humor) as a somewhat indirect way of letting them know that we care about them.

Julie Bulitt (Bulitt and Bulitt, 2020, p. 181) is writing about her interaction with girlfriends and often wonders about what her husband (and other men) are saying and doing in relating to others of the same gender: "I cannot believe that men don't ever talk amongst themselves about anything more important than we did what to which girl back in high school or college." She asks David: "Shouldn't you have real-life discussion with your friends . . ." "I know that my own response to Julie would be that we men do talk about more important things—but this conversation might take place in a way that she doesn't readily observe.

Furthermore, what takes place between men (and among many women) is not just talking. It is also working together on repair of a truck or simply observing an

exciting baseball game together (perhaps wearing full regalia). For both men and women, it might also be about preparing special dishes together for a carefully planned potluck or working together in cleaning up a park in their community or painting the living room of an elderly couple. We share our doing as well as in our saying.

## **2. We will frequently review the duties each of us has taken on in managing household chores.**

Usually, by this time in the history of a relationship, duties have been sorted out. One person takes out the garbage and someone else pays the bills. There might still be points of contention regarding who does the cooking on a weeknight when both partners have had a busy day, or regarding who gets the kids ready for bed. While the routines are a good thing, Kristen and Stephen rightfully noted that a review should take place.

Kristen has taken on new responsibilities in her job requiring that she attend evening meetings every two weeks. Some renegotiation has to take place regarding cooking, cleaning and child-caring duties during these meeting days. Does Kristen pick something up to compensate for this extra work being handed over to Stephen? Is this instead just part of the give-and-take of daily life—a sign of Stephen’s willingness to be flexible in their relationship (for at least a certain period of time).

There is also the matter for Kristen and Stephen of shifting life interests—especially those related to their regular duties. Like many other relatively affluent young couples, Kristen and Stephen have both become interested in some new things. They are devoting time and energy to these newly emerging priorities in the midst of busy lives.

For Stephen, there is a new interest in cooking Asian food. He has bought a couple of cookbooks and purchased some “exotic” spices. He wants to prepare one of these dishes at least once a week and is willing to take on an extra night of cooking (he now usually does just about one half of the cooking). Kristen is fine with this—though she is not particularly fond of the dishes that her husband is cooking.

For Kristen, the newly awakened interests have created a bit of a tension in her marriage. In addition to assuming some new work-related responsibilities that take her out of the house several evenings a month, she is increasingly interested in joining a monthly book club that has been set up by several of her female friends. These women not only use this as great excuse to read a new novel each month,

but also as an even better excuse to spend some time together so that they can catch up on both domestic and work life (given that they are all engaged in demanding jobs).

Stephen is a bit frustrated, especially given the evenings when Kristen is reading in bed rather than spending time (and snuggling) with him. He wants to honor the commitment (number two) that they allow and even encourage each other to “spend time alone and to engage in projects and avocations other than just those which [they] share in common.” However, Stephen wonders about the extent to which this second commitment interferes with an equitable distribution of household duties and with the amount and quality of time he spends with Kristen.

The review in this case got a bit heated and was not very successfully resolved. Kristen did agree to take on one more night of cooking (and it won't be Asian food!) and she will read in bed only three evenings a week. During the other evenings she will get the kids ready for bed and spend some time with Stephen down in the den (no television, just conversation). I find that this revisited negotiation of daily duties is common for most of the couples being interviewed. This is part of the soulful “vernacular” life that Thomas Moore has identified as critical to the nurturing of long-term intimate relationships.

### **3. We will encourage one another to spend time alone and to engage in projects and avocations other than just those which we share in common.**

This third commitment in the Long Pond Charter is a real dilly for many couples. David Bulitt, our divorce lawyer, puts it this way regarding his own marriage (Bulitt and Bulitt, 2020, p. 185):

The truth is that we don't go to get away from each other, although that does have a certain benefit. We go because we enjoy being with our friends, doing our own thing without each other every so often. Time away is good for people. Being a couple does not mean we have to be tied together at the stake. We can be in love, be best friends, but still be independent people, doing what we want without the other, at least for a few weekends a year.

Julie adds her own observations:

It's the 'me time' that I still really enjoy. I do what I want to do and I don't worry about whether you want to do it, too. The other aspect is just the



lighter side of it. We make jokes, talk about sex, and drink wine. Just have fun. Just laugh.

David adds in:

And go to nude beaches.

I'm not sure if it is only David who wants to go to nude beaches. Or is this one of their shared, bonding interests?

This third commitment comes in two subsections—finding time to be alone and finding time to work on an independent project. Sometimes, it is important that we are left alone—especially if we have a fair amount of Introversion in us. Greta Garbo “wanted to be alone” and some of us do too. Both my wife (Kathleen) and I are introverts. We both have made a career of interacting with other people.

However, these interactions sap the energy in both of us. We need time by ourselves to restore this energy. By contrast, extraverts often gain energy by being with other people and are de-energized when left alone. However, even extraverts need time to themselves, and they join the rest of us in asking for (or at least potentially asking for) time by themselves.

Julie and David Bulitt write further about this value of being alone and report another brief exchange about this desire on her part (Bulitt and Bulitt, 2020, p. 179).

Julie begins:

Together is great, it is what I want and what works for us—most of the time. But another part of our enjoying our time together is our spending some time apart. For me, that means quiet, peaceful time just to sit here, read a magazine, watch one of my home shows, or even just close my eyes and soak.

David asks:

Our being apart from each other is just as important as when we spend time together, is that what you are trying to say?"

Julie:

One is not ranked higher or more of a priority. Alone and separate time is important, that's what matters. It works both ways. You need your time, too. It's not that I don't love you."

David:

You just don't want me around," he says.

Julie:

At this particular moment, he is entirely right. "Why are you laughing?"

David:

Because I just wanted to clean up real quick, Had you let me pop in, I'd have been in and out by now and you would be basking in your alone time. Instead, you spent ten minutes giving me another lesson in Relationships 101 and your water is probably getting cold.

Julie (to herself):

Lesson learned, I hope.

At other times, we wish to set aside our desire to be alone. We are ready to engage our world by taking action. When this occurs, we need just as much understanding and support from our partner as when we wish to be alone. The first step in the fulfillment of this charter obligation is to get to know and appreciate what it is that our partner cares about at a deep and enduring level.

Julie Bulitt identifies this deep caring as a matter of personal aspirations. She brings this topic up during her sessions of couples therapy (Bulitt and Bulitt, 2020, p. 68):

I talk to both partners about aspiring to do one of the things that they each are missing out on. Say that Mom really wants a day at a spa for a makeover, manicure, whatever. The two of them work together to save money so she can get it. Of course, the kids still need what they need, so maybe it doesn't happen overnight. One day, he puts five dollars in the jar, two days later she does the same. After a few weeks, could be even a month or two, they have enough saved and mom goes and gets her spa day. Then they work on one of Dad's aspirations. Maybe he wants to be able to go to a concert in June and needs money for tickets. The two of them work together to try to get him to reach his aspiration.

While this might work when Julie is the therapist, it is a bit more challenging in her own marriage (Bulitt and Bulitt, 2020, p. 167):

What does a good. relationship need more of? Or could do with less of?

"More sex, less sleep," David says. That is a shocking response from him

to be sure.

"More knowledge, less wondering," I say.

It is important for the two people in a relationship to know what to expect, to know what is going on with their partner. A relationship is hampered when one or both individuals are unsure of things, where they stand, that kind of thing. That leads to insecurity in a relationship.

I wish to introduce one way in which we might find out "what to expect, to know what is going on with [our] partner." I suggest that we focus on that which our partner now cares about - and especially that which they have cared about over a sustained period of time. I recently completed a book about something called *Generativity*--a term first used by the noted psychologist, Erik Erikson (1980). Together with my colleague and long-term friend, Gary Quehl, I expanded on Erikson's notion of generativity by offering four different types (or levels) of generativity (Bergquist and Quehl, 2019)

Gary and I used the term "deep caring" in our identification of the way in which generativity is embedded in our heart, mind and muscles. I believe that all four types of deep caring are to be found in the projects and avocations in which all (or at least most) of us engage. They certainly relate to what Julie Bulitt identifies as aspirations. In keeping the relationship with our lifetime partner vital and nourishing, it is important that we encourage and appreciate the way(s) in which our partner engages and fulfills their need to care deeply about something.

The first type of generativity concerns our care about the children in our life and/or about special projects in which we have been engaged or wish to engage in our life. Generativity One resides close to home. We express our deep concern with the welfare of our children or the welfare of the business we own. We care about the design of the sailboat we are building or about the completion and publication of the book we are writing (such as this one!!).

The second type of generativity concerns our care about the people we are working with in our life or that we are teaching and guiding. We might simply serve as a role model for them. This kind of generativity relates specifically to the process of mentoring and is the type on which Erikson focused. It is also a form of generativity that can cause a strain in our relationship with another person: "You spend more time with him than with me and our own children." It can also lead to suspicions of an affair: "What are you doing in the evenings with her?" Stephen and Kristen were a bit worried about the time each spent with other young colleagues. What for

instance, is Kristen doing with her younger male colleague after their new twice monthly meetings?

A third and fourth type of generativity can be a source of great pleasure and satisfaction for an enduring couple—or can become major barriers. These expressions of generativity have to do with expansion in time (generativity three) and expansion in space (generativity four). Generativity Three has to do with guarding and honoring history and traditions. This honoring can focus on a couple's immediate family and/or on the heritage each brings to the relationship. Thanksgiving can be held each year with even adult children returning for the traditional turkey and pumpkin pies. Our partner can begin tracing their own family history using one of the exceptional new internet-based tools for searching and retrieving documents.

One or both members of the couple can also move beyond their own household and find time and energy to work on historical projects or commemorations (parades, monument dedications, etc.). This extension should be covered by Kristen and Stephen with this commitment –but it isn't always easy to gracefully encourage (or at least not express resentment) regarding the time spent “trying to honor the entire world rather than just our family”. Similarly, the fourth type of generativity can be a source of shared joy for a couple who are mutually dedicated to serving their community (or even broader constituencies). They both get involved in community projects or volunteer as poll watchers or even political event organizers.

Generativity Four is deeply grounded in one of the “plates” that I will soon be addressing. This is the third plate concerned with shared values. As I will note, if members of a couple don't share a set of fundamental values, there are likely to be ongoing problems in their relationship. This is particularly the case if one of the partners is actively engaged in generativity four activities which their partner does not support.

For Stephen and Kristen, there was a fortunate alignment in political views and a shared understanding of the need for specific improvements in the functioning of their community, state and nation. However, neither can now find time to do much more than share their ideas and their passion after watching the evening news on their favorite cable network. This matter of generativity four, however, is important for Kristen and Stephen.

They talk about devoting more time (both individually and together) to engaging with their community once the children are grown. They laugh a bit about this

possibly being nothing more than a deferred wish. However, they promise to keep each other honest about translating this wish into action when they grow a bit older and (hopefully) set aside a bit more time to be of service to other people.

#### **4. We will not go to bed without at least talking about a conflict we are having.**

This “commandment” is a variant on the “24-hour rule” that Chuck and Terry adopted. In many ways, Chuck and Terry might have enacted a better rule than is to be found in Kristen and Stephen’s Long Pond Charter. Chuck and Terry wisely decided that if it isn’t worth addressing within a day then it simply is not worth addressing. They give themselves twenty-four hours to address an issue and agree that if it is not brought up within this time interval then it is not worth addressing.

We might even redefine this 24-hour agreement as a “petty-disagreement” clause that could be appended to the Long Pond Agreement: “we will not go to bed without at least talking about the conflict we are having, unless we both agree that this is a petty disagreement and need not talk further about it.” What happens, however, if one of our folks is still “steaming” and believe it is not petty. Maybe the twenty-four hour “cooling off” option is a good one.

There is one other important point to make that favors the twenty-four-hour rule. Conflicts often arise when one or both partners have been drinking an alcoholic behavior or some other mind and emotion-altering substance. Or both partners have a long hard day and are tired. Twenty-four hours later they might both be sober and more energetic. With a clear mind and body, they can do a better job of deciding whether or not the disagreement is worth addressing—and can do a better job of managing the conflict if they decide it is not trivial.

#### **5. We will not use silence as a form of revenge or pay-back against one another during or after a conflict.**

The dynamics of silence plays a major role in many enduring relationships—including that engaged by Stephen and Kristen. As Watzlawick and his colleagues pointed out earlier in this book, one cannot NOT communicate. Silence is itself a powerful form of communication that says a lot to the recipient of this silence. If nothing else, silence allows the recipient to read in their own interpretation of what

their partner is trying to “say.” Silence also plays a powerful role, as Watzlawick and his colleagues noted, in setting the structure for a conversation (the function of punctuation). Silence often brings the conversation to an “official” close - though the internal dialogue usually continues in the mind and heart of each partner. Silence also helps to establish or reinforce existing power relationships between two people: who gets to be silent and why?

Julie (Bulitt and Bullit, 2020, p. 25) writes about silence when referring to one of her clients in couples’ therapy:

So, what’s wrong with her not talking to him? Better than yelling, screaming, even destroying his property, no? I don’t think so. Not being spoken to for any length of time is just a bad feeling, a you-are-dead-to-me feeling. As if she is trying to exhibit some port of power, control over her husband. At its essence, she is punishing him. While a ten-minute time out might be fine for a five-year-old in the midst of a melt-down, I don’t see a place for punishment in a healthy adult relationship.

I agree with Julie and appreciate the attempt of Kristen and Stephen to bring this important matter into their Long Pond Charter. Silence can be destructive in two ways. It is not just a matter of revenge - serving as what psychologists call a “passive-aggressive” weapon against one’s partner. It is also a stall tactic that is deferring any addressing of the conflict. As a variant on the fourth commitment, the fifth often leaves an area of emotionally charged disagreement remaining unaddressed.

Like a wound that is only scabbed over and never healed, the conflict can remain dominant but unresolved in a relationship. It might still be unacknowledged and unhealed twenty-four hours later. The unhealed wound, in turn, might be one that neither partner wants to touch. So, it is declared “trivial” by both partners. This is a very destructive collusion by both partners to avoid this festering conflict. The snowpack of resentment grows larger. An avalanche of anger awaits this couple.

One other point. The passive aggressive strategy often is not only a form of revenge, it also frequently produces a destructive feedback loop. As we noted previously regarding the relationship between Betty and George, Betty indicates that she tends to get silent when she is very angry and remains silent for a long time. George, in turn, doesn’t do anything (letting Betty’s anger “roll off his back”). This seeming indifference on the part of George further angers Betty. She interprets George’s own silence as an indicator of his lack of care for her or their relationship. Anger leads to silence which leads to more silence which leads to more anger: escalation!!!

**6. We will express our appreciation often for the effort one another has extended to make our life together more pleasant and less stressful.**

Kristen and Stephen found this to be a commitment that was much easier to fulfill than many of the other commitments—though after a busy day of work and a petty annoyance or two, it was sometimes hard to be appreciative. Furthermore, to be effective an appreciative approach requires a fair amount of “emotional intelligence” (EQ) (Goleman, 1995)—something that our guide John Gottman (2015, p. 124) suggests is more often found among women than men. When engaged in a clumsy manner, appreciation can begin to feel like pandering (in order to receive some reciprocal reward) or patronizing (showing who has the power). I suggest that this pandering and patronizing exemplifies the kind of emotional ignorance that Gottman would contrast with EQ.

This appreciative perspective is based not just on this catchy phrase, but also on a profoundly important insight offered by those 21<sup>st</sup> Century psychologists who are involved in something called “positive psychology” (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Specifically, there is something of a paradox associated with appreciation. At the point when people are fully and skillfully appreciated and reaffirmed then they tend to live up to their newly acclaimed talents and drive. Similarly, they tend to live down to their depreciated sense of self if constantly criticized, undervalued or recipients of ineffective appreciation. Carl Rogers suggested many years ago that people are least likely to change if they are being asked to change. People are more likely to change when they have received positive and appreciative feedback.

**7. We will take time to offer articulate appreciation for the work being done by one another that is independent of our work together.**

In some contexts, the process of appreciation refers to an increase in worth or value. A stock portfolio “appreciates” in value. This use of the term appreciation would seem, on the surface, to be economic in character. Value, however, can be assigned in non-financial terms. Van Gogh looked at a vase of sunflowers. He appreciated these flowers by rendering a painting of them. In doing so, he increased the aesthetic value of these flowers for everyone. Van Gogh similarly appreciated and brought new value to his friends through his friendship: “Van Gogh did not merely articulate admiration for his friend: He created new values and new ways of seeing the world

through the very act of valuing” (Cooperrider, 1990, p. 123). We can certainly play this critically valuable and loving role with our partner. As reiterated in many love songs, “I can’t believe they have fallen in love with me.” Or “I can’t believe that you believe in me.”

From yet another perspective, the process of appreciation concerns our recognition of the work that is being done by another person—*independent of us*. This is what Kristen and Stephen intended in preparing this Long Pond commitment: Sometimes this sense of appreciation is reflected in the special recognition we give our partner when we celebrate their birthday or their role as a mother or father. Our anniversary is often an occasion for this recognition of our partner’s contribution to our own welfare and happiness. While these occasional forms of recognition can be gratifying to those receiving the praise, appreciation can be exhibited in an even more constructive, ongoing manner through the daily interactions between two partners. The consistent acknowledgment of contributions is embedded in mutual respect.

The term appreciation can be used in an even broader manner. It can apply not only to individual partners, but also to the overall setting and environment of the couple’s relationship. There are at least three ways in which the attitude of appreciation is exhibited in an intimate relationship. A relationship is considered to be appreciative if one finds a positive image of the future being held together by the couple, especially if this image is infused with shared meaning and purpose (see our discussion of the Values Plate in Chapter Thirteen). A couple’s relationship is also appreciative if a concerted effort is being made to recognize the distinct strengths and potentials of all people affiliated with the couple (especially children and the couple’s parents). Finally, the setting of a couple is appreciative if both partners consistently value and seek to spend quality time with one another and recognize the mutual benefits that can be derived this shared time. These partners, in other words, like being together!

An appreciative approach also involves a focus on a specific approach in the provision of this appreciation. The following characteristics are particularly important for a couple such as Kristen and Stephen to keep in mind when seeking to be appreciative with one another. The appreciation is *descriptive*. By describing one’s own reactions and interpretations, it leaves the individual free to use the information or not to use it as he sees fit.



The appreciative comment is *specific* rather than general. To be told that one is “wonderful” will probably not be as useful as to be told that “in the conversation that just took place with our son, you listened carefully to him and he opened up more than usually is the case.” The appreciation is focused on *behavior* rather than on the person. It is important that we refer to what a person does rather than to what we think or imagine they are like as a whole person. This is particularly important for an intimate couple to keep in mind, since our sense of what they think and what they feel is often more influential than what is really going on regarding their actual behavior.

It is directed toward *behavior that the receiver can do something about*. We often bedeck praise on someone with whom we have just fallen in love (or lust) that is not under their control: “such sparkling blue eyes, tall, dark and handsome—or just about the most beautiful thing I have ever seen!!” This can be compelling praise—but is of little value when we are determining how to live with one another in a manner that maximizes our happiness. Sparkling blue eyes serve an important function for only a brief period of time.

Finally, it is important to recognize that appreciation is an important step toward *authenticity*. It opens the way to a relationship that is built on trust, honesty, and genuine concern. Through such a relationship, we will have achieved one of the most rewarding experiences that a couple can achieve. Furthermore, effective and caring appreciation will open a very important door to the personal learning and growth of both members of an enduring, intimate relationship.

While this expanded version of appreciation was not explicitly embedded in Kristen and Stephone’s Long Pond Charter, elements of this version are found in other commitments found in their charter. It would not hurt, however, for our Long Pond charters to spend a bit of time reflecting on the presence (or absence) of all forms of appreciation in their relationship. They might also be appreciative about their own use of appreciation at important times in their ongoing relationship. As the advocates of appreciation often announce: “catch each other when you are doing it right!”

**8. We will allow –and even support–the occasional extravagance exhibited by each of us regarding something of particular interest (even passion) for us.**

Julie Bulitt (Bulitt and Bulitt, 2020, pp.53-54) this about David:

He is right. I didn't need that new pair of shoes. Both of us are past needing anything. I like them and wanted something I could wear for work that was comfortable but cure.

“So, you are telling me that in your closet with a good hundred or so pairs of shoes, none are comfortable and cute enough to wear to work?” David asks.

Maybe it is a hundred pairs, maybe a few more. And no. I am not going upstairs to count them. What does he care anyway? He just got a new thing to put his golf clubs in. Golf bag, whatever it is. What was wrong with the other bag? . . . I have no idea why are we arguing about shoes and golf clubs.

It seems that it was a matter of balance of power for Julie and David. Perhaps this balance becomes particularly important when it is a matter of an “unnecessary purchase” – an extravagance. Poor couples don't need to address this concern—for there is no money available for unnecessary purchases (unless one or both members of this financially-struggling couple are self-destructive or using this purchase to blow up the relationship). This is primarily an issue for middle-class couples. This particular item on the Long Pond Charter is pertinent to the power struggle and the fundamental questions regarding purchases and related finances.

**9. We will take time to offer articulate appreciation for the work being done by one another that is independent of our work together.**

This ninth commitment relates closely not just to the eighth appreciative commitment but also to the third commitment regarding support for one another's work. Appreciation must expand when being engaged on behalf of work being done with other people. There are several forms of appreciation about which Kristen and Stephen might want to gain knowledge and learn to appreciate. These alternative forms come from the first book written by David Cooperrider and his associates (Srivastava, Cooperrider and Associates, 1990) about something called appreciative inquiry.

These are three ways in which the term appreciation is commonly used. We appreciate other people through attempting to understand them. We also appreciate other people through valuing them and often seeing them in a new light. A third way of appreciating another person is by being thoughtful and considerate in acknowledging their contributions to other people they touch (they are being good FOR the world, rather than just IN the world). In seeking to understand another person (such as our life partner), we are trying to step inside their perspective.

This ninth commitment means that Kristen and Stephen are seeking to understand why their partner is engaged in a specific project (that is not shared). One gains knowledge from an appreciative perspective by “identifying with the observed” (Harmon, 1990). At one level, this is not hard to do when you are living with this person every day. We “know” why they are excited about something.

In some ways, we “feel” what they feel. However, compassion and empathy, rather than objectivity, are critical. Compassion does not imply either a loss of discipline or a loss of boundaries between one’s own perspective and the perspective held by the other person. Appreciation is deeply caring about and caring for another person’s hopes and dreams without confiscating these hopes and dreams—making them our own.

Appreciation is caring deeply about the problems and challenges of our partner, without personally taking on their problems. We can appreciate another person’s work and assist this person with this work (when asked) without losing our personal identity or confiscating their identity. It is tempting to merge with our partner’s identity—this is part of what it often means to “fall in love” and experience limerence. Merging is not true appreciation. The prevention of merging is particularly challenging given that our partner’s problems are often our own problem. Compassion with boundaries can be a real challenge for Kristen and Stephen – and for any of us as members of an enduring, intimate relationship where love is lingering.

In some contexts, the process of appreciation refers to an increase in worth or value. A stock portfolio “appreciates” in value. This use of the term appreciation would seem, on the surface, to be economic in character. Value, however, can be assigned in non-financial terms. Van Gogh looked at a vase of sunflowers. He appreciated these flowers by rendering a painting of them. In doing so, he increased the aesthetic value of these flowers for everyone.

Van Gogh similarly appreciated and brought new value to his friends through his

friendship: “Van Gogh did not merely articulate admiration for his friend: He created new values and new ways of seeing the world through the very act of valuing” (Cooperrider, 1990, p. 123). We can certainly play this critically valuable and loving role with our partner. As reiterated in many love songs, “I can’t believe they have fallen in love with me.” Or “I can’t believe that you believe in me.” Later these appreciative comments become: “I can’t believe that you have just pulled this off!” Or “I have found a new reason to be in love with you. Your work is amazing!”

From yet another perspective, the process of appreciation concerns our recognition of the contributions that have been made by another person regarding a specific project: This is what Kristen and Stephen intended in preparing this Long Pond commitment: Sometimes this sense of appreciation is reflected in the special recognition we give our partner when we celebrate their birthday or their role as a mother or father.

Our anniversary is often an occasion for this recognition of our partner’s contribution to our own welfare and happiness. The ninth commitment made by Kristen and Stephen means that we use these celebrative occasions to not only honor the way our partner has improved our own life but also improved the life of other people. They are wonderfully good FOR the world!

While these occasional forms of recognition can be gratifying to those receiving the praise, appreciation can be exhibited in an even more constructive, ongoing manner through the daily interactions between two partners. The consistent, appropriate and frequent acknowledgment of contributions is embedded in mutual respect. It is founded on an appreciative attitude regarding the nature and purpose of enduring, collaborative relationships. We should not wait for our partner to complete their project. We should offer frequent and timely appreciation that is articulate (keeping in mind the list of appreciative characteristics listed in commitment eight).

The term appreciation can be used in an even broader manner. It can apply not only to individual partners, but also to the overall setting and environment of the couple’s relationship and of the work they are doing in the world (generativity three and four). There are at least three ways in which this broader attitude of appreciation is exhibited in an intimate relationship. A relationship is considered to be appreciative if one finds a positive image of the future being held together by the couple—especially if this image is infused with shared meaning and purpose (see our discussion of the Values Plate in Chapter Thirteen).

A couple’s setting is also appreciative if a concerted effort is being made to recognize

the distinct strengths and potentials of all people affiliated with the couple—especially children, the couple’s parents, and stakeholders involved in the partners’ projects. Finally, the setting of a couple is appreciative if both partners consistently value and seek to spend quality time with one another and recognize the mutual benefits that can be derived from this shared time. Projects are great, but so is our relationship. These enduring partners, in other words, like being together and recognize that their work outside the relationship is energized by and finds direction in the relationship. As noted in the Bette Midler song, we become the wind under each other’s wings.

**10. We will allow –and even support—the occasional extravagance exhibited by each of us regarding something of particular interest (even passion) for us.**

Julie Bulitt says this about David: (Bulitt and Bulitt, 2020, pp. 53-54)

He is right. I didn’t need that new pair of shoes. Both of us are past needing anything. I like them and wanted something I could wear for work that was comfortable but cure.

David concludes:

So, you are telling me that in your closet with a good hundred or so pairs of shoes, none are comfortable and cute enough to war to work.

Julie [to herself]:

Maybe it is a hundred pairs, maybe a few more. And no. I am not going upstairs to count them. What does he care anyway? He just got a new thing to put his golf clubs in. Golf bag, whatever it is. What was wrong with the other bag? . . . I have no idea why [we are] arguing about shoes and golf clubs.

It seems that it was a matter of balancing power for Julie and David. Perhaps this balance becomes particularly important when it is a matter of an “unnecessary purchase” - an extravagance. Poor couples don’t need to address this concern for there is no money available for unnecessary purchases (unless one or both members of this financially struggling couple are self-destructive or using this purchase to blow up the relationship). This is primarily an issue for middle-class couples. This particular item on Stephen and Kristen’s Long Pond Charter is pertinent to their own power struggle and fundamental questions regarding purchases and related finances.

## **11. We will be transparent (sharing) regarding expenses and our financial status and decision making.**

This was (and still is) a tough one for Stephen and Kristen. As Julie Bulitt notes, this is ultimately a matter of control and power—just as it is when supporting the purchase of “extravagant things” by our partner (commitment ten). Obviously, for those couples struggling with poverty, the discussions regarding expenses have an “existential” (survival) element that often elevates the level of emotions and brings additional stress into the relationship. However, even for middle-class couples, like Kristen and Stephen the stress associated with money is sufficiently great that they both fear talking about expenses and financial status.

As with most couples, Kristen and Stephen do not share the paying of bills. One of them does the bookkeeping. It has traditionally been the male who paid the bills (since they were the breadwinner). Today, the female member of the couple is often the one paying the bills. This is the case with Stephen and Kristen as a “liberated” couple.

Unfortunately, the “liberation” is often a façade, because the woman is still doing the grocery shopping, buying things for the kids, worrying about household matters, etc. She is still doing the old-fashion “home making” and these duties are often closely tied to expenses and bill-paying. So, she takes out the check book (or on-line banking services) and brings up the tough financial issues.

With Kristen holding on to the checkbook, the major question because not so much where she spends the money, but how often does she tell Stephen about their financial status (or invite him to examine the check book, their bank account, mortgage payments, and loan repayments). Furthermore, what does Stephen do with this information once it is obtained? Does he question Kristen’s spending? This is dangerous territory for the two of them—and for many couples

Does Kristen use this information acquired from Stephen to remind him about how much work she has to do in taking care of the finances? This is a “hot button” for the two of them. Finally, how big of an expenditure that Kristen is contemplating should be brought to Stephen’s attention? A \$100 purchase of a needed piece of cookware? If it is a wok for Stephen’s Asian cooking then consideration of the purchase should include Stephen (and he will undoubtedly approve of the purchase, given that it was his idea in the first place). What if it is a new mixer that Kristen needs when she bakes? Is this “any of Stephen’s business” and is it covered

under Commitment Eight?

Then we come to the much bigger financial decisions regarding such things as setting aside money for their children's education, purchasing a new insurance policy, taking out a new loan (using the equity in their home) or remodeling their den. These matters have to be discussed. However, how does the conversation occur in a manner that is productive and not confrontational—especially in areas where Kristen and Stephen might assign different priorities (such as remodeling the den). Finally, there are the really big financial decisions with regard to purchasing a new automobile and ultimately, purchasing a new home. How do any of us deal with these issues successfully?

A friend of mine is a very successful realtor selling homes in California. I asked her recently about the secret to her success. She mentioned that in her previous life she was a social worker who spent considerable time with dysfunctional families. For her, the decision regarding purchase of a home will inevitably push a couple into a state of at least temporary dysfunction. She can subtly and caringly help the couple to make their decision(s) during this dysfunctional stage in their life. I wish there were more realtors like her. Perhaps some training in couples therapy should be part of the curriculum for realtors-in-training.

**12. We will care for one another when ill, injured, fearful or depressed, knowing that it is only through mutual care that we can sustain our life and our relationship.**

While we should find other people to befriend and can turn to them for support and care (Charter Item One), we ultimately must look to our partner for loving care at important (often stressful) moments in our life. As Julie Bulitt notes, it is important for her clients (individually and collectively) to map out a strategy for their life. She borrows an image from *The Wizard of Oz* by encouraging them to find their own Yellow Brick Road. I would suggest (and Julie Bulitt offers several examples) that a loving and attentive partner can help us find our own Yellow Brick Road. Perhaps, our partner can help provide some of the brains (scarecrow), heart (tin man) –and in particular courage (cowardly lion) to face our ongoing problems in a successful manner.

Julie (Bulitt and Bulitt, 2020, p. 187) offers the following observation regarding her relationship with David:

Part of a good relationship is knowing what the other person needs in

terms of support, help, or backup. During the conversation, I might raise a problem, and during the course of us talking, I ultimately figure it out. “You came to the right conclusion yourself,” David says. I did, but having him there to help me along was a key to my getting there. That’s what I mean by taking the Yellow Brick Road. It happens all the time in my sessions with clients.

Julie (Bulitt and Bulitt, 2020, p. 156) offers the following touching comments regarding this fine charter commitment that is based on her own work with couples:

Instances often come up during the course of relationships where one person is dealing with something that causes her to be more needy, more dependent on her partner. It could be the death of a parent, a conflict at work or loss of a job, a medical or mental health worry, an out of control child. That person's attitude, her outlook, everything she does, is being affected and weighed down by something that she is having trouble managing. She is the wide load and she needs help, protection, and guidance. It is incumbent upon her partner to be that escort car, to help her stay in her lane until she gets through the situation and can do so herself. Couples in a committed relationship inherently understand this concept. Today- I might be the wide load; tomorrow it could be my turn in the escort car.

Julie (Bulitt and Bulitt, 2020, p. 157) goes on to invite in another expert on relationships—Albert Einstein:

Being able to toggle between the wide load and the escort car is but one example of balance in a relationship. Albert Einstein said that in order to keep your balance, you have to keep moving, and I am certainly in no position to argue with him. In a balanced relationship, a couple spends quality time together, but each person has interests and activities that are separate; they can be best friends, but still maintain their other relationships; they learn to expect things from their partner, but not take anything for granted. A balanced relationship calls for the two people to communicate, talk, and even disagree with each other, but at the same time, know when to just wait and be quiet.

In this closing statement, Julie is bringing together several of the statements made by Kristen and Stephen in their Long Pond Charter. Maybe Julie was taking notes in the back seat!!



Before closing off this exploration of the Long Pond Charter, I wish to expand on Julie Bulitt's insightful comments. I will go beyond just the role played by conversations in helping our partner down their Yellow Brick Road. Sometimes, it is matter of physical assistance rather than just thoughtful listening. The Yellow Brick Road is filled with obstacles that require more than head, heart and courage.

Someone might be needed to lift up and throw aside the obstacles. I offer my own story about Kathleen, my wife, after she broke her ankle and had it immobilized in a cast. As a very independent person, Kathleen was accustomed to doing things herself and rarely asked for a helping hand from me (or anyone else). For a brief period of time, I was often wheeling her about (in her office chair of course - not a wheelchair). I was assisting her physically.

Ironically, our wedding anniversary occurred during this time when Kathleen was relying on my assistance. Many of our dear friends know of Kathleen's independence and assumed that this would create tension in our relationship—especially with Kathleen and I celebrating our long-term marriage. This is not what actually occurred. Both Kathleen and I realized that this moment of assistance represented a new era in our relationship. As the two of us grow older, we will often be reaching out to one another for help. We used this anniversary to acknowledge and even celebrate this new phase of interdependence. The two of us would have signed off ourselves on this twelfth commitment in the Long Pond Charter.

### **13. (or is it a new 1?) An Amendment to the Charter: Finding Quality Time Together**

The charter was working pretty well for Kristen and Stephen. They had operated under its rules of engagement for more than five years. There still were fights and misunderstandings, but they frequently reminded one another of their charter and even pulled it out of their shared desk for review and reflection.

During the sixth year, however, Kristen suggested that they go back to Long Pond and spend a bit of time talking about their relationship. Stephen and Kristen very much loved one another and didn't seem to need a radical remarriage. Yet, for Kristen, something was missing. In rereading the charter, she noticed that an emphasis was being placed on what they would do independently of one another and how they retain their autonomy and freedom, while remaining in a long-term committed relationship.

What seemed to be missing was a commitment to spend quality time together—not

alone. Stephen agreed. Both Stephen and Kristen were quite busy. Life had not slowed down for either of them as they grew older. They still had their daily rituals and still shared many common interests. But it was much too easy to say: “we’ll find some quality time together tomorrow, or next week, or next month.” It was hard for the two of them to even set aside the weekend to travel back to Long Pond. Postponement is often a strategy that is easy to embrace when we are acting on many other priorities in our life.

## Conclusions: A Shimmering Commitment

I am reminded of the attachment phobic song (“Marry Me A Little”) offered by Stephen Sondheim that I mentioned earlier. There is also a poignant song penned many years ago by those remarkable Broadway musical lyricists, Betty Comden and Adolph Green. It is called “Some Other Time” and begins with a question and then a response of postponement: “Where has the time all gone to? Haven’t done half the things we want to. Oh well, we’ll catch up some other time.”

Stephen and Kristen have done their fair share of deferring. They sometimes seem to be “married a little.” Yet, there was so much that they could do together as two people who cherish one another. They don’t want to be like Bobby, the disengaged protagonist featured in Sondheim’s *Company*. They wish to avoid the outcome portrayed by Comden and Green who write about precious moments together being often unacknowledged or acknowledged as nothing but “tokens.” Comden and Green’s couple never does come to terms with the deferring: “There’s so much more embracing. Still to be done but time is racing. Oh well, we’ll catch up some other time.” Kristen and Stephen want something different.

Kristen and Stephen decided at the Long Pond reunion that they would not continue to say: “oh well.” They committed to setting aside an hour each month to plan for and then “embrace” a shared event of at least four hours duration. This event was to do three things for them: (1) allow them to enjoy an activity together, (2) maximize the opportunity for a truly memorable experience that can be repeatedly shared in their subsequent recollections, and (3) be distinctive and not repeated for at least another year.

This was quite a commitment. Both laughed about its specificity and regiment-sounding rhetoric. However, they lived with it and still do—sharing remarkable experiences (replete with a fair amount of Csikszentmihalyi’s “flow”). While Comden and Green’s couple settled “for what we’ve had”, Kristen and Stephen

reached out for something that they didn't yet have. And they grabbed it with a loving grip. Love was going to linger in the life of Stephen and Kristen. Their Long Pond shimmers in the light of their shared commitments.

## Key Chapter Points

Enduring couples:

- Set norms or rules by which they live and work with one another in an effective and interpersonally gratifying manner.
- Establish norms of mutuality and dominance between the two partners that are consciously different than the old patterns followed by their parents and families.
- Experience a marker event when the couple is recognized and labeled as one unit by friends and family.
- Set norms about discussable and non-discussable issues both with each other and with other people about themselves.
- Discuss each other's weaknesses frankly and honestly.
- View the maintenance of their relationship with their partner as more important than the maintenance of any other relationship.

## Chapter Ten

### Performing in an Enduring Relationship

With the establishment of effective working norms, a couple is prepared to begin performing its new developmental tasks. The couple typically will experience a period of harmony and fulfillment, at least regarding a set of predominant issues in their life. As the demands change or intensify, a couple may have to retreat to norming, storming or even forming phases, though typically the “battles” will lessen in intensity if the four phases have been successfully traversed in the first place. Any regression to an earlier phase will typically take a much shorter time than did the initial movement through this phase and require less energy and attention on the part of the couple.

#### The Rituals of Daily Life

Michael Polanyi (2009) speaks of the tacit dimension in life, this being the way in which we come to know things without ever being conscious of them or even being able to articulate what we have learned. Something similar seems to occur when a couple has established a good working relationship. Much occurs in the relationship that goes unnoticed while the partners are nurturing the relationship. These unnoticed things give the relationship new direction and renewed vitality.

In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye asks his wife if she loves him. At first, she dismisses the question as another sign of the old fool's inappropriate romanticism. Yet, he persists. Eventually, she acknowledges that she must love him, since she sleeps with him, works alongside him, and has raised three children with him. This is the tacit dimension of the performing phase in a relationship. Nothing is usually said, other than an occasional, often very informal, recognition that there is something special and important about this entity, the couple.

Karen is a twenty-five-year-old woman in a five-year marriage. She describes this tacit dimension in her own, relatively young relationship with Ben:

Karen: It's so weird to try and sum up. So much of the relationship is unspoken. And we've never had to put this into words. It's an

underlying feeling You go through everyday life, and it gets stronger and stronger. You never put it into words except to say, "I love you so much." Like every minute.

Ben: But I love that. We always say that.

Karen: We can't even walk by each other without touching each other. A lot of it is physical and a lot of it is just saying, "I love you." A lot of it is how he makes me feel inside about myself.

Karen and Ben certainly say that they love each other much more often than does the couple in *Fiddler on the Roof*. But then they are of a different era and culture. Perhaps in their own, different ways, both couples reaffirm the power of long-term, intimate relationships in helping to define the very purpose of our time here on Earth.

## **The Vernacular Life**

How do the tacit dimensions of an enduring relationship manifest themselves? As we mentioned regarding the establishment of norms in a relationship, many of the most important rules in a relationship are established in the "vernacular life" (Moore, 1994), the informal interactions with one another and with other people and event that fill our daily lives together.

Typically, the tacit dimension of an enduring relationship is manifest in not only the daily routine of the couple, but also in the small, yet meaningful rituals that the couple observes as a way of celebrating their continuing growth and prosperity—and the continuing (if not openly acknowledged) love of each partner for the other. One couple celebrates their relationship by celebrating the sunset every evening on their deck (when it is not raining or snowing!). Another couple opens a bottle of champagne every month to acknowledge their thirty-year long relationship.

## Gottman's Bids

One of our guides, John Gottman (2015, p. 88) offers an observation about the valuable role played by the mundane, vernacular life based on his extensive work with couples:

Hollywood has distorted our notions of romance and what makes passion sizzle. Watching Humphrey Bogart gather teary-eyed Ingrid Bergman into his arms may make your heart pound, but real-life romance is fueled by far more humdrum scenes. It is kept alive each time you let your spouse know he or she is valued during the grind of everyday life. In marriage, couples are always making what I call "bids" for each other's attention, affection, humor, or support.

I find Gottman's notion about offering a "bid" to be quite insightful.

Gottman (2015, p. 88) goes on to describe the bid in more detail:

Bids can be as minor as asking for a back-rub or as significant as seeking help in carrying the burden when an aging parent is ill. The partner responds to each bid either by turning toward the spouse or turning away. A tendency to turn toward your partner is the basis of trust, emotional connection, passion, and a satisfying sex life. Comical as it may sound, romance is strengthened in the supermarket aisle when your partner asks, "Are we out of butter?" and you answer, "I don't know. Let me go get some just in case," instead of shrugging pathetically. It grows when you know your spouse is having a bad day at work and you take a few seconds out of your schedule to send him an encouraging text. In all of these instances, partners are making a choice to turn toward each other rather than away.

At a more fundamental level, this process of bidding seems to be founded on what Gottman (2015, p. 21) identifies as the Deep Friendship that is to be found in most happy, enduring relationships:

By this ["deep friendship"] I mean a mutual respect for and enjoyment of each other's company. These [happy] couples tend to know each other intimately—they are well versed in each other's likes, dislikes, personality quirks, hopes and dreams. They have an abiding regard for each other and express this fondness not just in the big ways but through small gestures [bids] day in and day out.

As Gottman suggests, Arlene and Kevin (like many enduring couples) speak of being each other's best friend. After going through several difficult years of struggle, Arlene and Kevin now most look forward to "simply paling around together." A typical day for these two people usually centers around work and school. They both get up early to commute to their jobs. Neither of them is a morning person so they don't talk for the first hour or so. They make up for the lack of nonverbal communication by spending a half hour or so in bed each morning just snuggling and cuddling. Perhaps they are offering each other Gottman's "bid."

Both Kevin and Arlene take classes at night, so it is usual to not see each other again until late at night. When they are not in school, they spend the majority of their evenings studying for classes. They see their classes as a fulfillment of the commitment they made to each other to allow time for individual personal growth. Kevin is currently taking a class in Tai Chi (in keeping with his romantic proclivities), while Arlene is taking a class in accounting (in keeping with her more practical bent).

To ensure that they also have time for each other, designate each Friday as "date night." A big evening of "bids." They take turns planning activities for the evening. This usually includes dinner of some sort, and a movie or a walk along the beach. During the past few years, Arlene has come around to Kevin's way of thinking. Now, they both consider themselves to be "romantics at heart." Kevin has also come around to Arlene's way of thinking—they realize that sometimes romance needs to be helped along with a little planning when two people have full lives.

They see date night as their special time together and reserve the night just for themselves. The weekends are usually spent with a handful of their closest friends. They both like to entertain, so it's not unusual for them to have friends over for pizza and a game. It can be very disillusioning for a couple when romance has left the relationship. Arlene and Kevin seem to understand the importance that romance plays in a healthy relationship. They have been very thoughtful and active in ensuring that this element is nurtured.

Gene and Margie make a point of having coffee together each morning before he leaves for work. Margie then takes their daughter to childcare and usually picks her up after work though there is flexibility when her schedule changes temporarily. They both have long commutes, so dinner is not elaborate. Gene and Margie like to cook, but Gene does most of it. They are both devoted to their daughter and spend time with her in the evening before going to bed around 9:30 pm. In such a busy life, there is little time for elaborate ritual or even so-called "quality time"

together—for the quality time is spent with their young daughter.

A small ritual (coffee together in the morning) soon is invested with considerable significance as the one act that is shared by Gene and Maggie virtually every morning. Even Gene and Margie may not be aware of the significance of this one shared act in their busy, independent lives.

The meaning of this small, daily ritual may only become apparent when they discuss it with an interviewer (or marriage counselor). Alternatively, its importance may only become apparent when one partner abandons it for some reason. Then all hell breaks loose. Both partners are likely to be surprised regarding the emotions attached to the ritual. There often is a pressing need to restore this simple daily event or risk losing the relationship!

## Moving Together and Apart

At the heart of the ongoing relationship between two people is the issue of enmeshment (growing together) versus disengagement (growing apart). Enmeshment concerns the extent to which the lives of two people are intricately interwoven. Partners in a highly enmeshed couple do everything together, are usually very dependent on each other for most of the emotional gratifications in life and often are unable to distinguish their own opinions, feelings and aspirations from those of their partner. There are, in other words, very diffuse boundaries between the two partners. It is hard to determine where one partner leaves off and the other begins.

By contrast, highly disengaged relationships are those in which the two partners barely keep in touch with each other. They operate essentially independently of one another, passing like "ships in the night." They establish what used to be called a "marriage of convenience." Today, these disengaged relationships seem to be more common. We might diagnose the current "illness" as Attachment phobia and can point to a phrase ("I'm not talking about moving in") from a once popular song ("I'd really love to see you tonight") as its anthem.. We find that couples often come together with a shared understanding that not too many demands (or expectations) will be made regarding what will be sacrificed for the relationship to endure.



## Marry Me A Little

One of our guides in this book, Stephen Sondheim has written an entire musical (*Company*) that speaks to this transient model of intimate relationships. One of the songs in this musical that I have already mentioned is the attachment phobic: "Marry Me A Little." This song speaks specifically to disengaged commitments. There is often an additional component of this contemporary relationship. Much as we find in Susan Campbell's model of intimate relationships (that we offered early in this book) emphasis is placed on freedom and the right to leave the relationship if it is not meeting current needs. There is no need to endure the stress and trauma of remarriage. We just bid "adieu" and say "thanks for the memories" (to quote a Bob Hope song).

In many cases we found that the issue of enmeshment versus disengagement focused on specific incidents, on moments of enmeshment or disengagement, rather than an overall style of living together. Aaron, for instance, spoke about his dream of temporary disengagement. He would like to spend a week alone sitting on a beach in Hawaii. Becky doesn't believe that this is really what Aaron wants (or at least what he should do).

She suggests that he really doesn't like being alone and has an obligation to spend more time with his family: "Why would you want to go to Hawaii by yourself of all places. You'd think you'd want to go there with me. We haven't had a vacation like that for years. I can't believe it. Why don't you want to go fishing with the boys or to baseball camp?" In this particular instance, Aaron is looking for (or at least wanting to dream about) greater disengagement in their relationship (and their family), while Becky is arguing for more enmeshment and engagement.

As in the case of many conflicts regarding the establishment of an enduring relationship, Becky and Aaron soon move to the heart of their relationship and their covenant with one another. Aaron suggests that Becky "thinks I want to go to Hawaii to make love to other women on the beach." I don't. I'd just like some time to myself on the beach." At this point, Becky could no longer maintain her pleasant veneer. She snapped back at Aaron: "Yeah right. You'd just lie on the beach by yourself for a week."

Aaron backed off: "It's just a fantasy. You know me. I'd be lonely and miserable in an hour. Of course, I'd rather be with you." In this brief interchange, we see Aaron submerging certain aspects of himself so that Becky can feel safe. Becky, in turn,

becomes the unloving and demanding "bitch" who won't let Aaron run free. Neither of them particularly likes these roles, and they must begin to openly address their real needs in the relationship for both connectedness (enmeshment) and independence if they are to move beyond their current conflictual status.

### **Marry All of Me (Or None of Me)**

For some of the couples we interviewed there is little conflict regarding the norms of enmeshment and disengagement—because they have come to agreement on this matter and are either heavily enmeshed as a couple or consistently disengaged. Highly enmeshed relationships are typical in many traditional European and European-American families of lower middle-class origins. The entire family is wrapped up in each other's business. No one does anything without checking in with one another. The transition of one member of the family out of the household, to get married or go to school, is often highly traumatic for everyone in the family, particularly the parents. Mother and father fight a lot, but always make up and never spend a night apart.

Conversely, many relationships among the upper class and upper middle class in Europe for many centuries were built on a norm of disengagement. The husband and wife agree to remain together for the children and to meet various social obligations. Each of these partners, however, had their own lovers who met their sexual needs and often their needs for intimacy.

They also often went their separate ways with regards to friends, recreational and artistic interests, and vacations. A disengaged relationship of this sort may be exemplified in the apparently successful marriage of Bill and Hillary Clinton. A not-so-successful, but perhaps unavoidable, disengaged arrangement may be found in the relationship that was established (unsuccessfully) for a short period of time by Prince Charles and Princess Diana.

As we turn to our own interviewed couples, we find disengaged couples like Sally and Max, who seem more comfortable when talking about "I" than "we." There was always hesitancy and question marks in their voices when talking about and for themselves as a couple. They felt that they have little in common, other than both being Tauruses, and are surprised that they are still together after three and a half years, having been "attached" on and off for the previous 15 years. Both teachers in their early sixties, Sally and Max have been very cautious about making a commitment over the years in part because Max lost his first wife to cancer and

wants to avoid ever going through that pain again.

In trying to play it safe, Max dated many women for a long period of time, though he always returned to Sally as his stable relationship. Sally found this complex dance quite confusing and paradoxical, for within a year after they started dating Max told her that he wanted a "deep and meaningful relationship without any commitment" and within four years "he told me that he loved me and then went out with other women." Instead of insisting on a showdown, Sally started dating other men, all the while insisting that the person who she really loved was Max. Of course, at the times when they started getting closer, he again started to pull away, and the dance began again.

Even in making a firmer commitment to Sally, Max uses a shopping metaphor that seems quite disengaged: you pick something out that you like at the store and ask them to hold it while you check around for a while. Then you look at other stores but keep coming back to the first store because "you know that that is what you really want." But something keeps you from buying it, and there is always that suspicion that there is something better somewhere. So, Max distinguished between "when he knew" that they were a couple, which was early on, and "when he was sure" that they were a couple, which occurred much later.

Actually, Max was "sure" that they were a couple when Sally finally gave up on him after 15 years of waiting and went to another country to work. While she was gone, Max had no desire to date other women. He finally followed Sally and asked her to come back and marry him. She waited six months to answer in the affirmative (giving him back a bit of his own medicine) and only after he went to get her a second time and proposed again. This ended the "dance."

Sally indicated, however, that she was never sure that they were a couple until the marriage ceremony when she finally was able to build some boundaries around their highly disengaged relationship. Max and Sally are a distinctive couple in many ways. Yet, in other way they exemplify traditional sex-role values and expectations. Max, the male, tries to keep disengaged, while Sally, the female, seeks out commitment. Sally's overall description of their relationship could stand as a motto for virtually all disengaged couples: "It was always fuzzy."

## Sort of Living Together

A similar pattern is to be found in the relationship that has been established between Tina and Ben. These bright, upper middle-class people have been in a relationship for seven years; yet, when asked if they live together, Tina (a lawyer) says, "Well, yes, we sort of live together," while Ben (owner of a business) says flat out, "no." They spend most of their nights at Tina's three-bedroom flat in a highly affluent area of a large West Coast city, and most weekends at Ben's home in an affluent suburban of this city.

They also spend at least one night per week without each other. To her this is "sort of" living together. To him, it isn't and that in and of itself tells us a great deal about this relationship. Along traditional gender lives, Ben sees himself as very separate (regarding his career) and very autonomous (in term of his interpersonal relationships), while Tina sees herself as part of a couple, with many attachments. He is part of a convenient arrangement. She is part of an intimate relationship.

The entire interview was very difficult for Ben, given that he didn't perceive that they were a couple. When the interviewer asked Ben and Tina about the moment when they had become a couple, Ben became very frustrated: "I don't know what it is that you're asking. Does that mean the first time you went to bed with somebody?"

He finally acknowledged that: "I never think of us as a couple. We are two individuals. It has nothing to do with a couple." Tina offered her own conclusion at this point: "I think we have been a couple for seven years, but Ben, what is it about the word 'couple' that bothers you?" At this point, Ben articulated a basic credo for many people who prefer to live in highly disengaged relationships: "Couple is like two people who are tied together."

In this statement, Ben reveals some of his most basic fears regarding being in a relationship and making a commitment. His fears may reside partially in a failed first marriage and in his continuing obligations to his two children from this previous marriage. While both Ben and Tina have children from a previous marriage, Tina's children are of college age and live with her when they are in town.

Conversely, as in the case of many men, Ben did not gain custody of his children after being divorced from his first wife. His children live in the mid-west and Ben flies back to see them at least once a month and spends four to six days with them. While Ben is successful enough in his career to devote considerable time and

money to being with his children, his commitment to them is quite impressive. Clearly, a commitment is to be honored in full by Ben. He does not enter relationships easily and tends to view them as binding rather than freeing for everyone involved.

In the case of Frederick and Helene, the traditional gender roles have been reversed. Whereas Ben and Max had assumed the male role of detachment, Frederick wanted a strong commitment in his relationship with Helene. While Sally and Tina were seeking out a stronger commitment from their male partner, Helene is concerned about keeping some distance between herself and Frederick.

In many ways, Frederick and Helene exemplify the emerging changes in gender roles. Many women wish to protect their new-found independence while many men want to participate more fully in family and community life. Frederick indicated that he "wanted from a family what I didn't get from my own." According to Frederick:

. . . my folks were pretty simple people . . . it was like I was always too weird or too smart for the Helene was adopted . . . she had stepbrothers and sisters . . . her mother divorced and remarried a couple of times . . . I asked Helene for a commitment . . . her take on it was, let's get married and if it doesn't work, hey, no big deal . . . we can just get divorced . . . and I wanted something more than that.

One gains a clear sense in interviewing this couple that Helene is not prepared to believe that someone as "exciting" or "exotic" as Frederick might be interested in having a long-term relationship with her. One also gains the impression that Frederick was deliberately looking to create a sense of family that he never had and still missed. Perhaps, Helene was being cautious about their relationship in part because she did not completely trust Frederick's staying power and may not be convinced that Frederick had a realistic sense of the nature of enduring commitment to another person. Conversely, she may doubt her own ability to make such a commitment, given that she has no role models of enduring commitment in her own life.

## **Finding the Balance**

Most couples do not live at either extreme of the continuum between enmeshment and disengagement. They somehow establish a balance between these two extremes. They discover a sense of interdependence; yet they still face many challenges regarding this critical balance between attachment and freedom. It seems that while enduring issues regarding enmeshment and disengagement concern the degree of interconnectedness within a relationship, there are also typically ongoing issues concerning the degree of interconnectedness between the couple, on the one hand, and the outside world, on the other hand. System theorists define this as the extent to which the relationship is open or closed.

Relationships tend to be open regarding the interaction between a couple and the outside world if they are deeply enmeshed in the extended families of one or both of the partners. We found that this was most often the case when one or more of the partners come from a traditional nonwestern culture or a western culture that places a particular value on loyalty to family of origin (parents, grandparents, siblings, uncles and aunts, and even cousins).

This openness and enmeshment within the family constellation was certainly the case for Jamal, who was born in an Arab country, but has lived in the United States for sixteen years. He is an engineer, attends graduate school, and married a broadcast manager, Suzanne, six years ago. Jamal noted that: "I have a lot of responsibilities. I'm torn between the two -- my family and Suzanne."

He went on to explain that in his culture, it is ingrained in you from the day you are born that you will take care of your parents, especially if you are the eldest son. Jamal said that it is often impossible for Americans to understand this commitment because they do not come from the same background or uphold the same traditions and hold the same cultural expectations. He added, "you do not choose between your family and your wife. They become one." Thus, we have a classic example of a very open system. The family of origins is merged with the relationship between oneself and one's partner.

## A Delicate Readjusting Balance

As in the case of virtually every long-term couple we interviewed, the stage of performing has never been one of eternal, unaltered bliss for Jamal and Suzanne. Rather, performing for most couples requires frequent readjustments and even several remarriages in order for the relationship to endure. In the case of Jamal and Suzanne, many adjustments have been made and they were in the midst of a remarriage process at the point we interviewed them. While both Jamal and Suzanne were initially eager to participate in the interview, they wished they had never agreed to participate by the time that the interview actually occurred, given a recurrence in their struggle regarding Jamal's extended family.

Their current struggle emerged when they were asked what they see as "the most difficult thing you had to weather in your relationship." Their response indicated that the "most difficult thing" is occurring right now. It became clear that their cultural upbringing was a major difference and much further reaching than any individual differences between them could ever be. Thus, the outside world in this open relationship became more important than their personal differences and interactions (as would be the case in a more closed or disengaged relationship).

Suzanne immediately responded to the question by identifying "his family" as the most difficult thing: "It's not like they are awful. It's the whole idea of having to share him. It's so unlike our society." She went on to explain that she would never really be his main concern because of the commitment he feels toward his family. It is just understood by his parents that they would move in with them if they ever married. At this point in their relationship, Jamal's parents have not moved in, because Jamal and Suzanne have never made the formal commitment to get married. However, now is the time to make a commitment (at least in Suzanne's mind) and this commitment brings the issue of Jamal's parents to the fore.

Over the past year, the issue of mutual commitment has become even more poignant because both of them have increased their commitments outside their relationship, which provides further evidence of an open relationship. Suzanne recently returned to college and is opening a small boutique. Jamal has become a partner in a flower shop and has decided to extend his graduate studies to include a doctoral degree.

When asked why they made these additional commitments during the past year, Jamal quickly replied that he is pursuing the flower shop for extra money and

pursuing a doctoral degree so that he can eventually teach at a university. Suzanne hesitated before she said that maybe it was a "safety net." She went on to explain that she was filling- her life with other commitments in case the relationship with Jamal did not work out. Jamal did not seem to be surprised by this statement. They had obviously talked about this.

Suzanne then looked at Jamal for his approval before she continued. He nodded and she went on to tell the interviewer that she had set a deadline for making a decision about getting married. She feels that after six years they must decide as to whether they will eventually marry. From this perspective, the issue would seem to be one of unwanted disengagement. She wants the relationship to have firmer boundaries and a greater longevity and commitment. Yet, the decision also hinges they can agree to a compromise about Jamal's family. He wants his parents to move in after they are married. Suzanne doesn't want them to move in. Suzanne summed it all up when she said: ". . . and then we're back to square one again."

Previous parts of their interview suggest that they have established a rich and caring relationship with one another. They have built a life together', have weathered many storms and genuinely love each other. They have moved several times through the processes of forming, storming, norming and performing. They are now at yet another turning point in their relationship.

In many ways, this is the most important point, for it moves them to a central question regarding the boundaries of their relationship. Are we an autonomous couple or are we an integral part of Jamal's extended family? Do we live alone or with Jamal Is parents? Suzanne is tired of living without a firm commitment from Jamal, yet she knows that obtaining a commitment of marriage from Jamal means that the boundary issue must finally be resolved.

Conversely, Jamal has been hesitant to discuss a lifelong commitment with Suzanne. In keeping with his culture, Jamal doesn't feel comfortable in making more explicit the nature and extent of his commitment to Suzanne. He feels that "she would know" that he would not be with her for so long a period of time if he did not love her. As in the case of Tevey's wife (who comes from another traditional culture) there is no need for Jamal to discuss the matter of commitment, given that two people have lived together for many years. Yet Suzanne is asking for just such a discussion and has set a deadline for an explicit decision. Like Suzanne, Jamal is hesitant to get married because it will bring the issue of his parents to the surface. As long as he and Suzanne just live together, they wouldn't have to make the difficult (if not impossible) decision to invite his parents to live with them.



From Jamal's perspective, Suzanne is forcing the issue and may destroy their relationship. From Suzanne's point of view, this is a double bind. She wants a clear commitment from Jamal regarding marriage but knows that either this demand for a clear commitment could drive him away or that the attendant problem regarding his parents could lead to a dead-end. Thus, like many of the couples we interviewed, Jamal and Suzanne face yet another difficult decision in the midst of a relationship that up to this point has endured. Will they make it past this most difficult point and forge a new relationship and new marriage?

### **Performing in Private and Disfavor**

To turn to the other extreme, relationships often tend to be closed regarding the relationship between a couple and the outside world if many or at least several important constituencies in the outside world look with disfavor upon the relationship that this couple has established. The most common cause of this disfavor, at least in the past, has been dislike of one of the partners by the other partner's parents, family or friends.

Sometimes, this disfavor is mild and soon overcome. At other times, as in the case of Romeo and Juliet, the disfavor is profound and sometimes leads to tragic consequences. Many a Hollywood movie has been based on this familiar scenario: boy meets girl, girl's parents don't like boy, boy and girl see each other in secret, boy and girl eventually elope, boy and girl do something special to win the favor and support of the parents, family or friends. The movie ends with a happy ending. Everyone is warm and cozy.

We found from our interviews that this process sometimes does occur (with some modifications) in real life. Clyde and Gertrude have been married for fifty-five years, and first met in their youth group at church. At the time they were both "going with" other people, but they soon broke up these other relationships and began dating each other. Their attraction to one another was immediate and strong: "Clyde told me that he was going to marry me when we were on our first date." After dating less than a year, they eloped because Gertrude's parents would not give their permission for them to marry, believing that she was too young.

The story of their elopement has become central to the definition of their relationship. It begins with a long weekend in July. Clyde and Gertrude left Wyoming (the state where they were born) and drove to Nebraska hoping to be married. They couldn't get married, however, because the legal age for marriage

was 21 in that state, and Gertrude, who was only 18, "wouldn't lie about her age." They then drove to Colorado, where a former pastor of their church lived. He did marry them, and they immediately drove back to Wyoming because Clyde had to work the next morning. They told Gertrude's parents and then spent the night in Clyde's room at his father's house.

The next morning after Clyde had departed for work, Gertrude came down to breakfast to find that her father-in-law had left a single rose at her place. This was to be the only flower that Gertrude received in celebration of her wedding, yet it was an important statement of her acceptance into Clyde's family. This acceptance was critical for both of them, for Gertrude's family continued to have problems with Clyde. It was also important in terms of Gertrude's relationship with Clyde's father, for he was later to live with them during the last years of his life. The care and support that Gertrude gave him built upon this generous gesture of support he offered to her in the form of a breakfast rose.

Sadly, the issue of disfavor has all-too-often centered on the mixing of races, religions, ages, or socio-economic levels in a relationship. Men and women had to keep their relationship "under wraps" because their parents, family, friends or community would disapprove of their commitment to another person of a different race, religion, age group or socio-economic class. We would like to think that this type of narrow thinking is a remnant of a bygone era, yet we found that several of the couples we interviewed were still struggling with these difficult issues.

Dan and Sarah have established a relatively closed relationship because of differences in their religious backgrounds. Reflecting on twenty years of marriage, this couple indicated that they met when she was just out of high school and was working as a waitress to save money for college. Dan was thirteen years older than Sarah and was already established in a professional career. She was Russian Orthodox. He was Jewish. Additionally, he had been married and was the father of three children. With all these differences and potential conflicts, they got together as a couple and lived together for four months prior to committing to marriage.

They immediately ran into family problems. Her grandfather (a lay church leader) strongly objected to her marriage to a Jew. Her mother opposed Dan because of his age and previous marriage. Even her brother gave Dan a cold shoulder, worrying that Dan would take advantage of Sarah's youth and inexperience. Despite extensive resistance to their marriage, Dan and Sarah decided to get married. They paid a heavy price, however, in that Sarah isolated for many years from her family and the two ended up establishing a relationship that was quite closed—at least regarding

communication with family members.

The differences in background (religion, age, previous marital experience) also created problems inside their relationship, Dan and Sarah had to learn much about each other before they could truly be accepting of one another. They knew little about each other when they were first married since they shared so little in common. Tied into a closed relationship, Dan and Sarah had very few external resources to which they could turn individually or collectively for insights, reassurance or simply a "breather" from one another. As a result, they had to work out their differences directly with each other. They had to rely on each other for patience, tolerance and persistence. Fortunately, for this couple, the relationship was strong enough to endure the difficult years, and the differences between Dan and Sarah served as rich sources of new learning and maturation for both of them.

In more recent years, strong, but closed, relationships have often been established among homosexual men and women. Gay men and lesbian women often must place a protective shield between themselves and other people. While our society has made great progress in recent years regarding increased knowledge about and acceptance of differing sexual orientations, the massive onset of AIDS during the decade of the 1990s produced new, irrational fears and led to renewed protectiveness among many gay couples and even some lesbian couples.

In the case of Mary and Ruth, a closed system was needed for many years as they protected themselves from the prevalent prejudice in their community regarding lesbian relationships. The existence of strong shared values on the part of Mary and Ruth provided reassurance for them during these early, difficult years together with frequent discrimination, they readily created a mutually reinforcing picture of their distinctive relationship as a lesbian couple. However, they were unable to share this distinctive identity with many family members, friends or colleagues at work. Furthermore, they would become very angry regarding the need to even consider being cautious in disclosing their relationship to other people.

In reflecting back on this difficult period of time, Ruth indicated that:

. . . given the nature of the relationship, there was a lot of stress and strain that evolved. It wasn't how I expected my life to go, and I don't think you [Mary] did either. So, there was a lot of inconsistency. What are we going to do? Major, major problem.

Both Mary and Ruth felt very ambivalent about keeping their relationship secret. They wanted to share their joy and excitement about one another. Yet they felt

compelled to often hide this special set of shared feelings. Mary pointed out that humor was often the saving grace for the two of them: "I would be ranting and raving [about discrimination against lesbian couples], so [Ruth] would put on a red [clown's] nose to protest and it made me laugh. So, she got the message across."

The joint purchase of a house was a particularly important marker event for Ruth and Mary, leading to the emergence of a much more open system for this couple. The new home represented a public statement about their legal existence as a couple. It came only after they had been together for nine years. In many ways, this purchase symbolized the mutual resolution of their ambivalence about "coming out" regarding their relationship. It occurred at a point when the other norms in their relationship had been firmly established, and they had settled on an acceptance of their life together.

They now had a public identity for themselves as a couple which provided them with the strength to face future discriminatory problems together. While their early experiences of prejudice forced them to pull in together as a rather closed system with very strong boundaries (as expressed in the secretive nature of their relationship), they were eventually able to open up their system and survive the public visibility of their mutual commitment.

### **Regressing to Closed Protective State**

Even couples who face no open discrimination because of religion, race or sexual orientation, sometimes decide to establish a very closed system, which tends to isolate them from other people. Kathy and Dave have made many provisions to ensure that their largely closed relationship remains intact. Kathy recently quit her job to be closer to Dave. She never ventures to friends' houses or even for that matter to do the household shopping without Dave.

Kathy was recently diagnosed as suffering from a panic disorder, resulting in part from sexual harassment at work (which re-invoked memories of her first, physically abusive, husband). Dave, who works the late shift as a truck driver, now assumes all shopping responsibilities including the other activities which may bring him beyond their front door, such as gardening, checking the mailbox and mowing the lawn.

As a couple they are regressing back to more primitive modes of functioning as a result of the closure of their relationship. As in the case of highly enmeshed relationships, couples like Dave and Kathy that block off the external world are likely (as closed systems), to soon fall apart under the weight of increasingly

interlocking and mutually destructive patterns of interaction. Without some fresh air from the outside world, most couples fall into habitual ruts that typically bring out the worst in the relationship.

Kathy has gained an excess of forty pounds and admits she smokes and drinks more than ever. Kathy and Dave used to enjoy taking vacations and playing golf together. However, because Kathy is no longer willing to leave her house, they have ceased to enjoy their shared interests. Dave has also gained weight—which he attributes to spending most of his leisure time with Kathy in front of the television. He also has a serious alcohol problem and, as a result, has suffered major liver damage.

Until very recently, Dave refused to attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, denying the fact he indeed had a problem with drinking. Kathy and Dave began fighting during this phase, as she voiced her fear to him that if he continued to drink, he would soon die. Dave revealed during the interview that Kathy had been close to a nervous breakdown when she had to confront the fact that she might lose him (much as she lost her first boyfriend, who died in an automobile accident).

Dave has successfully overcome his drinking problem; however, Kathy still refuses to leave her home, so the two of them must once again reform their marriage if they are to move into a less toxic relationship. They must open up the system that is their marriage and allow in the outside world. Kathy must agree to travel outside their house or the two of them must bring the outside world into their home in a way that is less passive than constant television viewing. They could re-establish relationships with friends (inviting them over for regular activities), build a more varied life for themselves inside their home, or perhaps even invite Dave's children to spend more time with them. A remarriage is essential for the health of this couple and both partners.

## **Conclusions: Is This Relationship Worth It?**

We have come to the end of our journey through the stages of development found among most couples. Life for those committed to an enduring, intimate relationship rarely is without bumps in the road as well as moments when the road offers the vista of beauty, thoughtfulness and caring. We ask along the way if this type of relationship is really worth it, given the ups and downs we experience. Wouldn't it be better to go it alone? Certainly, many people (especially those who are young adults in mid-21<sup>st</sup> Century societies) have opted for a singular life. The characters in Sondheim's *Company* repeatedly ask this question (specifically about marriage).

One of the characters is actually struggling with this question several hours before she is planning to get married!

There are, of course, many answers to this question. Whole books of both fiction and nonfiction explore the nature and purpose of long-term, intimate relationships. One of the answers is actually quite straight-forward: it takes two people to produce a baby! Yet even this answer soon becomes quite complex and multi-dimensional for women can choose *in-vetro* fertilizations or can choose to give birth to a child outside of a formally committed relationship. There is also the option of adopting a child or vicariously raising a child by becoming a teacher, coach or mentor. There are many ways to meet generative needs about child-raising without having to commit to and work hard within an enduring, intimate relationship. Love doesn't have to linger with a partner in order for love to be found and expressed in one's relationship with a child.

I propose, however, that our interviews have taught us a much broader lesson regarding the nature of these enduring relationships. Love lingers for many reasons. There are many things we can do together with someone we love and live with that either cannot be done alone or are done with less energy and passion as an isolated act. There is a lovely traditional song that was first preserved by Peter Seeger and made relatively popular more recently by James Taylor. The song is titled, "The Water is Wide". It concerns the challenges we face in life (which certainly are great in mid-21<sup>st</sup> Century life).

The water is indeed quite wide. It can chill our soul as well as our resolve. As noted in the song, we don't have wings to fly over (ignore) the water. Perhaps, I (or we) can build a boat that can carry us both across the span of the water to the other shore. Even more importantly, we can both row the boat. We can build and row together because our love is "deep" (enduring). This lovely and loving song ends with the following stanza: "Build me a bot that can carry two/And both shall row, my love and I."

Dare I introduce an often worn out and over-used psychological term in the midst of this poetry? This term is Synergy. It labels a dynamic process that results in one plus one producing something more than two. In the performing stage of an enduring, intimate relationship, something(s) can be produced that are much more than that which each member of the couple can produce by themselves. We can build a home together, work on a project together, be there for one another during times of sickness as well as health, cook special meals for one another and share a daily ritual with one another.

If nothing else there are shared memories. We can have our own personal experiences memories; however, the behavioral economists have shown us that these experiences and memories become even richer when they are recalled and shared with another person. Apparently, a scene that is photographed is enjoyed as much or even more when the photograph is shown to another person about whom we can. They can appreciate the scene - and are even more engaged in the sharing if they were also there when the photo was taken. The same “synergetic” process occurs when we watch old home movies (or more recently play our video recording of a wedding, birthday party or other festive occasion).

Even more basically, there is the matter of survival. When we were living on the savannah in Africa, survival was dependent on cognitively sophisticated collaboration among weak and slow human being. Tribes were formed to provide protection and cooperative killing of large beasts for food and apparel. However, an even closer form of bonding and collaboration was needed for the nurturing and protection of the very weak human babies that were being born without the capacity to walk, talk or even eat (other than sucking on a mother’s breast) for several months (and even years). Collaborative parenting was needed—even if most of the mothering was being done by the women. Two parents could do more than one parent—and the loving of a child by two people who also love one another might just be one of the synergetic ways in which to raise a loved and loving child.

This acknowledgement of the need for two people to create a child (or an important project) is portrayed in a poignant story being told by one of our guides, Stephen Sondheim, along with his colleague, James Lapine. They adapted a series of Grimm fairy tales to a Broadway musical that I have already mentioned—called *Into the Woods*. This musical addresses not only the issue of fickle Princes, but also the struggle of a couple (the “Baker and his Wife”) to conceive a child. As with all couples, the matter of giving birth to a child is not just a matter of fertilization. It also has to do with mutual obligations that come with having a child.

Child rearing and the sharing of an important project (such as building a life together) requires that both partners offer their unique skills and motivations. “I’ll get the cow and you get the golden slipper”—rather than “I’ll get everything. You just stay at home!” This fairy tale collaboration translates into real life negotiations and “bids.” “I’ll take out the trash while you feed Jimmy.” “Why don’t we both go to Sally’s concert. She would greatly appreciate our listening to her playing of the Chopin piece (no matter how much it hurts our ears!).”

The Baker and his Wife sing about what they have learned in the woods about

collaboration” “It takes two”. Even after the tragic death of the Baker’s wife, the Baker seeks collaboration. He looks to two younger colleagues – and Cinderella—for support. It sometimes takes many people to raise a child. Cinderella is particularly inclined to lend a hand—having decided to leave the Court and her philandering Prince/husband.

As Sondheim notes elsewhere and at the conclusion of this musical: “we are not alone”. Instead, like our ancestors on the Savannah, we need committed, supportive relationships throughout our life. The actions we take and decisions we make are never isolated. They impact all those around us. It is appropriate, therefore, to look for and love someone else who also is never alone.

All of this leads us to consideration of the major plates that occupy the attention and help to create and sustain the bonding established between two people who enter an enduring, intimate relationship. Love lingers and is expressed in many different ways via the plates being held (and often spun) by couples in these relationships. We turn in the next section of this book to these plates.

## Key Chapter Points

Enduring couples:

- Focus on developmental tasks in a stage called performing once norms have been set and are working.
- Frequently readjust and experience one or more remarriages with their partner.
- Find their own special ways to reaffirm the power of long-term, intimate relationships and do so with small rituals or habits.
- Wrestle with issues of enmeshment and disengagement and eventually achieve an interdependency between the two.
- Struggle with interconnectedness between the couple and the outside world and eventually identify as either an open or closed couple.



**Section Three**  
**Plates and Purposes**

## Chapter Eleven

### Plate One: Building A Nest (Establishing A Home Together)

In studying the life of an individual, one attends to all the events, historical forces and internal characteristics that impact on this person. While this is a major task, it seems small when compared to the task of describing and understanding the life of a couple. When studying couples, one must examine all the myriad factors as they impact on both of the partners in the relationship, as well as the couple itself.

It's not easy to formulate a simple, descriptive model that will account for the dynamics and complex development of even one-couple let alone many couples. We offer one perspective that might be helpful in this regard. It comes from the field of geology. We introduce the theory of tectonic plates as they impact on the life of our planet and suggest that something similar is occurring in the life of couples.

#### The Tectonic Plates Theory

Adult development theorists borrow the concepts of stage and phase from biology in their description of the systematic changes that occur in the individual lives of men and women. When speaking of the predictable stages through which adults move, they use an analogy, the seasons of biological life. We will appropriate a model from another field, geology, when describing the complexities of couple development.

We know that our planet is encased in a rigid outer shell. It is broken into a set of major plates and many minor plates or "platelets". Geologists have discovered that the continents and other major land masses on Earth are actually mobile "tectonic plates". These plates move slowly toward or away from one another to form new continental configurations, new oceans, new mountain ranges (where the plates collide) and new valleys or rifts (where the plates separate). These moving plates also produce volcanic action and earthquakes.

Similarly, the relationship between two members of a couple might be considered a single, unified entity (like our planet) on which floats a set of developmental plates that sometimes exist in isolation from one another and at other times in combination with one another. These moving plates yield a dynamic, changing configuration called the "couple." Just as tectonic plates collide to form the majestic mountains of this world and in doing so produce earthquakes and other geological disturbances, so it might be said that developmental plates collide and produce the majestic elements of a couple's relationship, while also producing disruptive (and at times destructive) interpersonal earthquake

What specifically are these developmental plates for couples and how do they interact? From our research, we have concluded that five plates are applicable to most couples: (1) establishing a home, (2) producing socio-economic viability, (3) selecting values, (4) creating a legacy (raising children or conducting a project) and (5) preparing for loss of partner.

Any one of these plates may be prevalent at any one point in the life of a couple, though the first and second plates generally tend to be foremost early in a relationship, while the fifth plate tends to be foremost at a later point. Each plate can exist in close interaction with one or more of the other plates, and strongly influences the other four plates as well as the individual developmental stages of each member of the couple.

Typically, a couple will experience a period of stress when things aren't going well with one or more of the developmental plates. The stress may be exacerbated when there is trouble simultaneously with several plates or when three or four of the plates are simultaneously colliding with one another, as when partners are confronted with a new child, while also establishing a first home and starting new jobs.

Each developmental plate has its own phases of development in the life of each couple. The four phases we described in the second section of this book (forming, storming, norming and performing) are played out in each plate. These four phases interact in an infinite variety of ways. Members of a couple confront the developmental tasks associated with each of the plates in various relationships to other tasks and plates.

They confront the tasks associated with each plate at various points in each member's own individual stage of development. The way in which each task is engaged by a couple will vary widely from couple to couple, and even within the same couple from year to year. We can identify several major features in each of the five developmental plates despite these complexities and variations.

I will describe each plate in one of the chapters in this section of the book, mapping out the terrain that couples typically traverse on each plate. We begin this journey, in this chapter, with a description of the first plate: establishing a home.

## Home-Sweet-Home

In his Pulitzer-prize winning novel, *Angle of Repose*, Wallace Stegner describes the way in which one couple remained together, through a series of disappointments and losses in their lives as pioneers in the early American West. His couple remained together by sharing small things and simple moments of joy. They savored small things and events that allowed them to lean against each other and to find meaning (however small) in their sacrifices and in their mutual commitments. This is the "vernacular" life that we identified when describing a couple's establishment of norms and forging a covenant.

This domain of daily living and the common place is no more plainly evident than in the small decisions made by and actions taken by men and women as they establish a home together. Moore (1994, p. 236) suggests that the vernacular "is located in some place -- in one person's life, in a neighborhood or a region, in a specific culture or community."

The couples we interviewed often located it in their home. As a result, the decisions they made about the nature and character of their home and the objects that they placed in their home were critical. The special activities that they engaged in while living in their home was also very important. These activities ranged from cooking meals or hosting birthday parties to raking and burning the leaves each fall. The character of their home, the objects they placed in it and the events they held in their home often provided an unrecognized but stable foundation for their relationship. The home-sweet-home is a tune often played in the life of an enduring couple.

## Candlelight Dinners

This plate usually is prevalent early in a couple's life. It typically begins after the couple has moved through a state of infatuation, commonly known as the honeymoon period. The couple is often most clearly and tangibly defining its own unique character or "soul" in these early decisions about the way they choose to live

together. Many couples build their covenant around these daily matters. It is, in the words of Stephen Sondheim, "the little things we do together" that makes relationships work and define their unique and sustaining character.

Members of a couple that I know well (Peggy and David) have candlelight dinners together every night, despite the busy lives that they both live. This ritual was first established when Peggy was living in New York and David was living with his children in Oregon. David would prepare dinner for his children, light the candles, and then call Peggy. Peggy got to know the children (and David) in a special way while they were eating their candlelight dinner each night. This ritual continued after Peggy decided to move to Oregon with David and his children. Even after Peggy moved in and while David's children were still young, candlelight dinners each night were a given.

Issues regarding this plate often become prevalent again later in the life of a couple if the couple has significantly shifted their living arrangements. This is the case, for instance, when two partners have decided to work in two different cities or when they must disrupt their regular patterns of daily living because of the intrusion of another development plate—such as the birth of a baby, one or both partners re-entering the work force, children leaving home, or the start or end of a major project in which both partners participate. Peggy and David, for instance, went through some soul searching about their candlelight dinners after their children left home. With just the two of them, would the dinners still be special? Should they save the candles for occasions when the children return home?

While it would have been easy to fall into a pattern of hurried meals and even separate meals, given their busy schedule as a dual career couple, David and Peggy decided to keep the ritual intact. Despite occasional lapses, this part of their relationship must endure—especially when both of them are particularly harried. In retrospect, David and Peggy recognize that these dinners made an important statement about the importance of sharing a few celebrative minutes together each day as a couple. During earlier years, these dinners symbolized Peggy's inclusion in David's family. In continuing this tradition, David and Peggy repeatedly honor their relationship.

In establishing their home, a couple may not actually have selected a specific place (apartment, house, room in parent's home) where they will live. A "home" can be as much a state of mind as a physical location. In the case of couples during wartime, for instance, a relationship may have barely been established when one or both partners are given an overseas assignment. In these instances, a "home" can be

established by means of letters, phone calls, emails, tweets or other rituals (e.g. keeping a picture of the loved one in one's pocket). For David and Peggy, a shared "home" was established for both of them (and David's children) through the symbol of the candle, lit at the point that David and his children were not only eating dinner, but also talking with Peggy by phone.

## **Identity and the Alter**

The primary task in this first developmental plate is the establishment of a sense of identity (the "home") for the couple as a distinct entity. A couple has established a "home" when both partners feel that the other person offers the most (or at least one of the most) secure and supportive environments in which he or she can live and work. The "home" must be a safe place, where one can relax and not have to defend oneself. It is a place where one can be intimate. The objects that are selected for the home are equally as important. We come to "cherish" special things that we own, for these things represent something safe (usually associated with continuity) as well as something intimate (usually representing an experience associated with the couple that is very private).

These "cherished" objects are part of the vernacular life that enriches the soulful aspects of intimate relationships. They give this relationship it's unique character. As in the case of the couple's covenant, the cherished objects in a relation are assumed to be permanent parts of the relationship. These cherished objects are often stored and presented on a family alter.

This alter is usually a vertical structure or visual display. It may be a tall bookshelf filled with memorabilia, a wall full of family pictures or a stack of electronic toys. Whatever is to be found on this alter, it usually offers abundant manifestations of the values and history of the couple. It often rivals the founding story as a source of rich insight about the couple and its covenant.

More than five decades ago, a noted psychiatrist, Jurgen Ruesch and a poet and film producer, Weldon Kees, joined forces to write about the messages that are conveyed through the visual displays that are often found in the homes of people who care deeply about their physical surroundings. (Ruesch and Kees, 1969) They describe "altarlike assemblies" that are points of central focus of interest in these homes.

Secular objects of value replace the traditional religious artifacts on these

contemporary altars: "Pictures of deities are usually replaced . . . by framed oil paintings or reproductions of a secular nature." (Ruesch and Kees, 1969, p. 143). Secular alters often contain books, recordings, plates, souvenirs and so forth. Ruesch and Kees also observed that lamps or candles are frequently present, or the altar is located adjacent to a fireplace. They suggest that the presence of these sources of light replicates the role of candles on most religious altars and "attests to the perhaps unconscious wishes of their owners to suggest an altar."

## **Leaving "Home" and Moving in Together**

For a younger couple, the establishment of a home usually means disengaging in some manner from the homes of their parents. This process of "breaking away" from parental influence is vividly portrayed in many movies and plays. For the older couple and partners who were previously involved with other people, but are now divorced or separated, the process of establishing a home usually means breaking away from some other home that has already been established by one partner alone or with somebody else. Or it means consolidation of two separate homes. Both breaking away and consolidation are difficult. If children are involved in a "blended" family, then consolidation may be particularly difficult.

For some couples, the primary marker event for this developmental plate appears to be the marriage ceremony. For many others, however, the event is something else: moving in together, making a first major purchase (furniture, car or house), or moving to another city. One of the first couples we interviewed for this study spoke of becoming a couple when they traveled to New England from California so that one member of the couple could attend a particular graduate school. This event, which required both members to physically separate themselves from their parents' homes for the first time, was apparently more important to them than was the marriage ceremony (Which preceded the move by several weeks).

## **Stress and the Mundane**

The major stress point in this development plate is often associated with the disillusionment that sets in as the couple moves out of a honeymoon period into more mundane day-to-day living. The disillusionment that accompanies the loss of one's dreams about career advancement or parental expertise usually occurs slowly. The disillusionment concerning "marital bliss" or the happiness that is supposed to be associated with any long-term intimate relationship, however, will often set in

very fast.

The mundane day-to-day issues associated with creating a new home together can pour an abundance of cold water on a once hot relationship. A leaking faucet is not romantic. The heating bill is not aligned with eternal marital bliss. The mundane will force members of a young relationship to accommodate to their lost dream at a very early age.

This disillusionment often is particularly difficult for young women who are raised in traditional settings and buy into the marital myth. They have traditionally been encouraged more than young men to invest considerable energy and expectation in the marital dream. While this myth is less prevalent today, it is still lingering in the hearts (if not the minds) of many young people looking to leave their own (often dysfunctional) home in order to establish a new, “wonderful” home with someone they “love.”

## **Forming: When Do We Make Joint Commitments Regarding Important Possessions?**

This was a second marriage for both James and Hillary. Hillary is 47 years old and was married at age 20 for 8 years. She has three sons from her previous marriage, aged 23, 25 and 26. James is 41 years old, was married briefly at age 25 and has no children. They were living together for several years and initially were both happy with this arrangement. Hillary, however, began to worry about the relationship. According to James "it involved a lot of crying, talking about what we've been through."

Eventually, they decided to get married, and about a year later they bought a house together. This was definitely a marker event for this couple -- as Hillary observed during their interview:

I needed a feeling of roots. The place was related to it. We wanted a place where we could have things the way we wanted, an investment. I wanted to decorate it and be done with it, so that I could do something else. I'm not quite done three years later. More settled though, just finishing touches. I may never finish.

For James, buying the house and fixing it up was a way of getting closer to Hillary.



It was not just an investment, as Hillary suggested (though she may have been speaking of their mutual "investment" in their relationship):

I've been able to get a better idea of where she comes from, how she feels, what's important to her. As long as things are comfy and functional, I'm as happy as a clam. She needs pretty colors and patterns. Buying a house with my brother was an investment. This home is a whole different thing.

For Hillary:

. . . it's made a big difference, because it's something we did together. We had to interact and come to agreements. Sometimes it was very hard. We were tired and crabby. It was stressful, but our relationship has started to feel more solid.

James agreed and added: "I have a better understanding of Hillary." Like many couples we interviewed, James and Hillary used the experience of buying and repairing a house together as a vehicle for solidifying their own relationship and learning more about one another. This forging of a new relationship in a "homebuilding" crucible can be risky, given that it may reveal different tastes, different levels of commitment and different notions about what a "home" is after all. However, homebuilding also can serve as an enduring base for a couple that is newly creating their relationship.

## **Storming: How Do We Resolve Our Conflicts Regarding Possessions?**

Many of the couples we interviewed spoke of conflicts associated with identifying "our" things alongside "your" things and "my" things. This task is particularly difficult when one of the two partners is moving into the "turf" of the other partner, rather than establishing a new home together from scratch.

Obviously, this is often the case when two people come together later in life. They can decide either to begin anew, by selling all or most of the possessions they accumulated in previous relationships, or they can move into the home that one of the partners has already established, then attempt to introduce some (or all) of the possessions of the other partner as well as begin to acquire some things together

that represent their shared tastes and portray their shared values.

## **Saving and Sharing Stuff**

Luke and Conrad decided to find a new home when they moved in together. They combined many of their possessions from previous homes and put leftover items in storage. In the back of Luke's mind, he still wanted to hold on to some of his things: "underneath, you still want to save your stuff just in case things don't work out and you have to move back on your own."

After three years of living together, Luke realized that they didn't need to keep all that extra furniture in storage anymore. Their individual things have melted together and instead of "yours and mine," it has become "ours." This marked a symbolic turning point for Luke. He felt more secure in the relationship, knowing that they now possess essentially everything in common.

Another symbol of change and deepening trust for Luke occurred when he no longer felt the need to be consulted about every little item purchased for their house. They always went to a large hardware and lumber store together on weekends to buy things for their home. But now Luke doesn't feel as strong a need to be involved. However, when there are large purchases or home remodeling projects, Conrad still consults Luke.

Luke and Conrad have learned how to manage their differences in most matters regarding joint purchases. Several years ago, for instance, they decided to buy a car together. Conrad did the research. He read consumer magazines, looked up base prices for specific models, and even found out that they could get a special fleet rate (as teachers). This new car was to be Conrad's baby!

The evening before they were to begin car shopping, Conrad's old car started to make loud noises and they barely got home. The following day, Conrad decided to go to the dealer and order the car they had decided upon for exactly the price they wanted. The dealer, however, could not locate the exact car they wanted anywhere in the vicinity or even in any neighboring states. Apparently, most of these cars come loaded with many extras that Conrad did not want.

In the middle of this frustrating process of Conrad and the dealer locating another car, Luke calmly walked up to the dealer and asked him what kind of deal he could give them "right now" on a fancy display car in the window. Luke's actions made Conrad furious, since he had done all the research and was determined to have it

pay off. After a few minutes, Luke and Conrad started haggling together with the dealer over price and options on the display car.

Conrad found that his anger dissipated as the dealer kept throwing in options at no cost. What started out as Conrad's anger and the need to see his project completed in his own way, turned into a fun game between the two of them. As they worked through pricing and options with the salesman, Luke would ask Conrad if he could "live with and pay for" a particular option. Conrad would respond with an emphatic "no, I don't want it." The dealer would throw in the option at no cost.

As Conrad noted, "the more storms we've weathered together, the stronger the relationship has become." In recent years, Luke and Conrad have also combined both of their incomes as well as their checking and savings accounts. Monetary and material things aren't as important to them now as they were when Luke and Conrad first met. They now trust each other's choices, decisions and aesthetic tastes.

## **Control and the Floating Rock**

At the time of their meeting, Bev had recently ended a four-year relationship. Furthermore, Teresa was gearing up to leave one of just about the same duration. Bev had a house and Teresa moved in. "She had to move into my life," Bev said, describing how the terms of their relationship were established. Teresa nods: "yeah, your friends, your home Bev: "you acquiesced a lot." Teresa, laughing: "you weren't charging me rent!"

Commenting on her own insistence on creating the physical environment of their home, Bev indicated: "I didn't know whether it would be OK with you that I was so controlling." Teresa laughed again: "I don't think I knew just how controlling you would be." This interchange reflected the central dynamics of their relationship both inside and outside their home. Teresa is apparently willing to let Bev set the tone and the terms of their relationship, as well as control the nature and tone of the home they establish together.

Teresa, however, also steps in at appropriate times to change the direction of their relationship (and their home) when appropriate. According to Teresa: "I always feel like Bev's the Rock of Gibraltar, but she has her black moods too, and sometimes it's nice for me to be the floating Rock of Gibraltar." Bev, in turn, recognizes and appreciates Teresa's easy-going acceptance and her role as the "floating rock" in their relationship. Above all, Bev and Teresa have discovered the saving grace of humor

and the related understanding of one another, their relationship together, and their common bond.

Their home (like most homes) reflects their relationship and their common bond. These women are proud of their residence, even though Bev makes most of the initial decisions regarding interior and exterior decoration (as the solid rock). Furthermore, both of them find their home (and their relationship) to be very comfortable and comforting, often building on Teresa's more intuitive sense of home and relationship (as the floating rock).

They speak of companionship as being at the heart of their relationship and identify their residence as a sanctuary where they can come together and not feel so lonely. Bev puts it this way: "We're both kind of loners in a weird kind of way in the rest of the world, and you just want to have one other person that's going to be around 'cause you don't want to be lonely."

Their home, however, is also designed to provide each of them with their own personal space. As part-time artists, each woman has her own studio. "It's really important to have your total own space," Bev explains. "The great thing about pretending to be artists [as both Bev and Teresa do] is you get to have a studio."

Teresa's previous partner "thought art took me away from her. I wasn't allowed to go into my own world and spend any time and I certainly couldn't get any help on a critique [laughter]. But Bev's a really great cheerleader. At the same time, she's really honest about my work--that's why I need the pep talk sometimes." Both women laughed. Bev responded: "I couldn't like you if I didn't like your work. I can't imagine I could like you if there was a whole area I didn't want to talk about or see."

Once again, we see that physical space and possessions are not always important in and of themselves. However, they are often critical as tangible, practical symbols of commitments that each partner has made to one another. In the case of Teresa and Bev, personal space is a requirement. Virginia Wulff suggests that a creative woman needs "a room of her own." Bev and Teresa have created a home with both shared living spaces and individual studios. Time together and time apart are of equal importance in the balance that keeps these two women centered and happy with one another and with themselves.

## Norming:

### Who Does What Around the House?

Many couples find that the issue of neatness is at the top of the list of things that "drive each other nuts." Conflicts regarding neatness are not usually at the top of the list in terms of importance. However, these conflicts are often at or near the top of the list in terms of frequency. Day in and day out couples struggle with one another regarding how clean their home should be. Who should feel and be responsible for keeping it tidy and attractive?

As a couple, Tara and Donald indicate that they are happy and "like each other most of the time." Some conflicts immediately came to the surface for this couple, however, as the issue of household neatness was broached. Humor and anger were interspersed as Tara and Donald addressed this hot topic. Their responses echoed those of many other couples (especially heterosexual couples) that we interviewed:

Tara: I like you ALL the time. I just don't like some of your sloppy, goddam habits.

Interviewer: Give me an example.

Tara: He's a mess.

Interviewer: He's a mess?

Tara: Or he **MAKES** a mess, and he doesn't care about the mess when I point it out to him.

Donald: That indifference bothers her more than the actual mess I make.

Tara: His standards are too low and so is his self-image. And he's willing to live with it.

Donald: I like a clean place, but it doesn't occur to me to clean it up. I like to think I have tremendous power of concentration, and I clean up the mess when I notice it.

Tara: Bullshit. And I like to think I have higher standards than his. I organize things and he messes them up. Like the pots and pans in the kitchen cupboards. [Angry] Two days after I organize the cupboards, they are a mess and when I go to find something, I have to look everywhere.

Donald: That is why we're such a successful couple. Tara: [Laughs] That's right. That's why we're so happy. Donald: See . . . I tell a joke and she laughs.

## Messes to Clean Up

We see several classic conflicts enacted in this one brief vignette. Different standards in cleanliness are intertwined with the sense (from Tara's perspective) that Donald is simply lazy and waiting for her to do the work, and (from Donald's perspective) that Tara is too uptight about outward appearances

Anger centers, therefore, not only on the issue of whose standards are observed, but also on the extent to which either partner discloses his or her real, underlying perceptions regarding the other partner's lazy or uptight disposition. This couple can head off an escalating argument through use of self-deprecating (and couple-deprecating) humor. Other couples often continue the escalation and create a home that is neither neat nor pleasing to be in.

Later in the interview, we discover yet other reasons why Donald and Tara can live with their differences regarding neatness. First, Donald has come to admire some of Tara's more obsessive traits. He praises her interest in making lists. He notes how these lists help both of them get organized. A confession by Donald: "sometimes when I want to stall for a time, I say to her that she should make a list . . . it works." Tara has also come to trust Donald more fully. She genuinely believes that his standards are different from hers. This has come about through extensive conversations between the two of them and the assistance of a marriage counselor.

A second reason is based on a somewhat less positive portrait of Tara and Donald. It seems that in many different domains of their relationship, Tara reacts off Donald. While she seems to get particularly mad about his messes around the house, she also has often reacted in the past (and even in the present) with considerable frustration regarding his relationships with other women and his taste in books.

Adding to Tara's list of complaints is Donald's unwillingness to teach her how to use various electronic devices. This leaves her dependent on him. Donald confirms Tara's worst suspicions: "And I intentionally try to show her how to operate them when she's in a bad mood. [They both laugh]." Tara even complains about the way in which he fights with her and the way he uses laughter to dodge her anger.

It seems that Donald continues to find ways in which to provoke Tara so that she will attack—and he will withdraw or laugh, thereby giving him a victory over her. It reaffirms his impression that Tara is "damned unstable" and that he is necessary in her life. On the other hand, Donald is very compliant in continuing to provide Tara with messes for her to clean up. These are not only messes in their home but also

messes in his life. While muttering under her breath or screaming at the top of her lungs regarding the mess he has made, Tara has assumed an indispensable role in their family.

In these complex ways, Donald and Tara ensure that they are both needed and wanted. This reduces the insecurities that both of them have felt throughout their lives regarding their own value to other people and, in particular, their parents. As with most couples, many of the issues regarding home and possessions are based in unresolved issues with their own parents. Household possessions provide convenient triggers and symbols for old childhood memories, Conflicts regarding neatness provide relatively safe ways in which to represent old parental values and conflicts.

## **A Woman's Touch**

The issue of neatness was even more difficult for Sally and Max to address. Unlike Donald and Tara, they came together as a couple much later in life and both had established well-entrenched patterns of living. Sally and Max were both teachers when they met, and Donald was still grieving the loss of his first wife to cancer. Sally fell "hopelessly" in love with Max within a year and envisioned them as married and providing a home together for Max's five boys. She anticipated domesticity, love, happiness and security. The home would reflect beauty, neatness and tranquility which she highly valued.

Unfortunately, Sally's dreams didn't match very well with reality. Since they lived in a small town not far from each other, the boys became friends, and she would be told all about the "other women" in Donald's life. This certainly did not lead to either love or security—at least from Sally's perspective.

Furthermore, Max 's home was always in shambles with a backyard that resembled a "car graveyard." Sally was torn between not wanting to enter the "disaster area" and wanting to go "fix it up." Even tranquility was missing, for Max and his boys had hot tempers and differences were always being settled, to Sally's way of thinking, in a rather uncivilized fashion.

In keeping with many Hollywood movies (the musical *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* comes immediately to mind), Sally felt that they all needed a woman's touch, a civilizing influence, cleanliness, and manners. During the interview, she indicated that "Max was afraid," so they never got around to these things. Once, after

eight years, they decided to move in together, so Sally moved some (not all) of her things over to Max's house. Three days later she moved out after he got incensed because she vacuumed too much. These idealistic expectations of hers will probably stay in the back of her mind for many years, as she goes on subtly trying to "civilize" him.

## Responsibilities and Gender

The issue of neatness is actually a subset (admittedly often the most important subset) of a more general issue, namely, who does what around the house? The assignment of responsibilities in many instances (as in the case of neatness) has to do with priorities, values and who is willing to do the lousy jobs. In other cases, the assignment of duties has to do with the actual or perceived competencies of each partner: "I'll take care of the car, because you don't know a thing about anything mechanical, and you take care of the garden because you have a green thumb. I'll handle the checkbook, and you antique the old desk we just bought. What if I buy the dinner dishes (since I know a lot about ceramics), and you purchase the artwork (since you were an art history major in college)? You do the cooking (since I can't even boil an egg), and I'll do repair work around the house (since you keep bashing your thumb with our hammer)."

In many instances, these assignments follow traditional gender lines. Men work on the cars, women in the kitchen and so forth. However, we found numerous instances where the traditional gender roles were mixed up or switched. Female mechanics, male cooks, female financial managers, and male interior decorators.

Reggie, for instance, assumed most of the household duties in his marriage to Sara. This began during their courtship. Reggie began to take responsibility for cooking, indicating that Sara was going through a "tough life" at this time because she had just been divorced. After their marriage, Reggie continued to take responsibility for the cooking. He also took responsibility for protection of Sara's children. Reggie is now retired, while Sara still works full-time. Reggie has taken on additional responsibilities for maintaining the house, a role which Sara relinquished with considerable gratitude.

In many instances, the assignments matched with and helped to reinforce roles that were assumed immediately when the two people first met each other. The pervasive influence of the founding story was perhaps no more powerfully exhibited than in these assignments of household duties. Devon and Kurt find that the patterns



established in their initial relationship are constantly being reintroduced and reinforced in their many household projects. Both Devon and Kurt thoroughly enjoy working together as a team on home improvement projects. Kurt tends to look at the overall picture, while Devon is a bit more compulsive and detail oriented.

## **Providing the Spirit and the Plan**

At times, Devon thinks that Kurt is too messy, while Kurt thinks that Devon is compulsive. Yet, when they work together on projects around the house, they value each other's perspective and contribution. This same pattern of coming together around a specific project is to be found in their first encounter with one another, when both admitted that the initiative toward getting acquainted was "mutual."

Furthermore, they were mutually attracted to each other because each felt a need to find the "other half" of themselves. Kurt was first attracted to Devon because Devon was the stodgy, masculine "klutz" who spilled his punch. Devon seemed to have been captivated by Kurt's flamboyant, gregarious free spirit. They still tend to play off these differences and reenact their meeting when they cook together, redecorate their home together, or plant their garden together. Kurt provides the spirit and Devon the plan.

While some couples avoid doing projects together because it re-invokes conflicts about decision-making, perceived incompetence, distribution of work, patience and so forth, other couples, such as Kurt and Devon, continually re-invoke the magic of their initial encounter through the work they do together on their home. This is, in turn, a concrete manifestation of their relationship and the values they share and express in public through their home.

## **Performing: What Do We “Possess” Together That Is Really Important?**

Many of the couples we interviewed indicated that the things they most value in their home are not very tangible and are not really things that can be possessed. Sam and Caroline indicate that the thing they care most about in their home is "the sense of family." For them, that means their two kids and having time with all four family members at home. Time together becomes the valued possession. This, unfortunately, is an elusive possession for Sam and Caroline.

Like many successful, dual career couples, Sam and Caroline find time together at home to be a rare commodity. Like many of her peers, Caroline commutes about 35 miles one way to her job. Sam's job takes him out of town frequently and there are many night meetings. This, coupled with his responsibilities at their church (as choir director), severely limits the amount of time the four of them have together as a family.

Sam and Caroline may value this sense of family more than any material possession in part because they really don't possess many material objects of any financial value. They do not own their home, nor do they see any prospects of home ownership in the near future. Caroline indicated that she would definitely like to buy a house as soon as possible. Sam thinks it would be okay to do so but doesn't seem interested in putting any energy into making that happen.

Caroline was silent as Sam expressed his hesitancy. The interviewer sensed that Caroline wished strongly that he would feel differently about buying their own home. For these two people, the sense of family is clearly the central possession, whereas material possessions (at least a home) was a bone of contention.

## **Conclusions: The Deeper Values**

Whether driven to it by financial constraints or by a growing understanding of the underling commitments that possessions represent, most enduring couples eventually begin to appreciate the deeper values of their relationships. They are not just enamored with physical possessions. Home is sweet because of the people who

inhabit it. Furthermore, love lingers in a home that provides safety and continuity.

## Key Chapter Points

Enduring couples:

- Engage in behaviors that are grouped into five categories labeled "developmental plates": (1) establishing a home; (2) producing socio-economic viability; (3) selecting values; (4) preparing for the loss of partner; (5) raising children.
- Balance each plate as it exists in close interaction with one or more of the other plates.
- Deal with the stresses created as developmental plates collide.
- Confront the developmental tasks (forming, storming, norming, performing) associated within each of the five developmental plates.
- Seek resolutions to separation from parents or blending two households as they establish a home (Plate #1).
- Evoke their founding stories to help them through stormy times dividing household duties, purchasing a house, recognizing their differences.
- Take solace in the fact that small daily rituals help to cement the relationship.

## Chapter Twelve

### Plate Two: Being Breadwinners (Achieving Socio-Economic Viability/Careers)

In the past, our society placed major importance on the economic functions of heterosexual couples and the families that these couples produced. Husbands, wives and children jointly produced the food, clothing and shelter that the family needed for substance. Today, the economic function is equally as important, though infinitely more complex and even contradictory. In many states, the economic "reality" of a couple is formally defined by community property laws. The couple is a reality because it exists as a single economic unit, with undifferentiated financial resources and real property whether or not both members of the couple feel like they are participating in this unit.

The social aspects of the couple's relationship are equally as important in defining its reality. Partners are often defined by their relationship with the other member of the couple: "That's Susan's husband." "Jim's the one who is married to a lawyer." "That's Mrs. (John) Jacobsen." The couple is invited to social gatherings as a single social unit. They usually entertain other couples rather than single people.

Many young couples speak of losing contact with single friends after becoming a couple. Some couples restrict the contact one or both members can have with other people after becoming a couple. Becoming "attached" for many heterosexual people means that they no longer can go out with friends of the same or (especially) opposite sex. The dating of other people is usually, though not always, prohibited.

#### The Early Decisions

This developmental plate typically becomes prevalent at an early point in a couple's history. It may not necessarily be at the forefront immediately after the couple has been formed. Many young men and women seem to avoid the economic and social implications of their union with another person until this union has occurred. The disillusionment process associated with the first plate often is exacerbated by a growing recognition that commitment has its price. An intimate relationship

requires restrictions in social interactions and requires considerable attention to the often-stressful issues of income and expenditure.

## **Economic and Social Marker Events**

The marker event for this second plate is sometimes the opening of a joint checking account or the establishment of credit (via purchase of a major item over time). These marker events are economic in nature. The marker event might instead be the first invitation (as a couple) to a major social event or the marriage ceremony itself. These marker events are social in nature.

Two developmental plates can share the same marker event. The purchase of a new home may signal the emerging importance of both the first and second plate, as might the marriage ceremony. Specific marker events are particularly important (and often stressful) precisely because they initiate a host of developmental tasks from two or more plates.

With the occurrence of social or economic marker events comes the public recognition that this union is the real thing. Whereas the forming of the couple in the first developmental plate is based on the intimate needs of the two partners, forming in this second plate is based primarily on externally based needs and demands. In particular, institutions tend to view two people as a couple primarily for social and economic reasons and require that two partners to act as a couple, rather than as two distinct, autonomous individuals.

These external constraints often help to bind a couple's relationship. The expectations of other people often sustain a couple through difficult times—when the more personal needs of the first developmental plate are no longer being met. The external demands of this second plate, unfortunately, will also hold a couple together in a destructive relationship long after divorce or separation should have taken place.

## **Freedom and Empowerment**

Our guide from the therapeutic perspective, John Gottman, observes that the issue of finances and money is centered on the balancing of freedom and empowerment. Money represents and symbolizes the elements of security and trust in a relationship. Money creates solvable problems that can become perpetual if not successfully addressed. Money also tends to produce dilemmas and polarizations

that create major unresolved and often unaddressed conflicts in many enduring relationships.

Gottman (2015, p. 207) offers the following description of the challenges that often arise when a couple takes on the task of managing their finances:

Whether their bank account is teeming or they're just scrimping by, many couples confront significant conflicts over finances. Often such disputes are evidence of a perpetual issue, since money is symbolic of many emotional needs—such as safety and power and goes to the core of our individual value systems. But when a simpler, solvable financial problem arises, the key to resolving it is to first understand a marriage's task in this area. While money buys pleasure, it also buys security. Balancing these two economic realities can be work for any couple, since our feelings about money and value are so personal and often idiosyncratic.

In this summary description, Gottman is circling around several polarities that often are embedded in highly personal and deeply embedded hopes and fears. He (Gottman, 2015, p. 207) proposed that these polarizing issues are likely to be solved early on or they become perpetual as the couple spends more years together and encounters a host of money-related issues:

I find that solvable financial differences are usually the province of newlyweds. That's because as a marriage goes on, these issues either become resolved successfully or develop into perpetual problems about money's symbolic meanings. However, long-term couples may also find themselves facing a solvable money issue as their circumstances change. Differences of opinion over job changes, financing the children's education, planning for retirement, and caring for elderly parents are common sources of friction in midlife.

Based on the insights offered by the couples we interviewed, I would concur with Gottman's conclusions. I would add that changes that are likely to occur in the financial plate as the couple moves through the developmental stages.

## Forming:

### When Do We Pool Our Financial Resources?

When a couple get "serious" about their relationship, there is usually some addressing of the issue of breadwinning. Which of us will be expected to work outside the home in order to raising money and support part or all of the relationship? For many years in most Western (and many Eastern) cultures, this decision was almost automatic for middle-class, heterosexual couples. The husband worked outside the home, while his wife remained inside the home and didn't hold down an outside job.

Over the past half century, this automatic decision has been rescinded in many relationships. Frequently, both partners work and both men and women are "allowed" to stay at home if they prefer and if their lifestyle and sources of revenues allow for single-income financing. Though the househusband is still more likely to be a topic of Hollywood comedies and talk-shows than a widely accepted practice, it is becoming a viable option. Young couples must now make difficult decisions about breadwinning that reflect their priorities, lifestyles and ways in which they wish to find meaning in life.

### Navigating a Shifting Relationship

Helene and Frederick have gone through several difficult periods of time during which the breadwinner role had to be redefined in their relationship. When they first met, Frederick was performing in a rock band. He was moderately successful, and this provided him with full time employment and a fulfilling occupation—albeit a poorly paying one. At the time of their meeting, Helene was working as a loan officer at a bank. Frederick found part-time work in a large music store as they built a committed relationship together.

Helene continued working. She was contributing financially to their joint needs. During this period of time, Frederick continued his song-writing ventures, attempting to use these activities to achieve a more lucrative and rewarding position in the local music scene. Helene shifted jobs, becoming a manager of a major apartment complex on the outskirts of the city in which they lived.

As is clearly the case with many married couples, a major change in Frederick and

Helene's economic plate occurred when Helene became pregnant and had to leave her job. Helene and Frederick were faced with the need for new financial revenues, given that Helene was no longer employed and there was now a third mouth to feed.

They decided to move to a city where Frederick previously lived and where several solid job offers were waiting for him: "come back here and play with us . . . there's lots of work here . . . we're just waiting for you to come back and help us put it together." Helene encouraged this move: "I wasn't going to be the reason that Frederick gave up music."

Unfortunately, the musical plans did not materialize, although Frederick did: ". . . put a group together. . . I booked the gigs . . . we had our pictures taken . . . interviews lined up [but] the singer's girlfriend wanted him to go with her down to Mexico, so we had to cancel the whole thing . . . and I had to do something else." The very next day, Frederick returned to work at a branch of the music store where he had worked before.

Helene was asked what it's like not to be active in the business world, given that she chose to spend all day with her newborn daughter. She indicated that: "it's really wonderful . . . I enjoy every minute with her. She's a great child, although there are times when I'd like to go out and do something by myself . . . the other mothers at the park are so snooty I don't have anything in common with them."

If there is resentment here, it may have to do with her daughter's attitudes toward Frederick. Helene states "She's Frederick's little girl." It's clear that their daughter dotes on Frederick and that this admiration is mutual. One gains the impression that Helene would like their daughter to be more affectionate with her, thereby rewarding Helene for her time and energy.

While it appears that Helene initially found the creative persona of a musician alluring, not every aspect of a musician's life is dramatic, romantic or compelling. Frederick has to redefine himself as a participant in the field of music. He acknowledges that were it not for Helen and their daughter, he would probably continue his active musical pursuits. On the other hand, he makes it clear that this period of transition was one he undertook willingly. He acknowledges that this passage has been eased by the nature of his relationship with Helene and that he has no regrets whatsoever.

Frederick now functions as the breadwinner and Helene takes care of the house, the child, the meals, the clothing, and Frederick when he is home. There is a



division of labor here that is clear and remarkably traditional. The danger for Frederick and Helene seems to lie in the ossification of these roles and potential changes in the perceptions of Frederick and Helene regarding these roles.

Helene is already presenting some dissatisfaction with her status as the housekeeper and caregiver. Is it alright for her to feel confined and stifled in this role, or should she simply feel grateful that Frederick is out there making money for both of them? Should Helene feel satisfied in being defined primarily in terms of these domestic roles? Can she change these roles? If so, when?

Helene is receiving little acknowledgement from either Frederick or their mutual friends for her other attributes and accomplishments. Nor is she encouraged to accomplish more in her life. One wonders when the dissonance will set in. The true test of Frederick and Helene is likely to come when they accommodate to their daughter's changing needs (school, friends and other forces pulling her out of the home) and when Helene begins looking for a more challenging lifestyle. Will Frederick support this?

In one guise or another, love and money seem to be central issues in the relationship between Helene and Frederick. They are deeply immersed at the present time in several difficult issues concerning breadwinning and its relationship to decisions about the spending of money that Frederick has earned. For Helene and Frederick, as for most couples, there's more to money than just how much is needed, where it comes from, or how it's earned. There's the central issue of how it's spent, what it's spent on and who spends it. There is an issue of control here as well as one of values.

As Gottman observes, decisions about finances are wrapped up in the couple's assignment of freedom and empowerment. Who has the freedom to buy something and who is empowered to determine how decisions regarding major purchases are to be made? How does the couple prioritize expenditures? Do Helene and Frederick purchase a refrigerator together with one large lump sum of money or do they pay for it over time? What about when they want to buy knickknacks and other inexpensive items? Do they have to check with each other?

The discussions between Frederick and Helene about money and, in particular, Helene's spending of small amounts of money here and there, can also be defined as discussions about identity. One gets the sense that Helene is asserting her identity and individuality by her purchases. She seems to be saying through her actions that "I've lived poor and don't want to live like this anymore."

Frederick seems to be saying "I have also lived poor, but we have made decisions in our life [having a child, Helene giving up work] that precludes any frivolous expenditure of money." It also seems that the issue of love and responsibility relates indirectly to the affections of their daughter. If Helene is making all of the sacrifices in their relationship, in part for the sake of their daughter, then where is her reward, given that their daughter is primarily devoted to Frederick? Maybe Helene's rewards will come through small purchases or a new career.

Can their child bestow identity with her love? Is it unfair that Frederick seems to be gaining gratification and rewards from both his career and parenting role, while Helene gets only the grudging recognition of making a sacrifice in her life? Will their daughter become the new turf on which Helene and Frederick's battles will be fought and territory won or lost?

Clearly, the issues of economics and career are often interrelated with other critical matters in the life of contemporary couples. As we have shown in a variety of different instances, the various developmental plates we have identified are difficult to negotiate in part because they are so often interrelated with one or more of the other plates. Relational earthquakes and remarriages are most likely to occur precisely at the point in time when and where these plates interrelate or collide.

In the case of Helene and Frederick, we may find this collision and an attendant remarriage will be focused on several issues: the raising of their daughter, the relationship between child-rearing decisions, and decisions regarding career interwoven with the expenditure of money. Ultimately, this couple needs to focus on the evolving nature of their love for one another—and their commitment to this changing relationship.

It is obvious that Helene's and Frederick's relationship is an ongoing state of affairs that continuously defines and redefines itself. The redefinitions are partly in response to external events regarding money, moving, job changes or birth of a child. Sometimes the definition is represented by something as mundane as "how was your day at work, sweetheart?"

The vernacular life with an occasional bid is ultimately the "battleground" and source of peace negotiations for a couple like Helene and Frederick. The redefinitions will continue in the daily life of Helene and Frederick as they face these new and constantly changing realities.

## Interdependence and Old Wounds

Closely related to the issue of bread winning, is the issue of interdependency. As intimate partners, we must not only decide who will be responsible for generating the money, but also the extent to which this money and other resources generated outside the relationship will be shared by both partners. Obviously, for many couples the primary marker event for the economic plate is the marriage ceremony.

The couple becomes a legal entity at this point, and in most states and nations, each partner in the marriage assumes full, legal responsibility for financial obligations accrued by either partner. Often there is a more personal and less public marker event that defines the sharing of financial resources. Typically, this marker event is the identification of one partner to manage the couple's finances. This may occur prior to or after the formal marriage ceremony.

The issue of money and allocation of funds is made even more complex, in many instances, and becomes a reoccurring problem for many couples resulting from shifts in income level (both up and down). New demands may be made on the couple's funds—such as raising children, paying for the education of children, and preparing for retirement.

Burt and Karen were particularly thoughtful during their interview about these shifts. Burt noted that "relationships change as job and income changes. . . We're better off financially now and there are fewer chances to create financial problems now. . . . Both of us grew up in situations where we didn't have financial worries. . . . Money was important but not that important." Burt added, "I don't have to go to work every day." Karen built on this theme: "I have more financial independence from you now. . . It used to be that with any unusual expense I'd stew and fume if I should spend the money on shoes."

The interviewer detected old wounds resurrected in Burt when Karen made this statement. Thus, as Burt and Karen have become more financially successful, Karen has felt less need to consult with Burt regarding expenditures. Burt, in turn, has felt less compelled to be consumed in his daily work. After thirty-five years of marriage, they are no longer struggling to meet expenses and raise their two children.

As in the case of many couples who grew up in upper middle-class homes, the struggle to get ahead financially is not as great a source of satisfaction as it is for many couples who come from lower middle-class backgrounds. For those raised in

upper middle -class families, financial struggles are often nothing more than a source of conflict regarding priorities and dominance in the relationship. If and when upper middle-class couples do find financial security, some of the pressures in their relationship often drop off.

Given that more couples at the present time are deferring marriage or not getting married, there is an increasing possibility that financial management is a decision made prior to or without the presence of a formal legal marital contract. Traditionally, the financial matters of the household were placed in the hands of the husband—though most of the important day-to-day decisions concerning the allocation of funds for food, clothing, household goods and so forth were made by the wife. Today, these traditional roles are clearly outmoded. A decision about who manages the finances become much more important and telling in terms of the distribution of power and influence in relationship.

Bob and Rita faced this decision after their marriage. Both were reasonably well established financially and professionally when they married; thus, there was a fair amount of work and responsibility associated with the integration of their complex finances. During the interview, both Bob and Rita suggested that they informally made the decision about financial management by examining each partner's interests and values. Social interactions seemed to be more important to Rita than to Bob.

Part of the "price" that Bob paid in this relationship was to develop and sustain more social obligations. Conversely, Bob seemed to be more concerned about the financial side of their relationship, so he took over the bill-paying responsibilities. Initially, this was a source of conflict for Bob and Rita. She found it very disconcerting to give over control of a critical part of her life to another person. Rita indicated that she has subsequently come to terms with these control issues and actually enjoys being relieved of these responsibilities.

## **Money and Control**

Other couples have not been able to work out these difficult control issues as easily. Christine and Rebecca have struggled from the beginning regarding the control of their financial situation. Like many other couples they face a two-fold problem. First, for many years they did not make comparable salaries. Christine was working in the arts, while Rebecca held down a "straight" job which brought in much more money.

Christine felt both guilty and defiant about her smaller income from a more gratifying job, while Rebecca resented Christine's willingness to gratify her own needs while not contributing equally to their household expenses. The second problem concerned control. Who makes decisions regarding the expenditure of money in this relationship? Christine was quite resentful that Rebecca had "both the money and the control." Rebecca's response was: "okay, you take the money, I'll take the control" -- meaning that Christine can have more control when she gets a better salary.

In recent years, things have changed in Christine and Rebecca's household. Both Christine and Rebecca now have more traditional jobs, and their income is just about equal. As a result, ironically, Christine is now much more worried about money than she was when she wasn't making much. Rebecca, meanwhile, has eased up and taken a more "it will all work out" attitude, given that their joint income is now much higher. Christine got what she wanted: more control (and worries) and more money.

As a way to ease the financial stresses in their relationship, Christine and Rebecca have always retained separate checking accounts along with their joint savings account. Their separate accounts enable each of them to get a better idea of how much money they have made and spent. In addition, they have found it uncomfortable to have checks with two women's names printed on them, thereby immediately identifying themselves as lesbians.

### **It is Now "Ours"**

Sally and Max have had just as much trouble in combining their financial resources. Money is a hot topic for these two sixty-year-old teachers. Like Christine and Rebecca, they each have their own checking accounts. Both contribute to a mutual household account out of which the day-to-day bills are paid. They figure out the amount owed and split the bills in half carefully so that no one pays more than the other. Neither has access to the other's money, nor knows how much the other has in their account.

Max talked about sharing the kitchen by trading the "spoon" every week. When the spoon (with a ribbon on it) is handed over to the other person, that person has access to the kitchen and assumes the responsibility for next week's meals. Max is a "meat and potatoes" man, while Sally is a "brown rice gourmet" woman. Obviously, they have found a very creative and effective way of working out their differences in

the kitchen. However, when it comes to financial matters and mutual possessions, the spoon has not easily passed between them. Max, in particular, has been very hesitant about letting go of his old life and possessions.

During the interview, however, a critical shift in this plate took place. Max stated that he had something to say and hoped it would not upset Sally. With some trepidation, the interviewer listened while Max stated that he had wanted his house to be considered theirs and so some months ago he had gone to a lawyer and put it into both of their names. Sally turned white at this point, and the interviewer asked her if she had known about this. Sally said "no." Max had always said that "the house would go to his sons when he died, end of discussion."

This was particularly poignant at this point in their relationship because Sally had been of invaluable assistance to Max in recent months as he confronted both his own life-threatening illness and the tragic killing of his youngest son by an unknown assailant. Finally, after almost two decades of living together on and off, Max and Sally were establishing a permanent bond, symbolized in the shift of Max's home to joint ownership. This was a really big bid. Gottman would have taken note. It is often in these tangible acts of mutuality that the forming phase of a relationship is finally traversed, enabling the couple to move into an enduring and enriching lifelong commitment.

## **Storming: How Do We Confront Issues of Money and Career?**

In many relationships, money and career provide some of the most difficult and enduring conflicts. In our complex postmodern era, we find it very hard to deal with either money or career on our own. It is even more complicated when these issues must be addressed by a couple, each partner having his or her own fears and dreams regarding making money and structuring a career.

In many cases, the conflicts are short-lived, but intense. They typically involve something like haggling over a banking matter or a canceled vacation because of work commitments. For Dean and Kurt, a recent conflict centered on a discrepancy in a joint checking account. For two days they argued about this discrepancy and tried to assign blame to one another. After this extended struggle, they both came to realize that they were only talking about a forty-nine-cent difference. They now refer back to this trivial conflict and ask: "is this a forty-nine-cent fight?"

## Haggling and Dysfunctional Origins

While no one conflict of this sort will typically break up a relationship, an ongoing series of petty hassles can lead to dissolution of the relationship or a remarriage, particularly if these small hassles regarding money or career are symptoms of a much deeper source of disagreement. It is clear that in some cases, the conflicts are exacerbated because of different approaches to money and career—and more generally differences in approaches to life's challenges.

Frederick, for instance, describes himself as "the impulsive one in the relationship," while Melony is "the cautious one." As in the case of many couples, this complementarity initially attracted Frederick and Melony to each other; more recently, however, these different approaches have created problems, especially when it comes to money and career.

Frederick indicates that "if I have fifty dollars or five thousand, I will spend it all the same. I just can't hold on to money, but Melony is a penny-pincher." Similarly, Frederick has romantic notions about being successful in his career. He envisions "being the hero" who takes Melony off into the sunset to build a happy home and family together. Melony, on the other hand, does not want to have to depend on anyone—including Frederick. She doesn't believe in Frederick's dreams, nor in her own ability to find safety in a threatening world.

For both Frederick and Melony, the issues of money and career stem from dysfunctional families of origin. Like many other couples we interviewed who are very conflicted regarding money and career, Frederick and Melony were trying to undo their own upbringing. Yet they both still were confronting the ghosts of their past. Frederick tries to escape from his past by spending money that he doesn't have and achieving success that eludes him. Melony tries to find the security she never knew as a child who was shipped from home to home to home. Yet, she doesn't create the conditions that would make for a safe and supportive environment.

The glue that has kept this middle-class couple together for twenty-four years appears to be their tenacious determination to survive their wounding pasts, their loyalty to one another for "the long haul," and their shared commitment to raising children in a healthy and supportive environment. Furthermore, they still admire each other's complementary attitudes. Melony describes how Frederick helped her "come out of my shell" through his more optimistic and carefree attitude, while Melony has provided a stable home environment that keeps Frederick anchored.

Frederick also uses humor as a way to deal with their differing views of life. He

speaks of Melony's desire for autonomy by noting that she is still "keeping her options open" after twenty-four years of marriage. Ironically, in his humor and in his role as the "chatterbox" in their relationship, Frederick provides a warm and supportive environment in which Melony can feel a little less alone and a little more loved. These simple acts of kindness and care—their bids—can make up for many struggles regarding both money and career.

## Youth and Finances

Young couples in particular want to believe that money will never get in the way of their relationship. Often, they are disgusted with their own parents and their seeming preoccupation with the unromantic issues of income, financial security and budgeting. Yet, young couples often find that financial problems loom large in their development of a viable, long-term relationship. Karen and Ben offer an excellent and challenging example. Karen recalls that:

Ben went through a period with his business where he wasn't making any money at all. He was working alone and he was really bored. . . . I was back in school getting a teaching credential, so we weren't looking forward to a lot more money. It wasn't this high-powered degree where we were going to have the big bucks coming in. And we were strapped for money, and he was freaking out all the time . . . screaming and yelling and throwing things. It was to the point where I said: "Look, let's give this another six months, and you have to get this together or I don't know how I can live with this." I never had any intentions of our marriage ending, but it is the only time where it can be said that a change had to happen. . . . It's interesting because all of the stress was money related. You don't want to think that a relationship comes down to that but . . .

Karen and Ben clearly experienced a major conflict at this point in their relationship that centered in their financial life together. This conflict called for either a significant transition in their life (a remarriage) or termination of their relationship. Ben began to focus with new energy on his business and soon became quite successful. Both Ben and Karen decided to postpone having any children until his business stabilized.

Ben seems both sheepishly proud and a bit uncomfortable in the role of successful businessman. This certainly was at variance with his personal image as a "party man"



and with the anti-business perspectives of their young friends. Ben tries to keep a distance from his business commitments by describing this work as a "Monopoly game." Both Karen and Ben want to believe that relationships don't come down to finances. However, there is a reality to marriage!

Sarah and Dan similarly speak of money as the source of many strains in their relationship. When there is a monetary crisis in their household, Sarah responds with emotional outbursts against Dan. Like many young adults (or older adults for that matter), Sarah equates having money with overall family stability and a sense of well-being. Dan has an excellent work ethic and applies himself unstintingly to the generation of money for the family.

When money is in short supply, he tends to avoid getting emotional about the issue. In part this is because Sarah's father always displayed very upsetting emotional outbursts. Dan didn't want to be "like her father." This was particularly important, given that he is thirteen years older than Sarah. Instead, Dan worked that much harder to create new sources of income.

Like many traditional couples, Sarah (as the female) worries a great deal about money. Yet, she does not feel it appropriate to work outside the home. Hence, she feels powerless in confronting the issue of inadequate funds. She can't blame Dan, since he works so hard; yet, she is frightened about their financial future. By contrast, Dan resents her emotional outbursts and feels that she isn't doing anything useful to overcome their financial problems.

Unfortunately, Dan, like Sarah, doesn't want her working outside the home; hence, he can't identify any particular role she might play in overcoming their financial problems. Fortunately, Sarah and Dan's financial arguments usually last only one or two days. Gradually, they begin to talk about their fears and about what needs to be done. They come to realize their differences in background and each other's strengths and weaknesses. They use this realization to reestablish their strong, trusting relationship.

## **Norming: How Do We Respect Each Other's Financial and Career Needs?**

Arlene and Kevin were wrapped up in several difficult issues regarding priorities in their lives together when they were interviewed. Some of their basic values have shifted as they have grown older—and this has impacted their finances. Arlene seems mainly concerned with acquiring a better balance in her life. For her this means adding some more romance and meaning—and becoming less practical.

She would like to grow closer to Kevin, even though earlier in their relationship she was primarily concerned with preserving her independence. While she wants more of Kevin, she is concerned that she is not interested in some of the goals that drive Kevin. She would like her career to continue to be rewarding and hopes that she's given the opportunity to express more creativity in her work, but she's also very cautious about allowing her work to become her main focus.

### **Dreams and Shifting Priorities**

Arlene is concerned that the two of them need to do a better job of planning for their financial security. She is still the pragmatist in their relationship. In acting from her emerging romantic side, Arlene would love to design and build her own home. In addition, she would like to take more time off with John so that they could travel through Europe. She worries about always planning for a rainy day and never taking advantage of what life offers. Arlene doesn't want life to pass her by. If asked whether she was satisfied with her life, she wants to be able to answer with a resounding "Yes!"

Kevin is dealing with a fair amount of conflict and frustration regarding what he sees in his future. He has added a new pragmatism to his life and has mixed it with his romanticism to produce an emergent, though still conflictual, entrepreneurial spirit. He feels that "happiness is expensive" and he often worries that he is not making progress fast enough to ensure a happy future for himself and Arlene.

His "dream" is to own several companies that he can "control" and preside over. He would like these companies to have some social worth, such as a chain of grocery stores or natural food stores. Kevin would also like to become more advanced spiritually and wonders if these two goals are at odds with each other. He worries

that he may become too wrapped up in a material life where he will never be content because "there is always something else to strive for."

Arlene and Kevin have decided not to have children. Child-rearing does not seem to relate to either of their emerging set of priorities. The prospect of children "just doesn't seem right" to them. They mentioned that the financial and personal obligations of child-rearing are too great for them to handle. There is also a concern that there are too many people in the world already and that they should not contribute to the problem. Arlene is not sure that they will ever be ready for children. She acknowledges that parenthood is the ultimate responsibility and wonders about the possibility of making a mistake in raising a child. She says that her parents gave it their best, but maybe that's not good enough.

Wendy and Steve resemble Arlene and Kevin in that they too are struggling over the priorities they should assign to their careers and to other aspects of their lives, including their relationship with one another. In the case of Wendy and Steve, however, there is a major age difference which contributes to the problem of finding mutually agreeable priorities. Wendy is a hard-working career-oriented person who, while feeling secure about her ability to survive, has reached an age when she wishes to accomplish something of lasting worth in her life.

She has created a nonprofit organization offering weekend recreational activities for children. Steve is ten years younger than Wendy and feels much less secure about life. He is unable as yet to find his way past early anxieties regarding his ability to find and hold a good job. He is still far too worried about his personal survival and far too dependent on Wendy for home and nurturance. This conflict, a repetition of his early life, is yet to be resolved. As Steve says: "everything could fall apart at any time."

The very motherliness that Wendy uses so well to keep the relationship together has been engaged as she tries to force Steve into being more active. Striving to retain his own sense of independent self-worth, Steve has countered by saying that Wendy is too busy to be a good companion. Wendy escalates the conflict by implying that Steve is lazy. He could do more around the house or in his efforts to find work. Steve counters by declaring that Wendy is a workaholic. Wendy says that Steve doesn't care about his future, and she worries that he won't share their household expenses. The conflict goes on and on.

In the past, this escalation has reached a point of bitter disagreement between Wendy and Steve, marked by a screaming argument and withdrawal from each other. Even now, like many longstanding couples, they constantly retrace old steps

in more or less the same ritualized manner until it becomes a Möbius strip with no beginning or end. The difference now is that the force of the conflict has been greatly lessened by so much conscious review –resulting from some well-timed counseling.

The review is laced with a pinch of acceptance, some good humor and a strong desire on both of their parts to remain in their relationship. They have done their best, or worst, to change each other, and a few minimal changes have moved them closer together. However, at the deepest levels, where anxiety rules, they have been forced to recognize each other's irrational, outrageous humanness—and they accept it in one another.

## **Expectations and Double=Binding Commitments**

Conflict regard careers often center on parental or community expectations that continue to have a powerful impact on one of the partner's concerns regarding the other partner's career. Sam, for instance, reports that he has always been "at odds" with Caroline's family regarding his decision to pursue a career in church music (directing a church choir).

The "rub" here seems to be that there is notoriously little money in such a career. Thus, a career in this field hardly holds any kind of "future" for those who pursue it. Sam reports that Caroline's family is always after him (and they "bitch" at her a lot, too) for him to get a "real" job. Since Caroline's family lives on the East Coast while Caroline and Sam live on the West Coast, her family is easy to ignore as far as Sam is concerned.

The interviewer asked Caroline if she agreed with her family's opinions about Sam's career. She said (with a sense of resignation) that she wants Sam to be happy, but that she, too, would like to see him land a better paying job. Caroline mentioned that they have no savings and Sam has no sense of responsibility for money. He has ruined their credit rating by not making payments on time. They can't get a major credit card, and financially have absolutely nothing to fall back on in the case of an emergency. She was quite ill at ease in talking about this. Sam validated the truth of Caroline's statements—but did so with an attitude of indifference.

Would it be easy for Sam to leave a career in the church to pursue a more lucrative career? Obviously, it is always hard for anyone to leave something with which they are familiar and to abandon a career that they find to be personally fulfilling. In the case of Caroline and Sam, abandoning a career in the church would be particularly

difficult, for their identity as a couple is fused with their commitment to the church.

Both Sam and Caroline observed that members of the church in which both were involved at the time they met were eager to recognize them as a couple. Caroline added at this point that she discovered later that several members of the church had "set it up" so that Sam and she would meet at this certain function. They both report that they have seldom had friends outside the particular church where they happen to be since they have met.

A further problem contributes to Caroline and Sam's conflict which concerns Caroline's ambivalence regarding Sam's career and her own parents' devaluing of this career. It is quite clear to Caroline that Sam eats, sleeps and breaths church music. It is in this context that he finds his identity as a successful professional. Success for Sam is determined by the quality of his work rather than by economic standards.

Part of Caroline seems to agree with her parents that directing church choirs is first of all not "any kind of career." Second, it is not anything which could be called a "successful career," primarily because it doesn't pay any money to speak of. Yet, another part of Caroline does not agree with this assessment, because in order to be part of Sam's life, she must accept his dedication to church music as a career—regardless of how she or anyone else feels about it.

Caroline finds herself in what family therapists call a "double bind." She wants to support Sam and his career because she knows his work is gratifying for him and because this is the only way in which she can remain in relationship with him. Yet, in doing so, she feels that she is encouraging his financial irresponsibility and his unwillingness to confront the inadequacies of this career over the long run.

Caroline is compelled to "sing in the choir," to allow Sam's music to assume a very important place in both of their lives. She works in the secular world at whatever job she can find to make up the difference in dollars required for them to stay afloat financially. This has been a pattern in their lives the whole time they have been married. The pattern has been remarkably similar in the three different "church jobs" that Sam has held since their marriage. It is a pattern which provides stability in their relationship, but also creates profound unhappiness at times in the life of Caroline—and perhaps their two children.

As in the case of many men and women who are deeply involved in their career, Caroline and Sam have built their joint friendships, value system and even identity around the job of one partner, in this case, Sam. Some couples invest themselves

in the corporate career of one partner—becoming a good "company" couple.

Other couples invest themselves in a specific profession. They become the physician and "physician's spouse" or the professor and "professor's spouse"—or even more powerfully, the pastor and the "pastor's spouse." Career shifts for these couples involve profound change that often threatens the core identity of the couple, even if such a shift might contribute to greater financial security.

## **Performing: How Are We Going to Live Through the Best and Worst of Times?**

Not all of the stories of success among contemporary couples are built upon the rock of financial or career success. Some of the most powerful stories of successful union between two people were told by men and women who are in financial difficulty or under the cloud of a failed career. These tend to be stories of courage, support and understanding on the part of two people who are under considerable stress.

### **Discrimination and Economics**

One such story was told by Denise and Joseph. Joseph once had a fairly successful career as a salesman for a manufacturing firm in the Philippines. He is now unemployed. Denise also had been successful in working at a Filipino food store and bank; she now works as a low paid assistant in a day care center. As a Filipino couple, Denise and Joseph talked about the racism they have both experienced in obtaining and holding a job in the United States. Joseph told of riding home on the bus with their six-year-old daughter (whom he takes to and from school every day). There were young Filipino men on the bus with food supplies. Joseph asked them where they bought the items (large bags of rice, corn meal, powdered milk and so forth). The boys told him that they waited in line to receive the food for free.

Joseph asked the interviewer about the welfare system in the United States and how a family becomes eligible. He then said that he and Denise could not participate in this system because it would not look good for them to be on welfare, if they are to be sponsors for their two children who still live in the Philippines. Denise indicated that if she were earning the Philippine equivalent of what she now earns, they would be starving to death. Here, they can live better, in spite of the fact that she has to

settle for a job below what she (and Joseph) could get if they returned to the Philippines.

### **Love and Hope**

Both of them talked about difficulties associated with integrating themselves into the American economic system. They are hopeful and remain in an expansive mood even while they describe their difficult life together. Denise indicated that their hopefulness is critical. It is their way of sticking together (with their children) as a family. They invited the interviewer over for Christmas one year from now. By then, according to Joseph, they will be successful and "will have a big feast." This year they can't afford even to decorate their tree, but next year they hope once again to be able to celebrate a full Christmas and a successful transition into the American culture and economic system.

The interviewer had a chance to talk individually with Denise, who told the interviewer of her fatigue and frustration with regard to carrying the financial burdens alone at the present time. Previously, Joseph had shared his humiliating and frustrating experience of meeting with potential employers who have a very racist attitude. He also was irritated that his adult daughter (who was still living with them) had taken her time in finding a job. Despite the very understandable pressures experienced by all members of the family regarding finances, they remain close and continue to talk with each other.

"Denise," according to Joseph, "is the budgeter, worrier and the quiet one." Denise speaks of her husband as "the planner, the decision-maker, the one who takes risks." Denise says again and again that Joseph is very caring toward the children. Joseph shares stories of the children and had spent the day preparing photo albums for their two children who still live in the Philippines. While Denise said that the albums probably meant more to Joseph than to their two children in the Philippines, she rushes over to show the albums to the interviewer and with Joseph told several stories to the interviewer regarding the circumstances associated with pictures in these albums.

## Conclusions: Devotion and Prospects

Clearly, Denise and Joseph believe their financial problems will only be solved by the active involvement of both partners. They value each other's unique strengths and firmly believe that they will need each other to resolve their financial problems.

Furthermore, they keep their priorities straight. While the financial problems must be solved, Denise and Joseph know that they are fortunate to have loving children. They devote time to their children, despite being distracted by concerns about economic viability, institutional racism and future prospects for their children in the United States and the Philippines.

## Key Chapter Points

Enduring couples:

- Accept that an intimate relationship requires some restrictions in social interactions.
- Give considerable attention to issues of income and allocation of funds.
- Combat tension and rifts over marker events in this plate, particularly when a marker event is shared between two developmental plates (like purchasing a home).
- See their relationship as "in process," an on-going series of events that continuously defines and redefines itself.
- Allow their partner to shift basic values and find a way to blend in new values to their daily functioning.
- Reduce the force of conflict about money or career by a conscious review of the problem, willingness to accept, use of humor, and a strong desire - to remain in the relationship.



## Chapter Thirteen

### Plate Three: Deciding What's Important (Identifying Shared Values)

This third plate is closely related to the first two. In pure form, it often only emerges fairly late in the life of a couple—though issues concerned with values are intimately involved in all aspects of a partner's or couple's life. Early on, most young couples will make decisions about spending priorities, political affiliations, recreational preferences and other matters related to values based on the preferences and affiliations of their parents.

They will either uncritically accept their parent's values or react against their parents by selecting opposing values. In either case, the couple is dependent on parents for definition of central values. Later in life, men and women are much more likely to form independent definitions of central life values—and they do so in a collaborative manner. Furthermore, the clarification and enactment of these values usually become increasingly important to the partners in a relationship.

### Values Over a Lifetime

The values plate is closely tied to the individual developmental stages of the two partners. Hence this plate often continues to change throughout the life of the couple. Several adult development researchers (notably Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan) have provided extensive evidence indicating that adults continue to struggle with and change personal values throughout their lives. As couples mature, their mutual decisions and commitments regarding values tend to become increasingly unique.

Their values structure reflects their own distinctive life experiences, rather than the socially prescribed expectations of their culture, society or friends. As I have already noted, their values and priorities also tend to diverge from those of their parents. In this sense, the values structure plate is likely to move further away from the socio-

economic plate as a couple matures, sometimes leaving a rather formidable and alienating chasm between a couple and the people with whom this couple has affiliated over the past twenty to thirty years.

## **Shifting Priorities**

While the values that individuals hold and that a couple shares tend to be among the most enduring aspects of life span development, there are changes that occur over time. Typically, people rarely change the values they espouse, unless they have experienced some kind of religious or quasi-religious conversion experience. Rather, the values that they already hold dear tend to shift in priority.

Specific values (for example, family, career success, sexuality) become less important or more important, in comparison to other values over time. Important values rarely are abandoned or newly adopted. They simply become more or less important. Men and women in their forties and fifties have often been found to shift in terms of the priorities that they assign to certain aspects of their lives—especially family life and alone time as opposed to time at work.

There are also distinctive changes as a function of gender. Men and women tend to change in different ways as they grow older. In general, men tend to become more interpersonally oriented and more interested in family and spiritual matters as they move into the second half of their lives. By contrast, women (at least until recently) tend to become more interested in careers, achieving greater autonomy and moving toward relationships outside their family,

Whereas the central developmental issue for many men at mid-life is learning how to establish meaningful relationships, the central issue for many women is learning how to establish a separate, individual identity. These shifts in values as a function of age or gender have a major impact on many couples and define some of the most important conflicts and points of growth for many couples over the lifespan.

It should be noted that these shifts and lessons to be learned might be changing in the midst of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Career women often look more like men in terms of their developmental shifts and lessons to be learned. It should also be noted that a counter argument has often been drawn: women are more likely to find alignment with the developmental shifts of men to be quite uncomfortable and the cause of significant midlife grief and guilt. There is still the lingering socialization of girls in early life that is traditional and counter to the socialization of boys. These

socialization ghosts can haunt women later in life—despite their strong commitment to career advancement and independence.

## **Segregated Values**

As we return to the presence or absence of shared values among couples, we find from our interviews that there is often segregation in values among newly formed couples. One partner is likely to define the values of the couple in one specific domain, while the other partner is responsible for another domain. Frequently, the domain over which each partner reigns is closely linked to traditional sex role stereotyping, though this is becoming less often the case in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. A classic cartoon shows the harried housewife indicating to her friend that “my husband makes all of the important decisions in our marriage, about war, peace, and crime in the street. I make the less important decisions about where our children go to school and how we spend our money . . . “

This cartoon speaks to the nature of values in many 21<sup>st</sup> Century societies as these values are actually being acted upon (rather than just espoused). One partner may be responsible for the selection of values in domains that have no immediate impact on the couple. The other makes decisions that may seem less important but impact in an immediate way on the actual behavior and priorities of the couple.

One partner may be responsible for decisions about expenditures, while the other partner attends to political matters. One partner picks out the living room furniture, the other selects the church they will attend. As a couple matures, the partners will often begin to define and act on values through mutual discussion and consent. At this point, the third plate becomes more visible.

## **Child-Oriented Values**

When the fourth plate (child rearing) is prevalent, the values often are placed on a backburner. Decisions about values and priorities often are based on the needs and demands of the children. When child-rearing couples look with envy upon the lives and activities of their childless friends, they often focus on issues of values and priorities: the way this other couple is able to decorate their home without having to childproof everything, the type of vacation this couple is able to take (“they can afford to be happy!”), or the time that is available to work on a particularly important social cause.

After the child-rearing plate has become less prevalent (usually with the exiting of the last child from the home), a couple is often faced with values-related decisions and may find these decisions to be particularly stressful: "Who are we as a couple without our children?" "What do we really stand for, independent of our children?" "What do we really want to do, now that the kids have left home?"

The so-called "Empty-nest syndrome" has received a great deal of attention over the past thirty years precisely because of the stress associated with transition into the values plate. I have a dear friend who has just bid farewell to her last child who is off to college. Her husband is busy with his own career and avocations. My friend talks about wondering around an "empty house."

She still worries about her kids and calls them frequently but doesn't know what to do with her "extra time" now that there are no meals to make for her kids nor sporting events to attend. Most importantly, she doesn't know what she has in common with her husband. The children have been "everything" for them—thought he has his own personal interests. She has nothing other than her very demanding career and a few friends (such as me).

How does she begin not only to find new interests for herself but also talk with her husband about what they might do together? Could this lead to stress in their marriage and perhaps even a remarriage? Maybe a few of Gottman's bids would help out. Perhaps a suggestion that she and her husband attend a concert (related to his own interest in music).

She might even ask her husband about food preferences that have been deferred on behalf of their children's often limited appetite. Perhaps her husband would join her in trying out a new recipe. They could go rouge and cook the "exotic" meal together for the first time. The end results: a lovely meal by candlelight along with a nice bottle of wine. Who knows?

## **Identity and Commitment**

We can leave my dear friend with her empty nest and return to the newly formed couple that doesn't even have a nest yet to worry about. The marker events for this value-based plate are often subtle and hard for a young couple readily to identify—perhaps because this plate is usually prevalent later in life when there are some newly emerging priorities to assign. Early marker events that were identified by the couples we interviewed included major "nonessential" purchases, decisions about

recreational activities or vacations, joint membership in specific social or political organizations, or selection of mutual friends.

All of this is relatively mundane for most heterosexual couples. This plate is much more important for many gay and lesbian couples. Their values-based marker event often is “coming out of the closet.” While they may have been living as a gay or lesbian couple for many years, it is possible to hide or at least avoid acknowledging their sexual preference in their interactions with parents, siblings and old friends.

Typically, the commitment to another person, as not only lover but also life partner, necessitates the public acknowledgement of one's sexual preferences. Such a commitment holds many implications and usually helps to define and establish a set of critical values regarding honesty (about one's sexual preferences) This commitment also involves support for a more open and accepting sense of life options regarding not only sexual preferences, but also marriage, the rearing of children, and other central life choices. All couples are faced with the challenge of making this commitment. It just is likely to be fraught with more difficulties for lesbian and gay couples.

In later life, values-oriented marker events often center on major increases or decreases in salary—which lead, in turn, to expansion, contraction or shifts in lifestyle options. A mature couple, for instance, may purchase a cabin in the mountains and decide to spend weekends and summers at this location. They may decide to go out to dinner once a week.

Other couples may decide, more dramatically, to abandon their current life structure in order to devote several years of their life to public service (Peace Corp, mission work) or world travel. For couples living on the edge of poverty there are few discretionally funds to spend on cabins, dinners out or volunteer services. For these challenged couples there is only one primary value: it is economic survival and the availability of food and shelter. Much simpler but a whole lot more stressful.

## **Forming:**

### **When and How Do We Break Away from Parental Values and Models?**

The issue of parental values is critical to most young couples as they forge their relationship. In some instances, such as the relationship established between Bessy and Bill, partners remain together precisely because they still fully support the values of their parents. They continue to admire the commitment that both sets of parents made to their own marriages. While Bill had rebelled against his parents by taking up a career in music and Bessy had rebelled by agreeing to join Bill in this lifestyle, both of these people built their relationship firmly on the value base and models provided by their parents.

In other cases, the couple finds unity in their movement away from parents. They are not so much rebelling against their parents as they are finding their own distinctive identity, this identity in part being forged in their partnering experience. Bart and Rebecca offer an excellent illustration of this movement from parental values to values that are distinctive and shared by the couple.

Though they are still relatively young people (both being in their early 30s) and are still struggling with their own identity independent of their parents, Bart and Rebecca have been together as a couple for ten years and have two of their own children. They have thus had ample opportunity to struggle over and find their own, identity and values as a couple. Rebecca observes that: "we are more like each other now that we were [when we first met.] Before, I used to share the values of my parents, but now the discussions that Bart and I have are much more relevant to me than my parent's views on the same subjects."

### **Traditional Values**

This forging of distinctive and individual values is all very well and good when it comes to couples who live in cultures that support autonomy and independence for young couples. But what about cultures that encourage continuing, close relationships between parents and children? Where mother and father are to be honored and served for a lifetime.

What about couples who are more radical in their departure from their parent's

culture? Who choose a very different lifestyle? And what about gay and lesbian couples who often must fight against major opposition from parents in order to even establish their relationship in the first place?

Many of the couples we interviewed who grew up in very traditional cultures found that their culture firmly enforced the commitment of children (even when adults) to their parent's values. Many of the older couples, like Clyde and Gertrude grew up in another era in American life. Traditional, church-related values were central to their individual life, their life as a couple and the community in which they grew up.

Clyde and Gertrude met at a church gathering, have remained in their church throughout the fifty-five years of their marriage, and have raised their own children within the church. Even though Gertrude's parents never accepted Clyde as their son-in-law, both Gertrude and Clyde fully accepted the values of her parents, for they were also the values of his parents and of everyone who lived around them. There was simply no alternative in the community of believers in which they were raised.

Maria and Roberto are much younger than Gertrude and Clyde, yet they share similar experiences, as citizens of Chile, having been raised in traditional families. As in many traditional cultures, Maria and Roberto refrained from sexual intercourse prior to their marriage. Like most of her female friends, Maria was a virgin when she married Roberto. Furthermore, Maria's family was very protective of her and did not want her to have a steady boyfriend—especially if that boyfriend was Roberto.

According to Maria, her parents “did anything possible to pull us apart in our relationship.” Furthermore, Roberto “was not welcomed to my house until we got married. They still aren't very happy with him.” While the resistance of Maria's family to her marriage to Roberto was a hassle, it was not a major deterrent. In part this was because at the time most of the parents in Chile seemed to be overprotective of their daughters. While the country of Chile was often in turmoil, the daughters were to live in a protective environment. The chaos outside the family may have fortified the commitment to order and stability inside the family.

Roberto readily accepted the resistance of Maria's parents to his courtship of Maria. However, he resented the strong push first exerted by his own parent's and Maria's parents against the decision he and Maria made to get married. And then, he began to resent his own mother's push for a big wedding once she recognized that the marriage was going to take place.

. . . I didn't want to get married in a very public way and my resentment appeared during our honeymoon. I didn't need marriage for Maris and I to be together. This all made me feel very upset. My mother wanted to do a big party. I was the first son in getting married . . . I didn't like all that proceeding . . . this situation made both of us feel very unhappy during out honeymoon.

Maria concurred:

. . . the honeymoon was filled with fights and tears. This unpleasant experience made me change the airplane tickets . . . and we canceled the trip five days before the time scheduled [to return home.] Later, everything was forgotten

Like many young men and women from their country and many other countries in the world, Maria and Roberto had to fight against their parents in order to establish a successful marriage.

Yet, they complied with the wishes of their parents and had a miserable honeymoon. Now living in the United States, Maria and Roberto have decided not to have children, in part because they don't want to replicate the struggles they had with their own traditional parents. At another level, Maria and Roberto have decided not to have children as a powerful statement to their parents that they are not going to comply with any more of the traditional Chilean values.

They agreed to get married to meet their parent's wishes but are not going to take the second step of having children in order to continue meeting their parents' expectations. As in the case of many young couples, their relationship is built in part not on the shared commitment to parental values but rather on the shared rejection of and rebellion against these values. They share a common enemy and this becomes part of the glue that keeps them together.

Alice and Fred exemplify the struggle experienced by many young couples in choosing between the acceptance and rejection of parental values. During their interview, Alice talked about being pregnant when she and Fred became engaged. They decided to have an abortion and, according to Alice, based this difficult decision on economic grounds: "[we] just weren't economically ready to start a family."

Several weeks after the interview, however, Alice informed her interviewer that she and her therapist had just been working on this topic. She now realizes that the reason she got an abortion is because when she called her parents to tell them she



was getting married, her mother's first words were: "You aren't pregnant are you?" - to which Alice falsely replied, "No." Alice now realizes that the reason she had the abortion was because she "couldn't live with the lie," and thus she changed reality to fit the lie.

At this early point in their relationship, Alice and Fred were clearly influenced profoundly by her mother and the values advocated by her mother. It is hard to admit to these early influences in a relationship—particularly at a later point in one's life when these parental influences usually have declined. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize their important role early in many relationships. The relationship is likely to undergo major change and stress as the couple begins to define distinctive values as a couple, independent of either set of parents.

## **Distinctive Values**

We can look to the lives of several gay and lesbian couples to get an even clearer and more dramatic sense of a couple breaking away from traditional, parent-based values. Marianne and Heather spoke of not only having to establish their connection as a couple, but also coming to accept their own individual identity as lesbians. Most "straight" people confront their values individually and then communicate these values to their partner. They hopefully find a way to integrate these values with those of their partner. The values associated with being a gay or lesbian, by contrast, are deeply embedded in the context of being a couple, much as values associated with child-rearing can rarely be separated from the couple's existence.

Heather spoke of the experience of moving in together as being difficult because of these inherent value issues. Marianne agreed: "Yeah, gay life was all new to me. And for you too, basically." At various times during their relationship, Marianne and Heather were caught by surprise in terms of the adjustments they needed to make in their personal and shared values systems. For instance, at the point when they both wanted to purchase a home together, they became very sensitive about their relationship, recognizing in a concrete manner that they had truly left behind their traditional notions about home, parents and family.

Each of them suddenly realized that they were about to buy a home together with another woman rather than with a husband. They were going to buy the home together and pay for it with the salaries they both earned. By contrast, both women had grown up with mothers who didn't work and with fathers who controlled the

finances. The act of buying and paying for a home together triggered a wide range of issues regarding alternative life and family values.

Marianne and Heather also spoke of the joys associated with this new relationship for both of them. They were excited about the new values they were identifying and by which they were living—even if in private. Heather observes:

I'd never been in the 'gay community.' . . . It was like you had this secret society. Like I'd see you at a bar and we'd have a fun evening and then the next day I might see you walking down the street and I'm all in my gussied clothes and you're in your suit and I'd say, "Hello Marianne," and you'd say, "Hello, Heather." And we'd look at each other and wink because we'd know that we played like hell together the night before and then all of a sudden today we were straight, all the way. It was sort of fun.

While their relationship was not "clandestine" (since neither of them were unfaithful to another person), it did have the magic and excitement of a forbidden affair. The broader social disapproval of lesbian relationships made their relationship that much more compelling. The "clandestine" relationship added intrigue and energy to their relationship, while also helping to define mutual values that were associated with a lesbian lifestyle. Initially, they found this intrigue to be "fun." Furthermore, they were able to forge their individual identities as lesbians while also forging their relationship as a couple. This is one advantage held by gays and lesbians in their initial relationships with partners of the same sex.

Our interviews have taught us that any couples (especially those who meet as young people) initially identify with one another primarily regarding the values (often of their parents) that they do or don't want to share. The recognition of shared values (often building on shared cultures and backgrounds) provides an early "glue" for a relationship and helps hold it together during particularly stormy times.

The obvious example of shared values, dreams and interests is the classic "boy/girl next door" -which is typically represented as the young man and woman who grew up together in a small, mid-west town. While we did find a few examples of these "childhood sweethearts" in the interviews we conducted, it was much more common to find partners who grew up in different communities but shared a common heritage.

Mary and Ruth, for instance, live in a so-called "nontraditional" relationship, as a lesbian couple. Yet, they share many common, traditional values:

We share midwestern roots. There is this whole thing we share. We also like midwestern people. There's something real basic about them, real solid. We were both brought up in the Christian tradition and we've both gotten away from that, but I guess we both consider ourselves sort of spiritual people. The general concept of money and what it's for and what you do with it are very, very similar. Friendships, I think, are important. Both friendships with other couples and also friendships that we have, individuals, separate friendships. Politically, I think we're very much matched.

With these deeply rooted, commonly shared values as a base, Mary and Ruth have been able to weather storms associated with the darker side of these same set of traditional values, namely, discrimination against homosexual sexual orientations. Mary and Ruth find refuge in their shared interests and dreams: "We laugh a lot. We take great vacations. We've never had a bad vacation. When the going gets rough, we take a vacation: We know how to play real well." Another couple revealed somewhat tongue-in-cheek, "If we ever divorce, the divorce decree will have to state that we will continue to always take vacations together as a couple! We are perfectly matched on vacation - love the same places and things to do; share the same novels."

## **Sacred Value**

Up to this point, we have offered a "secular" perspective regarding the values shared (or not shared) by a couple. Obviously, for many people the primary values are embedded in their religious beliefs. While we were hesitant to probe very deeply into the religious beliefs of the couples we interviewed, it is important to acknowledge the role played by religion in holding a couple together—especially if both partners were raised in the same religious tradition and remain observant of this tradition. Not only do many religions either ban or discourage divorce, they also provide the rich opportunity for the sharing of rituals and ceremonies, as well as regularly occurring shared activities (such as a Friday Shabbat or Sunday church service).

There are several variants on this sharing of a religious tradition many couples. One variant is the return to religion of one or both members of a couple. What happens when Susan decides to recommit to her Catholic upbringing, while Steve remains either indifferent to or hostile to his own Catholic upbringing. We also wonder about the dynamics that take place when both members of an enduring couple

spend most of their time together as devout non-religious types.

Then, later in life they each decide to return to their religious roots. They discover that these roots are actually quite different. Gavin was born into a mainstream Protestant tradition, while his wife, Sara, was raised in a fairly conservative Jewish family. Gavin and Sara had shared a non-commitment to religion as a young couple. Now they are observing and acting on behalf of two different religions - and two divergent sets of accompanying values.

These variants can offer quite a challenge for couples in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century world. What does happen when religion is discovered by one of the partners later in life? Early on, they had been in agreement that religion would play no part in their life. Now, this important plate is starting to move. How does a couple adjust to the move? Our guides, David and Julie Bullitt, recount the way religion has played out in their own lives. For a long time, they were both non-practicing Jews. Then a shift occurred for Julie (but not David).

They offer this account (Bullitt and Bullitt, 2020, p. 93):

. . . we made the bonehead move and bought that *Judaism For Dummies* book," David says. "Once she saw we needed a 'For Dummies' book about our own religion, she was sold on Christianity." We laugh about it now: In order to explain the underpinnings of the Jewish faith to our own child, we had to look at a 'For Dummies' book. From then on though, we handled her newfound faith remarkably well. We didn't make it a big deal with her or ask her a lot of questions. It wasn't a nightly topic at the dinner table. There was no anger or yelling\*, and we didn't confront her, asking how she could have come to that belie£

David adds a thoughtful observation (Bullitt and Bullitt, 2020, p. 93):

I think what was lost somewhere in the translation, what we didn't pass along that our parents did, was not the observance part. It was the association piece. . . .I never really felt any kind of spirituality. I went to synagogue a couple of times during the year during the holidays, but there was no religious connection. But I always associated with being a Jew. There was never any doubt to me about that, it just didn't mean anything to me from a praying, faith kind of way.

Can a couple who grew up with no religious tradition (as was the case with Julie and David) find a way to allow the sacred to enter their previously secular life? Will there inevitably be conflict when God enters their relationship and demands some

attention?

## **Storming: How Do We Negotiate Priorities and Interests?**

Conflicts regarding values inevitably center on issues of priority. Something of great value is given higher priority than something of lesser value. This, in turn, means that we devote more money to it or more time to it. Values-oriented storms, therefore, often build around such issues as: "can we afford this?" "do we really have to do this?" and "if you think it's so important, then why don't you take care of it!"

Many of the conflict regarding values center on the vernacular domain. These are conflicts regarding such day-to-day issue as: Who is going to take out the trash? Who does the house-cleaning? The dishes? The shopping for food? These discussions often center around values issues because at the heart of the argument typically is the question: how important is this task?

While arguments may focus on who does what when, and who has the right to tell the other partner what to do, there is often a much deeper issue concerning the importance placed on a particular area of responsibility. We argue about the cleaning of our house in part because we have different standards regarding how clean our home should be. In turn, we push back against one another regarding the priority that should be assigned to this area of our shared life (in comparison with other priorities such as recreation, relaxation, work and so forth).

At the beginning of their relationship, Karen and Ben didn't like the same things. Karen hated baseball and football, while Ben liked both of these sports. Because Karen agreed to agree with Ben, she chose to like baseball but not football. Currently, both Ben and Karen are avid fans of their local major league baseball team, but neither of them watches football. This couple has agreed to value and do things that they can enjoy together rather than apart. This is at the heart of their relationship.

When asked to indicate what is special about them as a couple, Ben replied: We like to have fun. I don't know -- the main thing is that we never get bored of each other, you know?

Karen: It's like being best friends. You're not really an individual when you're together.

Ben: That's what makes it the best. I know some people that have separate relationships. Saturday night they're out with the guys and that to me is a joke. If you're married, you are buddies. You do everything together. Like I said, "this winter, I'm going to go to Canada to go fishing with Todd" and she said.-."Well then I'm going to Florida with Gwen." I said: "No way;" She said "no way." We'd just be missing out. We try and get into things together. And it seems like things that I enjoy and did enjoy . . . I don't do them so much. Not because I don't like them (or maybe I don't like them anymore!)

Karen: It's just evolved more into what we can do together.

While many other couples are very successful in doing some things together and other things apart, Ben and Karen have worked out a formula that makes sense for them. They do things together and gradually begin to convince themselves that activities which they don't do jointly are somehow less interesting than they used to be. Their agreement to share something might start out as one of Gottman's bids. However, there eventually appears to be a genuine shift in attitudes.

## **Norming:**

### **How Do We Agree to Agree and Disagree?**

Couples often discover in establishing a life together that there are certain areas in which there will always be a difference of opinion regarding values. Denise and Joseph are a happily married couple who have come to terms about several differences regarding personal values. As we noted in an earlier chapter, both Denise and Joseph were born in the Philippines, Denise formerly worked for a food store and a bank, now she works in a day care center. Joseph was employed for many years as a salesman for a manufacturing firm. He is currently unemployed.

### **A Balancing Act**

With little money coming in, Denise and Joseph are very concerned about supporting their children, though fortunately their children are now adults and are able to be financially independent. Despite their financial worries, Joseph enjoys entertaining friends in the traditional Filipino manner, which can be quite expensive. In the Philippines, Joseph notes, "there are no pot-lucks." The host and hostess supply everything.

When he invites friends to go out, Joseph serves them dinner, pays for the transportation, the tickets to the show and "hotel hopping" afterwards. Joseph loves to go out and entertain. Denise adds that Joseph has to get the most expensive seats and the most expensive food. Joseph adds, "you might as well spend a little extra to get the best seats."

Even though she doesn't personally care about going out, Denise supports Joseph in his interests: "Yes, Joseph loves the night life and to be the host and the life of the party. I never cared for going out. But he loves to spend, spend, spend." In discussing this apparent area of divergent values and potential conflict, Denise looked intensely and lovingly at Joseph. He returned her affectionate glances. Throughout the interview, there were many examples of similar contradictions: differences in tastes, opinions and values expressed in the most humorous and caring manner.

What keeps this couple together, with passion and understanding, given all of these differences and financial pressures? At one level, we must look to their shared cultural background. Men in the traditional Filipino family are expected to entertain and spend money, while the wives stay home and tend the family. A second factor concerns their long history together and their close family ties that enable and encourage them to remain together when struggling through the hard times.

As Denise notes, "we were childhood sweethearts. He lived next door he was the oldest of five brothers and the troublemaker on our block. His brothers and relatives didn't like me because they saw me as cutting his wings, chopping off his horns. They thought I was the dominant one and bossed him around and made the decisions." Clearly, Denise knew what she was getting into when she began spending time with the "troublemaker." She also knew that she could have some influence over this strong personality, and perhaps even become dominant in the relationship.

Throughout the interview, Denise and Joseph balanced their two dominant personalities, Joseph was presented as the decision-maker and Denise as the power behind the throne. Denise always took the practical, doubting and corrective position, while Joseph spoke romantically, with a strong dose of adventure and curiosity. Yet, they did not argue in a contradicting or devaluing manner. The way in which they talked about the individual characteristics of each other suggests that they not only accept, but are fond of, these varying characteristics. Each partner's individuality is given more meaning because of its role within the relationship.

At the same time, it is obvious that they share the role of nurturing, doing household

chores and earning a living. Joseph and Denise talk about their relationship as an entertaining story. Denise presents the narration and Joseph provides detailed examples of particular situations. They enhance each other's part of the story and keep their story lively, never fixating on one topic. Each of them talks about the other in the context of an experience, not as the subject, *per se*.

According to the interviewer, it almost seemed as if Joseph and Denise were one person. They were debating with and balancing off different parts of a unified but varied personality. This personality was, in fact, the third entity—the couple itself speaking with a single voice that had been established in a single, unified culture. A voice that was further refined over a long history of child-rearing, financial hardships and adaptation to a new culture and set of social values. In their relationship, Denise and Joseph have found the best in one another and have found a way to use these strengths in their own individual and collective survival.

## **Habits of the Heart**

In many instances, partners like Denise and Frederick defy some of their parent's customs early in their relationship and end up adopting values that their parents held. One gets a clear sense, however, that they are adopting these values not for the sake of expedience (to somehow appease their parent), but rather because these values have now become their own values.

They have personally incorporated a treasured set of values and assumptions about quality of life from their local community or culture. Many years ago, Robert Bellah and his colleagues (Bellah, and Associates, 1985) wrote about this sense of shared values and community—a sharing that was often based in a common religious tradition. They saw this as central to the formation of the American character (“habits of the heart”) and as a vanishing element of the contemporary American culture (except in unique “enclaves”).

Frequently, these retained parental values and the supportive community that provides or builds off these values are religious in nature. Two partners may share a common religious heritage or church membership, or one member of the couple may have been converted to the faith or creed of the other partner. The church of which they are members often provides the foundation for their own relationship. The church helps to define projects that are of mutual interests. It congregates shared friends and provides values-oriented education for their children. Ultimately, the church and its members even provide solace and support for the



surviving partner after the death of his or her loved one.

Kathy and Tim exemplify this commitment to shared religious values—and habits of the heart—that were forged in their families of origin. Both Kathy and Tim were brought up in devout Catholic families. They have remained active in their local church and attend mass every Sunday with their sons. Embedded in their commitment to the church is a strong sense of responsibility for social justice as well as the importance of family life.

As a result, both Kathy and Tim are involved in community activities with their boys. Kathy has also become a political activist in the town where they live. Tim is proud of Kathy's activism and helps take care of the kids so that she can attend meetings in the evening. Because of their overarching commitment to the principles of their church, Kathy and Tim have been able to effectively blend family, community and political activism – priorities that are at odds among many other couples.

In many other instances, we found through our interviews that a couple has built their relationship not on the religion of their parents, but rather on their own, distinctive religious commitments (often in opposition to their parents and their communities of origin). Derrick and Catherine exemplify this centering of a relationship on nontraditional religious values. Their habits of the heart are distinctive.

From the day they first met, Derrick and Catherine have enjoyed deep and lengthy conversations about life. She was cooking in a small vegetarian restaurant at the time, and Derrick was a student. They entered a relationship very cautiously and used their long conversations as a means of buffering themselves against precipitous leaps into a doomed relationship.

They also checked out their horoscope and found, to their great delight, that there was great potential in their relationship. However, Derrick was on his way to a nontraditional medical school. They bid farewell to one another. They remained in contact and Catherine decided to begin meditation and mindfulness training (Derrick also was an advocate of mindfulness and meditation)

Ironically, with all their nontraditional perspectives on life, it took a nudging by Derrick's parents for him to call Catherine and propose that they live together and consider marriage -- on Christmas Eve! Yet, the marriage did not take place during this religious time of year. Even after a wonderful summer together in a meditation training program, neither was ready for marriage.

Their highly idealistic and individualistic perspectives on life led them both to be cautious in all matters, especially marital commitments. They finally did get married; though they continue to lead their own individual lives and come together primarily around their spiritual quest and their shared love for and attention to their daughter, April.

Whenever there are crises in their marriage they turn to their spiritual guides for assistance and continuity. Five years into their marriage, for instance, they visited with a clairvoyant in order to gain some insights into the stresses of their relationship. The psychic offered them some very practical advice, encouraging Derrick to become more decisive in his commitment to the marriage. He suggested that Derrick decide consciously every month whether or not he wants to stay in his marriage.

If he wants to stay, fine; if not, Derrick should move out for that month. The psychic, in essence, encouraged Derrick (and Catherine) to move into a remarriage phase. By testing his commitment each month and risking the loss of his wife and family, Derrick became more appreciative of his life with Catherine.

The psychic also encouraged Derrick and Catherine to use their talent for and shared interest in conversation and reflection. They were to reflect on what love is all about for the two of them. They struggled with the ideal of romantic love and concluded that their relationship is built on a different kind of love.

Catherine feels that her love is wrapped up not only in Derrick but also their daughter, April. She loves her role as mother and finds that April has brought purpose to her life. Both Catherine and Derrick see their love also wrapped up in their shared value, which is their spiritual quest. Derrick, in particular, looks forward to the day when they can meditate together (which is not possible while April is still at home).

Like Derrick and Catherine, John and Nancy came together around shared religious values. They now build their relationship on these values and shared habits of the heart. They are involved with a community of family and friends that also abide by these values. Like Derrick and Catherine, they found that their conflicts (regarding child-raising) can be endured in part because they have established such a strong base of common values regarding domains in which they experience no conflict at all.

When asked what they "mutually value," John looked at Nancy and asked: "Do you want to go first?" "Our faith," she responded. John added, "Family values." He

elaborates:

. . . following more traditional patterns for family living, and vocational honesty. To expand on that, you could say we each were taught to follow the Biblical standards of life. We have each accepted these standards for ourselves. We try to follow them, too. Things like the Ten Commandments. We aren't too great on keeping the Sabbath, but we still work on it. I don't think it's a completely outmoded commandment.

John thought for a while, then continued:

Other areas [of shared values] would be like that of mutual friends. We get those from Sunday School. Even though Sunday School is old-fashioned, I still think it's of great value. For years we weren't members of a couples class, but now we think that's where your true friends are. That's where you get support from others for your marriage, and those are the people who stand by you when things get tough.

As Robert Bellah and his colleagues concluded, it seems that those habits of the heart which one embraces are to be found and sustained in communities of faith and shared values. We live our values within the context of not only an enduring intimate relationship with another person that we love but also in an enduring community that we also "love."

## **Performing:**

### **What Are the Little Things We Do Together Which Keep Us Together?**

Through our interviews we discovered that couples continue to thrive in terms of their individual and shared values when several components exist in their relationship. First, they find something of great value to both of them that they can do together. Second, they are inclined to make the relationship itself a priority. Their lingering love is a jewel of great beauty and value. Our guide, Stephen Sondheim, wrote a song during the 1970s about the "little things we do together" as the ingredient which makes "marriage a joy." The little things keep people together. Heather and Marianne spoke during their interview of the ongoing joy they

experienced in working together as travel agents for a large agency. They worked alongside each other for many years—at times one of them being the boss and at other times the other being the boss. Both of them also taught other travel agents together as a training team. This common work experience might drive many other couple crazy. It was a source of shared value for Heather and Marianne. It was made even more magical because most of their co-workers were unaware that they were living together as a lesbian couple.

### **Little Things and Big Things**

We found that the little things we do together can actually be very big—as in the case of two people who work together for a common cause. The little things can also be little—and quite mundane. One couple we know was going through a divorce and had to decide how to distribute all of their worldly goods. No problem with the house, the furniture, even the retirement funds. They did run into a big problem, however, when it came to distribution of their highly prized season tickets to the San Francisco 49ers. They had been going to the games together for many years.

They had some of the best seats in the stadium. Both of them were ardent 49er fans. So, they finally decided to keep their own individual season tickets. They reluctantly agreed to attend the games together, since neither of them wanted to give up their ticket. They would meet at the game, root together for the 49ers, get angry together at the officials, mourn together when the team lost, and celebrate together when the team won. And fall in love again together! They have reunited and credit their shared love for the 49ers as a central catalyst in their reunification and their continuing commitment to one another and their relationship.

While a football team may be a unique but very powerful source of reunification, we found more often that enduring relationships build on somewhat more transcendent values. Nancy and Erik have lived a life that seems to exist primarily in the values domain. Like many men and women who met during the turbulent, politically active period of the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Nancy and Erik initially defined their relationship in terms of their shared beliefs and values. While the debates and causes have changed somewhat over the years, the importance of shared values and the debates regarding differing values continue to provide Nancy and Erik with the core of their relationship.

This couple lives in a West Coast community that is well-known for high levels of political activity. Erik is now 45 years old and works 20 hours a week as a museum

aide and sometimes an additional four hours as a carpenter. Nancy is 41 years old and works fulltime as a licensed social worker in a community agency. She is also working on a novel and has published several short stories. They have been together for 7 1/2 years and were married on Halloween six years ago. Neither had been married before. They have lived in the same house for seven years and have no children or pets.

The values-orientation of their relationship resides in their shared political activism. Erik recalls that they met after getting out of a local jail following an anti-nuclear demonstration at a nearby weapons research laboratory. Following a support group meeting after their release from jail, Nancy gave Erik a ride home. There was a very immediate physical attraction between Erik and Nancy. She came over to Erik's house for the weekend and, according to Nancy, there was "instant combustion!"

Nancy: The day I brought him home from the meeting, we talked for about 3 1/2 hours in his kitchen. . . At the door, he said "Can I give you a hug?" So, we hugged, and I thought, shit, I want to spend the night with this man, and I don't even know him [Erik laughs with embarrassment] [Nancy turns toward Erik] Then you said, 'I want to give you a hug every day for the rest of your life',

Erik: It just came out!

Nancy: And I said, "I'll bet you say that to everybody" and he said, "No, never before."

They fell in love quickly and spent most of their time together for the next five months. "It was real surprising to both of us," observed Nancy, "cause we were both pretty independent and loners."

The founding story of Nancy and Erik specifically describes their mutual attraction and spontaneity. Yet, underlying this passion was their mutual passion about politics: 'I [Erik] think of it in terms of how we met. For me, that's a big dimension of our relationship. We went to jail for our beliefs. That was part of the attraction.' They still agree on most political issues and share many common values and ideals; however, there are also several major differences in terms of lifestyle preferences that have confronted Erik and Nancy during their relationship.

Nancy notes that Erik is a very gentle, loving person. "He's very giving emotionally, in certain areas. For a long time, we didn't even share money. . . .Money was the last frontier . . . .When I first met Erik, I was a workaholic . . . .My self-esteem was inextricably tied with my work . . . .I did not want to be that way . . . .Meeting Erik helped . . . .He has a premium on having fun. I didn't know how to have fun. I began

taking pieces of Erik and putting them in Nancy. There were a few brick walls I ran into. One was that Erik always wanted to have fun. He never wanted to sit down and talk about economic realities, which got to be a real headache and power struggle, even now. Erik didn't want to take on [more work]. I wanted to divest [work], but . . . the money has to come from somewhere. I didn't have a partner who was willing to assume the work past a certain point.

It appears that Erik's values regarding lifestyle have had a tempering influence on Nancy and vice versa. She has given-up her workaholism to move more toward his need to enjoy daily life with a minimum of competition--to be free for spontaneous activities. The kind of spontaneity that took place when they first met. Nancy observed: "A value for me as a person and a value in our relationship is spontaneity and the ability to be flexible enough to go kind of with the flow, to know that my fears get in the way and halt the process."

Erik, in turn, has taken on more responsibility for saving money and has already begun to make plans for their eventual retirement. He is blending his interest in independence and spontaneity with her concern for financial security. He wants to be sure that they have sufficient funds when they are older so that they can still be spontaneous.

Erik has also taken on more responsibility for household duties so that Nancy can find time to relax and be spontaneous when she isn't working: "I [Erik] do all the laundry and the grocery shopping so that Nancy . . . has more time apart from work. I don't have a problem with that because I have the time to do it." He is offering a big and sustained bid. It provides sustaining evidence of his loving care for Nancy's welfare.

Increasingly, Nancy and Erik have also identified and built mutual commitment to other emerging values. Nancy lists these shared commitments and values: "We have a lot of values that [Erik and I] share in common, like good communication, play, having fun with each other on many different levels, good health . . . having a loving relationship as a couple, the companionship, that's real important . . . Begin a loving couple. . . good sex . . . having similar world views A style of negotiation . . . working through differences . . . We have a certain level of commitment to attempting to integrate the differences into the relationship."

While many other couples would probably agree with Erik and Nancy regarding these central ingredients of a successful relationships, this man and woman are a bit different. Erik and Nancy speak of these ingredients not in terms of what they do with each other in their relationship, but rather in terms of the value they assign to

each of these actions.

They are people who greatly appreciate a clearly stated set of principles that they expect themselves and other people to emulate in their daily activities. Though they value spontaneity, they also value consistency. Nancy and Erik want to know that they will be there for each other in a world that might at times seem to be rather hostile toward their political values or other lifestyle choices.

## **Little Respect and Big Respect**

As in the case of the other developmental plates, couples seem to successfully perform in the values domain when they share respect for one another and genuinely appreciate and rely on their important differences—even during the difficult storming stages of a relationship. According to Erik:

The main thing that everything else comes from is high regard for one another. We really respect one another and have retained that respect for the whole 7 1/2 years. That's helped us to get through a lot of really hard times . . . We do share a similar world view . . . We are able to give each other space when we need it and time apart when we need it. We play well . . . We're able to really relax . . . We've been able to establish some real good, sophisticated negotiation skills. It was with a lot of work. We went to couple counseling two or three times, with different counselors. It took a lot of sitting at this table. for three or four years . . . for three hours at a time. . . It was painful at times.

Much as they have patiently continued to struggle for major social reforms, Erik and Nancy have fought hard for their own relationship.

First of all, Erik and Nancy are quite purposeful about finding time together for the nurturance of their relationship. They find time to demonstrate their respect for one another in small ways [emulating Gottman's bid]:

Erik has given me a foot rub almost every day of my life . . . We hug each other every day. We spend some time every day talking . . . We play a lot . . . We act silly around the house. We play as part of the way we exchange affection and have sex . . . We nourish one another by respecting the other person's need for alone time. . . . We have sex several times a week. When we go for a week just on once a week,

we get really weird. We get irritable and snappy. . We write notes to each other [pointing to some hanging from an archway].

Second, Erik and Nancy make use of negotiation skills (such as active and empathetic listening) that they learned in their training as social activists. They have been willing to work through conflicts, rather than avoid them. This requires some big-time demonstration of respect. According to Nancy:

We do it pretty much right out of the textbook. I talk first and I say my feeling or opinion. Then we respond to each other and sometimes in that initial sitting down we can come to an agreement. Sometimes it is for one of us or both of us to be heard as to how we see it. There are other times where we want the other to come around to our way of thinking. These conflicts have taken a much longer period of time. We have a whole series of strategies. If we're in the middle of discussion . . . and we feel it's escalating we have a magic word, "flowers," and that means the discussion is off. We'll regroup an hour later and check out whether we're willing to go on with the discussion. . . . If we're really polarized and really stuck, [Erik suggests a method] of having us exchange viewpoints and talking about it through the other's point of view to see what the other person is so insistent on . . . what is so hard to let go of.

Erik offers an example of Nancy's complaint regarding working forty hours a week, while he only works twenty hours:

I'll say, well, I'm really not into working that much. I really enjoy my time apart from work, and I'm not into money so much. I'll do the chores . . . Then we'll switch positions . . . I can get some empathy for her point of view [when I imagine working 40 hours a week]. What we've done is establish a real process to deal with stuff and I think' it comes from that mutual respect for one another . . . We have safeguards, the "flowers," the "time-outs" . . . But we did have to set some kind of limits, because otherwise it would just stay at a power struggle. We'd never get anywhere.

Nancy and Erik also recognize the occasional need for outside assistance. They met at a support group meeting following the stress of incarceration and still see a counselor when working through stressful transitions in their relationship as a couple. Nancy reveals that their early struggles concerned not the state of world politics, but rather something much more mundane and immediate: "The early



[conflicts] were around chores."

However, even in these instances, Nancy saw the issue as much more complex and basic to their future relationship as a male and female:

. . . it had to do with power struggle, and who was going to define the relationship, and how was it going to get defined . . . We had real different standards of cleanliness . . . I didn't want to be a woman in a relationship . . . who wound up doing all the chores. That was what my mother had, and I was going to be damned if I was going to have that. That isn't feminist!

While some men and women tend to recreate traditional and often repressive gender roles while trying to liberate everyone else in the world, Nancy was not going to let this happen in her relationship with Erik. They were not only going to work toward the liberation of other people. They were going to create a relationship for themselves based on principles of equity and mutual respect. According to Nancy, during the first four and a half years of their relationship:

. . . a big value for us was the idea that we were recreating what a relationship could be between a man and a woman . . . fifty-fifty . . . we were very purist . . . and everything was fifty percent, adding to the relationship.

Erik agrees with Nancy regarding this period of time in their relationship: "I think we were kind of creating as we went along . . . We had to do all that [learning how to negotiate] ourselves without having any role models." They had many conflicts during this storming phase of their relationship. According to Nancy, they had "fights like you wouldn't believe."

However, like other successful enduring couples, "from the word 'go', [Erik and I] recognized that we were in a committed relationship." This commitment to their relationship, together with commitment to a central set of values, enabled Nancy and Erik to successfully negotiate the mine fields of the values plate. They were able to move into a long-running performance stage in their relationship.

## Earthquakes and Magnificent Mountains

While neither Nancy nor Erik would suggest that they have a perfect relationship, they would agree that they would rather be with one another than anyone else in the world. This is what a good relationship is all about. One can almost see the majestic mountains rising as their value plate clashes with their other plates (economic, children, establishing a home).

Earth-quaking discussions are produced about how much time they each have to spend working, how little money they need to live without feeling insecure, and how they can find a way to equitably distribute the workload in their relationship. There is an imperfect harmony—as with all intimate relationships described in this book. One can hear the clang of the "money/time" bell in the clear mountain air and the early seismic rumblings of new conflicts regarding retirement and old age. There are gentle reminders that the maintenance of any contemporary relationship is an unending and challenging process.

In many cases, enduring relationships are built on a particularly firm foundation of shared values because the relationship itself is the most valued aspect of life. Obviously, making the relationship all-important can at times be problematic. Heavily enmeshed relationships in which men and women spend all their time together and literally can't live without one another make for great romance novels but lousy lives. Similarly, people who care only about their relationship are particularly vulnerable when the relationship goes through the inevitable transformations that we are describing in this book. We need something else that's important in our lives if we are to survive remarriages in our significant relationships.

Bettina and Neil both speak of their relationship as the most important part of their life. Bettina indicates that their marriage has been their "number one commitment." Neil similarly states that "marriage is our highest priority . . . If something I desire to do gets in the way, then I program myself to say I won't compromise our marriage." This placement of marriage at the heart of their individual and collective lives caused them major problems when they went through one of their own transitions.

Neil had begun participating in a sensitivity group that was sponsored by their church. Bettina was not included and began to feel threatened when she felt that a woman in the church was becoming attached to Neil: "I felt like he was having an

affair right under my nose. I was feeling apart and very threatened. I felt numb. Something had happened to my relationship."

Given the central role played by marriage in her life, the threat of another woman's attention was viewed not as a potential source of new learning and maturation for Neil, but rather as a debasement of one shared value (their marriage). According to Bettina: "There was lots of pressure for Neil to get involved in the group. I was so upset. I even went to the minister to talk about it, but there was no way he could understand my feelings. No one got what I was going through. It was very disruptive to the church. We all decided this was not what should be done. It was like setting off a bomb."

Neil directed his remarks toward Bettina at this point in the interview: "I was perplexed as to what your problem was. I didn't understand what you were feeling or where you were coming from." Bettina responded: "You sure didn't!" This was a difficult transition point for Bettina and Neil. Bettina's continuing feelings about this episode were evident. Nevertheless, the two of them have continued to place their relationship at the center of their world of values. They have found ways to accommodate to shifts in their own individual development and joint development as a couple.

The valuing of our partner and our shared relationship can be extremely important, especially if this valuing is flexible enough to consider the shifting nature of contemporary relationships. Earthquakes do take place. And sometimes majestic mountains emerge—though at other times there are only ugly cracks in the earth.

Transitions are always a risk. Remarriages aren't always successful. Bettina and Neil were taking a risk. Their statement concerning commitment to their marriage is not just an idle statement, for both Neil and Bettina have many interests outside the home that could distract them from their marriage. Furthermore, they differ significantly in what they value and what interests them outside their home.

This is not unusual among the couples we interviewed, given the enormous diversity of images, activities, diversions and entertainments that inundate us every day in our mid-21<sup>st</sup> Century world. It is probably quite smart that Neil and Bettina have "programmed" themselves to always go back to their one shared value. Namely, their marriage. Bettina also noted that this shared commitment is flexible, given that it shifted when they had children. The children became the center of attention for both Bettina and Neil, as is the case for many couples we interviewed.

If both Bettina and Neil don't make the shift, then conflict can occur. One of them

remains committed to the relationship as the primary value in their life, while the other partner shifts attention to the children. This shift is often viewed as a betrayal unless it is mutual as it apparently was in the case of Bettina and Neil. But what happens when the children grow up and leave home? Once again, Bettina and Neil have remained flexible.

Bettina notes that they both felt less like a couple when they had children: "but once the kids leave it seems that you are more of a couple. For me it's a more pronounced feeling of being a couple when we don't have to think about anything else." Neil enthusiastically agreed: "That's right! That's right!" They might find that their relationship becomes a majestic mountain to be admired in the future. We will just have to wait and see.

## **Conclusions: Creating a Culture of Endurance and Commitment**

The little things do make a difference. Many "bids" and rituals provide the "glue" and the continuity for a relationship. These are the moments when emotionally intelligent conversations occur and when Long Pond Charters are formulated and honored. All of this adds up to the creation of a culture within the couple's intimate relationship that contributes to its endurance and reinforces the commitment made by both partners to a life spent together.

John Gottman (2015, pp. 263-270), our therapeutic guide, identifies four pillars that he believes helps to build this culture and "shared meaning" in the relationship. The first pillar concerning "rituals of connection." It relates directly to the various activities I have portrayed throughout this book. Pillar Two focuses on the support that each member provides for each other's roles. Our discussion of Norming directly references this important pillar. The third and fourth pillars concern shared goals (Third) and shared values and symbols (Fourth). They both relate to the Values plate that we explore extensively in this chapter.

Given the alignment between Gottman's four pillars and the content of this book, what additionally does Gottman have to say about building a culture. He (2015, p. 261) has quite a bit to say:

Usually we think of culture in terms of large ethnic groups or even countries where particular customs and cuisine prevail. But a culture can also be created by just two people who have agreed to share their lives. In essence, each couple and each family creates its own microculture. And

like other cultures, these small units have their customs (like Sunday dinner out), rituals (like a champagne toast after the birth of each baby) and myths—the stories the couple tells themselves (whether true or false, or embellished) that explain their sense of what their marriage [relationship] is like and what it means to be part of their group.

I am particularly pleased that Gottman has introduced culture in this manner. His observations reaffirm the emphasis I have placed in this book on ritual, myths and narrative. It seems that the couples we have interviewed offer the kind of wisdom that is also found in the therapy offices of psychologists such as John Gottman.

Gottman (2015, p. 261) turns at this point specifically to the theme of shared meaning in an enduring relationship:

Developing a culture doesn't mean a couple sees eye to eye on every aspect of their life's philosophy. Instead there is a meshing. They find a way of honoring each other's dreams even if they don't always share them. The culture that they develop together incorporates both of their dreams. And it is flexible enough to change as [the partners] grow and develop: When [an enduring relationship] has this shared sense of meaning, conflict is much less intense and perpetual problems are unlikely to lead to gridlock.

He does note, however, that shared meaning is not always required:

It is certainly possible to have a stable [relationship] without sharing a deep sense of what is meaningful about your lives together. Your [enduring relationship] can "work" even if your dreams aren't in sync. . . . It is important to accept that you each will probably have some dreams that the other doesn't share but can respect.

It would seem that shared meaning is valuable but not essential. What does seem to be essential is a heavy dose of appreciation for one another. Appreciation for that which is shared and that which is different in each partner's perspectives on the world and life priorities. Each of Gottman's four pillars and all of the plates spinning around in an enduring relationship find a fundamental "attractor" in ongoing acts of appreciation.

Like the other attractors I have identified in this book that are related to limerence and conflict, the attractor of appreciation draws in and brings coherence to the bids, rituals and narratives offered by each participant in the enduring relationship. Ultimately, sustained appreciation is what performance is all about—and a culture of endurance and commitment depends on this appreciation.

## Key Chapter Points

Enduring couples:

- Choose values structures that reflect their own distinctive life experiences rather than those imposed by society, friends or family.
- Hold deeply rooted, commonly shared value(s) as a core of their relationship.
- Negotiate with their partners over the priority or importance of their individually held values and their joint values.
- Tend to make the relationship itself a top priority.
- Accept their individual differences in values and are fond of such varying characteristics each other holds.
- Find the best in one another and find ways to use these strengths in their survival as a couple.

## Chapter Fourteen

### Plate Four: Creating A Legacy (Raising Children or Conducting Shared Projects)

Love is always a *ménage a trois*—a triangulation between two lovers and the love relationship itself. The couple, itself, is always the third entity in an intimate relationship. The third entity, in turn, is often tangibly manifest in something about which both partners deeply care—such as a child or a mutually supported and rewarding project. This developmental plate need not be a distraction from love. Rather it is a plate in which this love is often manifest. Shared love can often be most clearly seen, understood and nurtured through the care bestowed on a child or project.

In this chapter, I turn to the stories that our couples told us about the challenges and gratifications that come from the fourth plate. We have woven together the narratives of child-raising with those of conducting a mutual project because we believe that these processes are often parallel.

Furthermore, many of the couples we interviewed view a shared project as their "baby." Their project should in no way be diminished by being relegated to some secondary role or defined as a "surrogate" for or "sublimation" of the child-rearing process. We turn first to the central question facing any couple in the forming of this plate: should we or should we not raise a child or start a mutual project?

#### Forming:

#### Should We Raise a Child/Start a Project Together?

Many of the couples we interviewed early in their relationship to have children—thereby replicating the standard family-oriented social structures of our society. Other couples either had children from a previous relationship or decided to have children through adoption or *in-vetro* fertilization. These couples clearly moved outside the standard social norms and structures. In some instances, couples cannot give birth to children themselves. Others decide not to have children.

This decision not to have children may result from their individual and collective decision to focus on their own individual careers. They wish to avoid any major time-consuming commitments to child-rearing. Or this decision might have been made because the two partners simply didn't want to take on the awesome responsibility of raising children.

In other cases, couples can't conceive and are unable to adopt. They may live in an area where it is very difficult or impossible to adopt children. Or they may have decided that the available avenues for having children (adoption, surrogates, artificial insemination and so forth) are too problematic or emotionally disturbing to pursue.

The decision whether or not to have a child is often of central concern to contemporary couples, for child-rearing is no longer an automatic requirement of marriage or other long-term relationships. Given the liberalization of adoption and *in-vitro* fertilization rules and regulations, gay and lesbian couples, as well as heterosexual partners who are not married, are not freed from the decision of whether or not to raise children.

In recent years, a new reason has emerged for not having children. Young couples simply don't wish to bequeath an environmental and politically collapsing world on any children. They care too much about children to slap chaos on them from the moment they are born. Their decision reflects a very sad (even tragic) legacy that we are leaving our own children.

Many couples also confront the issue as to whether or not they want to join together in conducting some long-term (even lifelong) project—such as starting a business together, participating extensively in a mutual advocacy, hobby or recreational activity, working together on a voluntary project of shared concern, or making their home into a very special showcase of their taste and artistic endeavors.

In some of these instances, the couples we interviewed decided to focus on something other than a child and began their project together in lieu of children. In essence, they have turned to "rearing" a mutual project and investing it with the emotional commitment and caring that is usually associated with the raising of children.

In other cases, the decision to begin a joint project had little to do with the decision about raising children. The couple either decided on a joint project in addition to raising children or started their project together prior to (or instead of) any consideration of child-rearing. With decisions about child-rearing often being



deferred to the late twenties or even early thirties by many contemporary couples, it is not unusual for a couple to have already established important life priorities before deciding about children.

The decision regarding having or not having children often becomes complex in contemporary times for many reasons. It is very expensive to raise children; furthermore, with dual career couples the problem of finding time to raise one or more children is often severe. And what about the ethical issues associated with bringing children into a world that may soon be virtually uninhabitable?

We can turn to the couples we interviewed for their own reflections on making a decision about having children. Like the fabled couples of old, Glenda and Kurt were "childhood sweethearts" who came together as a couple when they were both fifteen years old. They have spent all of their early years together as a couple living in close proximity to their parents. In these respects, they are very traditional. One might almost call them "quaint." When it comes to the decision regarding having children, however, Glenda and Kurt are much more closely attuned to contemporary values and concerns.

## **Spontaneous or Planned**

Like many couples of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Glenda and Kurt were married eleven years prior to having their first (and only) child. They spent a considerable amount of time deciding whether or not to have children. Like many young couples who are faced with major financial challenges (for example, the high cost of home ownership), Glenda and Kurt were ambivalent about having children. They weighted the impact children would have on their carefree and mutually gratifying lifestyle. Glenda and Kurt's decision were also impacted by their observation of the styles adopted by other couples they knew in rearing children. If they were going to have children, then they wanted to be different from other young parents who seem to give up everything to have children.

Glenda and Kurt wanted to retain at least part of their old life if they were to have children. However, they were feeling parental pressures. Glenda indicated that:

. . . part of what kept us from having kids for so many years was that Kurt's side of the family, well, his one brother has three kids, and his mom was into having grandkids, and it was real important in that family to have kids. And I think that we were kind of saying, well, I was saying: "No, I don't want to do that. I want to play and

be a kid myself!"

Living so close to their own families of origin, being without children themselves and holding down excellent, well-paying jobs, Glenda and Kurt had been able to remain "kids" themselves. As Kurt indicated, they "really liked the lack of having responsibility" that comes with childrearing.

Kurt suggests that their decision to have a child was vaguely formed and never definitive. As with many couples, the ultimate decision was based on biology rather than economics. Glenda became pregnant. Kurt describes the process:

We never specifically said "Let's have a baby." We talked about and we said: "Yeah, we could maybe -- we're in a position where we could have a child now," but then neither of us really wanted to commit to that. We looked at it realistically as far as what it would mean to our lifestyle, we know. No more just spur of the moment going out with friends or that kind of stuff. We really thought about that, and that made us hesitate. And then, when it happened, it was just lust! [laughs]

At this point, Glenda chimes in: "Like, whoops! [laughs] That was convenient! . . . I think we were getting more and more lax on birth control. We didn't feel it would be so devastating in our lives if we had a kid."

It seems that Glenda and Kurt did decide, but never fully acknowledged that they did, allowing the relaxation of birth control procedures to determine their future life. Kurt and Glenda did engage in important discussions regarding childrearing prior to the conception of their child. While many other couples used the same strategy of relaxing birth control rather than making a definitive decision, Kurt and Glenda were distinctive in having talked about the issue extensively prior to Glenda's pregnancy. They were thus prepared for the birth of their child, even though they had not specifically planned to have a baby. They were very thoughtful about reforming their relationship to accommodate a child. What appears to be an impulsive act ("whoops") on the surface, was actually long considered.

## Children Already Here

The decision about whether or not to have children is moot in many instances among contemporary couples. They come together from previous relationships that produced children. Thus, the question becomes not one of whether or not to have children in their life. Rather, it becomes one of deciding the extent to which the couple is actively involved in the rearing of the children that are already present and whether or not the couple will have their own children to raise along with those already present in the relationship. Many contemporary couples involved in second marriages decide not to have any more children. Sometimes this decision is relatively easy for the couple to make. At other times it is quite difficult and often remains an unresolved tension within the second marriage.

According to Hillary, she and James decided not to have children not only because Hillary has her own grown children to care for from her first marriage, but also because they wanted to begin saving for their retirement (even though both are only in their 40s). James nodded his head in agreement. He then frowned and began to crush the soda can he was holding between his hands. Hillary didn't seem to notice his reaction and continued smiling and talking about how wonderful it was to be a parent.

She had to keep raising her voice as James continued to make more and more noise crushing the can. James then jumped up, reminding Hillary and the interviewer that he had to get ready for a hunting trip, excused himself and left the room. The interviewer's immediate impression was that the subject of child rearing was uncomfortable and possibly painful for James and that it may have been a great loss to him not having had his own children. It may have been particularly painful for James, given that Hillary gave rather spurious financial reasons for not having children with James.

James and Hillary were not alone in facing (or not facing) this dilemma. One of the partners has already been through the child-rearing experience and looks forward to years of freedom and time to concentrate on their new love. The other partner has looked forward to raising his or her own children, rather than just being stepparents to children that may already be living outside the home. Alternatively, the other partner looks forward to the intimacy and intensity that is possible in a child-free relationship.

Kathy and Dave decided not to have children together. However, unlike James and

Hillary, they seem to both agree that this is the best for both of them. Dave has children from his previous marriage. Although Kathy has never had children, she does not wish to have any. Both feel that having a child would not only be unfair to themselves, but to the child as well. As Dave explains, since he is fifty years old now, he would not look forward to spending the next twenty, perhaps his last living years, raising a child. Furthermore, he feels it unfortunate for any child to have an older father who is only able to participate in his life and activities for a limited period of time.

Dave feels fortunate that he has been able to enjoy his children through to their adulthood. Although she is only thirty-eight years old and capable of childbearing, Kathy has chosen likewise not to have any children. Both feel they sacrificed themselves in their previous, abusive marriages. Dave sacrificed himself to his wife and children. Kathy gave herself completely to a demanding husband. Both Dave and Kathy remain cautious about letting anything come between their love for one another.

As in the case of many couples who are in second major relationships, the problem of child-rearing for Kathy and Dave did not go away with their mutual decision not to have children. Kathy and Dave began living together in Dave's house shortly after they met and prior to their marriage. Dave and his first wife had been separated. She had moved into her own place prior to the filing of divorce papers and the subsequent final divorce. Dave retained custody of his two teenage children (his first wife having been very neglectful of both children)

Neither Dave nor Kathy anticipated the difficulties which arose following Kathy's entrance into his home. Both were caught up in their new-found love and had not looked realistically at the process of moving in together. Dave's children presented the first major obstacle in their establishing a home together. As is frequently the case, Dave and Kathy's major problem at this early stage in their relationship involved the interplay between two or more developmental plates, in this case, establishing a home and child-rearing.

Kathy was not well received by Dave's two children. They challenged her as a potential mother figure. Dave felt he was not prepared to mediate between Kathy and his children. As a father, he felt a strong obligation to his children. Like many men of his generation, Dave assumed Kathy would adapt easily to the role of mother. Kathy never anticipated the duties of being a mother and resented Dave for imposing this function on her. As a result, Kathy moved out of Dave's house into her own apartment for a while, precipitating a remarriage and a renegotiated

marital contract.

Dave agreed to make other living arrangements for his two children. His son, recently graduated from high school, enlisted in the Navy. His daughter went to live with her mother for her last year of high school. Kathy and Dave could for the first time live alone together. Problems still existed, however, for Kathy and Dave—even though the children were now living elsewhere. The remaining problems concerned finances. This often the case for couples with children from previous relationships. Kathy believes that Dave's children are demanding too much money from Dave. They are capable of working for extra money like many teenagers their age.

In addition, while Dave is working his late shift as a truck driver, Kathy claims his children spend many late evening hours out partying with the money their father provides them. Dave would listen patiently as Kathy expressed her fears that the money was being used for alcohol and drugs. His children, however, claim that Kathy is just trying to ensure that their father keeps all his money for her, and, contrary to her allegations, they are riot spending money on alcohol and drugs. Dave finds himself again caught between his children and wife.

A second re-contracting and remarriage takes place. Kathy and Dave decide that Dave's daughter would continue to receive money, however at a fraction of the original amount that Dave provided. Since his son enlisted in the Navy, Kathy believed that he no longer needed financial support from his father. Dave agreed. In addition, Kathy and Dave decided to pool their incomes during this time to pay jointly for the mortgage on the house (which Dave had previously owned with his first wife) and any other expenditures.

Unfortunately, since this time, Kathy began to grow very dissatisfied with her work environment. She left her job and soon found that she had become quite isolated, not having found another job and having remained at home. Dave now provided all of the income for both of them. Thus, while Kathy and Dave's child-rearing and related financial issues were resolved for a short period of time, they soon faced new challenges regarding the financial (socio-economic) plate which may, in turn, unravel their resolution of issues associated with the child-rearing plate as well.

Child rearing obviously becomes even more complex when one or both of the partners already have children through a previous relationship., Dottie already had two children, and did not want to have any more, despite being pregnant with Ricardo's child. Her teenage son and daughter were "terrible." Her daughter was still living with her and hated Ricardo. Her son had just run away, first to live with his father and then to join the Army. Her pregnancy was a loaded event for Dottie. Her

second marriage had been to a man who wanted children, although Dottie felt she could not handle more than the two children she already had. Her second husband had initially seemed willing to give up having his own children, but ultimately, he left Dottie for a younger woman.

When Dottie became pregnant with Ricardo's child, she knew she wanted to have an abortion, but she needed a lot of support from Ricardo about this decision. Ricardo, however, was unable to discuss the issue with Dottie. He "didn't want to influence her decision;" he "couldn't talk about it;" "she had to decide for herself." Dottie pleaded with him to "let me know how you feel."

Still stung by the rejection of her second husband, it was difficult for Dottie to make the decision to have an abortion without Ricardo's support. Ricardo, however, became very angry when Dottie kept pushing him to discuss his feelings. He decided to move out. Dottie begged him to get into bed with her before he left that night. She wanted them to just "hold each other," even if they couldn't talk. At least they could have a sense of mutual support and acceptance.

This incident led to a remarriage. They separated for a short period of time—then decided to make a new start. They made a firm commitment to one another (having not been married at the point when Dottie became pregnant). They learned how to relate more openly with one another and came to recognize ways in which they were repeating the patterns of their own parents. Ricardo tended to withdraw when he felt highly emotional, and Dottie's need for excessive reassurance when she is frightened. They exhibited little understanding or sensitivity in making their decision not to have the child, but they did learn from this experience and recreated a life together than benefited from this learning.

### **Focusing on the New Child**

Margie and Gene started living together at Margie's residence within a few months after they first met. They chose to live in Margie's house in large part because she was the primary parent for an 8-year-old boy and ten-year-old girl. Gene had been married twice before but had no children. Four years after they began living together, Margie and Gene decided to get married. While they raised Margie's two children together, little was said about these two children during the interview.

Perhaps this was because they did not consider these children (now in their teens) to be a part of their own identity as a couple, being instead part of Margie's

individual identity and her past life. We have found many, often painful examples in our interviews of children that seem to be caught in limbo existing between several different relationships, rather than being identified as a central, even defining product of any existing relationship. One wonders about Margie's children. With what set of adults do they relate as their parents? Is there a couple that calls them its own?

Margie and Gene focus most of their attention on the decision to have their own child. Margie had made it clear to Gene before they made a commitment to one another that she did not want any more children. However, six years ago while on a long business trip in Europe together she shifted from that position and decided that having a child would be a good idea.

Apparently, the decision regarding giving birth to children was left in the hands of Margie. Perhaps, this also occurred in Margie's first marriage, given that her first husband seems to have taken little interest in his children after his divorce from Margie. Many men (and some woman) unfortunately, seem to limit their sense of responsibility for a child to the confines of their relationship with the other parent of this child. When the relationship ends so does their child-rearing commitment.

A year after Margie changed her mind, Gene and Margie stopped using birth control, and she got pregnant very soon thereafter. This decision had some unexpected costs associated with it. Most of Margie and Gene's friends at the time were single. They report that they lost some of their single friends when they decided to have a child, and it was a hurtful experience. They also lost some of their free time together and some spontaneity.

On the other hand, it was quite clear during the interview that their four-year-old daughter plays a powerful role in their relationship. According to these-doting parents, their little daughter "runs the show." Margie even feels that Gene devotes too much time to their daughter. They don't go out enough as a couple or take trips the way they did before her daughter came along. They spend time together on hikes or going out and about—but always with their daughter.

Margie is clearly a good and loving mother (at least to her new daughter), but she is feeling sorely neglected. This is Gene's first child (of his own). She is a "cherished dream come true." It would seem, however, that while Gene is in his dream state, Margie is in the midst of a mid-life struggle with having had one family and now a second—as well as holding down her career in a helping profession. She now wonders what it's all about.

Margie is not content to return to the totally child-centered mode of her earlier life. However, she wants to support Gene in his new-found love, and appreciates the attention he shows their daughter. Like many dual-family couples, Margie and Gene are at different individual stages of interest in their own child-rearing careers and must find an appropriate and mutually satisfying compromise regarding their joint-childrearing career as a couple.

### **Unable to Give Birth to a Child**

In other cases, we found that couples we interviewed don't have to worry about fitting children into their busy work lives, for they cannot give birth to their own children or have as yet been unsuccessful in having children. This inability to have children can often be a source of considerable stress and strain in the relationship—unless the couple is able to direct their energy (and desire to create something together) toward another valued end.

Ted and Velia, for instance, have been trying to have a baby for five years. According to Velia "trying to get pregnant put a strain on our relationship for about a year." Furthermore, she believes that the strain could reappear again in the near future, if they continue to be unsuccessful in their efforts to have a child. Fortunately, Ted and Velia have other projects that provide meaning. In particular, they both thoroughly enjoy renovating their cabin in Wyoming.

Ted indicates that when Velia moved into his Wyoming retreat ten years ago, he knew they had become a couple—for no other woman had ever stayed for more than a day at this retreat. So, this place represents the heart of Ted and Velia's relationship. They "feel like a couple" when working on the cabin and buying furniture for it. While Velia must travel elsewhere to attend graduate school, she returns as often as possible to Wyoming. Their reunion is always particularly special because of the romantic and central role played by the Wyoming retreat in their life together.

### **A Shared Project?**

Many of the couples we interviewed have faced the issue of not only whether or not to have children, but also whether or not to begin a project together. This shared project represents something of great value to both partners (thereby often bringing in the third plate). The mutual project can take on many forms, ranging from raising



animals (cats, dogs, horses, gerbils, tropical fish, *ad infinitum*) to mounting a major corporate venture.

Regardless of the breadth or depth of the commitment, this mutual project becomes an important developmental plate for these couples. It often helps to define the distinctive character of the couple. The shared project provides the couple with something to hold on to when the going gets tough in their relationship.

In some instances, the mutual project overlaps several of the developmental plates we have identified. It is not unusual, for instance, for the mutual project to be deeply embedded in the shared value system of the couple. Many partners mutually invest substantial time and money in political campaigns, public causes or various public service activities. The church, synagogue, mosque or other type of religious institution plays a major role in the life of many couples. We also found several instances where the establishment of a home went well beyond the normal level of concern for a couple and became the couple's special, mutually shared project.

Larry and Harold exemplify this heightened commitment to building a home. A couple for six and one half years, Larry and Harold have similar careers that lead directly to their mutual project. Larry is a thirty-four-year-old architect, while Harold is thirty-one years old and a successful retail designer/architect. The commitment of Larry and Harold to building a beautiful home was widely known and admired in their local community. The interviewer was looking forward to finally seeing the house about which he had heard so much. The house that Larry and Harold built exceeded even the interviewer's inflated expectations. It is a spectacular home in terms of both design and detail. Furthermore, it serves as the backbone for the enduring and intimate relationship established by Larry and Harold.

In arriving at their home, the interviewer walked through the corridor of a large apartment building and into a garden. Tucked away behind a cluster of tall apartment houses, Larry and Harold's cottage stood out in stark contrast against its urban environment. The interviewer was greeted by Harold at the door with warm hospitality. Their house was immaculate and finely detailed. As their story unfolded, it was clear that the detailing was a blend of both their personalities and characters.

Harold's diverse artwork, which ranged from oil paintings to ceramic sculptures was displayed in the living room. The clean, sharp detail of the structure and the modern leather sofa was a touch of Larry. The old, stuffed chairs sharply contrasted with the newness of the sofa and were indicative of Harold. Downstairs there were two bedrooms with a veranda connecting them. A hot tub was hidden in the corner,

overlooking the garden in back. Beyond the garden, the cityscape rose in full view. The second floor consisted of a carefully designed kitchen, with a dining area connecting to it. Behind this was a large, yet cozy, living room, with a fireplace and high ceiling. The art of both Larry and Harold was displayed in this room. On the bookshelves were photos and books, representing their separate lives and their life together as a couple.

Larry greeted the interviewer, sight unseen, from the small loft above the kitchen space. This was their shared office. Harold was cooking and asked the interviewer to join them for dinner. As Harold prepared the meal, Larry hollered down to watch the pasta. Harold assured Larry that everything was under control. He worked with ease in the kitchen, stirring the sauce, watching the pasta, and eventually pulling a freshly baked sheet of cookies out of the oven.

Harold told Larry that dinner would be ready any minute. Larry came down from the loft, said hello to the interviewer again, and briskly walked into the kitchen to determine if indeed all was well. He insisted that the pasta was ready. Harold reassured him that it needed to boil just a few more minutes. The give and take of this couple were readily apparent. Finally, dinner was served, the wine was poured, and the interview begun.

In this brief vignette, the interviewer had insightfully captured the essence of this couple. They loved to host other people and demonstrate their shared commitment to and expertise in providing a richly sensuous environment in which to live and work. They have created "the good life" for themselves by surrounding themselves with their own products (artwork, architectural design, meals). Harold and Larry created an environment that reflects their common tastes as well as the individual tastes of each member of the couple. Visitors are warmly welcomed and invited to fully partake of the environment.

Music and a love of Poland have kept Mick and Sheila's relationship alive during the past twenty years—much as a shared interest in architecture, design and visual beauty provided the base for and helped animate Larry and Harold's mutual project and love. As a defector from Poland during the late nineteen seventies, Mick has a deep, abiding interest in the culture and political liberation of Poland. Sheila shares this interest, having been raised by first generation Polish parents. Sheila and Mick met as performers at a House of Poland social gathering. They still play together at the House of Poland events. Furthermore, they sing together in the evenings in their home (where Mick has built a recording studio).

Mick and Sheila have produced their own recording which they give out or sell at

their performances. Their songs are all written by Mick, while Sheila assists with the vocal arrangements. They love being able to perform in their own home studio, because their home itself has taken on special significance for them. They bought this home five years ago. It was in miserable condition. They renovated the house themselves and built their studio into their home.

Their interviewer noted that every detail of their home reflects their unique tastes and their love for one another and their music. Clearly, for Mick and Sheila, Poland, music and home are the three “children” they have raised and are still nurturing. Each of these children has required considerable effort and one of them (Poland) went through its own adolescent crisis during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. They worry a great deal about the future prospects of Poland (given recent events in Russia and Ukraine). Mick and Sheila hope someday soon to be able to travel back to their beloved Poland.

### **Storming:**

## **How Much and In What Ways Do We Nurture This Child/Project?**

Typically, there are two major questions that face any couple when they have begun to raise children or begin a mutual project. The first of these questions concern the amount of time and other resources (money, space and so forth) that each partner, individually, and the two partners together allocate to raising children or conducting their project. As we noted earlier in this book, chronic stress (due to shortages) rather than acute crises often wears down and even destroys intimate relationships. Many of these shortages concern finances. Money can be a lingering burden that challenges the lingering love.

As we have also noted, it is often a matter of distributing power in an equitable manner. We certainly would have to place child rearing and mutual project management at the top of list regarding demand for scarce resources. Our guide, John Gottman (2015, p. 275) puts it this way (with regard to childrearing in a heterosexual relationship): “what separates . . . blissful mothers from the rest has nothing to do with whether their baby is colicky or a good sleeper, whether they are nursing or bottle-feeding, working or staying home. Rather, it has everything to do with whether the husband experiences the transformation to parenthood along with his wife or gets left behind.”

The second central question concerns ways in which children will be raised and project managed. This can be just as conflictual as the problem of scarce resources. This question is founded on the challenge of equitably distributed influence in a relationship. Often, it is not just a matter of who will change the baby's diaper, but also which diaper we will use and how often will the diaper be changed.

Another of our guides, Paul Watzlawick and his colleagues, taught us earlier in this book, that influence involves not just the matter of who wins and who loses an argument and who gets to make the decision. Influence also has to do with how this "struggle" is engaged. Do we shout, offer "reasonable" arguments, lapse into silence, or "give up" to the other member of the couple? As Gottman has suggested, do we "yield to win" or do we remain defiant in our loss (or win)?

In this section, I examine both of these stormy issues. I then look at the unique manner in which couples must address these issues when they bring children from a previous relationship or a project from a previous time in their life to the relationship. Finally, I look at the unique interplay that often seems to take between this plate and the other developmental plates during this period of storming about raising children or managing mutual projects.

## **Children Are Everything!**

Typically, child raising or attending to a joint project is a major all-energy-consuming component in a couple's life. When children are young or when a project is still in its fledgling state, most of the other plates take a backseat. Rebecca, for instance, describes a typical day in the lives that she and Bart lead:

Calvin (three years old) gets up about 5:30 or 6:00 and wants to watch cartoons. Bart gets up with the kids and I sleep until 7:30 or 8:00. We are trying to encourage Natalie (four months) to take a bottle. I am usually up with her one or two times in the night. When I get up, we mutually get the kids dressed and fed and take turns getting them to their appointed places: schools. Bart goes to work and comes home around 6:00. I have Natalie most all the time and my days are focused on the household and the children. By 9 pm the children are in bed. We read, we talk, we have sex, Bart watches T.V. We go to sleep.

This couple finds late nighttime for their own life together. The rest of their time

together is devoted to raising their children.

Rebecca's description of their typical day together revolves around their children, Bart's job and the household. In assuming this traditional role in her family, Rebecca represents a minority voice among the women we interviewed. Most of the women who are less than fifty years of age are working outside the home, even if they have young children. The focus of Rebecca and Bart is on raising their children in as nurturing and trouble-free a manner as possible. They try to "stay afloat" while managing this difficult process. Many of their fights are precipitated by their fatigue and the feeling that there is no way out.

Fortunately, they have built a solid relationship and are quite flexible in assuming child-rearing responsibilities. Rebecca tends to her daughter during the night, and Bart gets up first in the morning with all the children so that Rebecca can sleep. At overwhelming moments, when they do get angry at one another, Bart and Rebecca tend to use a variety of strategies for the resolution of their conflicts. They both realize that while child-raising is the source of many of their tension (child-raising) it is also the primary source of their joy. They know that they love each other and that these tensions will soon pass, especially as the children grow older.

## **I Feel Left Out!**

Other couples have even less time than Rebecca and Bart for intimacy, talking or simply enjoying each other's company. Frequently, one of the partners (often the male) feels left out and ignored by the doting parent/partner. When describing a significant change that has occurred during the twenty-three years of their marriage, Jeannie immediately told the story of the birth of their first son, Pete. He was born ten days before their first anniversary. Jeannie was ecstatic about the pregnancy since both she and Bob had thought that he was sterile.

Jeannie did not even see a doctor until she was five months pregnant because she thought it was impossible. When Pete was born, Jeannie's whole world became her child. She shut Bob out. The couple had little time together and she later described herself as being an "obsessive" mother. Her child came before anything else. After fifteen months of considering only her child and lavishing him with all her love and devotion, her relationship with Bob showed signs of disrepair. They fought more often. Jeannie and Bob communicated less frequently and less clearly with one another. Bob also began drinking more heavily.

Bob reports that he felt excluded from the bonding between Jeannie and his son. Having been neglected himself as a child, Bob became jealous of the attention Jeannie was giving their son. Once again, he was being left out—now as husband and father rather than as a son. Bob resented the loss of time as a couple and did not like their child sleeping in their bed. He became increasingly fearful about being a capable parent. He felt guilty about his own feelings of rivalry with his son. His "insecurities kicked in" and Bob tried to escape through alcohol and drugs.

### **There is No Time nor Resources!**

Frequently, the issue of time spent in doing something other than child-rearing is heightened because both partners work full time and late evenings are often filled with completing the household chores that neither partner can do during the day. Many couples we interviewed reported little time for talking or sex. They are left with an exhausted snuggle at the end of a long day.

Many couples also do not enjoy Rebecca and Bart's capacity to look beyond their immediate child-rearing problems to the gratification that they are receiving from this complex and demanding process. It is often difficult for a couple to share a moment of mutual admiration for the important job they are doing in bringing a child into the world—in the midst of hurt feelings about attention being devoted exclusively to a child or conflicts regarding who should change the diapers.

Child-rearing is often the source of contentious arguments regarding financial priorities and areas of responsibility, at least for couples who have young children living at home. Many couples we interviewed pointed to birth of their first or second child as a joyous event, but also the source of considerable strain in their relationship.

The remarriage process is particularly common among couples with children who are trying to discover new ways in which to structure their relationship (including finances, attitudes about home and possessions, career, and values). This restructuring often occurs while their children are also exploring new ways of relating to their parents, siblings, friends and the world in general. It is a case of dancing on a trembling dance floor.

Remarriage was certainly apparent in the life of Lawrence and Tina. With the birth of her first child, Tina experienced postpartum depression. She also found herself performing most of the household chores—where they had been equally shared

before the birth of their child. As in the case of many women we interviewed, the period of pregnancy and childbirth seems to bring out the traditional masculine role(s) in Tina's husband.

Men who have been very actively engaged in household chores before the child is born often seem to abandon this role precisely at the time when their partner needs the greatest amount of assistance. Tina had taken a maternity leave from her health management position. As a result, she was spending 24 hours a day with the baby. The caregiver responsibilities were left exclusively in her hands.

Lawrence was having some problems of his own. He resented Tina's "nagging." He started to spend more time at work and riding his bicycle—precisely because he wanted to get away from her. He was drinking more wine with dinner than was his custom, and many arguments ensued, with Tina finding little ways to "get even." Their relationship became rocky. It was obvious to both of them that they would have to take some steps to recover their marriage. They decided to see a counselor.

When asked "can you identify a time when you were particularly open with one another and what made it easy to be open at that particular time," they both agreed that it was during their visits with the marriage counselor. This was a classic remarriage scenario. Lawrence was able to express how he felt about an abortion that they had decided together to have earlier in their marriage.

Lawrence also shared his feelings about Tina's unilateral decision to give birth to their second child. Up to this time, Tina and Lawrence had not discussed his feelings regarding these matters. Both Lawrence and Tina agreed that they were able to be so open because it was safe. They had a referee! They continue to seek help when either one feels the need.

## **Grown Children Still Demand Attention!**

Even for couples who have grown children, the issue of child rearing rears its contentious head. When John and Nancy were asked to identify areas in which they differ regarding values, Nancy immediately replied, almost dryly, "The time I spend with the children." John agreed and explained that one area where this showed up was in long distance phone calls. John complained that Nancy would spend an hour talking to one of their distressed children about their life in general. John thought that was an expense they couldn't afford, especially since she wasn't offering counsel about a specific problem.

Nancy soon turned the conversation from finances to the issue of responsibility for child-rearing. Nancy often goes to help her children during times of great need. To her, as well as her children, this is an expected task. However, according to Nancy, "John doesn't like me to be gone for more than two days at a time." John acknowledged that this was so. But he defended himself by asserting that Nancy usually goes to such events as the births of grandchildren.

Then Nancy comes home and has to work 52 hours a week to make it up financially: "I'm afraid she'll kill herself, so I try to keep things from getting out of hand in this way." Even though this was still an area of contention for the two of them, John felt that they had come a long way in learning to work out these conflicts. "Now we have a lot more give and take," according to John.

John brings religion into the conversation: "If we talk about it, and still don't agree, we give it time and we pray about it. Circumstances will usually direct us, without our having to force things. It's almost exciting to see how it works out." For John and Nancy, a third entity (prayer, God) is brought into the picture to help mediate the conflict.

They step away from their set positions during an argument, talk a bit, cool off and wait for this third, intermediary (circumstances, God's intervention) to provide an answer. Many of the couples we interviewed indicate that a third entity is helpful in their resolution of difficult conflicts. The third entity might be a person (friend, relative, counselor) or a transpersonal force (God, fate, some unforeseen event, horoscope and so forth).

## **Where Do We Find Money and Time for our Project?**

In the case of mutual projects, the issue of time is often compounded by the concern for appropriate and feasible allocation of money. How much do we invest in this new business? How much can we afford in terms of veterinary and boarding costs for our cherished dog or horse? Where do we find the money for the remodeling of our prized kitchen? Do we spend our weekends addressing all the needs of our customers? We are either successful and too busy to enjoy our financial success, or we are not successful and too worried to enjoy our newly found free time!

In the case of Larry and Harold, the remodeling of their home required the entangling of finances for the first time in their relationship. The financing of their



home was, according to Harold, "like our marriage." He went on later to point out that: "our relationship has evolved into that of a married couple. We're comfortable . . . much more domesticated. The house is indicative of our lives. It's a blend of both of us. I like garage sales for clothes and furniture. Larry likes nice things."

They have found ways in which to overcome their differences in taste regarding their home, but the process was not easy. As Larry notes:

. . . two architects together with different tastes can be a problem.  
. . . Well, the house kept us moving forward. It preoccupied all of our time. It fell during the renovation. It was a major disaster. We had to get another contractor to fix the problem. It was a lot of work and was very stressful. I became extremely focused. Harold was all over the place.

Harold acknowledged that Larry was much more competent than he at this point of the renovation process. Whereas Larry usually is the cautious member of the pair, at this moment he became much more "adventurous" with their money:

We had bills coming in for thousands of dollars. Harold panicked. We needed to stay focused and that is my forte'. It was a time when we couldn't afford to lose sight of our goal and therefore had to pay attention to the survival of our project. It's this that has kept us together through difficult times.

Harold reflected on this shift in Larry's attitude about money and concluded that "we learned a lot . . . Larry taught me that life isn't worth living, if you don't take risks." However, Harold, not Larry, was able to obtain the assistance of friends during this difficult period. While Larry remained focused on the home, Harold reached out to other people.

Larry and Harold have been successful in building their joint project (home and lifestyle) largely because they have been able to honor and make use of their individual differences. Larry is the "financial caretaker," "the designated driver," "the vacation planner." Conversely, Harold is the "navigator, cook, buys groceries and cleans." Harold is the "spokesman and the social planner." Larry is more "assertive," whereas Harold is "the more verbal one." They move eloquently together, allowing each other to take the lead at various points in their relationship, particularly with reference to their prized goal: a beautiful home. They have learned how to dance on their trembling dance floor.

## **Norming:**

### **How Do We Raise Our Children and/or Conduct Our Project?**

Even when a couple has arrived at a comfortable decision regarding the priority that they will assign in their life to raising children, they still must agree (or agree to disagree) on the rules of conduct and type and degree of discipline they will exert in raising their children. Similarly, even when a couple has arrived at a comfortable decision regarding the priority that they will assign to the shared project they have undertaken, they still must agree (or agree to disagree) on the ways they will lead and manage this project.

With regard to the raising of child, voices from previous points in their lives (typically, their own childhood) frequently come to the fore. Grown men and women hear themselves mouth the words and warnings they heard from their parent when young. Words and warnings that they once vowed never to use themselves! Men and women who find themselves agreeing on most issues in their lives (politics, music, literature, recreation and so forth) suddenly find themselves on opposite ends of the spectrum when it comes to raising children.

Partners may know that they have some differences of opinion about raising children, having come from very different families; however, they often don't realize how deeply engrained these patterns of behavior are and how frustrating it can be to raise children with another person who is absolutely "nuts" (usually either a Nazi or an anarchist!) regarding the raising of children.

In our interviews and in the literature on child-raising, we find three fundamental issues raising their head for many couples. The first issue concerns the time that each partner devotes to the child. It is also about the quality of time being spent with the child. Just sitting there watching television with the child is usually not acceptable. Typically, this negotiation about allocated time gets caught up with negotiations regarding other household duties. Sadly, it is often a tradeoff between taking out the garbage or caring for the kid.

This same struggle regarding assignment of duties typically occurs when the couple is negotiating time and energy allocated by each partner to their shared project — though tradeoffs between garbage and paying the project bills seems less inhumane than that between garbage and a child. Yet, as our couples have shown us during the interviews, a home or political cause can become just as important as a child. Furthermore, it is often not a matter of taking out the garbage. It is the matter of

devoting time to salvaging a business or ensuring that a specific candidate wins the election. The stakes can be quite high!

The second and third major norm-based issues regarding child-raising (and shared projects) involve management strategies. They involve struggles with a child that inevitably take place during the child-rearing phase of an enduring relationship. They involve the struggles that inevitably arise when operating any complex, enduring project. Love is never enough. There must be some head that complements the heart. Devotion is sustained only with thoughtful reflection by both partners of what is now happening and what should be done when engaging the child or the project.

Our second issue concerns the specific responsibility assigned to each partner when a child is “unruly” or a project is “on the rails.” In addressing this issue, I turn back to the wisdom offered by David and Julie Bulitt. In doing so, we find that garbage is once again entering the picture! Specifically, David Bulitt is writing about “passing the trash.” Since he is not a therapist, David offers a decidedly non-therapeutic metaphor based on one of the ways in which the game of poker is conducted (sometimes called “Pass the Trash”).

Here is a record of David’s interaction with Julie regarding the use of this metaphor in describing how parenting duties might be shared (Bulitt and Bulitt, 2020, p. 83):

[In this game] once all the passes are done, each player discards two of his seven [cards] and plays what is now a five-card stud game with the other five, with everyone turning over one card at a time, betting, raising, or folding in between. The high poker hand wins or it can be played as a high-low game where the best hand and the worst hand split the pot at the end.

"All very interesting, but what does this have to do with relationships?" Julie asks.

"It has to do with raising kids. You have to pass your kids, just like we pass the trash in the card game."

"So, in this weird card game world of yours, kids are the trash, is that what you are saying?" she asks.

That's exactly what I am saying.

"I don't think most parents would think of their children that way," Julie says. "Passing trash."

I don't mean the kids are literally trash: What I am talking about is passing the responsibility of taking care of a kid when you are tired and can't do it anymore. Can't do it effectively, at least.

"Like when one of our girls had a tantrum, something like that?"

Julie asks. "Maybe, but I was more thinking of the longer-term irritating, obnoxious, drive-you-crazy behavior from one of the kids that continues for hours on end. You know what I am talking about."

I suspect that similar "trash" is to be found when managing a project. The trash can be an irritating employee, an obnoxious customer, an unfair law, a building that need repair. Who hands this matter? The one of us who is an expert on this matter? The one of us who has time to work on this issue? The one of us who is least tired or less sick-and-tired of this matter?

I continue to rely on the wisdom (and candor) offered by David and Julie when bringing in the third norm-based issue. This third issue concerns the wisdom to be found among our children. They know how to size up the underlying perspectives and priorities of each parent and can often find a way to maneuver one parent against the other. All children should be granted an advanced degree (or at least certification) in what psychologists identify as "triangulation."

Julie Bullitt identifies this specific strategy that children are likely to deploy in their own "parenting" of their parents (Bullitt and Bullitt, 2020, p. 77).

Have you ever heard the term "divide and conquer?" That is essentially triangulation. And kids can be masters at triangulating. How many times has any parent heard from a son or daughter that "Dad said it was okay" or "Mom told me I could stay at the party until 12"? My guess is that all parents have heard those types of things from their children repeatedly, over and over again, whether the child is a toddler or a teenager. Parents are regularly manipulated and played against the other. If they don't communicate directly to one another, the child's manipulation is a success, and the relationship between the parents can break down.

Our children are not alone in their ability to triangulate. We find this operating among our employees when two of us (as a couple) are leading and managing a business. There is also triangulation among different factions in a community project - especially in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century world of polarization (the triangle consists of one pole, the second pole and what we hope is a third compromising entity). We hear different, contradictory messages from our employees, our constituencies, our

customers. The triangulation certification should be awarded quite widely. Apparently, our children are not the only ones to know what to drive us crazy!

If the child is particularly skillful at “parenting” their parents, they can bring all three issues to the fore. They can maneuver their parents into a debate about how much time is being allocated by each parent to them. A child can even help to “mess up” the passing of trash (responsibility) being engaged by their harried parents.

The child can sit back and observe the heated debates among their parents about responsibility. It should also be noted that this maneuver might be a source of temporary satisfaction for the child; however, it is often only a temporary solution. Ultimately, children do want their parents to be skillful and coordinated in their parenting. An unstable, conflict-filled set of norms regarding child-raising is not satisfying – or safe—for any child. Need I point to similar dynamics operating among those involved with our demanding projects.

Given the presence of these three fundamental issues in all parenting (and project-based) relationships, we can turn to the ways they (and related issues) play out in the lives of the couples we interviewed. We will see how they play out with couples who are committed to raising children and those who are committed to a shared project. Both children and projects have a way of triangulating couples—especially when these children and projects are not “behaving themselves.”

## **Children and Miracles**

We begin our observation with the establishment of norms about child-raising by Bea and David. Bea certainly was aware that Donald came from a tight-knit Sicilian family, and Donald knew that Bea came from a cold, authoritarian family of German descent. They knew this because they shared a common interest in escaping from these repressive backgrounds and because Bea had already struggled with a mother-in-law who tells her how to cook, do the laundry, and arrange the furniture.

Bea's in-laws in fact had bought the furniture for their new home and had it delivered as a surprise. However, neither Bea nor Donald was prepared for the impact of four children, born about a year apart. They strongly disagreed on how to raise their four girls. Donald tended to be very demonstrative and permissive (like his Sicilian parents) whereas Bea tended to be a disciplinarian. They soon learned, despite their deepest intentions, that they were repeating the same child-rearing patterns as their parents. I wonder about the experiences of their girls. I suspect that they experienced a change in “culture” every time the “trash” was being

passed from one of their parents to the other.

This difference in child-raising habits and perspective became a critical moment in the relationship between Bea and Donald. They had to create new values regarding child-raising that worked for both of them, independent of their own experiences as children. They also faced several other related crises. Bea became very depressed during the early years of her children and was at times suicidal. At the same time, Donald was trying to pass a licensing exam for his profession but was unable to study with all of the chaos at home.

Bea received little help from outside her home. She rejected her mother-in-law's offer of assistance, and her own mother moved far away soon after their children were born. Donald did help out at home, but it was a very traditional division of labor. Donald took care of the car and yard, while Bea did the cooking, laundry and house cleaning. Both cared for the children.

A crisis occurred in their life when their third daughter was about ten years old. It brought about a remarriage and at least a partial resolution of their child-rearing conflicts. Their daughter was diagnosed as having bone cancer. An enormous conflict ensued in which Bea accepted the medical advice she had received and believed they should leave the decision up to the experts. An additional biopsy was recommended, but Donald would not allow it to occur and pulled their daughter out of all treatment programs.

Within a year, the lesion had disappeared completely, without treatment. Bea, who is the traditionally practical one, believes that it was a miracle and has become quite religious as a result. Donald, the expressive, emotional member of the couple, is more skeptical and speaks of errors in diagnosis and the possibility of recurrence. Donald and Bea tell this story with great relief as though a shadow passed over. They tell this story with deep respect for each other. They mention that the support they received from friends and family was what held the marriage and family together.

I suspect that another key ingredient was the change this crisis precipitated in both Donald and Bea. After the "miracle" Donald became more practical and realistic (in contrast to his Sicilian upbringing), having been successful in standing up in an impassioned and "unrealistic" (but very loving) way for his daughter to be treated.

By contrast, Bea has become more idealistic and religious. She has become more open to support from other people, thereby breaking away from her traditional German upbringing. Both these partners have changed. They now more fully

appreciate and complement one another. One does wonder, however, what would have happened if their daughter had not successfully recovered? Do miracles often attend remarriages?

## **Children, Projects and Parental Ghosts**

Many disagreements among couples we interviewed center on the raising of children or creating and maintaining a specific business, project or production process. These disagreements often concern one of the three norm-based issues I identified earlier. They also tend to concern the identification of one's own values and differentiation between these values and those that are inherited from our parents, our community, our church, our friends and so forth. Even after we have come to terms with the separation of our own personal values from those of our parents, something dramatic and often disturbing occurs when we have our first children or start our first mutual project.

The voices of our mother or father suddenly come back to haunt us again. We tell our son not to play with that stick or "you'll poke your eye out." We realize that we are using the same intonations of voice that our parents used and are basing our predictions and in junctures on the same faulty logic as our parents. We find ourselves using the same old outmoded assumptions about how to motivate workers or how to sell products as our father or mother used thirty or forty years ago. These assumptions were out-of-date even back in those days!

Disagreements regarding rules of conduct and discipline often center on the issue of leniency when applied to the raising of children or managing a project. This issue is inevitably wrapped up with the issue of time-allocation and can contribute to the emergence of triangulation. One of the partners is "too strict" and the other "too easy" on the children. One is relaxed about the project, while the other is always worried about what is happening.

Often these differences can be traced back to parents. Were a parent's fears realized when one member of the couple fell on their head or were a poor student? How have these fears infected this partner's current attitudes about child-raising or project-managing? What about the partner who was raised by permissive parents who let them play with knives and find their own way as a student? How are the ghosts of these parents manifest in the couple's current attitudes about child raising and project leadership?

Caroline has no problem letting Sam (or anyone else, for that matter!) know that she believes he is entirely too harsh with the kids. According to Caroline, Sam speaks to them from a dominant, authoritative stance and they seem to react to that tone out of fear rather than respect. Sam disagrees with this assessment. He believes that they need strict discipline in their lives at this point in order to grow up to be loving, productive adults.

In fact, Sam feels that Caroline is too easy going with the kids. Sadly, Sam's own childhood was filled with violence and unpredictability. His father had been an alcoholic. While Sam tries to provide a home environment that is conducive to the love and respect that he never received, his own parenting behavior is undoubtedly modeled after that provided by his father—the only male parental role model he probably ever observed firsthand.

Caroline and Sam tend to deal with these differences of opinion regarding child-rearing in a rather ineffective manner. Caroline's comments about Sam's relationship with his children were met by clear rejection on Sam's part. She had no trouble saying that she felt Sam's approach was the "wrong" one.

On the other hand, Sam seemed to have no problem in ignoring what Caroline said. He waited quietly while she said what was wrong with his approach. He then took up the conversation by directing his comments solely to the interviewer. Caroline might as well not have been in the room. Out in the world, I wonder what their children hear when they are interacting with their parents. Does triangulation take place when Caroline and Sam's children are being "difficult.?"

Caroline and Sam both agreed that the children had brought them closer together. The kids had at times been the "glue" that held Sam and Caroline together through times of high stress between them as a couple. However, this doesn't seem to match very well with their current differences of opinion. While the two shared their individual perceptions about the other in relationship to the kids, there was clearly a distancing between them when they spoke of these differences—and their children might be fully aware of this distancing.

Caroline wasn't afraid to acknowledge that they disagreed. Sam refused to acknowledge the differences. Yet, they both seemed impervious to these differences when they talked about what the children meant in their lives. Their comments here almost read like: "these are the things parents are supposed to feel about their kids." There seemed to be a pseudo agreement between them that their kids would be the glue that held them together.



As long as they didn't argue with each other about their disagreements concerning discipline, they wouldn't have to face the fact that they don't agree with each other. They can ignore the fact that their children are pulling them apart as well as holding them together—and they can ignore the presence of their parents as ghosts in the relationship each of them has established with their children.

## **Differences and Blends**

Tally and Kesha also struggled with the issue of discipline, but came to a much more satisfying solution than did Caroline and Sam. They both came from a very traditional culture (India) and found that a focal point of their relationship and their shared values was a struggle with old parental values.

When first married, Tally and Kesha had quite different views on parenting. Tally was very reluctant to discipline their children in any way. He traced this back to his strong reactions against the domineering and abusive parenting that he experienced. Kesha claimed he was afraid to touch the children at all. He would sit and "reason" with them for hours, while she became more and more frustrated.

The key for them was to find a way of blending Tally's distaste for coercive control with Kesha's concern that their children receive a clear message from their parents regarding boundaries and acceptable behavior. It was important for them to find a satisfactory blend—otherwise the issue of triangulation could come to rule their role as parents.

Kesha and Tally now have weekly family meetings with their children where they encourage trust and honesty in each other. They negotiate disagreements with their children, rather than forcing them to accept parental authority. However, at the end of these meetings there are clear resolutions, and expectations regarding what the children will do during the coming week. Love is mixed with clarity and communication.

It was this new focus that helped Tally and Kesha look at themselves in action. Gradually their work on parenting moved to marriage counseling and some effective new ways of living their lives together. The end result of their disagreements regarding child-raising was not only a rather innovative style of family decision-making, but also the creation of a new focal point for their marriage.

This focal point eventually helped them through several difficult times in their marriage. Since they began their new approach, Tally and Kesha have constructed

a new lifestyle which involves their own children. It also involved several shared projects: their work with others in parenting, their work with other married couples, their church, and many other shared activities. They now teach the parenting class which had been so helpful for them. They are team leaders in the Marriage Encounter movement.

For this couple, disagreements about child rearing led to a new focal point in their relationship, blending two of the developmental plates: values and child-rearing. Throughout the interviews we conducted it became clear, on the one hand, that whenever two or more developmental plates are blended (especially if the blending occurs following a major conflict and remarriage) the relationship is likely to become truly remarkable. On the other hand, the blending of these plates can produce conflict regarding the first of the parenting issues I identified earlier: namely the allocation of time for child-raising.

Tally and Kesha are a couple for whom the first of these scenarios applies. Blended plates produced a very positive outcome for the two of them. They have overcome one of the partner's abusive childhoods—as well as the transition to a different culture and struggles regarding old and new values in their lives—to create a vital and enduring relationship. At the end of the interview, Kesha indicated that she most appreciated Tally's openness to new experiences: “he is open to anything which will help him grow.” The same can be said about their relationship.

## **Sharing and Caring**

Children (or a project) from previous relationships pose a unique challenge for many couples in 21<sup>st</sup> Century societies. As in the case of many couples who have previously been committed to other relationships, Dean and Kent faced the problem of moving into another person's life, complete with previously incurred obligations and possessions. Dean and Kent come from quite different backgrounds. Dean is an African American from a small town in Tennessee. He was 42 years old when the interview took place and has been in several long-term relationships, dating back to his high school days. Each lasted about three years.

Kent, who is ten years older than Dean, is a European -American from Ohio. His longest lasting relationship prior to being with Dean was for thirteen years. This was with a woman, with whom he had two children. The children are now grown. Tina is twenty-one and David is twenty-five. When they first met, Dean was twenty-five and Kent was thirty-five. The key issue for the two of them has not been race, but

rather Kent's family obligations—and the matter of time-allocation (our first fundamental issue).

Dean tells this part of the story: "On the second day [Kent and I were together], the kids came running in." Kent had said nothing to Dean up to that point about an ex-wife or children. Tina was five and a half at the time and she came running in screaming, "Daddy, Daddy." Dean was sitting on the couch watching television at the time. Then David, who was about ten came in, then Kent's ex-wife, Patricia. Dean said he panicked and thought: "Oh shit, he's married. There is going to be a huge fight." But he said he managed to keep his cool.

Tina came over to the sofa and sat next to Dean. Kent came into the room and introduced Dean to his ex-wife. Then Tina turned to Dean and said: "I don't know you very well, but if you hurt my father in any way, I will get you." Five minutes later they were all wrestling around. A remarkable story of one man being accepted into the life and home of another man and his children (and ex-wife!) This immediate acceptance, however, does not mean that a relationship has been formed or that the marker event has occurred which establishes the two partners as a couple, ready to establish a home together.

Kent and Dean dated each other for ten months before moving in together. Kent kept pressing Dean to move in, but Dean said "no" because they were both recovering from previous relationships. They needed to get beyond these relationships first. The logistics were also a problem—as they are with many contemporary couples who are attempting to establish a home together. Kent lived in an urban area and Dean in a suburban community about forty miles away. They both were working as teachers in public school systems and had other jobs on the side. It was not easy for either of them to pull up stakes. Finally, Dean announced that he was moving in. He did, and they have lived together for the past fifteen years.

Ironically, while the issue of children and Kent's established home were initially a potential problem for this couple, these commitments have turned out to be one of the strengths in their relationship. They are both very proud of the two children, and in particular their independence and individual accomplishments.

When Kent divorced Patricia, the children chose to stay with him. They have maintained a close relationship with Patricia over the years and have lived with her on several occasions. Yet, their primary commitment during their childhood was to their father, Kent, and their second father, Dean. Sharing and caring resides at the heart of this couple's relationship with one another and with their children.

Dean and Kent talk about the challenge of raising two children during an earlier era in American life—when there were few role models for same-sex partners regarding the raising of children. They found that with the children as a focus in their relationship, they had to assume roles that were more often patterned after heterosexual roles. Kent, for instance, is very conscious of Mother's Day. He feels that he assumed that role in his children's upbringing and is adamant that this role be celebrated despite the fact that he is the biological father.

### **Storms, Plates and Lies**

Children or mutual projects tend to draw in all of the other plates. As a result, this plate is often the eye of the hurricane during stormy phases in the life of a couple. Consequently, child-rearing or joint project management is often identified as the central problem area for a couple. This is certainly the case with Caroline and Sam. They both indicated during their interview that their most intensive "serious talks together" have recently centered on family and child-rearing issues. Our three issues all came to the surface—especially time-allocation.

About six weeks prior to the interview, Caroline had become very angry about Sam's new job (church promotional director). It was taking Sam away from their family more than she felt was necessary. She confronted him with her frustrations, citing what she termed his "lack of interest" in assuming "his share of the responsibility around the house and with the kids." She indicated that these problems needed to be fixed immediately or she was considering leaving him.

Sam agreed that things had gotten out of hand but noted that he had recently begun to structure time with the kids and with Caroline. He listed the tasks he had recently assumed as his to equalize the responsibilities in their home but didn't seem to have a clear picture of what all that left for Caroline to do. She declined to comment further. They were both uncomfortable at this point. Clearly, they had work to do on this difficult issue.

As with many couples, Caroline and Sam are caught up in a difficult conflict that draws in the socio-economic viability and values plates, along with child-rearing. Sam has to make a living, but he must also spend time with the children. With a higher-paying job, Sam would not have to work so hard by assuming extra work and could therefore devote more time to his family.

Yet, Sam finds his work with the church to be personally gratifying and of great value. He does not want to shift to a higher paying but less valued career. What

should be done? Caroline indicates that she wishes Sam would separate more from the Church and value time with her and the kids more. She seemed almost on the edge of suggesting that she and the kids are taking "second place" to the Church in Sam's mind.

However, Caroline did not actually come out and say this. Sam wishes that Caroline was "less compulsive." He describes her as going through life at 100 miles per hour. He sees her as given to instant problem-solving and worrying about problems long before they actually become problems. He doesn't necessarily see her as impulsive, but just wishes that she would learn to relax more. He uses himself as an example of how that should be done. Sam indicates he has the ability to come home, enjoy a nice dinner and then sit in peace and quiet with a glass of wine and just "forget that the rest of the world exists." He "knows" how to spend his evening. Sam seems pleased with his ability to just wipe cares and concerns out of his mind with little or no effort.

Caroline is neither smiling nor frowning at this point in the interview. Rather, she drily adds that it is hard to have a relaxing evening when the kids need attention: meals, baths, bedtime. All of this has to be done by Caroline. She notes that Sam is not always around during his "relaxing" evenings. He often is out of the house at business appointments (frequently at night) or at the Church for meetings. Sam is quick to add here that "he has responsibility for the kids in the morning since she has to leave so early for work (6:00 a.m.) and he doesn't. She has the kids in the evening since his job often requires him to work into the evenings." Caroline looks at the floor and does not comment.

Asking them to describe a typical day with their parents, family and friends did little to ease the tension accumulated at this point. Sam took the lead by describing Thanksgiving Day. Caroline refused to drive about forty miles to spend the day with Sam's mother. There had been arguments between his mother and Caroline regarding Christmas presents for the kids.

Caroline had "become tired" of dealing with Sam's mother and refused to spend the day with her. She was perfectly content for Sam to take the kids and leave her to herself for the day. It was agreed that they would tell Sam's mother that Caroline was ill. Caroline added at this point that they knew this was classic cover-up and denial. However, she seemed not to be concerned in the least about how Sam's mother would react to this fib.

Caroline and Sam certainly are faced with a difficult problem. There are no easy solutions, though one cannot help but wonder if Sam is as sensitive as he could be

to Caroline's predicaments during the evening. Is Caroline really as supportive as she could be of Sam's commitment to a career in the church? They reach out for a solution to this child-rearing problem—such as Sam dropping back on his workload or taking on a higher-paying job. At this point, Caroline and Sam bump up against another critical issue (financial security, meaningfulness of job) which keeps them in conflict. They find it difficult to dance on a turbulent dance floor.

Their church certainly plays a central role in both the continuation of and potential solution to their ongoing problems. On the one hand, the church has provided them with support, friendships, and a sense of purpose in life. Their children have benefited greatly from the community and education they have received from this congregation. Yet, the sum total of their time outside of work and family is consumed in church activities. Sam has his music programs, while Caroline teaches Sunday School. She is less committed than Sam to volunteering her time to the Church. She seems resentful that their social life has never moved beyond the church.

Clearly, the church isn't meeting all of Caroline's needs. However, since it is such a strong focus in Sam's life, there are no questions asked on this score. This is one of those "non discussable issues" that I described in an earlier chapter. Sam has everything invested in the church. If Caroline wants to remain with Sam, then she must continue to be actively involved in the church. This point is not discussable, nor can this couple talk about the fact that they can't discuss this issue. It is a self-sealed wound that never heals.

A central issue in the child-rearing plate for Caroline and Sam's relationship is not only that this issue is self-sealed. It is also subject to considerable distortion and resentment by both partners. Caroline and Sam are at a crossroad in their relationship. Caroline is threatening to move out. They eventually face either a divorce or a remarriage that profoundly alters their way of relating to and living with one another. Professional counseling would seem to be warranted at this point, if Sam and Caroline are committed to saving and improving their relationship and resolving these tightly interlocked, multi-plate problems.

## Enmeshment and a Couple's Identity

To what extent is the couple dependent upon their children or their joint project for their own collective or individual identity? In the case of Bill and Fay, their professional lives and personal lives are closely intertwined. Both seem to be pleased with this condition. As in the case of many traditional couples, Bill occupies the role of professional (in his case, lawyer), while Fay operates as the office manager and legal secretary in their small firm. A similar pattern of roles and shared responsibilities is to be found among many lawyers, dentists, architects, accountants and other professionals throughout the United States.

According to Fay: "most days we work together in Bill's law office, so we're together almost twenty-four hours a day." Bill notes with pride: "Fay developed a law office system for the personal computer, so we don't need a legal secretary. We've sold that system to a few other law offices." Fay adds to Bill's statement: "Bill used to work for a large firm, but we're both a lot happier in a small practice."

Whereas many couples report that they find it impossible to be together twenty-four hours per day, Bill and Fay seem to enjoy their extensive interactions. Furthermore, Bill values Fay's work and there seems to be little sense of hierarchy. This mutual respect may be reinforced by Fay's occasional work as a systems analyst and consultant outside their law practice. Their shared commitment to their law practice resides at the heart of the matter. It resides at the heart of their shared identity.

Bill and Fay are working together on something that is of importance to both of them. They chose to start their own small law firm precisely because it would give them an opportunity to work together. They make adjustments in virtually all other aspects of their lives to ensure that they have substantial time together and that their daily routine is maintained. This is an enmeshed couple, yet their enmeshment was freely chosen and is working effectively for both of them.

I brought up the phenomenon of enmeshment earlier in this book and advocated a balance between enmeshment and disengagement. This balance must be struck when two people first fall in love. An appropriate balance must once again be found when a couple is raising children or conducting a mutual project. This is the critical normative issue that a couple must address regarding this developmental plate. This issue builds directly on one of the two issues of the storming stage: who is responsible for what (given the amount of time and attention each partner will

devote to child rearing or the project)?

The matter of enmeshment surfaces an important issue that reside at the heart of the matter regarding this development plate. It concerns the role that the child (children) or project will play in the ongoing relationship between the partners and in the forging and maintenance of their shared identity.

In what way(s) is the child or project a tangible manifestation of the two partner's love for one another? How can the child (children) or project help the relationship stay together and hopefully become an even more abundant source of joy and growth for each partner? There is also the opposing question: in what way(s) does the child (children) or project cause strain and produce conflict in the relationship? IN what way(s) does the child or project diffuse or distort a couple's shared identity?

## **Triangulation and Schizogenesis**

I wonder, in particular, if triangulation is a leverage point for distancing of partners from one another and for exacerbating a conflict? Several times in this book I have offered a description of schizogenesis as it was introduced by Gregory Bateson (1972), one of our guides. I now add the factor of triangulation to the processes of both symmetrical schizogenesis and complementary schizogenesis.

The child or project because a third entity in the room with two competing tribes (:in this case, the two members of the couple). The child/project can play off the opposing partners by taking sides against two quite different approaches to child-rearing or project management (complementary schizogenesis).

Alternatively, the child or project can provoke an escalation between the two partners (symmetrical schizogenesis). Each partner declaring that they will do more than or operate better than their partner when tending to the needs of their child or project. Conversely, the complementary form of schizogenesis can aide the couple as they each take on increasingly distinctive roles in their roles as those who are raising children or leading and managing a project.

Many couples, such as Bessy and Bill discover that their life values as a couple begin to settle securely in place with the beginning years of child rearing or building a shared project. Typically, responsibilities are firmly and clearly assigned, whereas before the birth of a child or the initiation of a major shared project, these responsibilities are more likely to be loosely framed, readily shifted or even ignored. Bill and Bessy made the choice like many couples to identify an "equal and logical



way" of distributing their time with their daughter (when she was very young) and distributing the new household chores associated with child-rearing. Roles become more clearly assigned

As in many heterosexual relationships, the woman (in this case, Bessy) does the assigning of duties and responsibilities—and often is responsible for child-rearing when the child is being “unruly”. The trash is being passed to the “lady of the house.” In the case of Bessy and Bill, there is a fair amount of reciprocity. Each partner has particular household chores that they had done for many years. Bessy does the wash and Bill takes the clothes out of the dryer and puts them away.

With the introduction of diapers and baby cloth into the equation, Bessy and Bill simply expanded their responsibilities in the same areas to accommodate the new demand. Bessy has more clothes to wash. Bill has more to dry and fold. As their daughter, Trudy, grew older, she was also assigned chores. Complementary schizogenesis sets in. Clearly defined assignments of tasks become entrenched.

Other couples are not so sanguine about the assignment of duties and responsibilities; yet, if a couple is to establish viable norms for child-rearing or project-building, the increased pressures and work demands inside the relationship typically requires that they establish firmer boundaries and clearer expectations—especially if they are to avoid triangulation. Whether raising children or building a project, a couple in this developmental plate is clearly in a "business" and must establish "business-like" rules or they risk destruction of the relationship.

There is, of course, a positive way of defining the need to establish norms regarding child-rearing and project-building. These norms can provide the glue for a relationship. Schizogenesis of all kinds generates stability in a relationship (good or bad). These stabilizing norms can give the couple a sustaining meaning and purposefulness. Furthermore, the children or project can be a wonderful focal point for the shared aspirations and values of a couple. They help both partners weather many domestic storms and life intrusions.

On the other hand, an enduring couple should never be totally dependent on norms regarding their children or their shared project as a way of keeping themselves together. Typically, when this is the case, then the parents are lousy parents and project managers. The children are left with a legacy of guilt and resentment. The partners are lousy businesspeople who soon burn out or use the project to enact (though rarely resolve) their own domestic problems.

## Safety and Security

Bessy and Bill keep bringing up words like protection, safety, security, responsibility and pride in their child-rearing when talking about their relationship. They have created a life that embodies all these values, specifically regarding their role as parents. Bessy's interest in and connection to child rearing provides continuity in their relationship. The interviewer suggested that Bessy and Bill's own personal need for protection, safety, security and shared responsibility is the key to their mutual interest in these values. In seeking security and safety for their own child, Bessy and Bill are creating a home that is safe and secure for themselves.

The problem that Bessy and Bill must face in a few years concerns the termination of their primary role as parents. Their daughter will be leaving home and they must directly address the issue of safety and security, rather than working on it indirectly through their child. Bessy and Bill have already begun to take constructive steps. Bessy has begun to meet regularly with a group of women friends. Bill has a sailboat to which he devotes an increasing amount of time. They are both quite involved in their work outside the home—though there is not a good match in this regard. At this point, Bessy is looking forward to having more time to put into her job and Bill is hoping for early retirement.

Bessy talked a bit about other people, suggesting there is something "weird" about Bill having a boat which is not a part of her life. Then Bill said, "My Dad had a shop. He'd go out and work in the shop. My Mother never entered that shop." What will become of this couple after their child leaves home? What will be their common, shared purpose?

When asked about their hopes and dreams for the future, when their daughter is gone, Bessy spoke of having the opportunity to work fifty to sixty hours a week if she wants, while Bill wonders how to incorporate sailing and traveling with Bessy (who gets seasick). As they both spoke about their different ideas for the future, they showed little concern for any problems of working out a life that could be increasingly separate.

When asked what was the glue that has held their relationship together for twenty years, Bill said "valuing our differences." Bessy agreed with him. This does seem to be important to them at the present time and possibly in the future—for if they did not value their differences, their relationship could be heading for a crisis.

Earlier in the interview they spoke of not having disagreements. Now they have spoken of valuing their differences. This is one way in which to avoid triangulation.

While the two partners might disagree on how to raise their child, they are not caught in a contentious battle based on these differences but instead have learned to thoughtfully value and act on these differing perspectives. And imagine what their daughter learns in observing this sensitive deliberation!

Clearly, Bill and Bessy's sense of unity was built on a shared purpose, raising their daughter. They held very few differences of opinion in this realm, having both affirmed the traditional values and beliefs transferred from their own parents about raising children. Now, they either must find a new purpose and shared meaning or go their separate ways in a very disengaged relationship. At the present time, they seem to have chosen the latter route. Yet, one wonders as they grow older if they will learn not just to value their differences but also learn from each other and grow closer together again under the auspices of some new shared vision.

### **Performing: How Do We Best Savor the Fruits of Our Mutual Labor?**

Glenda and Kurt offer a superb example of the movement of a young couple through the difficult early stages of child-rearing to a balanced and gratifying performing stage. Their life story also illustrates the difficulty inherent in the initiation of this newly emerging developmental plate in the life of a couple. The two of them had been a couple since they were each fifteen years old (both now being 33 years of age). They were married eleven years prior to the birth of their daughter, Trisha.

They still live within a few miles of their parents and the homes where they grew up. For most of their early years together, Glenda and Kent lived simple and carefree lives, receiving substantial assistance from both families. In essence, the two of them never had to grow up, but could remain as "adult children", living in the shadow of their original homes and families. As we noted earlier in this chapter, their decision to have a child came very slowly. When they finally did decide to have a child, they suddenly had to grow up individually and as a couple.

## **Growing Up as a Couple**

During their two-hour interview, Glenda and Kurt talked about what is most important for other people to know about them as a couple. With their daughter, Trisha, taking a nap in the other room, they identified child-raising as the central theme in their current life. They spoke of the contrast with their past life when they were free of most responsibilities. Glenda observes that "lately we're very busy, you know, it's hectic with Trisha on the scene." Kurt also includes work on the list of emerging pressures. Glenda agrees: "Yeah, well the thing of both of us working and having a kid, pursuing the 'American dream' sort of lifestyle . . . [laughs]. So as far as being a couple or even thinking about each other, it's sort of hard sometimes."

Kurt and Glenda don't have much time together alone anymore—what with Trisha, their dual career, and family commitments. While both love their child, Kurt and Glenda also refer to former areas of mutual enjoyment (now largely forfeited), new complex responsibilities within their relationship, and even an inconvenient change in residence they thought necessary because of their child.

## **Growing Out as a Couple**

Trisha's arrival when they were living in their former home convinced them that they were now too large a family for its confines. They moved to their current, larger residence. Now, because of the proximity of their house to a busy highway, they are concerned about Trisha's safety. They are again looking for a different rental with a larger, fenced yard in which their toddler can play.

## **Conclusions: The Three Ingredients**

Glenda and Kurt had anticipated that Trisha's birth was going to require changes in their comfortable lifestyle, and they prepared for these changes: "When Trisha was first born I [Kurt] took about six weeks off work and Glenda took four months off. So, we were together a lot right in the beginning." This period appears to have provided Glenda and Kurt with an opportunity to "re-calibrate" (Watzlawick, et al., 1967, p.147) the style of their relationship

In essence, the birth of Trisha allowed (required) these "adult children" to "grow

up” as a couple and remarry. They had to initiate a new cycle of forming, storming, norming and performing regarding the roles each of them would play in taking care of Trisha while caring for their own relationship.

Following an initial period of testing and turmoil, Kurt and Glenda began "performing" their roles and newly established routines with a high degree of mutual confidence in their performance:

Glenda: Yeah, Rishi [Trisha's nickname] really loves her Daddy. It's gotten where she doesn't want me to give her a bath. She wants Kurt to give her a bath because I'm less patient. It's like I say "Ok, you got to get a bath and then it's time for bed," and Kurt, he just hangs out with her and they make bubbles in the water. (laughs)

Kurt: I like to play with her.

Glenda: And she likes that.

Kurt: Oh, yeah.

Glenda: But also, a lot of that is we kind of decided on routines, so I'm the one that gives her a bath at night, well usually, and so when I give her a bath, she just expects that.

Whereas some mothers might resent the preference of their daughter for father's attention, Glenda views this preference with considerable fondness (and perhaps some relief). She delights in the affection expressed by Trisha and Kurt for one another and values the differences between herself and Kurt.

Kurt also frequently performs "single parent" responsibilities because Glenda's job requires her to travel for as long as a week at a time. Kurt indicates that:

. . . it's hard for me to be a single parent, going to work and taking Trisha to day care and doing meals and it's hard to catch up on what you need to do until she's in bed . . . I look at the upside of that, though, in that there's time when it's just me and Trisha, and she's entirely dependent on me. Solely. And that has helped me bond with Trisha a lot and helped our relationship.

These seems to be three essential ingredients in Glenda and Kurt's relationship that has enabled them to establish and maintain the performing functions of this development plate. First, they exhibit an accepting and generous attitude regarding competing relationships among other members of the family, as opposed to resentment, possessiveness or competition for attention when a child prefers the

other parent in certain settings. Second, there is respect and affection regarding differences between styles of childrearing. Third, there is a willingness on the part of both partners to perform nontraditional roles (for example, Kurt serving as primary parent when Glenda is traveling) Other couples might learn from the example set by Glenda and Kurt.

## Key Chapter Points

Enduring couples:

- Engage in extensive discussions about how their relationship may accommodate a child (or children).
- Negotiate childrearing and project management responsibilities with each other.
- Devote time, energy and dollars to mutual projects instead of focusing exclusively on childrearing.
- Share moments of mutual admiration for the important job they are doing in bringing up a child or successfully engaging a project in this complex world.
- "Remarry" repeated times as they find new ways to structure their relationship as it is tested throughout the life of the project or the duration of childrearing.
- Seek a third entity to help resolve conflicts: either a person (counselor, relative, friend) or a transpersonal entity (God, fate, psychic, horoscope).

## Chapter Fifteen

### Plate Five: September Song (Growing Old Together and Facing Major Life Challenges as A Couple)

Each of the four developmental plates we have already discussed tend to absorb the attention of couples during the early and middle years of their relationship. This final plate, however, moves to center stage during the years when either a couple have reached their senior years (usually after age fifty-five or sixty). It also is engaged when one or both partners face a major intrusive life event that is either life-threatening or potentially disruptive of the relationship. In either case, the partners are faced with the task of preparing for major changes in the ways they relate to one another.

During the senior years, there are dramatic shifts in life structure brought about by retirement from a job or shift in household responsibilities. In addition, couples typically must deal with the death of their own parents during the first phase of their senior years.

Later, they must deal with the impending death of one of the partners. At the very least, most enduring couples must address challenges associated with the extended absence of one of the partners as a result of illness. There is also the matter of a shift in the role of one partner to that of caretaker for the other, newly disabled partner.

Until very recently, these difficult transitional issues in the life of a couple were rarely addressed in the popular media, nor, for that matter, were they addressed in a systematic and thoughtful manner by researchers in the social sciences. The common image has usually been one of a somewhat humorous older couple drifting off blissfully into senility. Today, we know better. We know of the challenges that many older couples face when one of the partners is afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. The case of President Reagan brought this challenge forcibly to mind for many Americans during the early years of the 21st Century.

Other changes in the popular image of old age have taken place in the media. We have been shown how romantic love can very much be a part of relationships among men and women during their senior years. We can point to plays and movies such

as *The Gin Game*, *Love Among the Ruins*, *Robin and Marion*, *The Whales of August*, *The Bridges of Madison County*—and more recently *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, *Letters to Juliet* and *Something's Gotta Give*.

Other plays and movies such as *On Golden Pond*, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *The Notebook* describe ways in which long-term relationships must continue to adjust in the face of ongoing problems and new realities regarding illness, children, spouses of children, and grandchildren. Lest we forget, the musical, *A Little Night Music*, containing the work of our musical guide, Stephen Sondheim, focuses on the lingering love between two older adults. We might add the work of ABBA that populates *Mamma Mia*—a musical and movie about an older woman finding love with one of three men.

Obviously, a case has been made in abundance regarding romance being in the air for older men and women. There is somewhat less romance in the air when it comes to the opportunities and challenges facing older adults who have built and maintained an intimate relationship. This not quite as attractive to theater and movie going audiences as new-found love—but it is probably more important.

It might also be the case, that plays and movies about older couples who have been together for many years are likely to be complicated and multi-tiered. The story is hard to tell. A fundamental question often remains unanswered: “why did they [why did we] stay together over all of these years?”

This final developmental plate is clearly complex and often elusive, for it involves four other questions of a more personal nature. These questions concern the issues that each of us, individually, must face in our lives: “for what did I spend my life working?” “Why am I still alive?” “When will I die?” “Will I live alone before I die?” In this chapter I first address the challenges associated with preparation for retirement and other tasks of our senior years. We then turn to preparation for the death or illness of a partner and to our own death.

## **Forming:**

### **What Will This New Situation Be Like?**

When one or both partners in a relationship retire from their job, it impacts on both partners and on the relationship. There is also an important “retirement” process that occurs when one of the partners who has primarily served in the role of parent and homemaker must adjust to children leaving home, living in a smaller



home or declining physical capacity to take care of the home.

Each partner, in his or her own way, must adjust to shifts in their own life and the life of their partner as they approach the final life stage. Typically, at some point in the life of a couple, most of the plates (such as establishing a home and raising children or completing a project) are no longer at center stage. There are now no longer distractions from the two fundamental couple-based questions: What are we truly about? What would I do without you?

Alice observes that: “. . . after giving [our] attention to the children, to the remodeling [of their home] and to [Fred] losing his job for a worrisome period of time before finding new work, now we can concentrate on ourselves again.” In addition, at this advanced stage in the life of most couples, time is often set aside for individual growth and development. Alice has initiated her own twelve-step recovery program from alcoholism. Both Alice and Fred together have participated in several personal growth workshops for couples in recent years.

This focus on personal and interpersonal growth is often related to the new freedom a couple acquires when bidding farewell to live-in children, a demanding mutual enterprise or individual careers. Accompanying this freedom are fears that the children might return home, having been unwilling or unsuccessful in living an independent life. There also might be the fear that their mutual project suddenly needs the couple's attention again.

## **Storming:**

### **How Do We Handle Our New Situation?**

Many women and some men are accustomed to working alone at home, without their partner being "under foot." Now they must anticipate or even live with the reality of a partner who is also at home. This can lead at times to new forms of conflict. Suddenly, they have to interact with their partner twenty-four hours every day.

They also must find new things to talk about, new things to occupy their shared time together, and new ways to budget their now stable or diminished income. Most importantly, both partners must examine and hopefully talk with each other about expectations regarding new roles to be played by each partner in their changing relationship. Their home and family life will inevitably shift. The dance floor is once again trembling.

## Addressing the Shift

An unexamined shift in expectations is facing Robert and Fiona, the couple who met at a London pub. Robert retired from the Air Force ten years ago. He had to negotiate with Fiona regarding his new role in the family and the way in which they were to relate to one another. Fiona had previously taken full responsibility for their three children. Robert hated to discipline his two boys and daughter—so Fiona had taken full charge of the children while he was in the service.

The boys were teen-agers now and Fiona became very angry when Robert still didn't offer to give her a hand, despite the fact that he was back in civilian life. She wanted Robert to help out with the boys and not just let her do everything. Fiona reports that she felt hurt and angry all the time for several months. Finally, according to Fiona, the situation led to a major argument.

Robert picked up the story at this point: "I was hunting real hard for a job. I tried lots of different things." Then Robert decided to go back to school and get a degree in electronics. Now he was working days and going to school in the evening. This meant he was almost never home. In the meantime, Robert was becoming aware of the fact that things had changed within the college system during the years he was in the service. He was an older man and was shocked at the way young men and women behaved on campus. Even the professors left much to be desired. Sometimes he thought they were as irresponsible as the students. On top of this, he was experiencing substantial discord at home.

Robert decided that he would quit school, stay with his job at a nearby military base, get an electrical contractor's license, and take over some parenting jobs with the boys. Robert claims he never regretted that decision. "Now," adds Fiona, "he is great with the kids even though they're grown up. I just let him handle whatever they want. They know he tells it like it is. Sometimes, though, I wish he would give a spoon full of sugar with what he says. But he never does. So, when it's necessary, I just smooth it over a little. I'm good at that."

Robert's decision to retire from the military created a crisis in his relationship with Fiona. This crisis was perhaps more complicated than is usually the case when one or both partners retire—for Robert was still a relatively young man. He still could find another job. Like many retired military personnel, he could start a second career. Yet, Robert's retirement could also be viewed as a time for reassessing the child-rearing plate and, potentially, other plates as well in his life with Fiona.

Fiona did not stand aside. She used Robert's retirement as a time for her own reassessment. Apparently, Robert viewed the transition differently. Initially, he didn't see his retirement as an opportunity to spend more time with his children and take some of the load off his wife. Rather, he immediately began looking for another job (which no doubt was both stressful and distracting for him). He wanted to prepare, through additional education, for a second career. Thus, quite different expectations regarding retirement led to new levels of stress in Fiona and Robert's marriage.

### **What If Someone Does Something About the Shift?**

The story continues. They did something about resolution of the stress. Did Fiona get Robert to stay home—to be more "under foot"? Actually, she didn't seem to be very successful in her own efforts. The heated arguments she had with Robert didn't seem to have much of an effect. Perhaps he spent even more time away from home—purportedly because he was both working and going to school. It was more likely because he wanted to avoid Fiona's anger. Yet, a change did occur. It seems to have come from Robert himself and his own personal development.

Like many men at middle age (cf. Bergquist, Greenberg and Klaum, 1993; Bergquist, 2012, Yong, Warrior and Bergquist, 2021), Robert came to two important realizations. First, he recognized that he was no longer a young man. Robert's experiences at college seem to have forced this realization on him. This, in turn, encouraged him to reexamine priorities in his life. Second, he seemingly came to an appreciation of the role of parenting. He wanted to spend more time with his children and less time pursuing a career. While he was a little late in arriving at this realization, it was not too late to engage with his boys. Perhaps, he was a better father when working with teen-agers than with infants and prepubescent boys

For Fiona and Robert this change did not occur because the two partners came to a mutual agreement regarding the change that was needed. This seems to be the case regarding many major transitions in the lives of couples we interviewed. Rather, one of the two partners gains some personal insights—and the other partner must adjust to the changing behavior that comes with this insight. With the insights he gained, Robert made some changes in his own lifestyle that had an impact on Fiona and their relationship. His new behavior broke through an interpersonal impasse with Fiona.

In some cases, a retired person "gets under foot" in a way that causes problems for

their partner; in other cases, the retired person's reassessment of personal priorities and a renewed or first-time interest in family matters is a belated but welcomed change for a long-suffering partner. In yet other cases, the behavioral changes are dramatic. One's partner confronts a "new" person with whom they can fall in love (once again) or with whom they have little in common (I am sleeping with a stranger!").

## Norming:

### How Should We Plan for Our Future?

The later stages of life are often described as a time for assessing life purposes and reflecting on life values. In many Asian cultures, men and women of means, who are mature, turn away from the world of commerce and government to the worlds of teaching--or the study of philosophy and religion. Even in the Western world, we find that the older couples we interviewed often view their later years together as a time for assessing their own purposes as a couple and for reflecting on the values that they held in common. The norming stage of their relationship, therefore, is often particularly important and core to their enduring vitality as a couple.

As they grow older together, most couples begin to speculate on their future life together, especially their years after retirement. Often in this speculation they must come to terms with the lifestyle that their own parents adopted in their later years. Typically, these early images of the future are filled with ambivalent feeling. On the one hand, they both look forward to "peace and quiet;" on the other hand, this may seem quite dull and only appropriate for "old people (like our parents). "But not us!" I can't imagine living in a retirement home like your parents do or like my parents refusing to leave a home for which they can no longer care."

### Will We Be Lucy and Ethel?

Mary provides a wonderful portrait of an ambivalence regarding her own retirement and growing old. She shared these concerns with her partner, Ruth:

[We will be] Lucy and Ethel [as in the TV show *I Love Lucy*] retiring and playing . . . go on vacations . . . living in a nice home in [suburbia]. We're always reading, and we're always ferreting out information. If you're [Ruth] not working and I'm not working,

we're going to have to be doing something! So that will probably mean taking classes or volunteering. One thing we could do is take a travel class. Teach a travel class. The perfect vacation is what we'll call it. Maybe that's when we'll write our book. Yeah, we'd probably like to write a book. Can't tell you what we'll write on, though. It changes year to year.

On the one hand, Mary seems to be looking forward to the life of "Lucy and Ethel". There will be nothing but comedic crises and the absence of real-life problems of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. There were only fun and funny days for Lucy and Ethel as they found ways to cope with their straight husbands. There was no discrimination-- even though the fictional (and real life) Lucy was involved in a multi-cultural marriage.

Yet, Mary doesn't see herself (or Ruth) sitting still. As is the case with her current life, Mary hopes to remain quite active. She wants to make full use of their best current strategy for renewing their relationship—which is taking vacations together. Like many of the men and women we interviewed, Mary is bringing her current lifestyle into her images of the future. While this is very understandable and appropriate, it will also be important for Mary and Ruth to begin thinking of ways in which their future life together will be different from what it is today. They must take into account potential health problems, loss of income, shifting personal values and interests, and so forth.

## **Sacrifice and Adventure**

Other couples we interviewed have already begun to specifically prepare for their "retirement years" together. They are confronting realities associated with money, health, housing and the potential continuing support of their children or pet project, rather than just the hopeful fantasies of their earlier life together. John and Nancy are just such a couple. when asked to describe their "typical day,"

John indicated that their days at present were certainly not "typical" of their lives together. This was due to the fact that all their children are now away from home and retirement years are approaching rapidly. Therefore, John and his wife, Nancy, have decided to "put their nose to the grindstone" and pay off their new house in just a few years.

In doing so, they hope to increase their financial security for the years to come.

Unfortunately, the days that John and Nancy described consisted of two adults working different hours. They are passing like ships in the night. In building for their own future, these two people seem to have forgotten their present life together.

Perhaps they have grown accustomed to subordinating their own interests to their children's interests. They have decided (explicitly or tacitly) to continue diverting their attention from themselves as a couple to some other project -- in this case, their future financial security.

John and Nancy do possess something, however, that keeps them from falling apart as a couple. They always reserve Sundays as a time to be together. On that one day, they go to church, have lunch, and then have an "adventure." According to John:

It's those weekly adventures that help keep us going. We may go to a movie, or to an amusement park for the first time in fifteen years, or something else. So even though we are working long and hard all week long, we are doing something memorable together every weekend. Before, we certainly worked fewer hours between the two of us. However, we also had fewer "adventures." As a result, I think we enjoyed life a lot less.

John and Nancy haven't taken steps that will ensure a quality relationship during the years that do remain until they are ready to retire. They will find more time together, without ignoring their desire for greater financial security. John indicated that he hopes to use digital networking (including social media) to continue doing business from his home, as a consultant. In this way, John and Nancy won't always be like ships passing in the night. John and Nancy also plan to remain active outside their home after retirement, though they want to spend more time together.

Nancy plans to at least do some volunteer work at the hospital where she now works. She also looks forward to keeping her household to her satisfaction and hopes to work more on her home's landscaping and have time to sew. Then, together, during the interview they added: "yes, and we hope to have much more time to visit all those grandchildren!"

## Recollections and Appreciation

The days of many men and women in their senior years are filled with recollection of previous life experiences. Rather than daydreaming about the life to come, they reflect back accurately or inaccurately on the life that they have already lived. Long-term, enduring couples are inclined to reflect back on their relationship together.

A lovely scene in the movie *Gigi* concerns the recollections of two former lovers, played by Maurice Chevalier and Hermoine Gingold, about their special moments together. "Ah, yes," exclaims Chevalier, "I remember it well!" Maurice is confused dates, locations and perhaps even lovers! Hermoine seems to be forgiving him.

These moments of recollection are to be cherished by couples. They certainly represent some of the richest sources of deep gratification for long-term couples. The home that they have created together, their cherished possessions and unique rituals. They all serve as reminders of the things in life that the couple values.

They offer a tangible representation of the relationship that they have established together through their daily, vernacular life (Moore, 1994). The character of their lingering love is manifest in those objects, places and memories that they cherish together. Yet, it is truly sad to listen to older couples reflect back on their life together with fondness and nostalgia—while discounting the wonderful moments they still can spend together. This is particularly the case now that they have more free time, fewer distractions and, sometimes, more financial security than ever before in their lives. This is the developmental plate that opens the rich and rare opportunity for partners to live fully with one another and fully savor their mature relationship.

Tom and Maxine have lived together for fifty-three years. After this length of time, they have much to say about their life adventures. They talk in an easygoing, bantering fashion about the way they are as a couple. Tom begins by noting that "it's been fun!" He repeatedly introduces this theme as they speak, in particular, about their current life together. They focus on special moments together. They indicate during their interview that they take time to sit and talk together, go for moonlight walks, and toast the moon with glasses of wine.

They also keep in close touch with friends and family. According to Maxine: "We've always been very social and tried to create great parties for our friends and colleagues." Yet, they now enjoy each other's company more than ever before in their life. Maxine and Tom find their different personalities to be sources of

enjoyment rather than conflict. They retain a sense of humor and playfulness toward each other and toward life. The interviewer noted that she felt drawn into what seems to be their embracing of life. Their appreciation of each other and of being in the world. A wonderful model of an enduring intimate relationship. Love lingers here.

## **Transitions Can Be Difficult**

In the case of Heather and Marianne, the transition from work into retirement was difficult. They have not embraced life as joyfully and playfully as Tom and Maxine. Their transition was problematic, not only because both women had been working full-time (a common problem for many contemporary dual-career couples), but also because the two of them had worked closely together for twenty-five years as travel agents in the same organization. Suddenly, they had to relate to each other without their joint work identity. A facet of their lives that they had shared for so long was now gone and it took them a while to adjust.

They now had so much more free time—that they could spend together away from work. Heather had gotten used to having more free time when she retired four years earlier, but Marianne had still gone to work. Suddenly they had no restrictions. But they felt adrift without their shared work experience.

Even after Heather retired, they could at least talk about Marianne's work. They both still knew the cast of characters at work. Now what do they talk about? What about the "elicit" excitement of being lovers (in private), but co-workers (in public)? What would happen now that their public relationship is no longer separate from their private relationship.

This forces Marianne and Heather to invest everything in their private relationship. Will it work? What do they do with themselves, given that they are no longer the sprightly, passionate, secretive lovers of old? So much of their identity individually and collectively was wrapped up in their work. And what would other people think of them now that they were both retired? Does their sexual orientation now become of greater interest to other people now that their unique experiences of working together for many years is no longer to be observed and discussed?

If the interview is an accurate reflection on their relationship, the transition has apparently been successful. According to Heather:

We probably come off to you like your-grandparents. And that's



really OK. But Marianne and I are content. That's how I'd describe the way we feel about each other. Contented. We're very comfortable with each other. We've already had the passion where all you want to do is make love and be intense. That part has been gone for a while. But a relationship or marriage of quality does change. It's the intensity that has changed, that's all. There is no one else I'd rather be with than Marianne. And a quiet life with her in our home with the cats is just fine with me.

Who cares what other people may think or what they might say to one another. We have our home and our cats. The transition has taken place and it has worked for us. We leave this "marriage of quality" impressed with the flexibility and commitment exhibited in the adjustment of both women to a quite different lifestyle and relationship.

## **Performing:**

### **How Do We Best Learn From Each Other?**

Couples who remain together for many years often spend their last years learning from one another. Jungians suggests that this may be one of the most important functions that a long-term intimate relationship can serve. While some observers of contemporary relationships focus on the capacity of the relationship to provide each partner with happiness, Jung and his associates (Gugenbuhl-Craig, 1977; Sanford, 1979) have suggested that intimate, enduring relationships are meant primarily to serve the process of individuation. Mature men and women begin to reclaim and reintegrate into their personal psyches those aspects of self that they had projected out to other people and institutions. All aspects of self are welcomed home when love lingers.

### **Reintegration with a Little Help from Someone We Love**

A woman in her 60s, for instance, may reclaim her right to ideas of her own. A man in his 70s may for the first time since his childhood give himself permission to cry. A woman in her 70s who has left finances to her husband now begins to inquire about how their money is being spent (just in case he should die before she does). A man in his 60s become a devoted grandpa. He looks to his wife for guidance on which toys to buy his beloved granddaughter—and “how exactly do I play house

with Becky without stepping on her imagination”.

When we are young, the tendency is to accept what other people say about the things we are and are not supposed to think, feel and act on. They think about us primarily as a function of our age, gender, race, social position, job, size, abilities and so forth. We are told by others—and we tell ourselves—that we are supposed to be “realistic” and “get along” if we are to be successful in life.

By the time we reach our 50s, the “voices from other rooms” (Bergquist, Greenberg and Klaum, 1993, Bergquist, 2012; Yong, Warrior, and Bergquist, 2021) that were neither realistic nor socially acceptable at the time demand to be heard after twenty to thirty years of neglect. In our 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s we often return to ideas and dreams that we abandoned in our twenties. And so begins the process of reintegrating parts of ourselves that were set aside at a much earlier time. This process of reintegration is very important—and it might be ongoing for several decades during our later years of life.

This process of reintegration and individuation can be aided greatly by one's partner—for we usually picked a partner who is different from us. This person often exhibits those characteristics that we disowned much earlier in our life. The strong dominant male executive looks for an expressive and creative life partner.

A woman who is very industrious and practical in her work as a small business owner falls madly in love with a dreamer who wants to transform society. A man who decided early in life to be a somewhat reclusive college professor marries a woman who is a great athlete and lover of automobiles. Later in life, the executive can learn about expressiveness and creativity from his life partner, while the practical small business owner can become more of a social activist, courtesy of her dreamer-lover. The college professor can learn more about his own body and about mechanical self-sufficiency from his outgoing wife.

### **Grasping the Hand of Darkness**

At an even more basic level, heterosexual men and women in the final stages of their life often turn to their partner to learn about feminine (in the case of men) or masculine (in the case of women) aspects of themselves. Older gay and lesbian partners often learn more about both the masculine and feminine aspects of themselves from their life partner. As we have noted in this book, two life forces, according to Jung, lie at the heart of the process of interpersonal intimacy. These forces are the “anima”, (feminine energy or archetype) and “animus” (masculine energy or archetype). They are called by many other names “Yang” and “Yin” the

Light and the Dark, the Active and Receptive.

Both of these forces reside in each of us, according to Jung. However, only one of the forces usually plays a dominant role in our life when we are young. This is largely because our society expected us as men to be directed by the animus and as women to be directed by the anima. It is interesting to speculate (as Ursula LeGuin has done in her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*) on what a society would look like in which everyone is androgynous (a well-integrated mix of anima and animus). This is a world in which everyone has grasped the hand of their own dark side—their own animus or anima.

Or what happens in a world where everyone can switch between being a male or female (as is the case in LeGuin's novel). This a world in which sexual orientation and identification are malleable and situation specific. We can partially glance at such a world together in the med-21<sup>st</sup> Century with the retreat from binary gender identification. We can also find a fragment of this non-binary world in our own integrative of animus and anima during our senior years.

It is particularly important during our mature years that we give ourselves permission to learn about the other side of ourselves – what Sanford (1979) calls our "invisible partner." We have the opportunity to grasp our own dark side. When we are in an enduring intimate relationship there is no one better to learn from than the person with whom many years ago we fell in love (often as a result of becoming captivated by the opposite gender force in them).

The individuation process involves the reintegration (for the first time since childhood) of the anima and animus forces in ourselves. This becomes the central purpose of the last years of our life:

. . . to achieve this union of the opposites within ourselves may very well be the task of life, requiring the utmost in perseverance and assiduous awareness. Usually men need women for this to come about, and women need men. And yet, ultimately the union of the opposites does not occur between a man who play out the masculine and a woman who plays out the feminine, but within the-being of each man and each woman in whom the opposites are finally conjoined. (Sanford, 1979)

Thus, we find that men and women often become more alike as they grow older not just because they have lived through the same experiences in their adult lives, but also because they have learned from each other. They have each reclaimed (in

part through the informal teaching and modeling of their partner) those aspects of themselves that they disowned at an earlier time in their lives. With the loving assistance of their life partner, they have courageously grasped the hand of their own anima or animus darkness.

## **Love and Individuation**

A classic example of this process of learning from and becoming more like each other is offered by Dora and Jim. These partners have for many years lived with distinctive differences in the ways in which they relate to other people. Dora is "a great dancer and likes to be in the spotlight," stated Jim with considerable pride. He also noted that he doesn't "like being in the spotlight."

He has lived vicariously off Dora's interpersonal skills and enthusiasm. Yet, in their senior years, Dora and Jim are becoming more like each other. Dora and Jim both agreed that right now their traditional roles are switching. Dora is pulling herself more into the background, and Jim is putting himself more into the spotlight. Both of them believe that this is important in their individual and collective development.

George and Betty are 68 and 64 years old respectively. They have been married 43 years and refer to each other as Mama and Daddy—reflecting their primary identity as parents of six children. George was a dentist. Though Betty ran his office, she has always thought of herself as a housewife. The interviewer began by mentioning that couples often seem to go through cycles. George immediately interrupted: "yeah, one with kids, one without kids. That's the real one. Another is work and retired." Betty agreed.

George went on to express his concern about possible demands that their children might make on them in the future. He indicated that child-rearing was a very taxing experience for him. He is glad that they are finally all out on their own and doing well. He loves his children but worries that they might try to impinge too much on his and Betty's lives and finances.

Betty always goes along with George's fears, so as not to upset him further. For George (and perhaps Betty), the shift to another stage in their own development as a couple was clearly welcomed. They no longer need to focus on children. Both are now retired from most work both at the Dental office and within their home.

George and Betty have now settled into a stable post child-rearing pattern. Betty takes care of the finances, while George putters around the house completing small

home repair projects. George has always been worried about money; however, Betty is an excellent bookkeeper and enjoys keeping track of every penny spent.

George is proud of Betty's ability to handle the finances and frequently praises her for doing such a good job. Betty's subservience to George's financial concerns has kept the socio-economic viability plate in the background. There have been no earthquakes or eruptions along this plate. In this way, George and Betty have established a complementary relationship, with George's worries being matched by Betty's competencies. Much as Betty reassures George about possible demands that the children might make on them, she also reassures him about the finances.

The complementarity that has been established in this relationship seems very mature. It works very smoothly, making the interplay between these two people seem almost invisible. One wonders, however, what would occur if Betty were to die before George. He doesn't seem to be learning from Betty, hence does not yet seem to have the capacity for "self-assurance."

Perhaps Betty also needs to learn from George about worrying. She may be so concerned with assuring George that things will work out and dependent on George to discover the things about which they should be worried, that she has not had to develop her own problem-detecting capacities. Some mutual instruction may be in order.

While Betty and George are closely linked together with regard to child-raising and finances, they tend to assert their independence and differences from one another regarding other life interests. Betty enjoys reading books, while George watches television -- sports, news, wildlife programs and, in particular, travelogues ("That's how I've been around the world -- no waste of money.")

Both Betty and George seem to enjoy these differences and appreciate each other's unique qualities. The focus throughout their relationship seems to be on building each other up--always making the other person feel loved, wanted, needed and useful. It seems as though the underlying game plan of their enduring relationship is based on providing a sense of mutual security, love, and respect for each other.

With all of this mutual respect, it is still apparent that this is an old-fashioned relationship in which traditional sex-roles are clearly upheld. George is defined as the breadwinner, even though he is now retired. Betty has always taken care of the business side of his dental practice. Betty is defined as the homemaker, though George, like other men, is given the task of puttering around on "men-type" projects. One wonders if this type of relationship could survive for very long among younger

21<sup>st</sup> Century couples. Furthermore, both Betty and George seem to accept their roles on the surface, but there has been an underlying threat of Betty becoming a "woman's libber." This is no joke for George.

Though George says he like to tease Betty about the lib stuff, the fact remains that George has been very concerned that Betty might get "funny ideas." He does not want his wife doing anything other than homemaking. He is ignoring the fact that she has been a very successful businessperson for years in running the dental practice.

Betty has never had the courage to assert herself, though there are many things that she would have liked to have done (as told us after the interview was concluded), Simple things, like joining a bridge club, taking a class in accounting at the university, taking a part-time job at a nearby dress shop. George didn't want any wife of his out running around. He wanted her home. Betty stayed home for her lifetime in order to keep the peace. She had literally no social contacts outside her family. Love may have lingered here—but at great cost for Betty (and perhaps even George).

## **Tradition and Sacrifice of Self**

Betty and George have survived and even thrived in their own uniquely constructed relationship. They went through many hard times in creating and recreating themselves as a couple. Outside the interview, Betty indicated that "marriage is a series of mini-divorces." She had considered leaving George several times during their marriage, but never mentioned such personal crises to George. It seems as if Betty has taken on the remarriage process single-handedly, which may have been typical of many women of her generation.

The relationship between Betty and George has remained intact because the two partners established a very traditional relationship. Their relationship is aligned with the complementary relationships to be found throughout most civilizations. These are the one up and one down relationships between master and servant, boss and employee—as well as parent and child. This is supported and maintained sometimes through loving symmetrical communications of mutual respect and praise. Tragically, it is maintained at many other times through fear, repression and sanctioned violence. Enduring intimate relationships are supposed to be based on the more positive elements of complementarity—though they often can look more like master and servant.

The relationship between Betty and George seems on the surface to be working—both partners express feelings that they are very fortunate to be with one another. They really seem to mean it when they say that they love each other. Privately, however, Betty reveals a darker side of their relationship when she speaks of the almost total sacrifice of self on her part. She indicated outside the interview that her mother had told her: "Honey, for a marriage to work, the woman must give 90% and the man 10%." Betty's experiences have shown this to be the case.

There is an important question to be posed at this point: does not growing together through several developmental stages require two participants who are willing to help the other with their own growth and maturation? What happens when one of the participants has more or less given up their "self" for the sake of the other or for the sake of the relationship? Then you have one person going through the stages of his or her life with the help of an obedient appendage who has sacrificed their own identity.

Betty and many other women of her age and era have experienced this sacrifice. Their husbands have an identity. Even they as a couple have an identity (often established primarily through child-rearing). The primary role of wife is to support these two identities rather than establish her own. Such a state of inequity will hopefully not be tolerated among younger men and women of our current era.

## **Should We Get What We Want?**

There is a couple (Madeline and Jack) with whom I have been working. They have been together for many years; however, for each member of the couple they have had to live with one of their major needs not being met. For Madeline the need relates to financial security. Her own family went through major financial hardships. Her father lost his job (because of health issues) and the family plunged from middle class prosperity to near poverty.

She now is married to a man who has taken major financial risks. He owns a business and has invested a considerable amount of money in it over the past 30 years. While Madeline and Jack now lead a good life in retirement, Madeline still is quite resentful about the money that Jack has "squandered" over the years. She feels like she has been "sacrificing" for many years, just to help Jack realize his "dreams." Madeline gets angry and often shouts at Jack.

What about Jack? He grew up in a family that was loving, but not very demonstrative

with their love. There is little physical contact among family members: just an occasional hug. Jack longed for more physicality and emotional connection in his marriage. This has not occurred. Jack recalls being hugged by Madeline only once during the past decade, while he will give her a hug and a bit of a backrub every day. For Jack, it is a matter of quiet despair. Why can't Madeline occasionally come over and wrap me up in her arms? How about an occasional spontaneous kiss? Jack gets depressed and withdraws from Madeline.

I know that Madeline and Jack will remain married for the rest of their lives together. Their relationship will endure. They are committed to one another and subscribe to the oath they took during the marriage ceremony held many years ago: "until death do us part." Yet, neither have found one of the most important things they desire in their enduring relationship. Is it just a matter of replicating their own family of origin? Does Madeline somehow need to find a man who takes risks (like her own father did)? Was she attracted to Jack right from the start because he had a sparkle in his eye and a head full of dreams?

With Jack, is it possible that he can't really handle much physical display of love or much verbal expression of emotions? Perhaps he was turned away during his dating years from women who were highly expressive. Did he find them to be "smothering"? Was he always "coming up for air" when he was with them? Perhaps Madeline was a safe bet for him—not too much of the physical stuff. Jack gets to live a life that is not unlike what his parents lived. He longs for something that he actually might not know how to handle.

## **How About 95%?**

Is it finally a matter of finding compromises in our life? Is our intimate enduring relationship just one (and perhaps the most important one) of the domains in which we accept less than we really want? I recently came to reflect on this question when meeting with a young woman I know. She had recently broken up with a man who exhibited many wonderful qualities. He was a "great catch!" Yet, she broke off their relationship.

She told me that she couldn't remain with him because he didn't offer everything that she needs in a relationship. He fulfills 95% of what she needs, but not 100%. She indicates that she still loves him and longs to be with him—but he isn't the right one for her. I wonder if she will ever find the 100%. Perhaps like Madeline and Jack - and perhaps like all of us—she needs to fall in love with and live in an



enduring, intimate relationship with someone who is 95% (or maybe even 87%).

## **Preparing for Death: Parent, Partner or Oneself**

In many marriage ceremonies in Western Societies, the phrase "for better or for worse; in sickness and in health" appears—along with "until death do us part". This is probably a good thing—for committed, long-term relationships often exist only among couples who are willing and able to weather enormous adversity together. They must navigate financial hardships, career reversals, major illnesses and, in particular, death.

There tend to be two or three types of death that partners in an enduring relationship must face during their many years together. First, they must face the death of their own parents. Second, they must face the death of their partner. Third, they must face their own death (either before or after the death of their partner). Each of these experiences places all other developmental stages and plates in a new perspective. These experiences encourage deep reflection on and maturation of life purposes and values.

### **Forgiveness**

Erik Erikson (Erikson, Erikson and Kivnick,1986) identifies the primary developmental task that he believes should be engaged during the last stages of our personal lives. This task is coming to terms, finally, with our own parents and the long-unresolved conflicts that we may have had with them. Ultimately, according to Erikson, we can only come to terms with our own life and our own impending death, when we have come to terms with our parents.

When we have forgiven them for their inadequacies, then by extension, we have forgiven ourselves for our own inadequacies. Our guide, John Gottman (2015, p. 253) gets quite personal in addressing this issue of self-forgiveness: "As I look back on my own life, I realize that forgiving myself for all of my imperfections has made an immense difference in my role as a husband and father."

From a more spiritual perspective, Moore (1994, pp. 76-77) similarly observes that:

Our task as adults . . . might be to search for whatever it takes to forgive

our parents for being imperfect. In some families those imperfections might be slight, in others severe, but in any case, we each have to deal with evil and suffering in our own lives, without the benefit of a scapegoat. In fact, our lives would be all the richer if we could let go of the excuse of parental failure; we could make interesting adult lives out of the challenge of a world in which evil and suffering play a role. . . . Another benefit of releasing our parents and other family members from responsibility for our fate is the possibility of establishing a satisfying relationship with them—no small achievement for the soul. . . . Forgiveness clears the way for some kind of connection—tenuous and slight in some situations, profoundly satisfying in others.

Gottman (2015, p. 253) enters the conversation once again. He notes that: “one route toward [self-forgiveness] may be our personal spiritual beliefs. . . . Whatever your perspective on religions, there is an important message here for long-term relationships. Expressions of thanksgiving and praise are the antidotes to the poison of criticism and its deadly cousin, contempt.”

While as Gottman suggests, engagement in acts of appreciation (thanksgiving and praise) might best be done throughout our life in an enduring intimate relationship, it is particularly appropriate near the end of life. What does it mean to end our life as someone who is unforgiven by the person we most love?

Conversely, what are the words we wish to hear from our loved one regarding what they most appreciate and care most about in their long-term relationship with us? It is perhaps nowhere more important than for appreciative love to linger at these final moments in our life.

## **Death of our Parents**

Men and women typically do not begin to think in a serious manner of their own death or the death of their partner until such time as they are faced with the death of parents, favorite aunts and uncles, or other people who played significant roles in their lives. Certainly, this emerging awareness of one's own mortality is a central theme in the life of most middle-aged men and women. At the point when men and women begin to confront the death of significant others in their lives then they will inevitably begin to consider the potential death of their partner prior to their own death. This is particularly likely among women who marry men who are of the same age or older.

The death of a parent or other significant person in one's life tends to either open up or finally resolve some powerful personal issues that can't help but impact on one's relationship with a lifelong partner. Sam, for instance, spoke about the recent death of his father. Sam's father died of liver cancer several months before the interview.

His father had been an alcoholic. Sam reported that he hated his father vehemently and continues to hate him even after his death. Sam was notified that his father's death was imminent, yet Sam refused to go to the hospital to see him. He attended the funeral but returned home promptly after the service ended, refusing to go to the graveyard for the committal service.

Neither Sam nor Caroline had much to say about their own potential death, though it was quite clear throughout the interview that Sam felt the relationship with his father to be unresolved and (now) unresolvable. He is resistant to any advice from other people (particularly from either his mother or Caroline's parents) regarding his own career or life choices. Sam seems to be stuck and unable to move ahead with his own life.

Given the centrality of his career (as choir director) in the life of his family and, in particular, his marriage, the further development of Sam and Caroline's relationship may have to await his coming to terms with his own father and their estranged relationship. Can he ever forgive his father? And then can he ever forgive himself?

## **Potential Death of Our Partner**

Like many couples, Ruth and Mary have given some thought to the potential death of one another. Ruth indicated that:

I think we both feel that if we had to . . . if something happened to you or something happened to me, we would get along somehow. We could run our lives. We would be able to live afterwards, in some way. I kind of have that gut feeling. We are both survivors, it's true, but I've never had to survive in quite that . . . close, a big one. I think I could do it, but I'd probably be miserable for a while, a long time. At least every Sunday night [laugh]. But I think you know that if I weren't here, I would want you to enjoy your life. Yeah, and I know that you would too [laughing].

Most men and women who wish to spend the rest of their life with one other person will someday have to help their partner face the death of a parent or other cherished

friend or relative. They must also face the prospect of their partner's death. Fortunately, for most of us the potential death of one's partner is a life stage issue that can be deferred to the last half of life. For some couples, unfortunately, the issue of life and death and massive intrusive life events occurs much earlier in the life of the couple. This was certainly the case for many gay couples who were facing the horrors of AIDS during the 1990s.

Martin and Victor are just such a couple. They have been partners since the early 1990s, when they met in New York City. They had been living on the east coast until about ten months prior to the interview when they decided to move west. Martin has been living with AIDS for many years and received chemotherapy treatment for lymphoma over a one-year period of time.

Victor was tested for the AIDS virus during the 1990s and is HIV-positive. Martin's illness was the reason they decided to move to San Francisco. They both felt that it was important to be in a community that was on the forefront of combating the AIDS epidemic. Such a community, they hoped, would provide them with the services and support they knew that they will need during their senior years.

In telling their individual and collective life stories, Martin and Victor noted that they both came from disrupted family lives. As a result, they were both looking for a stable home life, with a house and somebody on whom they could depend. There were no positive role models for these two men, given that their family was dysfunctional. Furthermore, most members of the gay community in the east coast city where they lived were for many years "in the closet:"

. . .we would look at our families and then look at Donna Reed's family and think that Donna Reed's family and the Beaver's family were a little too far gone. But somewhere in between there's something that should be supportive and adult, without playing all these games. [You] should be able to sit down with the person that you love and say I feel this way about this, without them getting real upset.

When they did look to other gay couples for role-models during their early years together, it appeared that most gay relationships revolved strictly around sex. All other aspects of the couple's lives were completely separate. Martin and Victor realized that their relationship was much different and therefore the other gay couples they knew offered no insight during the 1990s and first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

They did manage to build a relationship without the aid of role-models, but faced yet another transition point during the 1990s, without any role models. How do you confront the potential death of one or both partners when you are still at the prime of life and are still at the relatively early stages of the relationship? How do you suddenly establish a mature relationship that has witnessed all the grief and love associated with death? How do you learn how to grapple with AIDS?

There certainly were many other gay couples living around them in San Francisco that were coping with similar problems during the 1990s. Martin and Victor were probably smart to move to a city where they were not alone in their struggles. Yet, at the time no one seemed to know how to handle this new intrusive illness that was threatening the very core of many communities in the United States and elsewhere in the world.

For both Martin and Victor, acceptance by other people (and, in particular, their parents) was essential, if they were to cope with this massive intrusion in their lives. Both men point out that acceptance had played a major role in the formation of their relationship. Martin observed, that meeting Victor's family "was a big thing in starting to think of us as a couple.

It was shortly after that [Victor's] brother started referring to me as his sister-in-law. I still have to get even with him for that." Victor noted this acceptance took quite a while. Members of both their families started treating them as a couple at the point when they were accepted by Victor's family. They started to get invitations as a couple from many different sources at this point in their history.

Obviously, Martin's hospitalization with AIDS-induced illness served as another marker event in their relationship. It forged a new level of commitment and intimacy for Martin and Victor—as it does for many men and women who must share an intrusive life event with another person. When the interviewer asked how AIDS changed their relationship, Victor indicated that part of the change related back to Martin's relationship with his family:

When Martin was in the hospital and I took control of his family. That was a major change in the way in which I viewed our relationship. Up until that point, we hadn't had anything serious happen. That was the first time that we had a crisis and how we dealt with that was important. It changed our relationship. We both realized that we were there for each other, that we could support each other in a crisis, that we weren't going to run. And, I think we were surprised in some respects.

Martin commented at this point that he was in fact quite surprised (and gratified): "Oh yeah, I had completely prepared myself for the idea that you were going to say 'I packed all your bags and you need to make other living arrangements.'"

Victor, however, was very much there for Martin -- "for better or worse, in sickness and in health":

When I called him [Martin] at the hospital, he said he would understand if I left and I said "what are you talking about?" And I think then we understood that this was for good, and we were going to make it work. I don't even remember making a conscious decision that "yes, I was going to be committed to him through this". There was just no question.

This was certainly a marker event for Martin and Victor. They had previously come to define themselves as a partner because of their parents' recognition and acceptance of them as a couple. The identification and acceptance of other people of a relationship, and even the acceptance of one partner for the other is important. However, commitment rather than external acceptance is the essential ingredient in enduring relationships and the support of Victor for Martin at this point is clearly a marker of this commitment:

That was a very important point, because I [Martin] changed dramatically after that . . . all of a sudden I had someone in my life who I was sure of, and I was able to become stronger because I had someone that would support me no matter what . . . and it's like our relationship really grew from that. Because I think at the same time Victor really realized that he had never really cared for someone that much.

Shortly after this mutual commitment, Martin and Victor went for HIV testing and found that they were both HIV positive. This outcome suggested that each of them might soon need the support and understanding of their partner. Victor observed that the tables were now turned, and that he was greatly appreciative of Martin's commitment to him. Martin observes that:

. . . it was the same thing with Victor being sick. He was always saying he's so glad that I'm going to stay with him, and to me the idea of leaving was just too foreign. I said to Victor: "You know, of course I'm going to stay. Our lives have become too intertwined to leave."

What is the nature of this remarkable, enduring commitment that Martin and

Victor have made to one another in facing these two parallel intrusive events? Martin describes the two of them as a "family":

I really do think we became family at that point, we went further than being a couple, we became family. We became the center and everyone else became bit players. Even in the way our family treated us became very different.

Apparently, their families of origin began to recognize that something special was occurring between Martin and Victor. As a result, Martin and Victor began to take on different roles with each other and with their families. They became role models for their own siblings. It seems perfectly appropriate and somehow a sign of cosmic justice that two people who recognized the importance (and absence) of role models in their own lives, were able to build a relationship that is now worthy of the admiration of others. In Martin's words: "It's amazing with our families . . . Victor's brother and my sister look at us as the most stable couple they know. Victor's brother in particular views us as a role model in his own marriage."

As they came to face their own personal life challenge, as well as the challenge facing their partner, it is ironic that both Martin and Victor found a new sense of independence. This was perhaps needed as preparation for the potential loss of their partner. Martin observes with considerable insight that:

. . . we are becoming much more caring about each other and also becoming a lot more independent than we were. It's like the "leaning on" part is gone. We don't feel like we need to lean on each other anymore for support. And that's being replaced by something a lot nicer. It's hard to explain what it is. The only word I can come up with for it is love. It seems to be intensifying a lot more. I don't know if it's because of Victor being sick or just what the reason is but it just feels like it's. . . I thought I could never be more in love with Victor before, and I'm finding that every day I'm loving him a lot more than I did.

Victor concurs in expressing his own growing, maturing love: "The more I see you becoming an individual and taking care of yourself, the stronger my love for you grows. We are individuals, but so closely tied." Love lingers in a relationship of courage, caring and strength.

There is much to be learned from this couple about the nature of commitment and about the very essence of love. Martin and Victor have learned much about

themselves during the past three decades. They have much to teach the rest of us as a result of the intrusive life events they have experienced. Their experiences have galvanized their commitment. Victor claims that "there's nothing at this point that would stand in the way of our relationship." This commitment has stood the test of time.

They are both still alive—to tell a tale about their own enduring relationship. [Martin] felt [during the 1990s] like we may have another 40 years, or we may have another six months. However, “we knew that we can face just about anything and come out of it okay.” After many years of continuing to find life, they are finding even richer understanding, appreciation and love. Clearly, the developmental processes of this couple have been neither stable nor always pleasant. They have produced a relationship, however, that is truly exceptional and enduring. We can ask for little else from any contemporary American couple.

## **Living with the Death of Our Partner**

One of our guides, Stephanie Cacioppo, faced the death of her own loved one at a very early age. Her book, *Wired for Love*, is not just about the application of neurosciences to the nature of loving relationships. It is also about her own personal journey through loss. With all of this, she still has time to reflect as a neuroscientist on not just love but also loss. Cacioppo (2022, p. 165) first notices that the process of grief involves multiple perspectives: “we’re thinking about the loss not only from own perspective but also from the point of view of our lost loved one.”

There is an empathic response “that we felt toward our partner when she or he was living. . . [This response] remains intact even after our partner’s death. When we see their photograph or visualize them in our mind’s eye, we can’t help but imagine what they would think and feel about their own demise.” Cacioppo suggests that this empathic response is associated with the mirror neurons that I noted earlier in this book when describing the potential neurological source of limerence.

Cacioppo (2022, p. 189) proposes that our mirror neurons enable (and even encourage) us to expect the physical presence of our loved one when we see a photograph of them. I would suggest that just living in and visiting a place that we occupied with our loved one will trigger the mirror neurons. We grieve once more. We find it hard to come to terms with the death of our beloved.

From a similar perspective, many psychologists and spiritual guides speak of the



grieving process as entering into the realm of death with our loved one and then reemerging from this realm after our loved one's demise. Grieving is sustained and profound precisely because of this two-phase process—and perhaps also because of what Cacioppo describes as a two-tier process of encountering our own loss and imagining what our loved one “would think and feel about their own demise.”

As Cacioppo notes (with considerable pain) about the death of her own loved one: “I know I was the only person in our relationship who was still suffering, yet I focused intently on his suffering, as if he were still feeling it. I thought; *It's not fair*. And: *He's too young*. I wished over and over again that I could take his place.”

I would suggest, with tender empathy, that Stephanie Cacioppo didn't want to leave the realm of death. She wished, as she said, that she could take her husband's place in this realm. In my own work during the 1990s with many young men who were grieving the loss of their gay partner, I know that they shared Stephanie's profound wish that they could replace their loved one in the realm of death.

## Other Intrusive Life Events

The death of one's partner is certainly the most profound intrusion in life for many of us—exceeded in a few unfortunate instances by the death of one's own children. There are other deaths, however, that also impact in a profound manner on not just our personal lives but also the life of us as a couple. While we might not lose a child, we can lose a project about which we care deeply. Our dreams can be squashed in the face of financial, marketplace and even political realities.

We grieve the loss of a large chunk of our life. We may regret all of the time and money we devoted to our cherished project or the business we started, nurtured and loved. “Was it all worth it?” “What other path(s) might I/We have taken?” We must remember that there were good times and contributions made to our pocketbook, to the lives of those people we employed, and perhaps even to our community or society. All projects and businesses will eventually come to an end. It is hard to remember this lesson—but important to remember when grieving the termination of our dream.

There are other important losses that we may experience as a couple. This could include the loss of a job—or at the very least the retirement from a job. It might also include the death of siblings and dear friends. As we grow older, there is not only a frequent decline in the number of people with whom we regularly affiliate but also

the loss of those we still wish to hold close to our heart—resulting from major health issues or even death. In some instances, there is the massive intrusive of some financial or political collapse.

Our parents might have experienced this during the Great Depression. Our colleagues from other countries might have lived with political chaos and even warfare. As a couple we might have lived through natural events that impacted our individual and collective life. There are floods, earthquakes and fires that can produce a total disruption in our daily life -and disruption in the relationship we have built with our partner.

Such was the case with two people we interviewed: Bernard and Gwen. Their story exemplifies in highly dramatic fashion the impact which intrusive life events can have on the way in which a couple is formed and sustained. On October 19, 1991, Bernard and Gwen were comfortably situated in a beautiful Oakland, California home overlooking the San Francisco Bay. They had assembled many material objects that reflected their interests in sports and the arts—as well as photographs and letters that reminded them of the rich variety of their past lives. One day later all of this was gone. The Oakland firestorm destroyed their home and burned up all of their belongings.

Bernard later reflected that little energy was available during the first few days after the fire for experiencing any strong feelings:

At the time, attending full to the moment meant accepting this condition, not trying to change it. Accepting what was true became our main way of coping and finding meaning in the chaos of the events. Initially, we denied the reality of our loss by holding out hope that our house had somehow been spared. Our house was nearly at the center of the fire area, yet this thought persisted. Monday morning [one day after the fire started], as everything was still burning, and as we still held out our irrational hope that our house was okay, we began looking for a new home. This seemed our first priority. It wasn't until late Monday afternoon that we stopped to buy some clothes to wear. By Tuesday evening we had rented a house . . . For the next two weeks we shopped till we dropped.

For Bernard, the loss of his home and possessions was very difficult: "it is amazing how much we take for granted on a day-to-day basis. The amount of stuff [one owns] is staggering. It was very stressful making all the mutual decisions about our

new belongings."

By contrast, Gwen reports that:

From day one, I felt relieved, freer than I had felt in months. I had been on the top of one of life's curves, living in a beautiful house, making lots of money, but I suffered anxiety that "the big fall" was coming. After the fire, I felt empowered. I had seen the beast. I had felt its hot breath, and I had escaped unscathed. I suffered the loss of everything I owned, and yet I was okay! I actually reveled in how simple life became all of a sudden. Our worries were reduced to putting a roof over our heads and buying clothes. It was actually nice to be able to fit everything I owned in my car again.

The fire brought out new understanding and appreciation for Bernard as well as Gwen. Bernard came to recognize "how much of my self-image was tied up with my special belongings: skis, kayaks, mountaineering equipment, carpentry tools, etc." Without all of these "toys," Bernard felt that he could no longer express an important part of himself. Yet, like Gwen, he found that these things were not essential to his enduring sense of self: "I have not been diminished even though it may be quite a while before we can replace our expensive toys."

The changes that took place in their relationship were even more profound. Both Bernard and Gwen discovered several important things during these early years in their relationship. They discovered their own inner strength, the strength of their relationship, and the strength of the support and love showed by their friends and family. Bernard recalls that: "On Sunday, two weeks after the fire, we had an open house party in our new home. Our friends brought gifts, including multiple sets of kitchen gadgets and a great deal of love."

He later wrote a letter to these friends and indicated, in part, that the fire separated the world into two categories for him:

. . . we got to see the difference between that which is eternal and that which is simply the stuff of this place, and of this lifetime. One of the things that clearly fell into the light and will from now on is recognizing the true nature of deep love and compassion that comes from all of you.

Even with this abundant support from friends and colleagues, Bernard:

. . . began to feel weary and sad. I was depressed as I realized how long it might be before we could replace the toys I used most often. I started to return to work a little and [graduate] school was continuing. I was upset at falling behind and at having to drop one course and probably have to take incompletes in the others.. . I was feeling overwhelmed.. . It now seemed impossible to shut away or set aside the intensity of my emotional experience.

Conflict returned to Bernard's relationship with Gwen. They seemed to be out of sync with each other. The different ways in which they approached the world now seemed to be exacerbated and disruptive to their relationship. They both needed to learn much about and from each other during this early difficult phase of their relationship.

## **Conclusions: New Learning in the Midst of Loss**

The new learning for Gwen and Bernard was built on the appreciation that already existed—based on the witnessing of one another's strengths immediately after the fire. Bernard indicates that:

We had to find a way to work together to accomplish the extra work that still remained, and we had to be respectful of our individual process. Extra sensitivity and respect have been discovered for each other. Since the fire, two important aspects of our relationship have been altered. The first is the recognition of a shared vision of our basic human condition . . . The second is a deeper respect for each other's way of being in the world. This became possible following our acceptance of the powerful events of these past few months.

Gwen expressed similar sentiments, in slightly different terms:

Two months later, I can say the fire was undoubtedly the best thing that ever happened to either of us. I had already realized that "things" couldn't bring me happiness and was on my way to understanding that happiness was within me somewhere, buried under layers of defenses and anxieties. Now I know from experience, what other people can only conjecture that nothing you can "own" matters. Only that which cannot be taken away has

meaning.

While many relationships are destroyed when intrusive life events impact on the lives of those in the relationship, strong, enduring relationships will be strengthened by adversity. We have seen this in the life led by Martin and Victor. We also see it in the maturing relationship of Gwen and Bernard. As Gwen observes about her own life with Bernard: "like the fire that forges iron into steel, our marriage has been forged by this experience, and we have barely begun to feel the truths that will come of it." This forged relationship has continued to endure as Gwen and Bernard celebrate their 38<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

## Key Chapter Points

Enduring couples:

- Prepare for major changes in the ways in which they relate to one another as a result of a major life transition (retirement, illness, etc.).
- Respond to a major intrusive life event by finding new ways to work and live together to accomplish joint goals.
- Continue to adjust to on-going problems regarding children, spouses /partners of children and grandchildren.
- Grapple with core issues like "what are we truly about?" and "what would I ever do without you?"
- Find new things to talk about, new ways to occupy their shared time together, new ways to budget their static or diminished income.
- Cherish recollection of joint previous life experiences.
- Savor their mature relationship with each other.
- Embrace life.
- Reintegrate, both consciously and unconsciously, the male and female sides of themselves learned from their life partner.
- Enjoy their respective differences and appreciate each other's unique qualities.

- Help their partner face the death of a parent or other cherished friend or relative.
- Demonstrate in daily behaviors their commitment to their partner and to their relationship as a couple.

**Section Four**  
**Love And Endurance**

## Chapter Sixteen

# Love Lingers Here: The Ingredients of Enduring Relationships

As we bring this book to a close, two fundamental questions remain. First, we must ask *Why* people remain together for many years. Second, we must ask *How* people remain together and committed to their relationship for many years. Love seems to be lingering—but why and how? The answers to both questions are not easily found.

One of our guides, Stephen Sondheim struggled with the first of these questions when deciding how to conclude his exploration of married life in his musical *Company*. He wrote several wonderful songs that have often been performed in later years. Neither of these songs provided him with an answer. He wrote a third song that he thought did answer this first question. He titled this song “Being Alive”.

Sondheim provides this answer through his protagonist, Bobby who suggests/sings that an enduring intimate relationship is fundamental to the experience of living a full life. It is in the give and take of these relationships that we feel most alive. To remain disengaged is to look at life as an observer rather than live it as someone who cares, who is frightened, who is angry, who is confused. When love lingers—we are truly alive.

Bobby shares his interpersonal wish:

Somebody crowd me with love  
Somebody force me to care  
Somebody let me come through  
I'll always be there  
As frightened as you  
To help us survive  
Being alive

Is this an adequate Why answer? Is it just a matter of finding someone as frightened



as I am, who will crowd me with love and force me to care? And what about the How question? In this final chapter, I turn to a summary of the How answers and related lessons to be learned from the stories we have offered. I also seek answers to the perhaps unanswerable question of Why. And turn on occasion back to Sondheim and what it means to be alive when spending most of one's life with another person.

## **Voices from the Past:**

### **Lessons to Be Learned About Enduring Relationships**

Before turning to these stories, I thought it might be informative to listen to the advice and life experiences offered by very long-term couples—for there are many couples in modern history with a much longer history than the couples we interviewed. What do these Methuselahs of Coupledom have to teach us about how to stay together as a couple? We turn first to the stories of these very long enduring relationships.

Certainly, in olden days there have been many couples who have supposedly lived together for very long periods of time. The Bible provides us with, the story of Abraham and Sarah. Given that Sarah lived to the grand old age of 128 (Genesis 23:1) – surviving war, intrigue and a very late childbirth – we can assume that she was married to Abraham for at least seventy or eighty years, although we can't be sure about their longevity.

We can be relatively certain, however, that their long-lasting relationship was due at least in part to their shared sense of value and purpose – and, in particular, their shared, devotion to Jehovah. They built a nation together, as well as raising a family together. Abraham and Sarah certainly exemplify the power of our fifth plate (Creating Something of Lasting and Shared Value). They also came from (and helped to establish) the same culture and shared many values.

Finally, the adversity in their life may itself have brought them closer together as many of the couples we interviewed taught us. It is almost trite to say that adversity either destroys a couple or brings it to a new level of trust and support. This adversity might reside in the external world—arising from war, discrimination, poverty or perhaps the many daily vicissitudes of life. The adversity might also come from inside the relationship itself—as we have noted in our analysis of interpersonal storms.

Sondheim puts it this way when describing what it means to be alive in the midst of our intimate enduring relationships:

Someone to hold you too close

Someone to hurt you too deep

Someone to sit in your chair

And ruin your sleep

What is it like to have our sleep ruined for many years?

## **Well-known Long-Term Couples**

What about more contemporary times? Are there marriages that have lasted this long and survived equally as traumatic events of war, social change and domestic strain in our own times. Is sleep still being ruined? If so, how have they managed to live together for such a long period of time? Each of us might already know of couples in our own life who have been together for many years. We might even have asked these couples what the glue has been for them. We also are acquainted collectively with the few long-term relationships that exist among celebrity couples.

We can mention Kevin Bacon & Kyra Sedgwick, Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Brad Hall. There is Mark Harmon and Pam Dawber, as well as Jamie Lee Curtis and Christopher Guest. To this short list we can add Keith Richards and Patti Hansen, Ozzy and Sharon Osbourne, Sarah Jessica Parker and Matthew Broderick—and finally Meryl Streep and Don Gummer. I would also offer the very long, enduring marriage of Jimmy and Rosalind Carter (what a remarkable example of shared values—our third plate should be named after them).

It is to be noted that this celebrity list is rather short. Apparently being famous is not necessarily beneficial for a couple. When asks about the keys to their long-term relationships, most of these celebrity couples point to the same relationship-sustaining strategies and actions that our non-celebrity couples identified, including equitable distribution of responsibilities in the home, finding time to be together in the midst of a very busy life, and engaging a bit of humor and appreciation when their relationship gets stormy.

There is also a unique challenge that must be addressed by many of these celebrity

couples. Often one member of the couple is famous, while the other member might be very successful but not famous. Frequently, these couples convey some version of the “wind beneath my wings” theme. The non-famous member provides the support and encouragement—especially during the early years of career related struggle for the celebrity.

There is one long-term celebrity couple that deserved some attention. The members of this couple are Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward. They not only were both very successful as motion picture actors, raised three children, and attained success in other careers (Paul as a race car driver), but also created a charity and built or co-sponsored several major theaters. Their work together exemplifies the way that couples can stay together on behalf of a joint project (plate four), and how shared and enacted values (plate three) can play a major role in sustaining the commitment of two people to one another over a lifetime.

## **Not Well-Known Long-Term Couples**

While that long-term couple that lives down the street from us might have words of wisdom to offer that are relevant to our own life, it is unlikely that most of us are living a life that resembles in any way the life of a celebrity couple. We must turn therefore to men and women who are not in the tabloids or featured on the Internet. In order to gain some wisdom from “ordinary” couples who have been together for many years, I decided to comb the major newspapers published in the United States over the past hundred years, as well as access more recent information to be found on the Internet. I found, many wonderful and often amazing stories about very long-term relationships.

First, when preparing this book, I kept bumping up against the yearly stories in the *New York Times* of the 1960s regarding a celebration hosted each year by the Family Life Bureau of the New York Catholic Archdiocese. A dinner and dance were held at St. Patrick's Cathedral for couples who had been married for fifty years. Each couple renewed their marriage vows at this long-standing ceremony.

In 1964, Cardinal Spellman hosted 300 couples. The Rev. Hugh Curran noted on this occasion that: “. . . in a culture that is hostile to many of the values in marriage which we hold sacred, we must work even harder to achieve . . . the loyalty and mutual assistance which the partners of a marriage give to each other.” Perhaps we are being alive if we hold each other very close and very deep.

By 1966, the number of fiftieth anniversary couples celebrating at St. Patrick's Cathedral had grown by 350 and by 1970 to 400. At these ceremonies, the inevitable question was asked of the celebrating couples: "what kept your marriage together?" Mr. and Mrs. Frank Konieki noted, that a husband and wife should "just be kind and grateful to one another." Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Baccaglini offered no advice at all: "not in this day and age!"

The Grand Street Boys Association also hosted an anniversary party for those couples in New York City who had been married for at least fifty years. Many of these couples lived on relief, others lived in homes for the aged. At this time the longest lasting marriage was recorded by Mr. and Mrs. Julius Maier of the Bronx, who had been married 60 years.

During the twenty-ninth annual festival in 1965, Harry Jacobs noted that he and his wife have "been married 50 years and we haven't stopped fighting yet." Mrs. Jacobs countered: "the secret of a happy marriage is to remember the good things and forget the bad. Remember the ups and forget the downs . . . That's the only way."

This may have been very sage advice, especially if Mr. Jacobs was correct in observing that they have been fighting for fifty years. Perhaps we are being alive if we need each other despite the conflicts and if we know each other, even if too well.

Sondheim would say:

Somebody need me too much  
Somebody know me too well  
Somebody pull me up short  
And put me through hell  
And give me support  
For being alive.

Mr. and Mrs. Jacobs and others attending this party might agree with Sondheim that "being alive" is a mixed blessing—but not something to be missed. So, they celebrate!

A decade earlier (1945), at the end of World War II, the Grand Street Boys Association hosted the eighth one of these parties. The longest married couple were Mr. and Mrs. Marcus Kay, who lived together for 62 years in the Bronx. A year earlier, Mrs. David Nierel reported, after 59 years of marriage, that: "I have my first husband . . . that's why I'm happy."

William Witz identified hard work as the key ingredient in marital bliss, but it was not clear whether he was referring to making a living or building a happy home. We suspect that he meant hard work in both domains of his life. Most of the couples apparently didn't want to comment on the key ingredients in a successful marriage. They just wanted to eat and dance. Perhaps, this is the reason for their success as long-lasting couples.

To turn once again to Sondheim:

Mock me with praise

Let me be used

Vary my days

Perhaps it is the dance which enables our long-term couples to vary their days. We find that they varied their days and used one another in many ways. They may have been partners not just in dance, but also in the engagement of several plates in their life (such as child-raising and building a home together).

## **Very Long-Term Couples**

These were the largest gatherings of long-term couples that we discovered in the newspapers of America, but these certainly were not the longest lasting marriages. In 1966, Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas Washienko of Yonkers, New York celebrated their seventieth anniversary. Yonkers proclaimed: "Nicholas M. Washienko Day." We don't know what Mrs. Washienko's reactions were to this civic oversight. When does she get her day?

Another pair of New Yorkers, Anton Gustafson and Borghild Anderson were born overseas, but married in Brooklyn and celebrated their seventieth anniversary in 1965. Mrs. Gustafson declared that: ". . . nothing excites me anymore. . . You get so used to big and beautiful things that nothing impresses you anymore . . . We've lived in the same neighborhood all our lives . . .that's why we've lived [together] so long. And we've loved through the best times - between the Spanish American War and World War I. It was peaceful and friendly and ever since there has been excitement." Perhaps we are being alive when we share our feelings with someone who wants us to share a little, a lot.

Borghild goes on to observe that modern women "always seem to be spending

money and going out -- they expect too much, busy keeping up with the Joneses. I say the heck with the Joneses!" In her defiance and in her commitment to community and continuity, Borghild echoes the sentiments expressed by many of our long-term couples. Like many of our successful couples, she is committed to finding a distinctive way in which she and Anton live their life together.

Yet, she does not want to remain isolated. She wants to remain in her community and recognizes that her relationship with Anton is sustained, in part, through their mutual commitment to their local community. What about Anton'? Well, he has been deaf for many years and refuses to get a hearing aid. He still has his own views on the matter, however. According to Anton, Borghild is "the best wife they don't come any better." Case closed.

Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Baskin of Brooklyn, New York celebrated their seventy-fifth anniversary in 1949. Mr. Baskin was quite forceful, in his support of marriage, after all these years: "there is no question that there should not be any bachelors or old maids. After seventy-five years of marriage, I think I am qualified to recommend it." Mrs. Baskin added that: "marriage should take place while the people are young. The earlier, the better. I was married at the age of 13. The companionship of marriage is what makes life worthwhile."

The Baskins were second cousins who were married in 1874 in their native village of Stolin, Russia. Mrs. Baskin came to the United States in 1908. Mr. Baskin remained in Stolin to dispose of property, then emigrated to America in 1909. Mr. Baskin was a mason in the east side of New York. At the age of 94 he still got up at six o'clock in the morning to attend religious services. Both Mr. and Mrs. Baskin agreed that to be happy in wedded life: "you have to make the best of things, good and bad." Perhaps being alive is the presence of someone we love who will always be there for us—even though they are as frightened as we are.

Mr. and Mrs. William Cook of Santa Rosa California give us some advice upon celebrating their 75th anniversary. Mrs. Cook suggests that wives "learn to cook a good meal and you'll keep your husband." Mr. Cook likewise had some advice. He urges husbands to "learn to eat the cooking and not complain and you'll keep out of trouble." We don't hear from the Cooks after this year (1953), but trust that their cooking (and conflict avoidance) arrangements held up for at least a few more years.

We also know of one couple from Hornell New York (Mr. and Mrs. Charles Cadogan) and one from New York City (A. H. and Maria Ames) who celebrated seventy-five years of marriage. Very few couples are heard from after this "watershed" seventy fifth anniversary. The attention given to this anniversary may

encourage them to assume a lower profile in future years.

Beyond the seventy fifth year of marriage, we find Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Blumenthal of Atlantic City, New Jersey (formerly of Pomeroy, Ohio) who celebrated their seventy sixth anniversary in 1935. They were both born in Germany and identified the secret to long term relationships as "friendship and understanding and not taking life too seriously." Like many of the couples we interviewed a sense of humor seems to have contributed to their longevity, along with some interpersonal skills. A letter from President Roosevelt capped off their day of celebration. Perhaps we are most alive when someone we love makes us aware every day that we are alive.

In the shadow of World War II (1941), the *New York Times* took notice of another couple who were married seventy-six years: Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Rockwell of Danbury, Connecticut. Joseph was a prisoner of the Confederate Army during the Civil War, returned to Danbury and married his childhood sweetheart, whom he had courted since she was fourteen years old. The Times also noted their seventy-seventh anniversary in passing. We lose touch after 1942. An even longer marriage was recorded by Mr. and Mrs. James Pratt who were married seventy-eight years before he died in 1946.

## **The Longest-Lasting Relationships**

As of 1944, the Pratts were supposedly the longest married couple in the United States (according to a national survey conducted by a flour company). In subsequent years, however, we find several couples that have established even more impressive records of longevity. Mr. and Mrs. Francis Miller of Madison Indiana celebrated their seventy-ninth anniversary in 1956. They received a congratulatory message from President Eisenhower (who was himself one half of a long-term relationship, having been married to Mamie for more than fifty years).

In the western United States, we find two marriages that lasted for seventy-nine years. Peter and Celestrina Peterson of Fairview, Utah commented on their seventy-nine years together. In 1957, Mr. Peterson suggested that "plain living and very fair health" contributed to their longevity. He also credited God and the fact that neither he nor his wife have ever smoked or imbibed. These latter factors certainly contributed to the lengthening of their individual lives and may have contributed to the longevity of their marriage – but did these factors make their time together more pleasant? Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Peterson commented from this perspective.

Drusilla Keith and Ben Hartley were both sixteen years old when they married in (London County) Tennessee in 1875. Seventy-nine years later they celebrated their anniversary in Sagle, Idaho. Like the Rockwells of Danbury Connecticut, they grew up near one another, living on adjoining farms. Dursilla and Ben had more than one hundred descendants at the time of their anniversary in 1954.

One of the three longest lasting marriages in North America can be jointly claimed by the United States and Canada. Mr. and Mrs. John Henkel were married for eighty years as of 1947. They were both born in Brooklyn, New York and moved to St. Marguerite in Quebec Canada in 1872 after they were married. On the day of their eightieth anniversary, Mr. Henkel observed that: "all of our troubles are behind us. We had a lot of problems, but we overcame all of them. Our greatest problem right now is how to blow out the 80 candles our grandchildren are putting on the cake for the party tonight."

Once again, a bit of humor sprinkled in with a generous amount of honesty about the problems they confronted in their lives together. None of this "lived happily ever after." Rather, they learned to acknowledge and confront their inevitable conflicts and difficulties in life. Does this suggest that we are most alive when someone we love puts us through hell, yet gives us support?

Eugene Gladu and Dolores Gladu have been husband and wife longer than any other North American couple alive today. Married on 25 May 1940 in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, the couple were awarded their Guinness World Records titles in July 2021 after 81 years 57 days of marriage. They have a total of five generations in their family! Eugene and Dolores currently live together in an assisted living facility, still enjoying each other's company after all these years. The pair have lived an active lifestyle and spent their prime years dancing, canoeing, snowmobiling, hiking and travelling together.

The only reliable instance of an eighty third anniversary is reported in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. Ed and Margaret Holler celebrated their eighty third anniversary on May 7, 1972, having been married in Kentucky in 1889. A longer United States marriage, however, has been reported in the *New York Times*. Otto and Annie Shipp of Sylvester Georgia observed their eighty fifth anniversary in 1976, having been married in 1891. At the time of their wedding, Annie was fourteen and Otto was eighteen. When asked about the ingredients in a successful marriage, Annie Shipp stated that "there are no secrets. Just do right and treat him as he is .. . a man." Otto proclaimed that "every day I live with her, I like it better and better." Words to live by.



As we look to the Internet for information about the longest lasting relationships in North America, we find that The Guinness World Record for longest living American couple belongs to North Carolinians Herbert and Zelmyra Fisher. Herbert and Zelmyra grew up together as best friends in North Carolina, USA and married on 13 May 1924. Herbert was 18 years old and Zelmyra was 16. They were married for 86 years, 290 days as of February 27, 2011 when Herbert died at the age of 105. Together they withstood the Great Depression and World War II, lived through the Civil Rights Movement and eventually lived to witness the first African American president of the USA. President Obama even sent them a signed commendation in 2010!

Herbert and Zelmyra offered some Valentine's Day advice on a 2010 Twitter: "A friend is for life; our marriage has lasted a lifetime," they said. However, if you're looking for their biggest secret to a long-lasting marriage, you may be disappointed to find out there isn't one. "There's no secret to our marriage, we just did what was needed for each other and our family." With each day that passed, the relationship between Herbert and Zelmyra grew stronger and more secure. "Divorce was NEVER an option, or even a thought," they wrote. The best piece of marriage advice Zelmyra and Herbert ever received was to "respect, support, and communicate with each other. Be faithful, honest, and true. Love each other with ALL of your heart." Their fondest memory of their record-breaking marriage was the legacy they left behind; 5 children, 10 grandchildren, 9 great-grandchildren, and 1 great-great grandchild.

Very few marriages elsewhere in the world have matched Otto and Annie Shipp's record in terms of either longevity or grace--nor the Fisher's long-term commitment to doing what was needed every day. Only four have been reported that rival the record of the Shipp and Fishers. Sir Temulhi Nariman (who was an Indian physician) and Lady Nariman, were married for eighty-six years, although she was only five years old when they were wed and was a cousin of Sir Temulhi. Two Serbian marriages of extraordinary length have been recorded in modern times. In 1932, two Yugoslavian peasants claimed to be celebrating their one hundredth anniversary. More than one hundred descendants were present at the celebration. We don't know their names.

In 1934, a second couple, Stoyan and Yelka Dimitriyevitch, were reported to have observed their one hundredth anniversary. Stoyan was 123 years old at the time and Yelka was 119. They were married in 1833. A third couple, Mr. and Mrs. Akmed Adamov also reportedly celebrated their one hundredth anniversary (in 1956). He was a 121-year-old farmer who lived with Mrs. Adamov near the Caspian Sea in

what was then the Soviet Union.

None of these marriages have been formally acknowledged as world records, though they speak to a remarkable span of time during which two people have lived together and observed and coped with profound social and cultural change. Imagine living together from 1833 to 1934! Or were the changes really so great given that these men and women lived in small Eastern European villages?

Could longevity on the part of any of these couples be dependent at least in part on the absence of major change in their world? To what extent are we likely to see long-term relationships of this length in contemporary times? Despite advances in health care, we may never again see 80 to 100-year relationships, given the inability of virtually any couple in the world today to remain sheltered from profound, turbulent change.

In addition to this dimension of stability and continuity in the world around them, what seem to be the key ingredients that make for a very long, successful marriage? Obviously, the first ingredient is the physical health of both partners. But there are other factors that clearly contribute to not only the physical well-being of both partners, but also the well-being of their relationship. The long-lasting American and European marriages we just identified would seem to point to not only the influence of cultural and social stability, but also the role played by religion (blessed by or at least held together by God) and communality of experience (growing up near one another or facing major challenges in their life together).

The success of these relationships also can be attributed, according to one or both partners, to such factors as love, mutual respect, humor or the avoidance of conflict. As Sondheim and our dancing couples suggest, we might be most alive when someone we love varies our days. Several of the long-term partners spoke of the need to accept (or ignore) the foibles of their partner, or to accept traditional marital roles (we noted that the wife's first name was rarely given in newspaper articles). Will these strategies still work with the present day challenging of traditional sex role expectations? Perhaps Mr. and Mrs. Baccaglioni were right in refusing to offer any advice "in this day and age."

## Studies of Long-Term Relationships

Several studies have been conducted that concern the ingredients of long-term relationships. Many of these studies yield the image of "golden sunset" relationships: partners who have lived together happily for fifty years or more. These golden sunset mates tend to look more and act more alike after many years of living together. The Duke and Duchess of Windsor offer a classic (or should we say royal) example of the "golden sunset" couple.

A full page spread in the *New York Times* (June 1, 1962, p. 30, col. 1) devoted to their twenty fifth anniversary indicated that "after twenty-five years of togetherness, they have seldom been separated except for illness or emergency. The Duke and Duchess present a picture of affectionate solidarity and upper-crust domesticity. . . . Whatever they appeared to be in 1937, the Windsors seem to be more so in 1962 -- he more friendly, more wistful, she more regal and fastidious." There seems to be an indefinable symbiosis that grows between two people like the Duke and Duchess who have created a golden sunset relationship. This type of close, long-term relationship often suggests that neither partner can die because they are so much intertwined with one another.

We can also turn to some of the classic studies of enduring relationships that offer insights of continuing value. The sociologist, James Peterson (1956), identified many stable, long-lasting relationships with little overt conflict: "who gives in to whom had been resolved a long time ago." One is reminded of Mr. and Mrs. Cook's complimentary comments about cooking. She always tries to cook him a good meal and he never complains about what she does cook him. Peterson noted that "there [is] very little excitement in these marriages." He did find some creative marriages "but unfortunately [there are] not very many of them."

By contrast, Marcia Lasswell (1976) described the "survivor" couple: two people who are not happy and feel trapped in their relationship. Their marriage is filled with conflict and, in many instances, either many unsuccessful remarriages (to use the concept introduced in this book) or no attempts at trying to revitalize the relationship. They feel like they never had a chance to get out, given social pressures, children, economic constraints and so forth.

In her extensive research on contemporary marriages, Lasswell found a small number of "golden sunset" marriages, a larger number of "survivor" marriages, and a vast number of marriages that fall in between. We probably can expect fewer

survivor marriages in the future, as the option of divorce becomes more viable in our society. We might also expect fewer "golden sunset" marriages, however, as the pressures surrounding long-term relationships increase.

What then can we conclude about the reasons why couples are able to stay together for a long period of time? Do we look to Stephen Sondheim and his exploration of the ingredients in a long-term relationship that enables us to be alive? Do we want someone who crowds us with love and forces us to care? Will they always eventually come through and help us survive? Is this what being alive is ultimately all about? Or is it more simply the matter of options. As Sondheim declares: "Alone is alone. Not Alive."

To look past Sondheim, we turn back to our interviews. In what ways do they complement (or contradict) the observations made by the very long-lasting relationships we just surveyed—and the often disturbing but insightful observations made by Stephen Sondheim. They will help us identify the **Why** and **How** of love that has lingered for many years.

## **The Nature and Dynamics of Enduring Relationships**

Throughout this book we have listened to the stories told by men and women who have lived together with other men and women for many years. The answers to why and how may be found in these stories. We have found many answers and many stories that indeed inspire a belief in the lingering power of love. Limerence turns into deep commitment and compassion. Daily life is filled with bids, compromises and celebrations. Charters are created, children are raised, shared projects are completed. Still, the question remains: why stay together all these years? And what is the glue?

As we reflected back on the stories and lessons provided by the men and women we interviewed for this book, one very strong theme emerged: enduring relationships are built on a strong commitment to remain together, despite adversity experienced by the two partners and by the couple itself.

At the start of this book, we described two different models of intimate relationships, one defining intimate relationships in terms of happiness and the capacity the relationship to provide joy in our life, the other defining intimate relationships in terms of the learning and growth that can occur in this difficult type of relationship in our society.

While listening to the people we interviewed, we found ourselves leaning toward the latter model. The enduring relationships that were described to us seemed to be the vehicles not for happiness, but rather for learning and growth. In many instances, the partners we interviewed have chosen to remain in and work on their relationship not because they wanted to be happy, but rather because they wanted to build a life together and find meaning in their life through their enduring, intimate relationship.

The first model seems to be the product of marital counselors and psychologists, who are in the business of helping to alleviate pain. Just as physicians will soon be out of business if they can't alleviate their patients' pain, as well as treat the physical problem that precipitates the pain, so marital therapists must help troubled partners find a way to feel better about themselves and their relationship.

It is understandable, therefore, that therapists who write books about couples try to help their readers alleviate the pain in their relationship and that they tend to view intimate relationships as contracts to be modified and even dissolved if the relationship isn't a source of happiness for both partners.

The second model, by contrast, seems to be the product of religious leaders and other people involved in the business of personal and spiritual growth. They are not in the business of alleviating pain, but rather in the business of "soul work" or, stated in secular terms, in the business of encouraging hard and often painful maturation of one's sense of life purposes and personal destination.

This difficult work is only likely to occur within the context of the relationship if the two partners establish a firm commitment, which we have identified as a "covenant." Within these constraining boundaries, a couple can take risks and come back together again and again through remarriage processes.

In previous times, this covenant relationship was perhaps easier to establish in most Western societies—given the pervasive role of formal religious institutions in our society. Couples were enduring in large part because church-based societies would not allow partners to break up their relationship. Contemporary relationships no longer are sustained because of strong social or religious taboos; rather, they must be sustained through the personal commitments of each partner to the relationship.

This is a much more difficult commitment for anyone to make, yet it is also a more authentic commitment than was made in the past. It is a mature commitment that allows for personal and collective growth, rather than just the grudging and often destructive incarceration of both partners in a sterile and dehumanizing

relationship.

Obviously, we base our conclusions in this book on a very distorted sample, for we have focused on enduring relationships, which are not necessarily "typical" in our contemporary society. We interviewed men and women who have chosen to remain in a relationship for many years, rather than those who have chosen to move in and out of relationships. We should anticipate, therefore, that our couples describe mechanisms for sustaining their relationship, such as covenants, remarriages and. retelling of founding stories.

Given this central theme of commitment of enduring relationships, what are some of the essential characteristics that surround this theme? Ironically, we didn't really have to go very far to find these characteristics. When asked what they would say to other couples about the lessons they have learned, Alice and Fred identified four lessons that captured the essence of most of the lessons cited by other couples. First, no matter what kind of problems are likely to confront this couple, Alice and Fred indicate that they are "still able to talk," if not immediately, then very soon thereafter.

Communication is critical to the continuation of Alice and Fred's relationship as it is for most enduring couples. Alice and Fred were able to overcome these differences, by honoring a variety of different modes of communication. Many men like Fred express their feelings primarily through modes other the overt description of their feelings. They express their feelings through actions and through offering assistance to the person they love.

Second, Alice and Fred cite their commitment to the third entity (the couple). Their relationship stands strong, no matter what the individual disappointments or wavering in their commitment to each other may be. Through their relationship, Alice and Fred have an opportunity to "create something bigger" than themselves through various kinds of investments in their relationship. They share financial investments, emotional investments and two children.

Thus, if they are conflicted regarding one of the developmental plates, they have other plates, in which they are currently performing in a satisfactory manner. Most importantly, they keep a healthy perspective regarding these conflicts. At the heart of the matter is their somewhat detached perspective on and humor regarding the domains in which they are in conflict. Throughout our interviews we found that humor was often absolutely indispensable in keeping the partners from taking each other and their areas of conflict too seriously.

Third, Alice and Fred share a vision of the future and their future and their own

growth together as a couple and individually as two maturing adults. Their values plate is mature and stable, serving grounding for their own life plans as they prepare for their senior years and their final stage of development as a couple. At the heart of their shared commitment to a specific set of values (and their own relationship in particular) are a set of simple ceremonies and rituals that they perform frequently in their relationship. These ceremonies and rituals serve as symbols and reminders of the special nature of their relationship.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Alice and Fred have a shared memory of the past. They can recall events that they have enjoyed' together and hardships they have endured together. This "community of memory" serves as glue for their relationship and provides the substance for this third entity and their commitment to it. In essence, we must tend to the unique character of the relationship we have constructed, as well as the broader culture(s) that we bring to the relationship from our own societal upbringing.

Our interviews suggest that we can tend to this unique character—what Moore (1994, p. 85) calls a “cultural hearth” in part through telling stories. These stories provide continuity as well as the celebration of our unique relationship. We found that the very process of asking men and women like Alice and Fred to tell us stories about their relationship was an insight and confirming experience for them as well as those of us who conducted the interviews. We join with Alice and Fred in encouraging partners who read this book to spend time together sharing and talking about their own favorite stories. Storytelling may be particularly important for partners who are seeking a breakthrough in their own relationship or even a remarriage.

## **Summary of Findings**

In bringing our study to a close, we reviewed our own findings and reread the stories that were told us by the men and women we interviewed. Following are major conclusions that we reached.

## **Founding Story**

First, we found that founding stories of our couples played a significant role throughout many stages of their relationship. They used their founding stories to help fight old "ghosts" from previous relationships and to help set the context for restructuring their current relationship. We found that enduring couples purposefully retold their founding stories to help sustain their relationship through difficult times. They seemed to relish describing early, passionate images of their partner.

Couples in enduring relationships tend to view their partner as the epitome of what they need to fill their lives with hope and meaning. It is with their partner that they are most alive. They reach a point where they recognize that the person whom they have become today is in part a product of this enduring relationship and their intimate interactions with their partner over the years. Thus, the retelling of the founding story in sortie way reignites the initial passion and romance. This serves to remind the couple of why they began and may, in fact, serve to remind the couple of key reasons to keep working on the relationship through troubled times.

## **Covenant**

We discovered that frequent retelling of their founding story seems to occur in part because this story contains important truths and core commitments that have been made both implicitly and explicitly. Such core commitments can be seen as a covenant the couple enters into at some critical point in their relationship. Initially, this covenant often has a magical quality and is assumed to be fixed and almost sacred in nature.

Covenants, however, are developmental in nature. The couple continually works on the maturation of their covenant by looking to other couples (even parents) for models and inspiration to adapt their initial covenant. The covenants of enduring couples typically contain four key elements: stable patterns of interaction, trust in one another, clarity regarding who gets to start and finish conversations about particular issues, agreements about the way differences will be honored.

Because of the power of the covenant, enduring couples spend little time reviewing or debating their commitments and underlying assumptions about what is of value in the relationship. Basically, they establish their own rules, which enable them to



effectively manage their disagreements and conflicts. Long term couples exhibit considerable respect, trust and acknowledgement of each other's position and worth in the relationship. They accept confusion and conflict as a vital part of all human interaction. They recognize that their partner is as frightened as they are and that together they can build a relationship that enables them both to be alive.

At an advanced point in their relationship, an enduring couple sets aside or at least supplements their covenant with a more flexible and consciously negotiated set of statements about what each individual and the couple needs for personal nourishment and growth. They crowd each other with love but also allow each other some breathing room (a balance between enmeshment and disengagement). They force one another to care and rely on one another for support but find their own personal strength, internal guidance and independence. Their flexible covenant enables a couple to spend their life being alive together and apart.

### **Marker Events and Sexuality**

Our study suggests that sexuality is more important than specific sexual acts with long term relationships. Enduring couples describe sexuality in terms of special moments together often not even involving sex. They tend to treat sexuality as a meeting ground where mutual needs are addressed. They find each other desirable at specific moments in their lives together, often moments that revolve around issues of power and acceptance.

At the heart of their relationships, couples in long term relationships maintain affection and shared interests and the capacity to honor and build on their differences. Marker events (either one special event or a series of small events) are experienced by long term couples, as examples of mutual commitment of both partners to not necessarily agree about separate marker events. Marker events help to create an identity for the couple which becomes part of the couple's covenant.

### **Developmental Stages**

Four developmental phases are repeatedly traversed in long term relationships. Using the concepts of Bruce Tuchman (1965), we have labeled these four phases: "forming," "storming," "norming" and "performing." During the forming phase, enduring couples decide whether or not to establish an intimate relationship involving some level of commitment. They simultaneously experience intense

communication and guardedness during the forming of their relationship. They learn to roll with the inevitable disillusionment after the initial magic and intensity of the relationship wears a bit thin.

Each time an enduring couple confronts a crisis that leads them to a new developmental task and places them on a new developmental plate they engage in forming activities again. Couples act to protect and even feed the deep fantasies each partner holds about their forming experience. They also establish boundaries that allow each other to get on with their individual lives as well as allow the couple's life to grow. Mature couples clearly present their own personal needs within the boundaries of the relationship.

We discovered that virtually all long-term relationships face a storming stage as a normal part of the couple's ongoing development and maturation. Storming cyclically reoccurs throughout relationships with movement to various stages and when two developmental plates collide.

Unabated storming typically results in either a remarriage or recommitment from two partners to make the relationship work or to divorce. With each remarriage or restructuring of the relationship, the enduring couple develops increased resiliency to brave new storms inevitably ahead. They can create hell for one another—yet find shared support in the midst of this hell and can pull each other through the hell they have created.

Once a couple has weathered a storming phase, they set norms or implicit rules by which they can live and work with one another in an effective and interpersonally gratifying manner. Norms of mutuality and dominance between the two partners are set that usually differ from the old patterns followed by their parents and families. New norms are established regarding discussable and non-discussable issues both with each other and with other people about themselves. Enduring couples frankly and honestly discuss without each other's weaknesses without serious consequences. They seem to view the maintenance of their relationship with their partner as more important than the maintenance of any other relationship in their lives. They find that being alone is not being alive and that they are not alone when they are with the person whom they most love.

The men and women we interviewed generally suggest that the performing phase is typically established once norms have been set. Enduring couples find their own special ways to reaffirm the power of their long term, intimate relationships. They tend to do so with small rituals or habits rather than major events or major celebrations.

During the performing stage, enduring couples frequently readjust and experience one or more remarriages with their partner. They wrestle with issues of enmeshment and disengagement between them and eventually achieve a balance between these two. During this phase, they struggle with interconnectedness between the couple and the outside world, and eventually identify as either an open or closed couple.

## **Developmental Plates**

The four developmental phases just described occur cyclically throughout a couple's movement through five primary developmental plates. We identified these plates as: (1) establishing a home; (2) producing socio-economic viability; (3) selecting values; (4) raising children or conducting a mutual project and (5) preparing for old age and major late life challenges (including the loss of a partner). Successful long-term couples balance each plate as it exists in close interaction with one or more of the other plates. These plates collide just as the Earth's continental plates shift and create explosive volcanoes and earthquakes.

Enduring couples can deal with the stresses caused as their developmental plates collide. Enduring couples effectively resolve separation from parents or blending of two households as they establish a home. Their founding stories are evoked specifically to help them through stormy times as they divide household duties, purchase a house, or recognize their individual differences.

Enduring couples take solace in the fact that small daily rituals help to cement and reaffirm relationship. As couples wrestle with issues about careers and producing economic viability, they come to accept that their intimate relationship requires some restrictions in social interactions. Attention is paid to issues of income and allocation of funds.

Our interviews suggest that enduring couples effectively combat the tension and rifts over marker events in this developmental plate, particularly when the marker event is shared between two developmental plates (such as economic viability and purchasing a home). The couple has evolved to a point where both partners can see their relationship as "in process"—an ongoing series of events that continuously defines and redefines itself.

Enduring couples exhibit an increased level of tolerance and allow their partner to shift basic values and find a way to blend in new values to their daily functioning as

a couple. Conflict (or at least the force of the conflict) about money or career is reduced by use of a conscious review of the problem, willingness to accept, use of humor, and a strong desire to remain in the relationship.

The third developmental plate finds couples choosing value life structures that reflect their own distinctive life experiences rather than those imposed by society, friends or family. Enduring couples hold deeply rooted, commonly shared values as a core of their relationship.

Enduring couples can negotiate with their partners over the priority or importance of their individually held values and their joint values. The relationship itself is clearly a top priority for most enduring couples. The long-term couple is able accept their individual differences in values and is fond of such varying characteristics each other holds. They find the best in each other and find ways to use these strengths in their survival as a couple.

We included child rearing and shared projects in plate four and found that enduring couples engage in extensive discussions about how their relationship may accommodate children or mutual projects. Substantial negotiation of child-rearing responsibilities occurs. Some couples choose to devote time, energy and dollars to mutual projects instead of child rearing.

Our couples shared moments of mutual admiration for the important job they are doing when bringing up a child or successfully conducting a project in this complex world. Naturally, child rearing or sharing a joint project can severely test the relationship, thus remarriage tends to occur several times as they out new ways to structure the relationship. Long term couples have a history of seeking help to resolve conflicts from some outside party (counselor, friend, relative, religion, psychic, horoscope, etc.)

## **Conclusions: We Are Alive Together!**

Some of the most heartwarming stories we were told come from couples in the fifth developmental plate which deals with growing old together or facing a major life crisis (such as the death of a partner). We found that enduring couples prepared for major changes in the ways they relate to each other as a result of major life transitions like retirement or illness. They respond to major intrusive events by finding new ways to work together to accomplish joint goals.

Enduring couples grapple with core issues about potential loss of loved ones, where

they are headed, and why they are focused on a certain direction. They find new things about which to talk, new ways to occupy their shared time together, and new ways to budget their static or diminished income. These people cherish recollections of life experiences. They openly savor their relationship with one another. They are truly alive!

There is a point when long term couples reintegrate, both consciously and unconsciously, the male and female side themselves learned from their partner (whether a heterosexual couple or a gay or lesbian couple). Individual differences are respected and even enjoyed, and a deep appreciation of each other's unique qualities is demonstrated. Often, they help their partner face the death of a parent or other cherished friend or relative. In countless ways, enduring couples demonstrate in their daily behaviors their commitment to their partner and to their relationship as a couple. In short, they embrace the love that lingers in their life together—and it is most often through this love that they feel fully alive.

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