

Love Lingers Here: Intimate Enduring Relationships

Essay I: Couples in Transition

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During the past couple of decades, 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 adolescence or even before the "latency" of late childhood. 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 begin to look at couples in a similar manner. Two people do not simply come together and "live happily ever after". As couples, we 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 and undergo maturation as the two individuals jointly gain more wisdom and understanding about themselves as a couple.

Do we have any additional evidence beyond the often insightful perspectives of literature and theater that couples do change in a systematic way over time? Our evidence to date is somewhat sparse and suggestive. The existing literature suggests three dimensions through which a couple will move if successful in adjusting to a host of difficult contemporary

problems.

Virtually of the studies about successful couples speak of the need for a relationship in which inherent conflict and differences can be tolerated -- in which 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 need for a successful couple to rapidly abandon outmoded and unrealistic expectations about the nature and purpose of contemporary relationships.

In most cases, 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. One wonders about 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 very little tangible reward, 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 the authors recognize. Their therapeutic perspectives may be limiting their vision. 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. These insights are essential.

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 seeming bliss of the last stages of development is somewhat troublesome. 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 ourselves now find ourselves (or have been in the past) , the couples in these models who are at the highest 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!".

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 highly successful in generating lists of positive and negative characteristics of modern relationships, but fall short when establishing a coherent pattern of change and development among couples. The next essays in this series 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.
