

Love Lingers Here: Enduring Intimate Relationships

Essay II: The Couple as a Third Entity

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I base my analysis of enduring relationships on a fundamental assumption: a couple is a living, dynamic entity that is something more than just two people living together. A couple is in essence composed of three entities: each of the partners and the couple itself. All three affect one another. A change in one has direct influence on the others.

Every part of a system is so related to its fellow parts that a change in one part will cause a change in all of them and in the total system. That is (how?) a system behaves not as a single composite of independent elements, but coherently and as an inseparable whole. (Watzlawick, Bavelas and Jackson, 1967, p. 123)

We find support for the notion of "couple" as a discrete, third entity in a now-classic analysis of married couples: *The Mirages of Marriage* (1968). Written by a novelist, William Lederer, and the noted psychotherapist, Don Jackson, this book focuses on the dynamics of couples as a single, coherent entity. The authors identify the couple as one of three "systems" operating in any marriage:

Marriage is a complex unit made up of at least three different but interdependent systems: the system of the male (his total being) ; the system of the female (her total being) and the marital system, deriving from the interaction of the male and female systems joined together (the compages, or relationship). The marital system springs into being spontaneously when the systems of male and female join. It is a good example of the whole being more than the sum of its parts, of one plus one equaling three.

In another of the now classic books on marriage, *Between Man and Women*, Everett Shostrom

and James Kavenaugh speak about the successful couple ("rhythmic relationship") as: "the creation of a new reality, a third substance (tertium quid), which neither individual could produce by himself." Joseph Campbell (1988) expressed something of the same thoughts in a somewhat more dramatic manner: "when you make the sacrifice in marriage, you're sacrificing not to each other but to unity in the relationship."

In recent years, this notion of groups of people and organizations being considered autonomous entities in their own right, as something more than the sum of the parts (the members of the group or organization) has been labeled "system theory". At the heart of this theory is the notion not only that systems (whether they are couples or corporations) lead their own autonomous lives and find their own distinctive directions, but also are composed of parts that are intricately interwoven. Each of the parts of the system is dependent on all the other parts for its identity, its purpose and even its ability to stay alive. This is what Scott Page and many other system theorists call "complexity." A complicated system will have many working parts. In a complex system these parts are all interwoven and interdependent.

This notion of interweaving is particularly appropriate when applied to the system which we are calling an "enduring relationship." As Thomas Moore (1994, p. 47) noted, many cultures emphasize processes that weave together families, communities and even nations, as well as work and creative endeavors. A relationship is woven together precisely because it operates as a single system, consisting of the two partners and their own individual needs and stories, the couple's history (as told through their stories), the couple's covenant (concerning mutual commitments and values) and various social expectations that impact on the couple's sense of itself a a single entity.

As we shall note repeatedly in telling and analyzing the stories of enduring couples, certain key events tend to inform partners in a relationship that the "couple" does exist and that they constitute this new entity. The key events might be marriage, moving in together, buying a house together, or having a child. The reality of this new entity is reinforced by social and legal custom. The "couple" gets invited to parties, is asked to join clubs, is requested to file a joint tax return, and in some states is required to jointly own all property. At certain critical moments in the lives

of members of a couple, their attention is redirected toward the "couple" entity. Often this occurs when one or both members is struggling for his or her own sense of individual identity and seeks to find it at least in part through relationship with a partner.

At other times, the couple's identity is in the background. Members of the couple focus on their own personal or vocational concerns, or the couple becomes a subset of an even larger entity, the "family". The life of a couple is obscured by the advent of children or the turbulent world in which they live. The couple, however, will periodically become a focal point again, when personal or vocational concerns wane, when a member of the couple seeks solace from the strains of these individual pursuits, when other members of the family move out of the home, leaving the father and mother to once again establish their own identity as a couple, when the two partners must travel to a new land and establish a new life together.

It is precisely in this expansion and contraction of one's awareness and concern for this relationship with another person that the most interesting and important development of the couple takes place. This development becomes very complex, for it is not only interwoven with the individual development of each member of the couple, but also perceived differently by each member of the couple, as each member brings his or her own perspective to bear on the nature and dynamics of the relationship.

There are many studies about the ways in which individuals change and cope with the complex challenges of our 21st Century world. The same kind of stages and coping strategies are to be found in the relationship. We tend to base our images of relationships on the basic, untested assumption that a couple is composed of only two entities -- that is, the two members of the couple. In fact, the couple's needs are more than a composite of the needs of its two members. While we would like to believe that "two's a couple, and three's a crowd," there is, in fact, a third entity in any relationship, and this is the couple itself. The presence of this third entity (the couple) is critical in understanding the dynamics of a couple; it is also critical to identify the extent to which each member of the couple is responsible for tending to various aspects of this third entity

"What is "Normal"?"

One of the distinctive features of this set of essays is its focus on the nature and dynamics of so-called "normal" couples as they undergo "normal" developments in confronting the complex and demanding challenges that inevitably face anyone living in our turbulent world. In our study of normal development in couples, we have interviewed men and women from many different socio-economic and educational levels, from different racial and ethnic populations, and of a wide age range. Some of the couples have children, others do not. Perhaps most importantly, we have interviewed some men and women who are married and living in heterosexual relationships, as well as men and women who are heterosexual but not married, and both lesbian and gay couples. Our concern is not with the distinctive features of marriage, but rather with those issues and insights that seem to extend across many different kinds of intimate, enduring relationships.

How did we identify intimate relationships that were long-term or as we coined it here, "enduring?" First, we avoided the task of defining "successful" relationships. At the same time, we also sort out relationships that we found to be long-term but highly destructive and held together to meet pathological needs. Our couples all have problems and difficult issues to address. They certainly can't be called "perfect" (whatever that means), but they have many redeeming qualities that we can all learn from.

We then were confronted with the task of defining "enduring" and "intimate." The first of these tasks was relatively simple. We arbitrarily picked five years as the cutoff point; however, most of the couples we interviewed have, in fact, been together for more than ten years. So we are focusing on long-term relationships

The definition of intimacy was more difficult. In essence, we used a simple-minded definition: two people who are living together and have been physically and sexually active with one another (at least at some point during their time together). As I listened to stories taken from the interviews of our couples and as I have read more about couples, a richer definition of intimacy emerged. Our couples speak not so much about sexual intimacy as about the intimacy of shared hopes, fears and vulnerabilities. I hope to document many of the remarkable passages that were

navigated by our couples through the complex and challenging journey of intimacy.

Sources of Information

There are three sources of wisdom and information of which I availed myself in preparing this set of essays. The primary source of *information* is a set of interviews which were conducted by ourselves and our associates over a twenty year period with 120 couples. These interviews were conducted by more than one hundred graduate students at The Professional School of Psychology. In many instances, I made direct use of the rich, insightful case studies prepared by these students for courses they were taking on adult development and the psychology of couples.

Second, I must admit to making use of my own personal experiences, Those who know me might recognize my life in this book as a partner in two enduring relationships. I have been in an intimate and enduring relationship that some would describe as "successful" and another that was clearly “unsuccessful” in several regards. These are important lessons to be learned and shared from both the peaks and valleys.

Last but not least, I borrow from the stories told by couples I know personally, as well as from my informal observations of their interactions together. I apologize for my unauthorized snooping into the lives of my friends and extended family, and hope they will appreciate the ways in which I have disguised their identities.

I think we are now ready to begin the exploratory journey into the lives of men and women who are involved, intimately, in a long-term (enduring) relationship. I begin in the next essay (#3) with the stories (often myths) we are told about “living happily ever after” with a partner.

References

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