

Love Lingers Here: Enduring Intimate Relationships

IV: The New Self and Founding Story

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The first 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, Carly Simon sings about this first 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 First Myth

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.'"

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 his present wife, Bev. Terrell and Bev met at a Parents Without Partners meeting in the Spring. 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 and 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 once again trying 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 more "bitchy" after their marriage. When they were first married, Terrell and Bev did many physical activities together, 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 very 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 to always 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 and 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, and Bev has become a second victim of this past.

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, 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 very 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 some-times 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 and makes an effort 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.

The Founding Story

Many psychologists who study the lives of individual people have recently come to the conclusion that we tend to define ourselves through the stories that we tell ourselves and other people about the critical moments, foundings, crises, triumphs and tragedies of our lives. This conclusion confirms the assumption being made in the telling and retelling of all wisdom stories (such as the biblical story of God declaring that man should not be alone)—the assumption that profound truths and valuable guidance is to be found in these stories. 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 tell about our past life. 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 essay, 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 did they know that they were in love with one another and what event(s) tend to bring about either the

feelings of love or at least the expression of these feelings; (4) what their first fight was about and how they resolved this disagreement; and (5) in what ways this relationship 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 *Alexandria Quartet* or the classic film, *Last Year at Marenbad*, in which 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/Marenbad 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 and that 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 very important to them and revealed much about the character of their relationship. Yet, this was not the only story they told us. They told us many other stories 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 own 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.