

# **Love Lingers Here: Intimate Enduring Relationships**

## **V. Exploring the Founding Story**

### **William Bergquist**

In this essay, we focus on the 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.

### **Setting of the Story**

While many elements of the founding story are very 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.

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.

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.

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 or through a 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! Kit and Dave typify many contemporary relationships. If they 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 awhile 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 and 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 laughing to walk the streets of London, leaving the other two women sitting along 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 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 he was approached by a woman who invited him to a party as soon as he sat down to eat. He soon realized that she was a prostitute. Robert indicated that back then the military was very strict, and 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 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, concerning who is allowed to hear all or part of the story, and concerning the extent to which the couple's 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 paper work at the same time he was answering questions. Then he added: "I'm not sure I want her to tell you this story."

John provided occasional commentaries on Nancy's narration throughout the course of the story, 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 (as we noted above) 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, and 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 with regard to intimacy or emotional issues. She 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" domains.

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 of defining 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 tell to 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 especially important, and 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 and 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, for 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 contra-

diction. 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 and when she returned to the Milwaukee area a year later, she gave Fred a call. 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." 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.

A variant on the question of who tells the founding story is 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 the 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 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 of these 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 for Kathy and Dave 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, 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, who 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 who was this nymphomaniac type of person 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 half way there he said "Hey, remember that guy Ben? Well, it's his party." Half way 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 too 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 the two partners discover differences as well as similarities in 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. Mick was at the time in the United States 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. 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 very 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 is now fluent in Polish and speaks with very little American accent. Ironically, having moved to the United States with Sheila ten years ago, Mick now speaks Polish with a slight American accent!

### **The Enduring Nature of the Story**

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 three 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 been 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 once again she made a sacrifice that was typical of women during an earlier era.

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."

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 sexagenarians, 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 art initiation dance." Betty then added: "Daddy didn't know how to dance very well." George: "That's right.. You taught me the two step." 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 steamingly 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. If And I said that I knew that but that's the way it is.

This was a defining moment for these two lovers in 1948. 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. From a less romantic perspective this seems patently absurd. 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, though 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 very 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 of partner. Clearly, the content of these stories tells us much about the

nature of the couple's commitments and interactions.

## **Key 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.