

Love Lingers Here: Intimate Enduring Relationships

VII. The Marker Event: Establishing a Commitment as a Couple

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We must 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 an *orienting difference*. Without the probe of the embryo there is no entity. Without the marker event there is no couple. In many ways a newly-formed couple is like the new-formed embryo. 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. If the embryo is grown in a vacuum, with no external intrusions, then it will never develop. Gregory Bateson describes this orienting intrusion in embryos as "the difference that makes a difference." Similarly, something must intrude on the couple to give it definition and character. This is the marker event.

In some cases, the 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?

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. In identifying the marker event in his relationship with Nancy, John indicated that he knew that he and Nancy became 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 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 marker 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 her 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! 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."

Certainly, most modern societies have traditionally designated the announcement of a couple's engagement as the formal acknowledgement and in some sense beginning of the relationship between these two people and the marriage ceremony as 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. Classic movies such as *Father of the Bride* carefully documented 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 Rebecca 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 Rebecca 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 rules with regard to consummating 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 memorable European love stories (such as *A Man and a Woman* and *Cousin Cousine*), and were also common in dramatic American films of the late 20th 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 with regard to 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."

Jim, for instance, 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.

Most often we found that the marker event is some special event that requires a mutual commitment of both partners or 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 Rebecca 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 Rebecca if it would be okay to have a "farewell f--k" with this gentleman. Rebecca 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 Rebecca during a fight they might be having. Rebecca 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 Rebecca in their relationship.

As a result of this strong, sometimes violent component of their covenant, Christine and Rebecca are able to talk about and monitor with each other their own temporary attractions to other people -- knowing that they will never act on their attractions without risking the "breaking of a leg" or, more importantly, the breaking up of the relationship. Rebecca 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 Rebecca

do so, if she thinks that the third party has other than friendly interests toward Rebecca.

Recently, Rebecca had a dinner with someone that was not about business. Christine heard very little from Rebecca about the outcomes of this dinner. She had a dream that night about the dinner which sent the message that it was alright if Rebecca 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.

While commitment is at the heart of most marker events, we found that there weren't many men or women who identified a formal event as the indication of commitment. Rather, like Christine and Rebecca, the commitment often is 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. During John's response, Nancy had remained silent. 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 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.

Finding an Identity as a Couple

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 1990s. 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 with regard to 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. Much as Tevia's inquiry to his wife, "Do you love me?" seems to be moot in *Fiddler on the Roof* given that they have spent a life together, so 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 and 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.

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, who 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, and 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 and, after a very long, stormy period of time, 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) and that this public commitment was a way in which she could fully express her deep and abiding love for Lita.

Clearly the issue of acceptance is a very important issue for any couple (for example, an interracial couple or a young couple that is 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 was particularly poignant during the past two decades among couples who faced the awesome problems associated with HIV status and AIDS. Kevin and Alan were fortunate in that both are

HIV negative. Many other gay couples were not been so fortunate. They may have previously ignored their families because they were never accepted by them, but at the point when they faced their own possible, premature death from AIDS-related illness, these men wanted to reconnect with their family, but not at the expense of losing their loved one. They were asking that finally their families accept their status as gay men and accept the presence of another man that they love in their life. Their families at this point could chose to withhold their acceptance, and risk losing an ir retrievable period of mutual caring and support with their sons or 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.

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 love 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 Bill was solidified when he gave her a key to his house (about three months after they met). Bill 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 and was told by her older brother that the only reason men dated her was that they "felt sorry for her." Caroline 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.

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 21st 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." However, while 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, 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.

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 somehow they are a couple ("picturing ourselves as a couple"). Rogers and Hammerstein identify this reflective process in "Oklahoma" when 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 Laurey. Fred and Alice were also less shy and knew at that moment that they had just formed this third entity -- the "picture" called 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. The couple (as a third entity) is confirmed by: (1) an external ceremonial event (e.g. a marriage), (2) a decision made by the couple (e.g. purchase of a common piece of furniture), (3) a third party (e.g. former boyfriend) or (4) by a meta-level analysis ("picturing ourself")..

Disagreement about 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. Gene and Margie identify very different times. 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, but 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 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, and

now in marital counseling they will 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 very 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.

The Absence of Marker Events: "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. The two people drifted into the 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 being formed in the 1990s and beyond. We will look specifically at two couples, Dave and Sheila, and Mark and Kitty, who 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 a number of men at the same time, and instead of "drifting apart" they "drifted into exclusivity." This love at second sight took hold quickly and strongly. Neither Dave

nor Sheila, however, 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. Again, the process was 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, and 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 very 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, fearing that she would immediately escape from the impending commitment. Sheila was also 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 tell about their growing relationship doesn't differ much from that told by many other "contemporary" couples who seem to move into commitment gradually and with very little formal acknowledgement of a commitment. They differed from most other couples, however, in that neither of them recollected that at any one point the relationship intensified or that there was a moment or event that led to an increased commitment to the relationship on the part of either Dave or Sheila.

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. Thus, Dave and Sheila 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. Before they were living together. But not really.

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. When asked point blank, "do you trust your spouse" they 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 and probably is 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.

Dave reminds us of Billy Bigelow, from the musical *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.

Clearly, both Dave and Sheila are intelligent, educated and committed (like many young men and women) to autonomy, independence and freedom from the constraints of "typical" relationships. 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. 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 intellectualizations, rationalizations and denials which allow 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, for 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 care-taking. 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 J um anyway V/ 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 . . .

Sadly, 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 jointly spent time, money and energy refurbishing the houses that they own together. Yet, they cannot come together with regard to the level and type of commitment that each 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.

Key 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.