

Love Lingers Here: Intimate Enduring Relationships

VIII. Compatibility and Covenant

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Similarity is often assumed to be critical to a long-term relationship. In the movies of the 1940s and 1950s, good, solid relationships were often based on shared upbringing (usually in a small town) and common values and backgrounds. The typical couple had been "childhood sweethearts" or even the girl or boy "next door." Certainly, the prototypic couple consisted of two people from the same racial background. Mixed marriages were obviously not going to work. Members of the successful couple also came from the same socio-economic class and usually the same religion. Many tragic movies concerned young men and women who fell in love with someone above or below their class (the prince and the showgirl, the princess and the valet). While some of these movies told the message that "love conquers all" and that ultimately socio-economic class is unimportant (at least in a free society), they inevitably described a difficult courtship in which many barriers both internal to the couple and externally-imposed made for a difficult (though usually very passionate and dramatically appealing) relationship.

The Third Myth

The third myth in 21st Century relationships concerns compatibility between the two members of a couple. The reality concerning compatibility seems to be quite different from that conveyed in the movies. First of all, most men and women describe themselves as being more different than similar to their mates. Those similarities that are reported by couples generally refer not to current or enduring personality characteristics, but rather to shared goals and aspirations. Furthermore, there are shifts over time with regard to similarities and differences. Partners in an enduring successful relationship are likely to be different from each other early in their relationship, having fallen in love, in essence, with their opposite (what Jung calls the "shadow") or with the cross-gender image or "archetype" (identified as the male "animus" and female "animal, by Jung) that resides within themselves.

We are inclined, in other words, to be attracted to someone who fills a psychological gap that we cannot ourselves fill. Yet, partners begin to learn from each other later in their relationship, and reclaim aspects of themselves that they have disowned or left dormant for many years. Thus, partners become more like one another late in life as they seek to reintegrate all aspects of themselves (what Jung calls the movement toward "ego integrity"). The issue of similarities and differences among partners seems to hinge on this intrapsychic change over time and the ways in which partners learn from one another. Information garnered from our interviews suggests that partners should compliment rather than duplicate each other during their early years together. The partners must understand and honor these differences. They also must learn from each other (especially during later stages of relationship) and eventually become more alike.

We see this typical emphasis on difference in the early relationship between Jeannie and Bob who were as different as they could be when they first met, but now are becoming more alike in certain respects. When they first met, Jeannie was very attracted to Bob's rebelliousness. He was the drinking, drug-using rebel that she would not allow herself to be. In her family, it was too important to receive approval and Jeannie saw her only chance at approval and love coming to her through being a good and obedient daughter.

Bob saw in Jeannie a hurting person from a cold and unloving family. He describes growing up with alcoholism in his own family. It may be that within his relationship with Jeannie he saw an opportunity to rescue and care for her and thus heal his own pain. Yet, as they have grown older together, neither Bob nor Jeannie has stood still. Jeannie became more rebellious. She began using marijuana and amphetamines with Bob for about four years. During this period, both described the times as good and the relationship as close. Jeannie was "totally there" for Bob. The drugs helped to break down her inhibitions. However, she later felt that had "abandoned" their children and her job by focusing so much attention on Bob. As a result, Jeannie stopped using drugs and shifted much of her attention back to their children and her work. Bob "drifted a lot" as a result, and was drunk seven days a week. He became more introspective, focusing primarily on his drugs and his relationship with Jeannie. Bob and Jeannie fought a lot during this two year period of time.

Bob is now clean and sober and in recovery for the past 20 months. Neither he nor Jeannie are as committed to their relationship as they were previously. He used to live only for Jeannie and became socially isolated. Now in recovery, Bob has other interests and more balance in his life. He is now able to care for himself. Bob feels a great deal of resistance from Jeannie. Bob believes that she is threatened with his growing independence, having become a man who is less fearful, more outgoing, and ready to take on a new challenge. Jeannie indicates that she is confused about the changes that are occurring in Bob's life. She feels excluded from his new life and can't find a place for herself in Bob's life. Although Jeannie says she is committed to the relationship, does not want it to end, and loves Bob, she has been considering separation.

Over a twenty three year period, we see three different versions of the relationship between Bob and Jeannie. Initially he was rebellious and she was a good girl. Then we see that she became more like him, and they both concentrated on each other, isolating themselves from other members of their family and their careers. In their third reincarnation, Jeannie has once again returned to a more "respectable" life style; Bob has also cleaned up and become more independent and outgoing. They started out quite different, became more alike, and now are trying to figure out how they can live with the changes that have occurred.

Gwen and Bernard are very articulate about the strengths and problems associated with their compatibility. Early in their relationship, Bernard controlled their activities and the selection of their friends. Gwen has a history of dropping everything whenever a potential mate came along:

I did the same thing when [Bernard] came along -- wanting to please. I gave up road biking for mountain biking, pretending to like kayaking and made all his friends my friends too -- simultaneously abandoning my own social circle. This worked. It got me a husband, but it has created some disappointments in [Bernard] when lately I have reasserted my own interests and goals.

Gwen seems to have entered adulthood with the same myth that many of us hold, namely that we can only be successful in relationships if we share common interests and, as a result, if the

less dominant of the two of us (often the woman) abandons those life interests that are not shared by the other member of the couple. Bernard bought into this same myth. In all of the intimate relationships Bernard has had in his life:

. . . finding out if we would ultimately be compatible was high on my agenda. My desire and pressure to work toward this end was, perhaps, not the best of strategies. This seems especially so when combined with my equally high expectations for mutuality of our interests, i.e. my interests in mountaineering and kayaking.

Bernard made a commitment only to those women who shared his interest in these two sports; consequently, those women who were attracted to him had to either share his interests or somehow convince Bernard (and themselves) that they would like to acquire interest in these sports. Gwen fell into this trap.

In recent years, both Gwen and Bernard have abandoned the myth of compatibility, in part because of what they have taught each other. This is a sign of an intimate, enduring relationship, when members of a couple learn from each other (even if this creates new tensions in the relationship). Gwen observes that:

I am learning things about myself from [Bernard] and he from me. We each see ourselves reflected in the other person. It is a potential for growth not as available to single people -- whose actions don't always have immediate repercussions in the same household. Everything we each do or say comes back to us one way or another, immediately.. I have undoubtedly changed more in the five years I have known [Bernard] than ever before. The good changes (becoming less rigid for instance) I am keeping. The less functional changes (like giving up my own sports or friends), I am trying to change back. I am reasserting more of my old identity, acquiescing less to [Bernard's] desires, sticking up for myself. I think it is healthy for me -- and in the long run will [increase] the longevity of our relationship.

Bernard similarly indicates that:

I have become more capable of seeing the difference between myself and others, and between my desires and expectations and my partner's. I have begun to appreciate other people for their inherent qualities, independent of their capacity

to gratify my needs. For me, this has been a difficult understanding. I have in the past equated much of intimacy with a kind of fused relationship. This is also changing, and is a significant development theme of our marriage.

These have been hard-won lessons for both Gwen and Bernard. "There has always been tension," according to Gwen:

. . . related to [Bernard's] need to have a woman who will share his passions. I love [Bernard]. That doesn't mean I love ice climbing or kayaking or skiing. I think he hits it right on the nose when he says "I have in the past equated much of intimacy with a kind of fused relationship." It is a fairly recent occurrence that we have admitted we are really much more different than we thought when we got married. I would harkens back to our marriage vows: "I promise that our love will consist of two solitudes, that border and protect and salute each other . . . I promise that there will be spaces in our togetherness, to let the winds of the heavens dance between us.

For Gwen, differences that she observed in her parents serve as an important guide for honoring her own differences with Bernard:

We [Bernard and I] were, for several years, inseparable. Now we are establishing our own identities again. Admitting our differences can only be a good thing. Lord knows, my parents are as different as two people can get – and they still love each other. It's easy to find a climbing or cycling partner. It's hard to find someone you can live with, day in and day out, for 40 to 50 years. I believe we have put our finger on what really matters, the essential nature of our relationship that isn't affected by who shares who's sports or agrees on what toys to buy (if I may borrow [Bernard's] terminology).

It is certainly not easy to either appreciate or accept the differences that our partners exhibit in the ways in which they (and we) see and relate to the world around us. According to Bernard:

Our [Gwen and Bernard's] rhythms are very different even though we enjoy similar activities. My mind is full of symbols and metaphors and basic principles but few rules of details, while [Gwen] maintains lists and facts and a level of

organization I could not approach. I have complimentary attributes that together make a greater whole, yet we also argue over which world view will define our actions. On the deepest level it feels correct to be together. However, I feel pushed to understand the lessons we create for each other. At once I feel deeply loved, but not understood fully, at times alone in a struggle to understand our common context.

It is lovely to observe that Gwen, the realist in this enduring relationship, uses a poetic image in referring back to their shared commitments to difference (i.e. their marriage vows).

Bernard uses his skills in creating and using symbols and metaphors (citing several lines of poetry) to further articulate his enduring commitment to Gwen -- and her differences:

Opposite walls of a deep canyon, facing
forever a different view.
Across the void a different self, a stranger
in the sky I know so well
We are joined and divided by the ever-changing
currents of the river,
And by the common earth, the substance
of our single being.

Bernard goes on to observe:

Perhaps it is the magnitude of our differences that have allowed us to recognize a deeper connection and the singularity of experience. Had we been more alike on the surface, perhaps we would have believed our commonality to be the substance of our bonding. In the past I evaluated my relationships and much of my experience by more superficial measures. Our marriage seems very different. Accepting the ways that we are different seems to bring us only closer. However, this is a difficult process. Each new insight is accompanied by sadness and a letting go of old attachments. Going through this I feel, at times, confused as to what might replace the old hope that another will make me feel complete.

Given this primary emphasis on the complementarily rather than similarity among

contemporary couples -- at least in their early years together—then it is essential that something in the couple holds together these disparate values, perspectives and skills. We have found in our study that the differences among partners are balanced in an enduring relationship with an integrative component—something that we have identified as the couple's "covenant."

The Covenant

As we noted earlier, couples often help to form some of the paradigms or frames of reference that guide this couple in its interactions with other people and institutions in the world. One of the most important frames concerns the rules by which the two partners live with one another. Partners are influenced by their shared assumptions and frames of reference not only in their interactions out in the world, but also their interactions with one another. Furthermore, these rules regarding the partners' interactions must meet all three of the criteria noted in an earlier essay. They must appear to come from the external world, rather than being arbitrarily created by the couple, they must be internally consistent, logical and coherent, and they must provide some stability for the couple as it faces unpredictable and changing conditions in the world. One additional criterion must be added to this list: the guiding rules for a couple are not subject to change.

What should we call this set of deeply based rules of conduct in a relationship? Some writers speak of a "contract" between the two partners. We think this is an inadequate term, for this set of rules is not a contract between two parties that is entered into, as in business, with the assumption of modification and flexibility. Rather, the couple enters into a covenant, in the Biblical sense, that is assumed to be fixed and sacred. An intimate relationship is considered a sacrament with spiritual underpinnings precisely because it is built on a covenant rather than a contract between the two partners.

What is the nature of the covenant that is established by intimate couples? A first "draft" of the covenant often exists in the founding stories that are told by partners not only for the edification of other people, but also for each other. The founding story is often repeated many times by couples, both for the sake of other people and themselves, because it

contains some important truth or a central set of commitments that have been made explicitly or, more often, implicitly by the couple.

Bea and Donald spoke of meeting during a blind date that was fraught with mistakes and a series of errors, but was also filled with many incidents that foreshadowed major commitments in their life as a couple. Donald indicated that he was "struck" with love at first sight when Bea walked down the stairs, whereas for Bea the moment of love was not so clear. After they first met, Bea broke several dates with Donald and dated other men. Now, years late, when asked about the most valuable aspects of their marriage, Donald speaks of love, whereas Bea talks about dependability. Bea needs space and freedom, while Donald is faithful and dependable. That is their covenant which was played out during the very first days of their relationship, and is still being played out.

If the founding story is a first "draft" of the covenant, then what does the mature covenant look like? Our interviews suggest that four key components are usually found in the covenants established in enduring relationships: (1) a stable pattern of interaction, (2) trust in one another (with regard to relying on each other and being open with one another), (3) clarity about who gets to start and who gets to finish conversations about particular issues, and about how the start and end of a specific sequence of events involving the two partners is defined, and (4) agreements about the ways in which differences between partners will be honored and used to strengthen the relationship. We will briefly describe each of these components, letting the stories of our informants lead the way.

Stable Pattern of Interaction

Alice and Fred seem to be an effectively functioning couple, despite a number of difficult decisions (having an abortion when engaged, abandoning alcoholism) and life intrusions (ill child, loss of jobs). Their interviewer observed that they seemed to be quite comfortable with the positions that each hold in the relationship and were noticeably appreciative of one another. They seemed to have spent their energy during the interview on the subject matter at hand a description of their relationship -- rather than on issues of who speaks, who's correct, or who gets in the last word.

Watzlawick and his colleagues (1967, pg. 52) offered an insightful observation many years ago: "it seems that the more spontaneous and 'healthy' a relationship, the more the relationship aspects of communication recedes into the background. Conversely, 'sick' relationships are characterized by a constant struggle about the nature of the relationship, with the content aspect of communication becoming less and less important." Stated in terms of a covenant, the couple that endures will spend very little time reviewing or debating its commitments and underlying assumptions about that which is of value in the relationship. The covenant, in other words, is invisible.

Trust, Reliance and Openness

The issue of trust is often critical for couples. In many instances, relationships that are established in a spontaneous and highly passionate and romanticized manner do not stand the test of time, in part because there was never the gradual accumulation of shared life experiences on which trust can be built. In many instances, the couples we interviewed offered founding stories that are descriptive of gradually forming friendships rather than an explosive, immediate moment of attraction. Like many couples, Bill and Betsy met in college. They were initially friends and only later began to date. Their founding story is filled with humor and reads like a TV sit-com -- for example:

He [Bill.] was around the house all the time -- because there was no water at his house. So sometimes I would hear a knock on the door and I would go and look out the little window in the door, and there would be this guy standing there with his toothbrush in his mouth.

They both shared and elaborated on this story with considerable delight and laughter. When asked what they thought their stories about coming together as a couple revealed about them as a couple, Betsy indicated that sometimes she "thinks it's all luck, but other times I think we were very good at picking friends." She suggested that the most important things about their story is that they started out as friends and actually liked each other first, before becoming lovers. Betsy proposed that friendships last and that the romantic elements aren't always there after some time passes.

The issue of trust is likely to be especially important, if the members of the couple have been

in other intimate relationships that have not been very trustworthy. One or both partners feel that they were "burned" in their previous relationship, and don't want this to happen again. Kevin and Arlene met at work. They both remember seeing each other several times around the office. Their first date was very casual—sandwich at a local deli.

Arlene remembers being immediately impressed by Kevin's "depth." None of the questions he was asking her seemed to be superficial, which gave Arlene the feeling that this was not going to be another "pick up." Arlene was surprised by how interested she was in Kevin. Most of the men she'd dated in their early twenties had turned out to be much too immature for her. Arlene was also intrigued by Kevin's interest in punk music and "bizarre" night clubs. She was used to dating men with more traditional, conservative backgrounds.

Recalling their first date, Kevin and Arlene remember having a strong sexual attraction to each other, but more importantly, they remember the good times that the two of them had whenever they were together. They seemed to find something to laugh about in everything. They both used to feel that this was a sign of how open, honest and comfortable they were around each other. Now they realize that though they spent the majority of their time together, it actually took them years before they really opened up to each other or felt that they could trust in one another.

Kevin and Arlene each had been involved in prior "intense" relationships in which they had been hurt. Arlene was especially hesitant to become involved in the relationship because she feared the intimacy. She found herself going back and forth between wanting to make a commitment to Kevin and not wanting to be involved at all. Part of this conflict was a result of Kevin's all or nothing attitude. For Kevin the covenant must include absolute commitment and trust. Arlene reluctantly agreed to this section of the covenant.

Kevin felt that his relationship with Arlene needed to be the deepest and most committed relationship that he had ever had. He admitted that he was totally infatuated with the relationship (rather than being specifically infatuated with Arlene). He was -- as they say -- "in love with love" and was ready to "run away and leave the world behind." Kevin compared their early relationship to the movie *Wuthering Heights*, which he thought suggested that if

the person you loved was not available, on a daily basis, "then life was miserable and not worth living." Kevin insisted that they spend every possible minute together. In fact, Kevin and Arlene almost eloped together, but Arlene decided that they may regret doing something so hasty. Thus, another provision was established in their covenant: it's important to be romantic, but there also is a time for practicality. Kevin will take primary responsibility for the romance. Arlene will handle the practicality.

Punctuation and the Pattern of Interactions

The covenant established by Alice and Fred seems to call for one of two ways of punctuating their relationship. The first way is when Alice is willing to fight to get her own way. In these instances, Fred refuses to fight. This, in turn, "defuses" Alice and ceases to push her point. The second, more common, way is when Alice is "stressed out and blows her top." In these instances, Fred "walks away" and gets some "fresh air." Then, after things have cooled down, according to Alice, "he would approach me and things would normalize." For some couples, the sequence of anger (Alice) leading to disengagement (Fred) would result in further anger and further disengagement, in other words, an escalating war. By contrast, Alice and Fred have established a covenant whereby Fred's disengagement allows both of them to cool off and soon reunite.

Watzlawick and his colleagues (1967, p. 56) have suggested that "disagreements about how to punctuate the sequence of events is at the root of countless relationship struggles." One member of a couple, for instance, says: "I withdraw because you nag." The other member responds by indicating: "I nag because you withdraw." (Watzlawick, et al, 1967, p. 56). Alice and Fred have been successful in establishing their own rules, which enables them to effectively manage their disagreements and conflicts. The specific actions that are taken by partners often are not critical in determining whether or not a relationship will endure. Rather it is the manner in which both partners interpret the behavior and the ways in which they re-engage in and re-adjust the relationship during times of stress and conflict that make the difference. A couple's covenant often will define the nature of this interpretation among the partners in an enduring relationship.

Honoring and Using Differences Among Partners

A final ingredient in most covenants concerns the role of differences in the relationship. In virtually every relationship, a choice must be made between what Watzlawick and his colleagues speak of as "symmetrical and complimentary" interactions (Watzlawick, et al, 1967, p. 68). According to their interviewer, Fred and Alice have clearly established a symmetrical relationship in which equality and the minimalization of differences frequently being reestablished and reasserted in their relationship. These two people exhibit in their relationship considerable respect, trust and acknowledgement of each other's position and worth. At the same time, each partner has his or her own areas of strength, where he or she takes the lead and the other partner seems to be quite at ease about that. Fred and Alice have established a dynamic, changing relationship that is long-standing and intimate.

The Origins of Covenants

What are the sources of the covenants that are formed between partners in an intimate relationship? Initially, the covenant (as an unchanging set of rules) is influenced primarily by sources that impact on the couple when their relationship is first forming. Though covenants may grow more complex, more expansive and clearer over time, much as a set of laws are subject to interpretation and precedent once they are codified, they rarely stray very far from their initial character.

There are four different sources that come into play as a couple's covenant matures over time. Initially, the covenant seems to take on a "magical." quality. Much as an intimate relationship in its early stages often seems to be directed by some external force or higher power, so the covenant is often assumed to be distinctive and very special for two people who are newly in love. Partners in the throes of love often make very impressive promises that can't be kept in practice, but only in spirit. One partner promises to buy flowers every day. The other partner promises to always be truthful. Both agree to talk through every disagreement without compromise or antagonism. These commitments are rarely abandoned (often being part of the founding story); however, they become more practical as they are translated into daily rules of interaction and interpersonal sensitivity.

Once this initial magical covenant is put into practice, couples typically look to other couples for models and inspiration. Typically, the expectations that couples form regarding the nature and purpose of covenants in their daily lives are formed by looking at and talking about other couples. Obviously, two of the most immediate and influential sources of influence and inspiration are the parents of the two partners. For good or ill, we tend to look to our own parents for examples of how a couple should (or should not) feel and behave.

Gwen indicates that:

. . . my parents have been married fifty years, and I entered into this relationship [with Bernard] with the belief that it is a lifetime commitment. I don't believe that a couple can always be in love, or always agree on everything, or always share the same goals. People change constantly and so must the relationship. One day we're in love and one day we're not. One day we agree on things. Another time, perhaps not. But marriage means the commitment to work things out, no matter how difficult.

The covenant that Gwen and Bernard have established contains the key ingredients which Gwen learned from her parents: tolerance for the difficult times and sticking with the relationship despite many difficulties (including loss of their home due to a devastating fire). The role model and belief system provided by her parents have also led Gwen to "assume that things will work out in time and a disagreement today doesn't have to be settled immediately." Gwen indicates that when she and Bernard fight, it greatly offends Bernard that she can go on about her business as if they weren't in the midst of an argument. Her experience of her parents as a couple has led Gwen to believe that things will work out eventually and that avoidance of problems and establishment of harmony is critical to a relationship.

Bernard's parents, by contrast, were divorced when Bernard was twelve years old. His parents and step-parent were vocal in their arguments and Bernard's life was often quite turbulent. However, Bernard shares with Gwen the assumption that relationships can be nurturing, and that he will be supported in life by other people who genuinely love him. This forms an important building block in their shared covenant. Like Gwen, Bernard assumes that things will eventually work out alright, hence they have built a covenant that emphasizes patience

and continuity, though he would like to fight more openly than does Gwen and is more likely than Gwen to bail out of an unsuccessful relationship (thereby replicating the decision made by his parents to divorce).

Unlike Gwen and Bernard, Fred and Alice look to couples other than their parents as role models for their own, relationship and have adopted aspects of these other couples' relationships in the creation of their own covenant. Fred described a favorite uncle and aunt who "treat each other with respect, allowed space for each other to have their own personal endeavors, and were supportive of each other's growth." Alice's favorite couple was a host family that she lived with when she was an exchange student from France.

Alice described the traits in them that she appreciated the most. They "would kiss each other, were humorous, and they were supportive of one another." Alice went on to note that "they were very different from my family." The attributes of this favorite aunt, uncle and host family were very similar to those shown by Alice and Fred. Did they model themselves after these other two couples, or do they admire these other couples precisely because they resemble them? We suspect that both are true, but that in the case of Alice and Fred, as in the case of many couples, modeling of other couples is common and very important, even if unnoticed or unacknowledged by the couple.

The third stage in the formation of covenants among many couples concerns individualization of the rules so that they will be responsive to this couple's unique needs and interests. Typically, a couple that sustains an enduring relationship will find its own distinctive covenant, rather than borrowing from other couples. As Moore (1994, p. 29) has noted, our society (and in particular various self-help books on marriage and love) tend to lay down "impossible rules and expectations for a relationship. We are told to be clear and forthright in the expression of our feelings. We are supposed to *communicate* [with] our partners. We are expected to be good listeners and to be full of patience and empathy. We are given the illusion that it's possible to understand ourselves and others." Yet, sometimes, the conflicts and tensions that couples experience in their relationship are not amenable to immediate solution, nor is communication, *per se*, the answer.

Moore suggests that at these times the couple is doing "soul work." Put in more secular terms, the couple is working through a complex issue that often triggers very deep feelings, old ghosts (both from their own relationship and relationships from their childhood) and ancient fears (only partially known or understood). Moore (1994, p. 29) suggested that "we may have to enter the confusion of [our partner's] soul, with no hope of ever finding clarity, without demanding that the other be clear in expressing [his or] her feelings, and without the hope that one day this person will finally grow up or get better or express (himself or] herself more plainly."

In this final stage, through the acknowledgement of one's inability to fully understand someone who is deeply loved and through the acknowledgement of one's own ignorance and continuing search for self-understanding, the covenant is re-invigorated and reestablished on the basis of "mutual vulnerability" (Moore, 1994, p. 30) along with mutual commitment to the relationship. The covenant becomes more explicit and discussable. A couple can appreciate the important role it has played in their shared life over the years, having often served as a guardian of their relationship. Yet, the covenant is now often set aside or at least supplemented with a more flexible and consciously negotiated set of statements about what each partner and the couple (as a separate entity) needs for personal nourishment and growth—as well as the nourishment and growth of the relationship.