

Love Lingers Here: Intimate Enduring Relationships

X. Forming A Relationship

As we move beyond the myths of couples living happily ever after in a life of tranquility and stability to the realities of complex, changing relationships, we discover both profound and chaotic change and some patterning and continuity in the changes that do occur. In general, we find that couples move through four overall stages of development, the initial stage being defined as "forming," and the subsequent three stages being defined as "storming," "norming" and "performing" -- to borrow terms used by Tuchman.

The Four States of Development

The "forming" stage is one in which two individuals decide whether or not they want to establish a relationship that is intimate and involves some level of commitment. This is the stage of expansive vision and a promising future. This is the almost mystical—even spiritual—quality of these first moments together and show how these early expectations set the stage for the inevitable disillusionment that arrives. The concept of marker event that we described in a previous essay resides at the heart of the forming stage. Our interviews suggest that relationships often are formed not as function of formal events (such as marriage ceremonies) but as a function of events that have special meaning for the partners, i.e. the marker event.

The "storming" stage which usually follows the "honeymoon" stage of forming, involves conflict regarding control in the relationship and the role (s) that the partners are to play in their relationship and in various social groups. Frequently, storming is associated with the process of remarriage that we described in an earlier essay. While this second stage builds on our fears and our suspicion of true intimacy, it is also clear that storming is essential to the establishment of a firm base of trust and flexibility in an enduring relationship.

The third stage is called "norming" because a couple must establish the norms (values and

rules) that will guide their activities as a couple. Typically, partners can't establish solid, working norms for themselves until they have moved through the storming period and even a restructuring of their relationship (the remarriage process). This stage is closely related to the concept of covenant that we introduced in a previous essay. The covenant conveys and reinforces the essential norms of any enduring relationship.

Once the norms are firmly established, a couple moves to a fourth stage of "performing" when conflict tends to drop off and the couple finds stability and tranquility in their relationship. Ironically, this stage relates closely to the founding story of a couple which we previously introduced—the founding story becomes the building block not for the forming stage of the relationship, but rather for its fourth, performing stage. The founding story provides the continuity for partners in a relationship as they confront the ongoing changes and unanticipated intrusive events that influence and often disrupt their individual and collective lives.

These stages of development for the couple never reach an end point, but are rather part of a recurring cycle of development, with each stage being reintroduced frequently (though hopefully with a little more insight and wisdom on the part of both partners). The developmental stages are often reactivated when a major shift occurs in the relationship. This shift, for example, occurs when partners give birth to a child (or a new project) or decide to elevate their commitment (e.g. get married) or when one of the partners confronts the death of a parent, or experiences a significant career transition (new job, loss of job). A couple typically moves through all four stages again, though may move through the forming, storming and norming stages much more rapidly and effectively the second or third time the recycling occurs.

Furthermore, as we shall discuss much more fully in the next set of essays, a couple will tend to move independently through these four stages in each of the major domains of their life. The recycling often occurs in part because of the emergence of new problems in domains of the couple's life that have not recently gone through the cycle. Thus, a couple may be moving through the forming stage as new parents, while they are moving through the norming stage with regard to their personal finances and are at the performing stage with regard to their

home and household possessions.

At any one time there is a rich interplay between various issues that a couple is exploring in their complex and demanding world. At any one moment, one or two issues are likely to play center stage and overshadow virtually all other aspects of the couple's life together; yet, these other dimensions of the couple's life must continue to be addressed and will impact on and be impacted by those issues that are playing center stage.

This is a particular stage that they return to and generally reside in as a couple—it is their “comfort zone” and what contemporary complexity and chaos theorists call the “strange attractor” to which all complex systems return when at rest or in a stable condition. Some couples prefer to live in a state of conflict, while others prefer the romance of the forming stage, or the more mundane life of a performing couple. Based on our own interviews, we suggest that couples also are inclined to stay in a particular domain of their life, focusing primarily on their physical possessions, their children, their shared values and so forth. Relationships often become particularly stressful when a couple is forced to address issues from the alien perspective of a stage or domain that they would prefer to avoid.

Before we will turn to these more complicated interactions in the next set of essays, we will attend in this essay and several that follow to more general ways in which the couples we interviewed moved through the forming, storming, norming and performing stages. We will turn first, in this essay, to the forming stage.

The Forming Stage of Couples Development

In the system that we have called the "couple" the forming phase of development defines the initial characteristics of the couple. What factors determine whether or not two individuals choose to begin the third ("we") entity? Boundary issues, psychological projections and family history all come into play during this formation process.

The formation phase in a relationship is often accompanied, in particular, by a cluster of fantasies and unrealistic expectations that are held in isolation by each member of the couple.

As Moore (1994, p. 51) noted many years ago: "we are drawn into intimacy by possibilities rather than by realities, by the promise of things to come rather than by proven accomplishments, and perhaps by seductions that are darker than the bright reasons to which we admit." A newly-married couple, for instance, will hold on to a host of fantasies about the ideal home, the ideal marriage and the ideal image that a couple should convey to other people. These ideals are often based on the two partner's own experiences with their parents or other salient partners in their lives. Media (movies, novels, television) obviously influence this ideal.

These fantasies, however, are further reinforced by the behavior of their new love, who is "on good behavior" during this initial courtship stage. Straight women often love the initial talkative nature and emotionally vulnerability in the straight men in whom they fall in love. Yet, these straight women also tend to be more fully aware than are straight men of the risks inherent in this new vulnerability. Similarly, among gay men, there is greater openness and expressiveness typically among both partners, which helps them overcome hesitations, while lesbian women often find their mutual hesitations to be reassuring given the frequent failure among lesbian couples to establish strong boundaries.

An accompanying dynamic for many partners is their fear that their new-found partner will "find them out" and recognize that they are neither the ideal partner that they initially perceive through loving eyes nor the "good partner" that they tried to be while on "good behavior." A major feature in the passage of a relationship from "forming" to the second phase ("storming") is a confrontation between the ideal state and the "good behavior," on the one hand, and the newly emerging reality of this relationship, on the other hand.

Typically, a couple repeatedly engages in forming activities in response to the emergence of a specific developmental task. A couple will engage in forming activities not only when they are first becoming acquainted, they often will revert back to early and primitive interaction whenever they confront a crisis that leads them to a new developmental task and places them on a new developmental plate.

Two partners who have been living together for five years may go back to step one when they

first decide to pool their income to establish themselves as a single economic entity. Similarly, a couple that has been firmly established for years may confront old, seemingly-resolved problems when learning how to live with their first child.

A public, marker event often signals the emergence of a specific developmental plate as particularly important at any one time in the life of a couple. A wedding may signal the start of several developmental plates ("establishing a home", "establishing socio-economic viability"), as will the purchase of a first home, declaration of community proper or birth of a first grandchild.

In the movie "Starting Over", Burt Reynolds exhibited symptoms of stress (hyperventilation) not at the point of moving in with Jill Clayburgh, but rather at the point when they are purchasing furniture for their new apartment. Burt is not alone. For many of us, purchases of major items are the first tangible signs of a long term commitment to a relationship.

On other occasions, a new developmental plate will emerge gradually, over a three to six month period, or will emerge through a highly private event or series of events that are known only to the couple—such as movement toward a new level of sexual intimacy or disclosure of a past indiscretion. In the latter case, the couple may experience a major transition long before other people with whom the couple relates perceive this change. This discrepancy in perceptions can-be an additional source of stress for a couple. One couple told us they had been considered the "Ozzie and Harriet" of their community by their mutual friends. They stunned their friends when they announced their separation and ultimate divorce. That simply does not occur with Ozzie and Harriet. If the "perfect couple" gets a divorce then what hope do their friends have in relationships that from the inside more closely resembles the Simpsons? This couple's divorce threatened the hopes of their friends, hence was greeted with very little sympathy and a large amount of anger by people who this particular "Ozzie" and "Harriet" had considered to be their close, supportive friends.

In later essays, we will discuss in more detail the “forming” stage in relationship to various development tasks that a couple must confront. For now, we’ll describe the forming stage as it is played out in brand new relationships.

Falling in Love

Obviously, the experience of falling madly in love is unforgettable and one of the great joys that anyone can experience in his or her life. Many books, plays, poems and songs have been written about this elusive phenomenon, ranging for the extraordinary analysis offered by Stendahl to the homespun lyrics of Hammerstein and popular insights offered by Fromm. For our purposes, in studying long-term enduring relationships, this first step in the formation of a relationship is important particularly in the creation of initial expectations about what another person can provide for us in our life. Typically, when we first fall in love -- or at least when we are deeply infatuated - - our new-found partner meets virtually all our needs. As an old popular song suggest, "you're every woman [man] in the world to me." All of our dreams and hopes are met in this one person with regard to someone in our life who can feel the hole in our heart or the gap in our life are met in this one person.

One couple we interviewed, Dan and Mary, talked about meeting at a large weeklong national conference in the Mid-West. Dan was an organizer of this conference and was heavily engaged in making it a great success. In part, he was using this conference to get over his recent divorce from a woman with whom he had lived for ten years and had been married for eight years. She was also the mother of his two small children and partner in a small consulting firm. Mary was still married, though her marriage had fallen into disrepair during the past two years and she was vulnerable to a more exciting and passionate relationship. Dan and Mary met during the first evening of the conference. He was immediately smitten by Mary and lost all sense of his role at the conference. Mary was scared to death of her own feelings as well as Dan's obvious attraction to her. Within two days they were making love and considering the future of Mary's marriage and their own relationship (living two thousand miles from each other).

It was crystal clear to both Dan and Mary that their newfound love met many if not all of their needs. Each pushed all other people and events in their life out of their new love's consciousness. The conference itself was only dimly remembered. In the words of Dorothy Tennov (1979,p. vii):

I want you. I want you forever, now, yesterday, and always. Above all, I want you to want me. No matter where I am or what I am doing, I am not safe from your spell. At any moment, the image of your face smiling at me, of your voice telling me you care, or of your hand in mine, may suddenly fill my consciousness rudely pushing out all else.

Dan found in Mary a very bright, engaging, passionate and beautiful woman. He no longer felt lonely and dreamed of living forever with Mary. He thought that she would be a wonderful mother for his children (Mary had no children herself) and great professional colleague. Mary was immediately struck with Dan's visions, his energy and his humor. Dan would be a great lover and someone who could lead her out of a stagnate life in upstate New York. After their week together, Mary drove back home to dissolve her seven year marriage and Dan flew back to California in order to prepare for Mary's eventual move to the Golden State.

Mary did move to California one year later. Dan and Mary did get married. And Mary did do a wonderful job of helping to raise Dan's two children. Yet, neither of these people were ever able to fulfill all of the needs that surfaced at that conference. Dan continued to be a visionary, yet this often drove Mary nuts, especially when they confronted the harsh realities of finance, child-rearing and home repairs. Mary has been a generous and loving step-mother, yet often resents the amount of time she must devote to the children.

Mary and Dan tried to work together in the consulting business, but found that Dan's visions often conflicted with Mary's practicality. Despite all the distortions that come with the first blush of infatuation and love, Mary was quite accurate in perceiving Dan's enormous energy and she still loves and respects this energy. Dan similarly was accurate in perceiving Mary's passion and intelligence. He continues to love and greatly admire these characteristics.

As in the case of virtually all intimate relationships, Dan and Mary went through a period of disillusionment. They discovered inevitably that many of their most important needs could not be met by their partner. In many instances, these needs can never be met by any one person. It is very hard, for instance, to meet another person's need for self-esteem, or to offer

unfailing companionship. Each couple must come to terms with this disillusionment. Each member of the couple must decide which needs their partner can meet and which roles their partner can play in their life. Both partners come to realize that these needs and roles may change over time,, as each partner and the relationship itself change and mature.

If this realization does not take place, then we may continue to expect our partner to fulfill all or most of our needs and play many roles in our life. He or she will inevitably fail in this task, leading to anger on the part of both partners. Even if our partner fulfills all our needs and roles (at least superficially), we will become absolutely dependent on this partner—which is ultimately even more destructive. We see both failed attempts at meeting all needs and the absolute dependency on one's partner in the wonderfully romantic, but disastrous, relationship between Heathcliff and Cathy in "Wuthering Heights." At various times in their relationship, either Heathcliff or Cathy expect their loved one to meet all their needs. They essentially take on the other person's identity (Cathy's statement that "I am Heathcliff") and demand that the other person become fully absorbed in meeting all of their needs (even those of which they are not fully aware). Heathcliff, as a result, takes on the image sometimes of being the perfect, absolutely-devoted lover; at other times, he is a selfish, brutish and ultimately evil force in the world. Cathy, similarly, shifts from being a lovely and loving spirit in the world, to being a self-possessed, insensitive force of indifference and destruction.

Enmeshment and Disengagement

Family psychologists would identify the relationship between Heathcliff and Cathy as "enmeshed"—in contrast to relationships in which there is virtually no interaction between the couple, which are identified as "disengaged." Initially, most relationships are rather heavily enmeshed. In essence, when we fall in love we tend to move backwards in terms of our own way of functioning in the world. Psychologists describe this as the process of "regression." However, this is a good form of regression (called "regression in the service of the ego") that parallels the regression occurring in acts of creativity, inspiration, spiritual reflection and many forms of psychological healing.

The initial enmeshment or regression' helps build the fire and engage the mystery in any

relationship, as well as providing wonderful material for the couple's founding story. We must always protect and feed the deep fantasies that are to be found in each partner's recollections as well as joint recollection of these forming experiences. Later, couples typically become somewhat more disengaged as the reality of their individual needs and differences set in. Boundaries must be established in part so that each partner can get on with their own individual life in conjunction with their life together. Some disengagement is Inevitable—unless, of course, a couple wants to reenact Heathcliff and Cathy!

These concepts about enmeshment and disengagement make sense when one is looking back upon a relationship that has gone through many different stages and transformation. We can look back with some detached wisdom and insight—and with wistful nostalgia—at the excitement, passion and of this infatuation and first stage of love. But what does it feel like when one is in the midst of this enthralling stage? With the help of Dorothy Tennov's description of “limerence” (the experience of falling in love) and the stories told by the people we interviewed, several principle phenomena come clearly to the fore.

First, when we fall in love, everything else takes a back seat. Dan was unable to concentrate on the conference he was to lead after meeting Mary. Second, we long for the other person's affections when we fall in love. We are highly vulnerable and tend to be guarded in displaying our own feelings of love and our own true self. An elaborate dance of hide and seek takes place. Old ghosts tend to be resurrected when we fall in love -- especially in our adult years. We enter each relationship (hopefully) with greater wisdom, but the experience of falling in love becomes increasingly painful, for it evokes images of former loves, both successful and disastrous. The act of falling in love is accompanied also by a great intensity of all feelings: sexual, aesthetic, emotional, spiritual Everything become more vivid and intense, especially when we are in the presence of our loved one.

We were fortunate to find two partners to interview (Patrick and Mary Ann) who were still very much in the throes of early love. In a short period of time, Patrick and Mary Anne have established a wonderful pattern of communication that keeps their relationship vital and alive. Though they have not yet made a commitment to marriage, Patrick and Mary Anne regularly talk, like many young couples, for two to three hours on the phone. Patrick writes Mary Anne

open letters which she can read and reflect on when she is in the mood.

At the early stage in almost any intimate relationships there seems to be much about which a couple can talk! Many of the couples we interviewed wistfully recounted how they had so much to say to each other in these early days and months.. Yet, they also noted that they had to be guarded about some of their most important thoughts and feelings, especially those related to the person they now loved.

Ironically, the forming stage in a relationship is a time of both intense communication and profound guardedness. It is a time for great hope and expectations, and a time for intense fear and vulnerability. Like most peak experiences in life, the process of falling in love involves a subtle balance between challenge and support. Early love swells in a distinctive threshold (called the "flow experience by Csikszentmihalyi) that is to be found in the threshold between intense anxiety, on the one hand, and stupefying boredom, on the other hand. Given that Patrick, is 22 years old and Mary Anne is 18, they are able to use this intense relationship to explore their own identity, while also helping their loved one explore his or her sense of self.

In *The Art of Loving*, Fromm suggested that one cannot love another person until he or she loves himself. In a later book, *Soul Mates*, Thomas Moore similarly speaks of the love for self (soul work) as a condition for the love of another person. Such a model is certainly in keeping with the masculine notion that self-identity must be forged before one can be intimate with other people. However, later studies of a more feminist orientation (e.g. Chodorow, Gilligan, Belenky and other), and some long-ignored insights from therapists (e.g. Sullivan) suggest that self-identity and self-love tend to build simultaneously with the establishment of intimate relationships. Patrick and Mary Anne have much to talk about because they are not only busy building their mutual relationship but are also building their own senses of self and their own love of self, particularly in relationship with one another.

The Tale of Narcissus

Some of the psychologists who have tried to describe and explain the first stages of love talk about "primary narcissism." They derive this term from the Classic Greek legend which tells

of a handsome young man, Narcissus, who happens to pass by a still pool of water and, seeing his reflection in the water, immediately falls in love with his own reflected image. Sad to say, Narcissus spends the rest of his life (which is quite long in old Greek legends) staring at his own reflection.

In some ways, the process of falling in love with another person, at least initially, resembles the story of Narcissus. First of all, we don't really have much information to go on when we fall in love at first sight (or even second or third sight) with another person. Rather, we are falling in love with our own internal image of this person. This image is a composite of the real person we see along with previous people in our lives (including our parents, siblings, and past loves), idealized images of our "perfect" mate or lover and deeply embedded (some would even say, archetypal) images of beauty, sexuality and seductive allurements. We have fallen in love (like Narcissus) with an image of love that is largely of our own making. When we are enthralled with another person, we tend to become very confused about boundaries. We don't know what comes from inside us and what comes from the other person. We think we love another person, but are, in fact, falling in love with something we helped to create.

The Images of Anima and Animus

Carl Jung and his associates offer a complimentary though slightly different version of this narcissistic process. As in the story of Narcissus, the Jungians propose that we tend to project a particularly powerful aspect of ourselves onto our new love object and then promptly fall in love with that aspect of ourselves that we have just projected onto this other person. The Jungians go on to note that men are typically inclined to project onto their new love object those aspects or forces in themselves that are feminine (what Jung calls the "anima.") Women are inclined to project out the masculine aspects or forces in themselves (the "animus".) Initially, we are inclined to project only the most positive aspects of our opposite gender characteristics onto our new love. At a later point, however, when we become disappointed because our loved one can't live up to this idealized and projected image of the perfect love, we tend to also project the less agreeable aspects of these gender-based forces onto the loved one.

Women suddenly change from being beautiful, erotic nymphs (positive anima archetype) to cunning and evil-tempered witches (negative anima archetype). Heathcliff certainly perceived this transformation in his relationship to Cathy. Men (like Heathcliff) who are caught up in the anima spell often project their own personal mood swings (and, in particular, their anger and depression) onto women and assume that they are feeling the way they are because of the way their loved one feels. Women, in turn, find that the men they love as saviors, heroes and spiritual guides (positive animus archetype) become clumsy and insensitive trolls or violent, belittling demons (negative animus archetype). We need look only at the changing reactions of Cathy to Heathcliff to illustrate just such a shift. Women, such as Cathy, project their own harsh judgments about the world onto men and assume that they are being fair in their own judgments but that the world is inherently unfair because of their male counterpart.

For a heavily enmeshed couple, such as Heathcliff and Cathy, there is no way out. They are both bound up in their projections onto the loved one; neither can recognize that they have given away powers that exist in themselves. Hence, they are always dependent on the presence of the other person for a sense of being a whole person; yet, they have also projected their negative images of the opposite gender on to their loved one, hence they are simultaneously in love and in hate. We know of some unfortunate real-life relationships that have lasted for many years, playing out this highly destructive cycle of projection, infatuation, disappointment, anger, rejection, fear, reconciliation and, once again, projection, and so forth. Heathcliff and Cathy finally joined together as one, in death, finding this to be the only way in which they could be in union without pain and conflict. We wish greater success and alternative solutions for our real-life Heathcliffs and Cathys.

In their musical "Cinderella," Rogers and Hammerstein, describe this same type of confusion. Prince Charming declares that he doesn't know if he loves Cinderella because she's beautiful or if she's beautiful because he loves her. Does he love her because she's wonderful or is she wonderful because he loves her? Like all princes, Charming doesn't know what the source of his feelings is with regard to this remarkable person that he met at the ball. He only met her for a brief moment, in a very artificial and romanticized setting (the ball) and knew very little about her background or lineage (very important for a prince). Yet, he fell deeply in love with her or, more accurately, with his image of her.

Probably the fleeting nature of their acquaintance made his internal idealized image of the feminine (anima) that much more prevalent. As a result, Cinderella becomes more alluring. After all, he already knew the other eligible young women in his kingdom (it wasn't a very big community). He knew more about them than lie probably wanted to know. Cinderella was someone new, who was an unknown. What better object on which to project one's fantasies and wishes!

And what about Cinderella? What does she really know about her Prince Charming other what she reads in the local newspaper (or local gossip) and the little bit she found after one dance? We know that Cinderella is inclined to daydream quite a bit, hence we might anticipate that her Prince Charming is composed primarily of her own fantasies and dreams—her own masculine (animus) projections. When does she find out who the real Prince Charming is? After the wedding? After their first child is born? After he begins spending more time with his friends and with affairs of state than with her? Perhaps, Cinderella should read some of the accounts of Princess Diana prior to her death (which are themselves mostly fantastic projections rather realities), before signing on with the prince.

This is one of the most remarkable features of this initial period of infatuation. Our new lover occupies a central position in all aspects of our life. We can't get this person out of our mind or heart. We try to wash him or her out of our hair, but they continue to haunt our every moment. As Steven Sondheim has observed, we feel like we're losing our mind: standing there in the middle of the floor, not knowing what to do with our life! In another song, Neil Diamond took this sentiment to an even greater extreme. He sings of a lover whose life story started the day his beloved came into his life and ends the day she leaves. For Diamond's lover, there is no life either before or after meeting the person he now loves. Not only does this person fill a central space in the life of Diamond's lover, there simply is nothing in life other than the object of his infatuation.

During the summer of 2002, Jane was a second season mountain climbing guide and one of only two women guides among a bunch of male guides. At 28 years of age, with solid skills, Jane was the "queen" of the mountaineering company and the focus of much attention. She

was engaged to a fellow back home, but spent the summer "looking around" to see what other kind of men might be out there: "if I hadn't met Steve, I would probably have married the guy I was engaged to." Steve was also on a break from school and was spending the summer in the mountains. He met Jane while working part time as a guide. Both Jane and Steve describe a period of intense attraction that summer. As it turns out, however, the underlying theme of their attraction differed in kind and durability.

Jane's feelings of intensive love for Steve were wrapped up in her exploration of a new world and her exposure to values that were quite different from those of her protective Catholic school upbringing. As in the case of Cinderella, her love represented the beginning of a profound reorganization and redefinition of basic beliefs—a "coming out" or expansion into a new world. Part of Jane's later understanding of her attraction to Steve was consonant with Susan Campbell's idea that "such feelings can give us a real sense of our possibilities, of how it might be if we really actualized our highest potential for loving."

In this light, Steve offered a distinct contrast to the fiancé from whom Jane would soon break off. For Jane, narcissism was displayed in her love for the new image of herself as an adventurous, desirable and unique woman. As the old cliché goes: there is nothing more desirable than another person who finds you to be absolutely entrancing. Like Cinderella, Jane looked at a reflection of herself and saw herself in a new role and with a new image; furthermore, beside her in the reflection was a man who admired this new person she had become, and she loved this state of being!

For Steve, part of the attraction was his image of Jane in her special role as "queen" of the mountaineering company. Like Prince Charming, he gloried in the fact that the most desirable woman at the Ball (or climbing on the mountain) was attracted to him. He had become the sole object of her love. This is the eternal theme of becoming attracted to and being with women he imagined others desired. It is a common theme among many men (straight and gay) of all ages. It was a way of making himself more desirable and of covering his own insecurities. Steve's narcissism thus shows up in his love for his own successful wooing of a desirable woman. He looked at the reflection and saw himself glowing even more brightly in the presence of a beautiful woman!

Romance Across the Ages and Societies

Our interviews suggest that the processes of primary narcissism are neither confined to the youth of our society nor to western cultures. Many of the older couples we interviewed who met when they were already past midlife describe an enthrallment that is as romantic and as basically unrealistic as the stories told by younger couples. Similarly, the few couples we interviewed who came from nonwestern cultures often spoke with great eloquence of their initial infatuation. For instance, Kasha and Tally are an East Indian couple married for twenty years. Tally indicated that he had been working at a personal development camp in which Kasha's sister had been a participant and through her he met Kasha's father. Kasha was eager to tell the story of their meeting:

We had a very large family back in India and we had a lot of domestic help. So there was always a lot of people around. But one day there just happened to be nobody home except me. I looked out the window and saw Tally in the backyard. He was looking for my sister. I invited him in and we sat for two hours just talking. Something happened during those two hours. We just looked into each other's eyes. We understood everything each other was saying. There were sparks between us. I knew then and there that we would be married someday.

This is certainly a lovely and loving story of first meeting. As with many couples, the primary conveyer of their inner truths (or projections) were the eyes of the man Kasha loved. Whether it is because our eyes somehow tell an inner truth, because we are particularly attracted to this physical feat in another person or simply because we expect other people who like us to keep eye contact with us, the force of looking into one another's eyes is universally powerful. Neither Tally nor Kasha had seen each other prior to the day they met. Though their families were "westernized" and would have allowed them to meet together without a chaperone, the enthrallment was no doubt intensified, as with Prince Charming and Cinderella, by the unknown nature of the person to whom Kasha and Tally were suddenly drawn.

They talked enough to learn a bit about each other, though one wonders to what extent they truly understood one another. Most of us aren't thinking very clearly during these moments in

our lives and can barely understand our own thoughts and feelings, let alone those of another person on whom we have projected a considerable amount of fantastic images. It is probably more accurate to suggest that Tally and Kisha heard their own words (whether actually stated by the other person or not) and assumed that they understood these words.

What happens after this initial infatuation fell away for Tally and Kasha"? Were they successful in adjusting to the realities of their relationship? They have, in fact, been quite successful in adjusting to realities, though they had to go through a major remarriage process. The memory of how they first met is still very clear and compelling. It serves as a stable foundation for their changing relationship. The two hours they spent "looking into each other's eyes and understanding perfectly" stood as an inaugural experience to be repeated frequently in their life together. This "first time" became the touchstone against which later times together would be tested.

Tally spoke of the daily ritual of sitting together in the evening after work, sipping tea and looking out at the nearby ocean. These are daily celebrations of their growing bond and covenant. When later they could only speak of superficial things or found themselves avoiding each other it was clear that something essential was missing. Finally, years later, when they saw themselves of television (as described in an earlier essay), it was the old ideal images of themselves. This reflection back of an old (now somewhat dim) image revived the hopes and dreams upon which their covenant had been founded. Now, as they reconfigure their relationship and engage the process of remarriage, it is more realistic than during their early years together; yet, it is still faithful to the original, founding vision of themselves as a couple.

The enthralling, romantic texture of the forming stage may last for a remarkably long time. Clearly, Tally and Kasha continue to reflect on and renew the intensity of their first meeting through their daily rituals. Among many of the other intriguing and reassuring couples we interviewed, romance was still very much alive. Delores and Bart met in a Texas bar. Out with respective friends that evening Delores spotted Bart across the room, as in "Some Enchanted Evening" and many other wonderful love stories (true and fictional). She eventually approached him (this is where their story breaks from traditional sex role

stereotyping) and asked him to dance. They spent much of that evening together, parting later in the parking lot.

On the way home that night, Bart remarked to his friend, "I just met the woman I'm going to marry." Bart and Delores often met again during the ensuing week. By the following weekend they were inseparable and already considered themselves a couple. They never again dated other people. One year later they were married. In the eight years since they met, Delores and Bart have had no children. Perhaps because of this, they aren't lacking for romance. They speak of their great respect for and great honesty with one another, and focus in particular on the romance that still exists in their lives. Candlelight dinners are the norm. "I love you" is often scribbled in lipstick on the bathroom mirror. They call each other at work several times a day.

The interviewer initially suspected that Delores and Bart were stuck in some primitive level of development -- one that is dominated by idealized and fanciful notions of each other. They seemed overdue for a profound period of disillusionment, as they finally began to suspect that they were not each other's ideal. Their fantasies would soon come tumbling down, and they would discover each other's bad breath! This was not, however, the case. From the start, we were struck with how genuinely and authentically Bart and Delores presented themselves.

Surprisingly, their individual personalities weren't buried within this very loving, merged picture, but seemed strong and very much in evidence. They spoke of passions not shared and of individual pursuits. They teased one another over these obvious differences, often agreeing with the other's statements of frustration and laughingly pointing out what they particularly found most irksome about the other. They often checked in with the other (asking "is this right?" or "did it happen like this?") to verify that their telling of events was accurate.

Delores and Bart shared a common vision, a deep sense of attunement with one another, a genuine respect and fondness for each other, and a remarkable ability to communicate openly and caringly with one another. All the while, they balanced this off with a clear presentation their own personal needs and an understanding of where their needs were and were not being met within the boundaries of their relationship. There was no starry-eyed romance. It was a

mutual love maintained by hard work.

Key Points

Enduring couples:

Decide whether or not to establish an intimate relationship that involves some level of commitment.

Weather a recurring cycle of four stages throughout the life of the couple labeled as forming, storming, norming and performing.

Learn to roll with the inevitable disillusionment after the initial magic and intensity of the relationship wears thin.

Engage in forming activities when they confront a crisis that leads them to a new developmental task and places them on a new developmental plate.

Protect and even feed the deep fantasies each partner holds about their forming experiences.

Establish boundaries that allow each other to get on with their individual lives as well as allow the couple's life to grow.

Experience simultaneous intense communication and profound guardedness during the forming of their relationship.

Clearly present their own personal needs within the boundaries of the relationship.