

# **LOVE LINGERS HERE: INTIMATE ENDURING RELATIONSHIPS**

## **XI. STORMING IN AN ENDURING RELATIONSHIP**

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The second phase that characterizes most developmental plates involves conflict about what the relationship is and should be and/or about the relative influence which each member of the couple should wield in working on specific developmental tasks. In many cases, couples confront the unreality of their idealized images of the relationship. One or both members of the couple try to make the other member conform to their unrealistic ideal, then, when unsuccessful in this endeavor, attempt to "get even" for the other person's impertinence, stubbornness or ignorance in not understanding, acknowledging and/or abiding by this demand for ideal performance.

Returning to the story of Narcissus that we introduced in a previous essay, one could describe this second stage as the draining of the pond beside which Narcissus sat in admiring his own image. Suddenly (or gradually, depending on the couple) there is no longer an idealized mate on which one can project unacknowledged or unacceptable strengths and desires. Our partner has become a real person, with real strengths and weaknesses, and with real needs. He or she is no longer on "good behavior." Our partner now exhibits all of their psychological warts and blemishes. Each partner must find a way to accommodate their new love to the life they led before meeting this person. They must reshift their attention back to work, back to their children by a previous marriage, back to their favorite hobbies, or back to their old friends and family members.

In addition, the two partners must now face several important issues together for the first time. These issues revolve around several different domains or plates (to which we will devote considerable attention in later essays). Many couples find that the new home they purchased, which is supposed to bring contentment, actually heightens tensions in their relationship. The house has several flaws that were not noted before the house was purchased. Each member of the couple blames the other for this oversight. Similarly, a new child brings

not only joy, but also new stress. Who will take the baby to the doctor? Who will stay up with the baby when he has a fever? Who will change the baby's diapers? Both partners get a double dose of anger when changing the diapers. First, they hate dealing with the diapers. Second, they wonder why they are changing the diaper rather than their neglectful spouse.

For other couples, conflict may surface regarding finances or careers or political preferences or family relations. It often seems that several areas of conflict emerge at the same time, each exacerbating the other area(s) of conflict.

### **Falling out of Infatuation**

In Sondheim's musical fairy tale called "Into the Woods" we discover what happens when the prince and princess (be she Cinderella, Snow White or Sleeping Beauty) are living "happily ever after." Among other things, the handsome prince loses interest in his attractive princess, despite the fact that she continues to look very beautiful. First of all, he no longer has something to dream about, to fight for, to snatch away from others who also desire her. The fair princess is now his alone and having won the battle, there is little joy in the victory. Sondheim's two Prince Charmings (one married to Cinderella, the other to Snow White) sing a duet about their painful discovery that the chase may be more interesting than the prize.

Our contemporary princes also discover that their beautiful h014V brides have much more to offer than just a lovely countenance. Sleeping Beauty has something to say when she wakes up, and neither Cinderella nor Snow White are interested in spending the rest of their lives doing housework for an ungrateful and often untidy man. Contemporary Cinderellas want to return to school. They are too tired or too busy with schoolwork to attend many grand balls. Many Sleeping Beauties return to successful corporate positions that they held before going unconscious (falling in love). Snow White becomes active in community programs to eliminate discrimination against short people. Prince Charming is often not very charming at this point. He must adjust to the realities of his princess's new (or renewed) vision and hopefully become just as enamored with these aspects of the princess as he was with her beauty or whatever characteristics (intelligence, wit, physical skills, etc.) originally attracted her to him.

If we can set the fairy tales aside for a few minutes, what happens in the real world when the disillusionment sets in? Bessy and Bill found that they went through very hard times when the "newness" of their relationship wore off. Having been friends for quite a while before becoming lovers, Bessy and Bill found that the transition to a more formal, intimate commitment was not easy. Bessy acknowledged feeling very jealous and possessive of Bill. She had been very cranky and guarded during this stage. Bill remembered the hard times that Bessy was having during this transitional stage, but his primary memory was of the struggle to survive the financial problems they were facing. Bessy said that her jealousy was caused by the life they led. Bill was playing in a musical group and came home from work at 3 in the morning. They would eat "dinner" and Bill would get some sleep, waking up late in the morning. Their waking and sleeping hours never seemed to match.

The interviewer noted with considerable interest that Bill and Bessy seemed to soften up and speak more slowly when discussing this period in their life together, even though both saw it as a very hard time. It seems to be a period when their true intimacy was forged. Like many other couples, a full commitment is only manifest when Bill and Bessy survived and worked through a period of crisis. It is often ironic that couples speak with greatest tenderness and mutual understanding about the most difficult periods in their relationship -- and, in particular, the period when they are falling out of infatuation and into truly committed love.

During the power struggle in the life of a couple's development there is often growing recognition that 'you're not who I thought you were!' The illusion of unity is replaced by disillusionment. While Bill and Bessy went through their disillusionment after a transition from friendship to intimacy, Steve and Jane [#10] found out about disillusionment after going through a highly romantic courtship -- they were never "just friends." Following their first summer together in the mountains, a school year of long distance romance, and another summer together in the mountains, Jane moved upstate to live in the same town as Steve. Steve found that Jane was no longer the queen of the mountain. While he was initially attracted to her as one of the first female mountain guides in the business, the goddess of the mountain was becoming a "Plain Jane" when he began relating to her in-person and in his own mundane backyard. In response to this disillusionment, Steve became involved with

other women who more closely fit his imagined ideal. Both Steve and Jane recall this time as "a year of hell."

For her part, Jane was able to sustain a longer-term vision of the potential of their relationship even in the face of conflict and inequality: "I didn't want to break up!" The issue of creating a broader understanding of the world around her (a central ingredient in her initial attraction to Steve) remained-powerful for Jane. She saw herself as "still very naïve." We can assist her in her effort to become less naïve about her relationship with Steve by helping her understanding why communications are so difficult and why many relationships break down precisely because of the communication challenges. We will specifically focus on four communication issues (or axioms) that were articulated many years ago by Paul Watzlawick and his colleagues: (1) the impossibility of not communicating, (2) the importance of both the content and relationship levels of communication, (3) the punctuation of the sequences of events in a relationship, (4) the important role played by different types of communication and (5) the important differences between symmetrical and complementary interactions

We will briefly examine each of these axioms as they relate to the conflicts experienced by the couples we interviewed.

### **Trying to not Communicate**

This first axiom suggests that no matter how one tries, he or she cannot avoid communicating. All activity or inactivity on behalf of the individual influences another in his or her presence. Heather and Marianne fully recognize the communicative power of silence and address it before it gets out of hand. Marianne puts it this way: "I sometimes harbor things. Heather's better about getting stuff out in the open. But we always end up talking about it." Heather adds her observations:

Yeah, we always do. If Marianne gets quiet, after a while I'll ask: "Are you alright?" And she'll say, "No, I'm not." And then we talk about it. We play this stupid game of Marianne being silent for a while. I know right away that something's going on but that seems to work for us. I give her a bit of time to be silent. It works for me to talk about it right away and I think that it would be better for Marianne if she'd talk about it right away too, but she thinks about it for a while in silence which is probably better.

Marianne chimes in: "and she flies off the handle more, which is probably better!" These two women have forged an effective, complimentary relationship and an effective conflict management strategy. They appreciate the destructive role played by unacknowledged and unaddressed silence.

Virtually all the couples we interviewed communicated only a small portion of their messages through words. In general, the longer a couple has been an entity, the greater the percentage of total communication that seems to come through nonverbal modalities. Men and women who live together simply can't shut off their communication with one another. As much as they would like to, they continue to communicate. Move to another room to get away from one's partner, and this communicates something. Find a few moments to get away from everything, and our partner gets a message (be it accurate or inaccurate). Snuggle up with our beloved and we also communicate something to them without having to say anything.

### **The Content and Relationship of Communication**

The second axiom is closely related to the first. Any communication implies a commitment (of some form) to a relationship and thereby defines the relationship. Communication is used by all animals (including humankind) not only to transmit information but also to influence the behavior of other members of the same species. Gregory Bateson referred to these two aspects of communication as "report" and "command" functions.

Bateson used a neurophysiological analogy in defining these two 'critical functions. He described the linear firing of three neurons in the brain. According to Bateson, the firing of the second neuron is both a "report" that the first neuron has fired and a "command" that the third neuron also fire. The response (verbal or nonverbal) of Dave to the initial comments of Kathy provides not only an indication ("report") that Dave had in fact heard Kathy and is concerned enough about his relationship to respond to her statement, but also an inducement ("command") for Kathy to respond, in turn, to him -- either verbally or nonverbally.

The "report" is synonymous with the content of any communication. The "command" aspect of the communication contains within it "information" as to the manner in which the communication is to be taken. This obviously will have a direct effect in setting up or

maintaining a particular relationship between the sender and the receiver. There exists an important relationship between the content (report) and the relationship (command) aspects of communication. These aspects contain information about information, and any confusion between the two leads to a meaningless result.

In their commitment to one another, Dave and Kathy have devised effective as well as ineffective ways of communicating together. When they are effective, Dave and Kathy can communicate about something outside of their relationship, for example, their work, their career interests, their avocations. They can also, however, communicate about their own relationship and, in particular, about their processes of communication. This ability to communicate about one's own processes of communication, is called "metacommunication". This process of metacommunication is based, in turn, on the concept of the couple as a third entity. Once two partners recognize that this third entity exists, then they can discuss their relationship as an identifiable and changeable entity.

In the case of Kathy and Dave, we found out that Kathy assumed a very passive, secondary role in her first, abusive marriage. In her second marriage (to Dave), Kathy has assumed a much more dominant and controlling role. Perhaps this is one of the things that Kathy found attractive about Dave in the first place. Alternatively, this pattern of dominance may have developed later in the history of the couple when Kathy attempted to establish a safe relationship with Dave that would not be abusive to her.

The content of Kathy and Dave's communication is about many different things,' the relational aspects of the communication, however, is mostly about Kathy's need for control and dominance in the relationship. For this pattern to change, Kathy and Dave must be willing to "meta-communicate!" "-that is, they must be willing to talk about this pattern of control and dominance. They must consider the establishment and carefully mutual monitoring of an alternative pattern of communication. Such a change is not easy and is often the central point in a major remarriage process. This process often must occur if the couple is to endure and hopefully thrive.

## **Punctuation**

Paul Watzlawick and his associates identified a third axiom in all relationships that tends to be essential in initiation, continuation and ultimately resolution of conflicts. This feature, called "punctuation", refers to the assignment of one-way causality to a sequence of events or behaviors.

Typically, when we are assigning blame we assume that the other person took some action (or didn't take some action) that caused us to feel a certain way -- or act in a certain manner. Our partner in the relationship is likely to identify a different event or behavior that started things off in a conflictual manner and led to our current predicament. What one partner perceives to be their justifiable -response to a stimulus evoked by the other partner, may just as accurately be perceived by the other as a stimulus to their own subsequent response in a spiraling chain of events.

Delores and Bart's interactions illustrate this phenomenon. Punctuation plays an important role in ongoing conflicts regarding Delores's dramatic outbursts. Delores and Bart agree that Delores' personality tends toward the volatile. She is often loud and demonstrative. Her feelings are very much on the surface. By contrast, Bart appears to be more reflective and quiet. His emotions are not so visible. Both attribute their current styles to their early family settings. Delores had more or less adopted her family style, which she sees as loud and exuberant, but at the same time warm and loving. Bart, on the other hand, remembers his family as smoldering with unspoken hostility. When conflict was expressed, it was unleashed in a torrent of rage. In response, Bart places importance on the ability to disagree, but to do so in a reasoned, calm and quiet fashion. Their conflicts often center around these varying styles and how they are interpreted by each partner.

Delores indicates that "when I'm angry, you tend to take it personally and you shouldn't." Bart agrees:

Yeah, I do, because like I say, I think it goes back to earlier days when people had those feelings, usually they were expressing feelings they had about one another, and not just a personal conflict. . . I interpret the yelling and the screaming and the slamming of things with not just a casual, "This is how I'm feeling right now. Just leave me alone," but with more of a deep-seated moodiness . . . anger.

Delores and Bart have worked hard to overcome these differences in interpretations of Delores' anger. Delores suggests that he is getting better at understanding her anger:

Delores: like, the other night, when I was trying to get the defuser on the hair dryer and I was [growling] and you just . . .

Bart: I just watch her do her things and make some suggestions . . .

Delores: I think you're getting better at dealing with that.

Bart: Well, sometimes it seems a little less personal. It seems a little less directed at me. That was something that was very obviously directed at the hair dryer, and it was apparent you weren't angry at me.

Delores: That's something you do . . . tend to do quite a bit, is when I'm angry.

Bart: I take it personally . . .

Delores: You take it personally and you shouldn't.

Bart: I've come to understand that is the way Delores communicates . . . ‘

Delores; But I've taken on some of your style too. Like when I go home and I'm around my mother and my sister. God, they seem so loud . . .

Bart: But you were as loud or louder years ago you were spunkier than them both combined.

Until recently, Delores's anger, though not actually directed at Bart, was interpreted by him in a personal manner (in part because anger in his own family was often disguised and expressed indirectly). He reacted by becoming defensive and often sarcastic. This, in turn, provoked Delores toward further anger, this time truly directed at Bart. The conflict escalated, each seeing the other as being responsible for starting and fueling the fire.

Delores and Bart are able to escape this angry embrace in part because they have developed the ability to communicate with one another about their communication (meta-communication). These have been difficult skills to acquire. Early in their relationship, Delores and Bart's differing backgrounds and styles of communication caused them some major discomfort. Delores recalls that:

Especially when we were first married, we used to just go to opposite ends of the spectrum. Bart would just completely clam up and say, "I'm fine, everything is fine"



and I'd be just screaming my head off, saying "No, it's not, goddammit!" We got to kind of a crisis situation, where we were just fighting all the time and I came home one day and said, "I think we better go see somebody."

At this point, Delores and Bart went through their own remarriage process. They visited a therapist for about four months and continued to go back when they felt the need for "a tune up." This experience helped them refine the tools they needed to more effectively talk about how they communicate and how their personal styles of communication shaped their interactions.

By learning to recognize and talk about their respective styles, by learning to break an escalating chain of events, by taking "time out" when either partner requests (in order to pursue their discussion after emotions have calmed), Delores and Bart learned to step outside the invisible constraints of their interaction, to cease to be ruled by unspoken assumptions and emotions, and to communicate (and often "meta-communicate") in a more mutually satisfying manner.

While in many cases, the partners in a relationship will disagree about the punctuation of their communication pattern and, like Delores and Bart, will have to find ways to "meta-communicate" about these differences in punctuation, other couples agree completely on the punctuation of their communication. In this agreement, however, one often finds a conspiracy of silence, for the agreed upon punctuation hides some of the underlying and often times destructive aspects of their communication pattern.

When describing their life together, Dave and Sheila describe the "meltdowns" that sometimes occur in their relationship. The process begins when things are going bad for Dave. He indicates that he copes by just "hunkering down." Like many men we interviewed, Dave becomes very focused on a goal ("tunnel vision") and emotionally detached from Sheila. At this point in time, according to Dave, Sheila (like Delores) often becomes emotionally upset, sometimes crying, without directly speaking to him about her concerns. As Sheila puts it:

Well, I have to kind of buckle myself down to cope when I don't have him to talk to,

don't have my usual outlet for frustration and satisfaction. And I can only do that for so long. I can keep myself really well controlled for a while. Then I can't do it anymore, That's when I melt down and get real emotional.

In reaction to Sheila's emotionality, Dave becomes even more focused and detached. He feels guilty because Sheila's "meltdown" is his fault. Yet, he also seems to be resentful of Sheila's lack of support for his own personal problems. While Dave sees his coping strategy as pulling in and focusing, Sheila sees it as an emotional withdrawal from her. It is important to note that the couple seems to have agreed upon the punctuation of this process: Dave hunkers down, Sheila melts down, conflict arises and reconnection is made. This sequence of events does serve to alleviate conflict, for Dave expresses his sense of guilt about causing the meltdown and Sheila responds by accepting his responsibility.

Sheila indicated during the interview that she does not see herself as responsible for Dave's "emotional withdrawal," while Dave indicated that: "whereas, often times, when she gets like this [meltdown], I feel like it's my fault. What did I do?" This agreed upon punctuation serves a reconciling function for the couple and thus helps to keep the couple together. However, it is not at all clear from the description that Dave and Sheila give that this sequence is always what occurs. It is just as likely that Dave's hunkering down is a response to Sheila's mounting emotional demands. Much of the reason for the agreed punctuation lies in the differing levels of responsibility that are assumed by each party. Dave and Sheila seem to be unwilling to acknowledge Sheila's own culpability in the precipitation of their conflict.

### **Digital and Analogical Messages**

Humans have two ways of communicating. They can define things precisely in terms of yes/no, good/bad and right/wrong categories. Much of the content aspects of communication is conveyed in this *digital* manner: "It is cold today." "You should wear your gloves-if you're going out in this weather." "I think that we shouldn't go out to dinner with Fred and Tamara tonight, given that it's so cold outside." These are digital statements that speak to facts in the world. Typically, digital statements are verbal, verifiable (you said so and so, didn't you?) and subject to confirmation (is it really cold outside and should this influence my decision regarding glove or evening activities?)

A second type of communication is much subtler. Meaning is conveyed through tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions, posture and so forth. These statements usually concern the relationship itself rather than the content of the communication. This *analogical* type of communication gives one a sense of more or less rather than distinct notions about what is or is not the case (digital). We speak a little louder to add emphasis to a statement we have made. A loud declaration, "It is cold today!" is quite different from a statement made in a matter-of-fact manner that "it is cold today." Similarly, my request that you wear your gloves today can be conveyed as a casual recommendation or as a forceful command solely as a result of the tone of voice and related nonverbal cues.

All of our interviews, of course, were conducted in a digital, verbal medium. We have quoted the words spoken by both members of the couple, and only occasionally comment on the tone of voice or gestures that accompany these words. Yet, this is certainly not the full story. In the case of Kathy and Dave, the interviewer felt that Kathy's voice was very demanding and often quite "whiney" whereas Dave conveyed a clear sense of resignation with an underlying expression of exasperation and strained patience. Do Kathy and Dave hear these messages in each other's voice? Have they ever heard these messages? What do they do about these messages, if they are heard? Many couples retain the status quo by choosing to ignore these messages, or at least never commenting to one another (meta-communicating) about what these messages seem to be saying about the relationship. An examination of this rich, analogical information is quite risky. A remarriage process often is needed to precipitate this type of discussion.

### **Symmetry/Complementarity**

The final axiom of communication concerns the nature of the relationship between two partners. In symmetrical interactions, partners tend to mirror one another. Emphasis is placed on minimizing the inherent differences between the two partners. Conversely, in complimentary interactions, partners attempt to achieve a maximization of differences, with one assuming the superior ("one-up") position, while the other adopts the inferior, secondary or "one-down" position. Kathy and Dave's relationship is clearly complimentary in nature, with Dave serving in a one down position to Kathy. Ironically, both of these people seemed to

have also created a complimentary relationship in their first marriages, with both Kathy and Dave serving in "one-down" positions.

Both parties typically help to build the symmetrical or complimentary relationship. It takes "two to tango" and two to form either kind of relationship. Kathy must not only assume a "one-up" position. Dave must also agree to assume a "one-down" position. Furthermore, he must find some indirect gratification for this "one-down" position. Otherwise, they would both be competing for dominance and a symmetrical relationship would be formed. Alternatively, neither might wish to be dominant and a relationship of mutuality and partnership might emerge. We found that some enduring couples seem to relate easily to one another in either complimentary or symmetrical relationships. Other couples have found ways to be together than are more mutual.

### **Learning How to Manage Conflict**

Rebecca and Bill are very clear about their style of fighting and see both advantages and disadvantages in the way they have • decided to get angry with one another. Rebecca begins by offering her perspective:

Oh, we talk. Usually one of us gets mad, and then we talk about it. Sometimes, the one that is mad will keep it inside for a while and then there will be an explosion and then we talk about it. And then, sometimes after the explosion, we won't talk until the anger has worn off a little. The rare situation is when I get involved in something that I have to write Bill a letter because when I try to talk to him, I get so emotional that I can't say all the things I want to say.

Bill is somewhat more quantitative in his analysis of their fighting behavior:

78% of the time I persuade her to agree with me. 14% of the time she persuades me to agree. 8% of the time we agree to disagree and 1% of the time we disagree and smolder and smoke for a while.

Rebecca then points out that she often gets mad at Bill (as was the case with many women we interviewed) precisely because of the way in which he gets mad:

There may be something bothering him, but he will hold it in and then fly off the handle at the first thing that frustrates him. I want to tell him to just go for a walk! We both are fatigued because of the kids and that is what seems to precipitate

most of the fights -- our fatigue. Sometimes, the kids just get out of hand and neither one of us wants to deal with it, but we have to. We get really tired of not having an out.

The description offered by Rebecca and Bill resonates with the descriptions offered by many of the other couples we interviewed. Typically, they use a variety of different ways of fighting ranging from the silent treatment, to time off from each other, to outright warfare. Frequently, as in the case of many couples, their fights result in part from (or are at least amplified by) other people and situations in their lives, often their children. Finally, as with many couples, we find that many of the fights concerning the process of fighting itself (the metacommunication processes we discussed previous)

In essence, Rebecca was getting angry about Bill's anger and, in particular, the way in which he expresses his anger. This "second-order" anger is particularly destructive in a relationship because it rapidly escalates. First, Bill gets angry and hides his anger only to express it later in an indirect way. Rebecca gets angry because Bill never expressed his anger in the first place. Bill is likely to be very confused about Rebecca's anger since it isn't directed at anything that he can see -and feel. Its anger directed at a process rather than any specific content. Given his confusion, Bill is likely once again to get angry, Yet, he is even more likely to hide this anger, because he is afraid of receiving even more of Rebecca's anger. Thus, the cycle begins again, typically at a more rapid and volatile level. Bill's later, indirect anger fuels Rebecca's renewed anger regarding Bill's inability to immediately express his anger.

Fortunately, Rebecca and Bill seem to have sufficient trust and flexibility in their relationship that they can shift to other modes of fighting. For example, Rebecca writes a letter rather than talking directly to Bill or Bill taking a walk to "cool off". In this way they defuse the escalating condition. Other couples are less fortunate, having no other modes of fighting in their repertoire. They have very little trust in the willingness or ability of their partner to monitor their own feeling; hence, they can't enter into a more thoughtful and detached period of deliberation or negotiation regarding the sources of their anger and fighting.

Arlene and Kevin talked about how difficult the first months of their relationship were

because of Kevin's insecurities. They were not sure whether the relationship was going to survive the first year. Arlene said that it was really horrible because it seemed like they were fighting all the time: "Kevin was so insecure and possessive concerning my time and who I spent it with, that I almost ended the relationship several times. I just felt like I was suffocating." She says that their emotions were so strong then that it was a bit frightening. One moment the two of them could be so happy and the next moment they were screaming at each other. The arguments almost always ended with both of them crying and apologizing to each other for the terrible things that had been said.

Arlene is still amazed when she reflects back on how petty the arguments were and yet how much emotion the two of them put into them. For both Kevin and Arlene many of the "petty" arguments may have been fueled by their mutual falling out of infatuation. Kevin had compared their relationship during its early months to "Wuthering Heights". Surely, no real relationship could hold up under this kind of super romantic pretension. In addition, they had to acknowledge and work with major differences that exist in their interpersonal needs. Kevin wanted romance, reassurance and commitment. Arlene needed independence and she wanted realism in their relationship.

With time, Arlene and Kevin have come to better understand each other and the source of each other's "triggers." The two of them still argue, but now the arguments are much more constructive. They are better able to recognize when they are upset because of a specific situation and when they are upset with one another. Now that they know themselves and each other better, it's much easier to understand and deal with frustrations and disagreements. Arlene has learned that when Kevin is upset, it is better to give him his space so that he will have the opportunity to solve his own problems. In the past, Arlene has always wanted to rush in and make everything okay. Today, their arguments are more likely to end in a compromise rather than degenerate into pettiness. This is not to say that Kevin and Arlene don't still fight about trivial things, but now it is easier to recognize when this is happening and they usually end up joking about it.

The relationship that existed between John and Nancy during their early years together was just as turbulent as Arlene and Kevin's. According to John: "one of the big problems in our

early marriage was that I would say things to Nancy that would hurt her, but she wouldn't tell me. She would just withdraw." Nancy agreed: "Yes, I would have to stand back and sort of lick my wounds, whereas for him when it was over, it was over." "Now," John continued, "she's learned to say, 'I have a headache,' when she doesn't feel well. And I say, 'You poor dear, why don't you go to bed, or take an aspirin or something?'" While this still keeps John and Nancy in traditional masculine and feminine roles, Nancy is at least describing her needs and disclosing that she feels ill. Previously, she wouldn't communicate to John that she had a headache and John would perceive her as being lazy or inconsiderate of his own needs.

After a marriage seminar, Nancy became more open in her communications, and now John has more information and can be more considerate of Nancy's needs. Remnants of the old, traditional pattern in their relationship remain. Nancy often still feels she is being ignored by John and he often still tears her down in front of other people, despite efforts at more open communication:

I constantly criticized myself, Nancy and our relationship. That criticism tore down her self--image. But she never said, 'Hey, you're destroying me,' Now I've learned, and I can usually tell when my kidding or comments are hurting her. When her self-image is high, I can tease her and say, 'You're no good,' and she can laughingly reply, 'yeah, but I'm twice as good as you are.' We both know it's a big joke and everything is okay. But if her self-image is low, she believes every negative word. Sometimes I misjudge where she's at and she will tell me, 'that hurts' and I'll back off. So we have both grown.

Communication seems to be a critical factor in helping this couple move through their storming stage. John was comfortable in being sarcastic and critical of other people. Nancy was not comfortable, but rarely told John of her concerns. With more open communication, John began to modify his behavior. He also began to express more positive feelings, along with his usual negative feelings. Nancy indicates that he now lets her know every day that he loves her: "I'm afraid that before I was like that guy who said, 'I told you when I married you that I loved you, and if anything changes, I'll let you know.'"

### **Fighting About How to Fight: Establishing the Contest Rules**

Some of the most difficult conflicts engaged by many couples concern the very process of conflict itself. How are we going to fight and about what is it legitimate to fight in this relationship? The rules of the contest must be established if each partner is to feel safe and acknowledged in the relationship. This is the part of meta-communication we discussed previously and is often associated with the remarriage process. Frequently, as in the case of Tina and Ben [#38] the real, underlying issue is the very existence of the relationship itself: "is this relationship worth fighting for or can either of us simply run away if the going gets tough." When asked: "who makes the decision in this relationship," Ben indicated that he makes "decisions about things that are very important to me -- the kids, about my life and myself. Everything else Tina decides. I don't feel very strongly about most things, just the kids and myself." Tina disagreed: "I think that Ben makes most of the important decisions and I get to make most of the trivial ones. Ben has decided that I shouldn't go to [the midwest] with him to visit his kids and that we shouldn't get married, and I decided where we went to dinner last night and I picked the last movie we went to."

Ben offers the key to understanding their relationship (or non-relationship) at this point: "Some decisions you can't make mutually. There are decisions that I need to make for myself, whether it is about my children or about getting married." Tina agrees in part, but offers a very insightful comment about their failure to establish equitable rules of conflict:

About the marriage thing, you are right, you have to decide what is right for you; [however] you so often make unilateral decisions that affect me. I just wish you would talk to me about what is going on more, so that we could negotiate things out. Same old stuff — you focus on the content, I'm more interested in the process and you draw me into the content so I end up arguing with you on your turf.

Tina goes on to offer several specific suggestions concerning the problem she is having with the way in which they fight (or don't fight):

Sometimes, Ben, I don't even disagree with your decision about something, like inviting Steve and Betty to join us for dinner the other night. I just get upset that you make unilateral decisions that affect me without discussing them with me first. But you kept on focusing on whether or not I liked Steve and "Betty and wouldn't I enjoy having them. That wasn't the point, and for some reason that is so



hard for you to see.

Part of the problem for Tina and Ben concerns the sequencing of actions leading up to a conflict. A couple's interpretation of each other's action (the process of punctuation that we discussed above) is often a critical first element in any successful resolution of conflicts. If the two partners can't agree on the origins of their conflict or at least agree to disagree on the punctuation, then they are unlikely to get very far in either managing the conflict or solving the problem(s) underlying the conflict (thereby reducing the chance that it will frequently reoccur). For Tina and Ben, punctuation problems center on Ben saying that Tina wants "to push things and talk about the process which I don't care about and want to drop. Because you push it, I drop it." Conversely, Tina notes (with some humor, fortunately) that "because you drop things I push them."

For Ben, "dropping things" usually means disengagement from Tina. In response, Tina says: "You know a lot of the time I just choose not to communicate at all. I just go into the study, close the door and am alone." As we noted above, it is impossible not to communicate in an intimate relationship, Ben is communicating to Tina when he disengages and Tina is fully aware of this: "Well, you may think we're not communicating because you aren't speaking and I leave you alone, but your communication is clear – you want to be left alone and I respond by acknowledging that and don't come in the room or talk to you."

Ben's detachment, however, is also communicating to Tina about his unilateral decision-making. Ben chooses to isolate himself, leaving Tina to adjust to his way of dealing with conflict, much as she must deal with his unilateral decision to see his children without her and to invite guests over for dinner. As Tina notes, it is not the content of the conflicts that are so disturbing to her; rather, it is the way in which conflicts are addressed (or more accurately not addressed) and Ben's unilateral decisions regarding his disengagement from the conflict that is disturbing, Ben's actions are inherently unfair to her and their relationship.

Betty and George exemplify many of the same problems with conflict that are experienced by Tina and Ben, as well as many of the other couples we interviewed. Betty and George have lived together many more years (forty-three) than have Tina and Ben, yet they still struggle

with rules to govern their own storming periods of conflict. When asked how they handle their disagreements, Betty mentioned that if George has a number of things that he needs to get off his chest, she just lets him blow off his steam, so that he will simmer down. George, on the other hand, indicates that when they disagree, he tends to "give in" to Betty: "I try to irk her a little sometimes. But I give her whatever she wants." Betty disagrees with George's assessment, indicating that she tends to back down when in disagreement with George because her mother told her: "Don't ever get mad at the same time." Betty claims that she tends to get silent when she is very angry and remains silent for a long time. When asked how he deals with this silence, George indicated that "I just let it roll off my back and wait." This, in turn, makes Betty even more angry: "He doesn't even get bothered by it."

Clearly, Betty and George get trapped in their own escalating conflicts. He tends to express his anger, but she, simply lets it pass and then doesn't remember what she was going to do anyway, which might further anger George. She tends to quite communicating when she is angry, which leads George to withdraw from her. This makes her even more angry. What keeps these escalating conflicts from blowing apart this long-lasting couple? Like George and Martha in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf", this couple has constructed certain control mechanisms that bring escalating conflicts to an end. Typically, Betty will give in to George's wishes, unless there is a financial issue, in which case Betty's acknowledged expertise (and George's expressed fears about money) takes precedence over George's need for control. Betty acknowledges that George "is in control. I was brought up that way and that's the way it is."

Outside the interview, Betty disclosed that in the past, there was another control mechanism that she employed when conflict got out of hand (and George became physically abusive). She warned George that if he ever hit her or the children she would leave him. In their early life together, they both had an absolute commitment to their children's happiness and would find life without the children to be intolerable. Thus, the threat of leaving George without any access to the children was very strong and helped to bring escalating conflicts to a close. These two governing mechanisms --- the man's right to have a final say and the woman's right to leave with custody of the children -- were quite prevalent among many heterosexual couples during the 1940s and 1950s (and before). Today, these mechanisms tend to be

dysfunctional. Women do not automatically defer to their husbands, nor are women automatically given sole custody of their children. Thus, new ways must be found to terminate escalating conflict or the couple must find a strategy for resolving conflict that cuts off the escalation before it begins.

### **The "Twenty-Four Hour" Rule**

We will leave this world of conflict and turmoil by turning to one couple that seems to have done a very effective job of managing their conflicts. They taught us their "twenty-four hour" rule. When asked how they have been able to maintain harmony and happiness in their marriage, Chuck and Terry point to their commitment to discuss things together (Terry: "we have a rule of not going to bed pissed at each other") and, in particular, their "twenty-four hour" rule. According to Chuck:

We . . . have a twenty-four hour rule. If you're angry about something but don't bring it up within 24 hours, then the issue is dropped. It's not fair to store up things that you are angry about and expect to deal with it two weeks later. Being able to communicate is real important.

While Chuck and Terry are both rather youthful idealists (being in their early 30s) and have only been together for eight years, they offer a very intriguing rule. Each partner is required not only to recognize that a problem exists, but also to decide whether or not this problem is important enough to discuss with their partner. They know that they can't store up their grievances, nor can they simply hold off in deciding whether or not to bring up the problem. We might all be able to benefit from the wisdom of this young couple and devise our own ways of surfacing our conflicts, deciding what is and is not important, and playing fair in the fights that we do have.

While there is no cookbook recipe for one ideal method of communicating in the storming stage of relationships, our enduring couples demonstrated an ability to articulate their feelings, needs and desires. They often shift patterns of managing conflict and emerged from a storming stage with a negotiated set of behaviors that would better serve them in the future as they face new challenges as a couple.

## **KEY POINTS**

Enduring couples:

- Face a storming stage as a normal part of a couple's on-going development.
- Experience reoccurrence of storming stages with movement to various stages and when two developmental plates collide.
- Weather cyclical storming since this stage is one of four developmental stages that occurs in each of the developmental plates to be discussed in Section III.
- Engage in a remarriage or recommitment from unabated storming.
- Develop increased resiliency to brave new storming stages with each remarriage.