

LOVE LINGERS HERE: INTIMATE ENDURING RELATIONSHIPS

XII. ESTABLISHING NORMS FOR AN ENDURING RELATIONSHIP

William Bergquist

If the couple has chosen to face the conflict and storming associated with the developmental plates head on, then the couple typically will move toward the third phase of development. This phase focuses on establishing norms (which are the rules by which people live and work with one another in an effective and interpersonally-gratifying manner). Enduring couples make conscious choices about norms in their relationships. They are able to articulate their needs or their boundaries and flexibly learn from each other to end up with a set of rules workable for them during their developmental stages

Ted and Velia have lived together for eleven years and have been married for eight of these years. Yet, in this period of time, Ted and Velia have often had to live apart; Ted residing, an artist, in their cabin in Wyoming; Velia attending graduate school in the East.

Perhaps because they have limited, highly-valued time together, Ted and Velia have established very clear norms by which they live and relate to one another. First of all, they like to have fun together and suggest that their greatest strength as a couple is, according to Velia, "our ability to play together." Velia fondly recounts their trip to Alaska, when they swam nude in a lake at night and warmed up around a campfire. Ted adds more: "I remember swimming with trout after a nine-hour hike! It was a high mountain lake. The trout were jumping all around us." For many couples, these very special moments of joy and fun provide the glue that keeps them together through many of the tough times. In Velia and Ted's case, these memories keep them going through their long separations.

Second, Ted and Velia support each other in their own individual growth. They are willing to spend time apart because each respects the other partner's individual aspirations in life. Ted wants to remain in Wyoming as an inspiration for his art work, while Velia wants to obtain a graduate degree.

Third, Ted and Velia respect and value each other and their differences. Ted easily identifies Velia's strengths as different from his own:

I appreciate the solidity of her person, her personality, straight-forwardness, her body. Mostly, it's her strong center; she gives me a lot of strength. I know that I will never be embarrassed that she's my mate.

Velia is similarly at ease in reflecting on Ted's strengths:

I appreciate his sense of humor, spontaneity, creativity. I admire his ability to "take in" but not take "on." His ability to listen to me. His flexibility, intuition and his physical fits -- strength and agility. And his health: spiritual and emotional. His bald head, hairy ears [playfully stated] . . . His genuine interest in people and his alive connection with the natural world [becoming more serious again.]

Fourth, Ted and Velia have established a norm of trust. They trust each other, even to the point of talking openly about being tempted to have an affair when they are apart from one another. Ted reports:

Sometimes I do feel tempted. But if I really thought about it . . . I could never do it [have an affair.] I could never hurt-Velia. It would complicate my life so horribly. I would never do it.

The quality of trust is particularly important in the case of Ted and Velia (as well as other couples involved in frequent separations) ; they must trust each other if they are willing to live with considerable independence.

In addition to trust, Ted and Velia point to frequent and open communication as a fifth norm in their relationship. Once again, this norm is particularly important given the extensive period of time that they live apart from one another. Not only must they be skillful in talking with one another over the telephone and by letter (without the many nonverbal clues that inform so much intimate, face-to-face communication among most couples) , they also must be particularly thoughtful in their communication with one another during those precious moments that they do have together. Their clarity of communication begins with their acknowledgement of the value each holds for the other. Velia observes that she:

came from a family of divorce. . . I think a lot about how these people didn't know each other! I think about our being together and what it means to me. If we ever did

separate, the communication would be different. I value you so much [turning to face Ted]. I wouldn't poison what you mean to me.

Sixth, Velia and Ted share a norm concerning money. Whereas money is a troubling and often destructive issue for many couples it is not a major issue for Ted and Velia because, according to Velia: "money is not a big thing with us. We use it when we have it and don't get weirded out about not having it." Ted confirms this conclusion: "I had become accustomed to the insecurity of an artist's salary . . . Learned to hustle when I needed to pay bills. I keep the faith that something will come through." Velia: "For me, it's more frightening to become possessed by money or possessions. Certainly, our love is more important than money. We have a lot of strengths to survive and do it well. I'm thankful that we're both comfortable with that -- not status seekers."

While at first blush, Velia and Ted seem to be a throwback to the late 60s and the hippy disdain for money and security, we find a quite different picture when we look at what they do on a daily basis. Velia is going back to graduate school in part to prepare herself for a more lucrative career. Ted remains active as an artist in Wyoming in part because he has a market there where he can sell his work and make some money. He also is able to live on a much lower income in his Wyoming cabin because of lower living costs. When Velia is able to once again live in Wyoming, all of their expenses will drop down, leaving them in a better place to put love ahead of money in their lives.

Seventh, Ted and Velia each take responsibility for what they need and not assume that their partner knows what they want. Ted indicates that they both have learned that it is critical "to communicate at times when you feel like closing up to make an effort." Velia adds: "to not assume that your partner knows what you want or need . . . to own your mistakes . . . own your own stuff." They seem to be living by this norm. They have managed, for instance, to keep their own disappointment in not having yet had a child from overwhelming their relationship. They talk openly and candidly about their disappointment. They share these feelings rather than letting them corrode their relationship through anger or the assignment of blame. Ted also noted that he has a mother who is very depressed and suicidal. It is very easy for Ted to get wrapped up in her problems and bring these problems into his own marriage. Yet, they

both are aware of this potential area of conflict and are vigilant in not bringing Ted's mother's issues into their own relationship.

Finally, Ted and Velia place romance at the heart of their relationship. This is not a business that they are creating together. It is an intimate relationship that requires special moments together and constant nourishment. During their interview, Ted and Velia always maintained body contact with each other in some way and maintained constant eye contact. They were speaking to each other as much as they were to the interviewer. They turned this experience of being interviewed about their relationship into a special experience that itself became romantic and a reaffirmation of their special relationship. Ted and Velia may not live "happily ever after." However, up to this point, they have fashioned a remarkable relationship and should take great pride in what they have created for themselves and hopefully the children they will someday raise together.

An enduring couple like Ted and Velia cannot rest on their laurels. They must establish new norms for each developmental plate. The norms or rules that a couple lives with regarding the task of parenting may not necessarily be appropriate when the couple is discussing the family's financial conditions. Similarly, the ways in which two people relate to each other while dealing with the "nuts and bolts" of establishing a new home or financial base, will often be inappropriate when they are dealing with the subtle and conflictual issues associated with preparing for death.

In this essay, we will focus on three different sets of norms that are established formally or informally by most couples: (1) ways of living and working together, (2) dominance and mutuality, and (3) discussable and non-discussable issues.

Ways of Living and Working Together

Norms often are not set by a conscious effort. However, in the process of establishing norms in an enduring relationship, the two partners discover and consciously negotiate practical ways of living and working with one another. In his study of love, relations and the work of the soul, Moore labels this process the "vernacular life" -- the particular place, family, friends, and neighborhood that are part of our daily lives." He suggests that the work we do as couples

in this vernacular life is the work of our soul, whereas the work of our spirit concerns loftier matters regarding ideal states and future plans. It is in our daily interactions with our partner and attention to the minor details of our life together that we forge the enduring structure and dynamics of our intimate relationship.

Mary and Ruth have lived together for the past fifteen years. They own a home together and have established a rich, enduring and vital relationship in which the norms regarding daily routines are clearly defined. Mary (a social worker) comments on these norms:

We can talk together easily. We've learned how to successfully argue. We respect each other's privacy. We have space and we give each other space. We have our own rooms . . . our own activities outside our relationship. We do two different kinds of work [Ruth is in a technical/scientific field], so we have totally different kinds of things to bring into the relationship.

This recipe for an enduring relationship was concocted by Mary and Ruth only after some difficult struggles concerning the distinctive differences that exist between the two of them. Typically, the initial versions of the rules of a couple's relationship are the primary focus of the conflicts that arise during the storming phase. The norming phase for Mary and Ruth, as for most other couples, consists of the day-in and day-out refinement of these initial agreements (whether these agreements are explicit or tacit). In essence, the couple is trying to establish a long-term, enduring commitment. During this phase the two partners build a shared history or common memory which can sustain them through many hard times.

Dominance and Mutuality

During the storming phase, partners often struggle over and eventually define areas of dominance for each partner in the relationship and areas of shared mutuality in the relationship. As we noted in the previous chapter, some relationships consist primarily of negotiated areas of control and dominance, while other relationships consist of very little dominance and a large proportion of mutuality. Neither type of relationship is better than the other. The key is: do both partners agree to and support this norm?

Frequently, the issues of dominance and mutuality in a relationship evoke very old memories

and images for a couple. Resolution of these issues often occurs only after both partners acknowledge the continuing and often inappropriate replication of old family patterns. Erik Erikson notes that the major task in the latter part of our lives is coming to terms with our own parents. Oftentimes, this coming to terms begins much earlier in life with the establishment of a good working relationship between ourselves and our partner that moves us beyond old, traditional patterns that may not be very successful for couples who are addressing the complex problems of 21st Century life. In a few cases, couples we interviewed actually identified the appropriate use of old patterns that were often ahead of their times. David and Meryl, for instances, have replicated David's parent's pattern of shared childcare and housework. David 's father was a police officer with an early morning beat who came home in the afternoon to take care of the children and cook dinner, while David's mother worked to supplement the family income.

One of the key marker events in many relationships is the moment when other people start referring to two partners as a couple. They now have a name as a couple: "let me introduce you to Cindy and Bob." "Where will Donna and Steve go on their vacation?" "Why don't we invite Bev and Elizabeth over for dinner?" With this naming process comes a very subtle but often critical decision related to dominance and mutuality. What is the ordering of the names? Will it be Cindy and Bob, or Bob and Cindy? Bev and Elizabeth, or Elizabeth and Bev? This sequencing of names in some instances is imposed from the outside. The names of the two partners in a couple simply begin to be sequenced in a certain order by friends or relatives and the sequence sticks. In other instances, the two members of the couple themselves implicitly establish a sequence, through the messages they leave for other people and on their own phone answering machine, the way they sign their joint letters, Birthday cards and Christmas cards, and so forth. In either case, the sequencing often says something about the distribution of authority and influence in the relationship.

Couples know that the sequencing of names can be important, but also know that this is an irrational issue. As a result, they often speak about the ordering of their names with humor and a touch of embarrassment. Bob and Rita spoke about the critical moment when their friends begin to refer to them as a couple. In referring to this point as a marker event, Rita states: ". . . you know, it's when people start referring to you by one name, like

Sue-and-Bob." Bob interrupts and nods agreement: "Oh, I see, Bob-and-Sue." He concurs with Rita about the importance of this event--but slips in a shift in the sequence of names. Other couples also kidded about the name sequence, often in a manner that identified this as an important, but not discussable issue.

Discussable and Non-discussable

Name order is only one of many areas in a relationship that may not be discussable. It is critical for a couple to identify those topics that are discussable and those that are not. This norm takes on two different forms. First, there are a series of decisions made (explicitly or implicitly) by the couple regarding what is or is not discussable in their own relationship. Second, there are a series of decisions, often quite explicit, regarding what they will and will not disclose about themselves as a couple to other people.

With regard to the first norm of disclosure, many couples define explicitly or implicitly certain issues that can be discussed (such as the food we eat or who takes out the garbage). Other issues may be highly loaded and can never be discussed (such as one of the partner's weight problems, finances, sexuality or the excessive consumption of alcohol). Many couples we interviewed spoke of their emerging sense of commitment to one another or the sense of intimacy they first experienced in their relationship as a matter of disclosing matters to each other that they had never disclosed to anyone else in their life. Jessie speaks of her first encounter with Dick and notes that while he "was tiptoeing into the relationship," she "proposed to him six months before he proposed to me." She told him that if, at some time in the future, he wanted to propose to her, the answer was yes and she just wanted him to know that if he ever started thinking about it. Six months later, Dick did propose and, true to her word, Jessie accepted.

Jessie offers a lovely example of how at least one member of a couple sets the norms early on for discussing the "undiscussable"—in this case her interest from the first in being married to Dick. Nothing coy. No beating around the bush. The flat-out truth of the matter for Jessie! This strength and openness was to serve their marriage very effectively in the years to come. Dick noted that Jessie "provided strength and stability" at the point when he began to confront a drinking problem. Jessie indicated during the interview that: "I'm a very consistent person

and I wanted to support him. I was real easy. He's someone to have a lot of respect for [because he stopped drinking]."

Her strength and candor also came in handy when both of them confronted problems with their parents. In her characteristically straight-forward manner, Jessie reported that both of their "parents have screwed up their own relationship so you don't need them to help to fuck up your life; you can do that on your own!" In their commitment to each other and their willingness to discuss the undiscussable with one another, Dick and Jessie present a unified front to their parents (and his children by a previous marriage). For both of them, their partner is more important than the maintenance of any other relationships. "This is us," Jessie told her mother: "take it or leave it. We're in love. This is who we are and we're not going to change."

While Jessie seems to offer strengths and candor, Dick tends to "calm things down" in the relationship. He explains that "we work on supporting each other's weaknesses. The strengths are easy." These wonderful words of wisdom would seem to be appropriate for most couples and certainly help to open the doors for candor and discussions of those things that are usually not discussable, namely, our weaknesses.

Benita and Darrell had an on-again, off-again relationship for nine years. They talked frequently during their interview about the initial ambivalence they both felt toward making a commitment to one another. Betina reports that the marker event in their relationship after all of these years related directly to their willingness to disclose important feelings to each other:

. . . we would go out a couple of times and then he would disappear and that was that. . . The most notable thing about the relationship is that we would separate and come back together again and separate and come back together again and that happened several times after college [as well as when they first met while attending the same college.] . We could talk about going to a movie, but we weren't able to talk about our feelings for a number of years and the only point at which our relationship became serious was after we were able to talk about our feelings, and so I don't think it's worth anything to talk about all those years we were sort of in and out of relationship because those were years in which he was important to me, in some ways, but certainly there were other people who were

important. There were actually two other men that I was interested in marrying. But when it really started to jell was when we could talk to each other and that was when we developed the kind of relationship neither of us had had with anyone else. . . . We (pause) started saying things that we felt were unspeakable and that made a lot of difference and it was pretty terrifying, but it sure as hell made a big difference.

The second part of the norm about discussability concerns what a couple willing to share with family, relatives, friends and strangers. This second norm is particularly important for Daniel and Ben, a gay couple who have been together for ten years, and for Mary and Ruth, a lesbian couple who have been together for fifteen years. In fact, most of the lesbian and gay couples we interviewed indicated that this second norm regarding discussable and non-discussable issues outside the relationship was particularly important and often troublesome. Gay and lesbian couples must individually and collectively decide when and where they will reveal that they are lesbian (or gay) and are a couple.

This issue is often a source of major conflict for gay and lesbian couples both because of the anger it tends to evoke in both parties regarding general societal prejudice and because of frequent differences of opinion between the two partners regarding how open they will be with their own families and friends, as well as strangers. While many couples have to determine when they will disclose to others (particularly, parents, relatives and close friends) that they are a couple (or have become intimate, moved in together and so forth), there is typically not the strong stigma and judgment that unfortunately often attends the disclosure of a gay or lesbian relationship.

For Daniel and Ben, the issue of disclosure resides at the very heart of their relationship, as defined in their founding story. When asked how they met, Daniel's reply was that they met at "a club." That was as revealing as he intended to get. Ben, however, was more straightforward and indicated that they in fact met at a bath house. This was a significant disclosure for Ben, given that in the era of AIDS, bathhouses have become symbols of gay promiscuity for many members of the "straight" world and as a painful reminder for many gays of their prior years in practicing unsafe sex.

The differences between these two men in their willingness to disclose to a stranger (the interviewer) may relate to their own upbringing. Daniel is 35 years old and still lives at home with his Eastern European-born mother and his brother. His cultural background is evident in his reluctance to discuss such private matters. Daniel's strong need for privacy is also manifest in his decision to live apart from Ben so that he will not have to reveal to his family that he is gay. Daniel sleeps at home every night, no matter what is happening in his relationship with Ben.

It is truly remarkable that their relationship has existed for ten years. Daniel did indicate that he would "like to see Ben more, in the day time." However, he went on to reveal that his need for privacy extends beyond his reluctance to reveal his sexual orientation to his family: "I realize that it is important for us to give each other their own space." Fortunately, Ben's own need for free time away from Daniel to do his own thing is quite compatible with Daniel's need for his own "space." Thus, Daniel and Ben find time together on their days off, but still devote much of their free time to independent pursuits.

While many other couples must confront differences in cultural background and, as a result, differences in comfort level regarding public and family disclosures, the dilemmas faced by many gay and lesbian couples have been exacerbated and particularly poignant during the past 20 years for many gay couples. Particularly during the 1990s, one or both partners may have facing premature death through the intrusion of AIDS-related illnesses. Daniel has tested positive with regard to the HIV antibody, while Ben is HIV negative. For many years they had to face AIDS, as have many other gay couples in America. Fortunately, both Daniel and Ben are still living. Complex issues regarding disclosure have been inevitably raised by this disease—regardless of whether or not it resulted in the death of one or more other the partners.

Like Daniel and Ben, Mary and Ruth reported that they often struggled over the disclosure of their relationship to other people. One of them wants to get it out in the open and "out of the way," while the other wants to be more cautious. Issues regarding disclosure of gay and lesbian identity are certainly less daunting than they were ten or twenty years ago, but they

still play a major role with regard to disclosure norms for these couples. Early in their relationship, Mary and Ruth established specific times for being together and other times for being apart. Vacations served as a safety valve for revitalizing their relationship in a positive, fun-oriented context away from external, discriminatory influences. While many couples find vacations to be a renewing experience in which they rediscover their earlier, more carefree relationship, lesbian and gay couples often find their vacations together to be particularly renewing, because they can travel to locations where homosexual orientations are readily accepted, if not pervasive. These precious periods of time together in a gay or lesbian "sanctuary" may be critical to the preservation of special relationships such as we find with Mary and Ruth.

KEY POINTS

Enduring couples:

- Set norms or rules by which they live and work with one another in an effective and interpersonally-gratifying manner.
- Establish norms of mutuality and dominance between the two partners that are consciously different than the old patterns followed by their parents and families.
- Experience a marker event when the couple is recognized and labeled as one unit by friends and family.
- Set norms about discussable and non-discussable issues both with each other and with other people about themselves.
- Discuss each other's weaknesses frankly and honestly.
- View the maintenance of their relationship with their partner as more important than the maintenance of any other relationship.