

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

## **XIII. PERFORMING IN AN ENDURING RELATIONSHIP**

### **William Bergquist**

With the establishment of effective, working norms, a couple is prepared to begin performing its new developmental tasks. The couple typically will experience a period of harmony and fulfillment, at least with regard to a set of predominant issues in their life. As the demands change or intensify, a couple may have to retreat to norming, storming or even forming phases, though typically the “battles” will lesson in intensity if the four phases have been successfully traversed in the first place. Any regression to an earlier phase will typically take a much shorter time than did the initial movement through this phase, and require less energy and attention on the part of the couple.

### **The Daily Rituals of Life**

Michael Polanyi speaks of the tacit dimension in life, this being the way in which we come to know things without ever being really conscious of them or even being able to articulate what we have learned. Something similar seems to occur when a couple has established a good working relationship. Much occurs in the relationship that goes unnoticed while the partners are nurturing the relationship. These unnoticed things give the relationship new direction and renewed vitality. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye asks his wife if she loves him. At first she dismisses he question as another sign of the old fool's inappropriate romanticism. Yet, he persists. Eventually, she acknowledges that she must love him, since she sleeps with him, works alongside him, and has raised three children with him. This is the tacit dimension of the performing phase in a relationship. Nothing is usually said, other than an occasional, often very informal, recognition that there is something special and important about this entity, the couple.

Karen is a twenty-five year old woman in a five year marriage. She describes this tacit dimension in her own, relatively young relationship with Ben:

Karen: It's so weird to try and sum up. So much of the relationship is unspoken. And we've never had to put this into words. It's an underlying feeling You go through everyday life and it gets stronger and stronger. You never put it into words except to say, "I love you so much." Like every minute.

Ben: But I love that. We always say that.

Karen: We can't even walk by each other without touching each other. A lot of it is physical and a lot of it is just saying, "I love you." A lot of it is how he makes me feel inside about myself.

Karen and Ben certainly say that they love each other much more often than does the couple in *Fiddler on the Roof*. But then they are of a different era and culture. Perhaps in their own, different ways, both couples reaffirm the power of long-term, intimate relationships in helping to define the very purpose of our time here on Earth.

How do the tacit dimensions of an enduring relationship manifest themselves? As we mentioned with regard to the establishment of norms in a relationship, many of the most important rules in a relationship are established in the "vernacular life" (Moore, 1994), the informal interactions with one another and with other people and event that fill our daily lives together. Typically, the tacit dimension of an enduring relationship is manifest in not only the daily routine of the couple, but also in the small, yet meaningful rituals that the couple observes as a way of celebrating their continuing growth and prosperity—and the continuing (if not openly acknowledged) love of each partner for the other. One couple celebrates their relationship by celebrating the sunset every evening on their deck (when it is not raining or snowing!). Another couple opens a bottle of champagne every month to acknowledge their thirty-year long relationship.

Like many enduring couples, Arlene and Kevin speak of being each other's best friend. After going through several difficult years of struggle, Arlene and Kevin now most look forward to "simply paling around together." A typical day for these two people usually centers around work and school. They both get up early to commute to their jobs. Neither of them are morning people

so they don't talk for the first hour or so. They make up for the lack of nonverbal communication by spending a half hour or so in bed each morning just snuggling and cuddling. Both Kevin and Arlene take classes at night, so it is usual to not see each other again until late at night. When they are not in school, they spend the majority of their evenings studying for classes. They see their classes as a fulfillment of the commitment they made to each other to allow time for individual personal growth. Kevin is currently taking a class in Tai Chi (in keeping with his romantic proclivities), while Arlene is taking a class in accounting (in keeping with her more practical bent).

To ensure that they also have time for each other, designate each Friday as "date night." They take turns planning activities for the evening which usually includes dinner of some sort, and a movie or a walk along the beach. During the past few years, Arlene has come around to Kevin's way of thinking. They now both consider themselves to be "romantics at heart." Kevin has also come around to Arlene's way of thinking—they realize that sometimes romance needs to be helped along with a little planning when two people have full lives. They see date night as their special time together and reserve the night just for themselves. The weekends are usually spent with a handful of their closest friends. They both like to entertain, so it's not unusual for them to have friends over for pizza and a game. It can be very disillusioning for a couple when romance has left the relationship. Arlene and Kevin seem to understand the importance that romance plays in a healthy relationship and they have been very thoughtful and active in ensuring that this element is nurtured.

Gene and Margie make a point of having coffee together each morning before he leaves for work. Margie then takes their daughter to childcare and usually picks her up after work though there is flexibility when her schedule changes temporarily. They both have long commutes, so dinner is not elaborate. Gene and Margie like to cook, but Gene does most of it. They are both devoted to their daughter and spend time with her in the evening before going to bed around 9:30 pm. In such a busy life, there is little time for elaborate ritual or even so-called "quality time" together. The quality time is spent with their young daughter. A small ritual (coffee together in the morning) soon is invested with considerable significance as the one act that is shared by Gene and Margie virtually every morning. Even Gene and Margie may not be aware of the

significance of this one shared act in their busy, independent lives. The meaning of this small, daily ritual may only become apparent when they discuss it with an interviewer (or marriage counselor). Alternatively, it's importance may only become apparent when one partner abandons it for some reason. Then all hell breaks loose. Both partners are likely to be surprised with regard to the emotions attached to the ritual. There often is a pressing need to restore this simple daily event or risk losing the relationship!

### **Moving Together and Apart**

At the heart of the ongoing relationship between two people is the issue of enmeshment (growing together) versus disengagement (growing apart). Enmeshment concerns the extent to which the lives of two people are intricately interwoven. Partners in a highly enmeshed couple do everything together, are usually very dependent on each other for most of the emotional gratifications in life and often are unable to distinguish their own opinions, feelings and aspirations from those of their partner. There are, in other words, very diffuse boundaries between the two partners. It is hard to determine where one partner leaves off and the other begins. By contrast, highly disengaged relationships are those in which the two partners barely keep in touch with each other. They operate essentially independent of one another, passing like "ships in the night." They establish what is sometimes called a "marriage of convenience."

In many cases we found that the issue of enmeshment versus disengagement focused on specific incidents, on moments of enmeshment or disengagement, rather than an overall style of living together. Aaron, for instance, spoke about his dream of temporary disengagement. He would like to spend a week alone sitting on a beach in Hawaii. Becky doesn't believe that this is really what Aaron wants (or at least what he should do), suggesting that he really doesn't like being alone and has an obligation to spend more time with his family: "Why would you want to go to Hawaii by yourself of all places. You'd think you'd want to go there with me. We haven't had a vacation like that for years. I can't believe it. Why don't you want to go fishing with the boys or to baseball camp?" In this particular instance, Aaron is looking for (or at least wanting to dream about) greater disengagement in their relationship (and their family), while Becky is arguing for more enmeshment and engagement.

As in the case of many conflicts regarding the establishment of an enduring relationship, Becky and Aaron soon move to the heart of their relationship and their covenant with one another. Aaron suggests that Becky "thinks I want to go to Hawaii to make love to other women on the beach." I don't. I'd just like some time to myself on the beach." At this point, Becky could no longer maintain her pleasant veneer. She snapped back at Aaron: "Yeah right. You'd just lie on the beach by yourself for a week." Aaron backed off: "It's just a fantasy. You know me. I'd be lonely and miserable in an hour. Of course, I'd rather be with you." In this brief interchange, we see Aaron submerging certain aspects of himself in order for Becky to feel safe. Becky, in turn, becomes the unloving and demanding "bitch" who won't let Aaron run free. Neither of them particularly like these roles, and they must begin to openly address their real needs in the relationship for both connectedness (enmeshment) and independence if they are to move beyond their current conflictual status.

For some of the couples we interviewed there is very little conflict with regard to the norms of enmeshment and disengagement, because they have come to agreement on this matter and are either heavily enmeshed as a couple or consistently disengaged. Highly enmeshed relationships are typical in many traditional European and European-American families of lower middle-class origins. The entire family is wrapped up in each other's business. No one does anything without checking in with one another. The transition of one member of the family out of the household, to get married or go to school, is often highly traumatic for everyone in the family, particularly the parents. Mother and father fight a lot, but always make up and never spend a night apart.

Conversely, many relationships among the upper class and upper middle class in Europe for many centuries were built on a norm of disengagement. The husband and wife agree to remain together for the children and to meet various social obligations. Each of these partners, however, had their own lovers who met their sexual needs and often their needs for intimacy. They also often went their separate ways with regards to friends, recreational and artistic interests, and vacations. A disengaged relationship of this sort may be exemplified in the apparently successful marriage of Bill and Hillary Clinton. A not-so-successful, but perhaps unavoidable, disengaged arrangement may be found in the relationship that was established (unsuccessfully) for a short period of time by Prince Charles and Princess Diana.

As we turn to our own interviewed couples, we find disengaged couples like Sally and Max, who seem more comfortable when talking about "I" than "we." There was always hesitancy and question mark in their voices when talking about and for themselves as a couple. They felt that they have very little in common, other than both being Taurus, and are surprised that they are still together after three and a half years, having been "attached" on and off for the previous 15 years. Both teachers in their early sixties, Sally and Max have been very cautious about making a commitment over the years in part because Max lost his first wife to cancer and wants to avoid ever going through that pain again.

In trying to play it safe, Max dated many women for a long period of time, though he always returned to Sally as his stable relationship. Sally found this complex dance quite confusing and paradoxical, for within a year after they started dating Max told her that he wanted a "deep and meaningful relationship without any commitment" and within four years "he told me that he loved me and then went out with other women." Instead of insisting on a showdown, Sally started dating other men, all the while insisting that the person she really loved was Max. Of course, at the times when they started getting closer, he again started to pull away, and the dance began again.

Even in making a firmer commitment to Sally, Max uses a shopping metaphor that seems quite disengaged: you pick something out that you like at the store and ask them to hold it while you check around for a while. Then you look at other stores, but keep coming back to the first store because "you know that that is what you really want." But, something keeps you from buying it, and there is always that suspicion that there is something better somewhere. So Max distinguished between "when he knew" that they were a couple, which was early on, and "when he was sure" that they were a couple, which occurred much later.

Actually, Max was "sure" that they were a couple when Sally finally gave up on him after 15 years of waiting and went to another country to work. While she was gone, Max had no desire to date other women. He finally followed Sally and asked her to come back and marry him. She waited six months to answer in the affirmative (giving him back a bit of his own medicine) and

only after he went to get her a second time and proposed again. This ended the "dance." Sally indicated, however, that she was never sure that they were a couple until the marriage ceremony when she finally was able to build some boundaries around their highly disengaged relationship. Max and Sally are a distinctive couple in many ways. Yet, in other way they exemplify traditional sex-role values and expectations. Max, the male, tries to keep disengaged, while Sally, the female, seeks out commitment. Sally's overall description of their relationship could stand as a motto for virtually all disengaged couples: "It was always fuzzy."

A similar pattern is to be found in the relationship that has been established between Tina and Ben. These bright, upper middle-class people have been in a relationship for seven years; yet, when asked if they live together, Tina (a lawyer) says, "Well, yes, we sort of live together," while Ben (owner of a business) says flat out, "no." They spend most of their nights at Tina's three bedroom flat in a highly affluent area of a large West Coast city, and most weekends at Ben's home in an affluent suburban of this city. They also spend at least one night per week without each other. To her this is "sort of" living together. To him, it isn't and that in and of itself tells us a great deal about this relationship. Along traditional gender lives, Ben sees himself as very separate. (in terms of his career) and very autonomous (in term sof his interpersonal relationships), while Tina sees herself as part of a couple, with many attachments. He is part of a convenient arrangement. She is part of an intimate relationship.

The entire interview was very difficult for Ben, given that he didn't perceive that they were a couple. When the interviewer asked Ben and Tina about the moment when they had become a couple, Ben became very frustrated: "I don't know what it is that you're asking. Does that mean the first time you went to bed with somebody?" He finally acknowledged that: "I never think of us as a couple. We are two individuals. It has nothing to do with a couple." Tina offered her own conclusion at this point: "I think we have been a couple for seven years, but Ben, what is it about the word 'couple' that bothers you?" At this point, Ben articulated a basic credo for many people who prefer to live in. highly disengaged relationships: "Couple is like two people who are tied together."

In this statement, Ben reveals some of his most basic fears regarding being in a relationship and

making a commitment. His fears may reside partially in a failed first marriage and in his continuing obligations to his two children from this previous marriage. While both Ben and Tina have children from a previous marriage, Tina's children are of college age and live with her when they are in town. Conversely, as in the case of many men, Ben did not gain custody of his children after being divorced from his first wife. His children live in the mid-west and Ben flies back to see them at least once a month and spends four to six days with them. While Ben is successful enough in his career to devote considerable time and money to being with his children, his commitment to them is quite impressive. Clearly, a commitment is to be honored in full by Ben. He does not enter relationships easily and tends to view them as binding rather than freeing for everyone involved.

In the case of Frederick and Helene, the traditional gender roles have been reversed. Whereas Ben and Max had assumed the male role of detachment, Frederick wanted a strong commitment in his relationship with Helene. While Sally and Tina were seeking out a stronger commitment from their male partner, Helene is concerned about keeping some distance between herself and Frederick. In many ways, Frederick and Helene exemplify the emerging changes in sex roles. Many women wish to protect their new-found independence while many men want to participate more fully in family and community life. Frederick indicated that he "wanted from a family what I didn't get from my own." According to Frederick:

. . . my folks were pretty simple people . . . it was like I was always too weird or too smart for the Helene was adopted . . . she had stepbrothers and sisters . . . her mother divorced and remarried a couple of times . . . I asked Helene for a commitment . . . her take on it was, let's get married and if it doesn't work, hey, no big deal . . . we can just get divorced . . . and I wanted something more than that.

One gains a clear sense in interviewing this couple that Helene is not prepared to believe that someone as "exciting" or "exotic" as Frederick might be interested in having a long term relationship with her. One also gains the impression that Frederick was deliberately looking to create a sense of family that he never had and still missed. Perhaps, Helene was being cautious about their relationship in part because she did not completely trust Frederick's staying power and may not be convinced that Frederick had a realistic sense of the nature of enduring commitment



to another person. Conversely, she may doubt her own ability to make such a commitment, given that she has no role models of enduring commitment in her own life.

Most couples do not live at either extreme of the enmeshment-disengagement continuum. They somehow establish a balance between enmeshment and disengagement. They discover a sense of interdependence; yet they still face many challenges regarding this critical balance between attachment and freedom. It seems that while enduring issues regarding enmeshment and disengagement concern the degree of interconnectedness within a relationship, there are also typically ongoing issues concerning the degree of interconnectedness between the couple, on the one hand, and the outside world, on the other hand. System theorists define this as the extent to which the relationship is open or closed.

Relationships tend to be open with regard to the interaction between a couple and the outside world if they are deeply enmeshed in the extended families of one or both of the partners. We found that this was most often the case when one or more of the partners come from a traditional nonwestern culture or a western culture that places a particular value on loyalty to family of origin (parents, grandparents, siblings, uncles and aunts, and even cousins).

This openness and enmeshment within the family constellation was certainly the case for Jamal, who was born in an Arab country, but has lived in the United States for sixteen years. He is an engineer, attends graduate school, and married a broadcast manager, Suzanne, six years ago. Jamal noted that: "I have a lot of responsibilities. I'm torn between the two -- my family and Suzanne." He went on to explain that in his culture, it is ingrained in you from the day you are born that you will take care of your parents, especially if you are the eldest son. Jamal said that it is often impossible for Americans to understand this commitment because they do not come from the same background, or uphold the same traditions and hold the same cultural expectations. He added, "you do not choose between your family and your wife. They become one." Thus, we have a classic example of a very open system. The family of origins is merged with the relationship between oneself and one's partner.

As in the case of virtually every long-term couple we interviewed, the stage of performing has

never been one of eternal, unaltering bliss for Jamal and Suzanne. Rather, performing for most couples requires frequent readjustments and even several remarriages in order for the relationship to endure. In the case of Jamal and Suzanne, many adjustments have been made and they were in the midst of a remarriage process at the point we interviewed them. While both Jamal and Suzanne were initially eager to participate in the interview, they wished they had never agreed to participate by the time that the interview actually occurred, given a recurrence in their struggle regarding Jamal's extended family. Their current struggle emerged when they were asked what they see as "the most difficult thing you had to weather in your relationship." Their response indicated that the "most difficult thing" is occurring right now. It became clear that their cultural upbringing was a major difference and much further reaching than any individual differences between them could ever be. Thus, the outside world in this open relationship became more important than their personal differences and interactions (as would be the case in a more closed or disengaged relationship).

Suzanne immediately responded to the question by identifying "his family" as the most difficult thing.: "It's not like they are awful. It's the whole idea of having to share him. It's so unlike our society." She went on to explain that she would never really be his main concern because of the commitment he feels toward his family and it is just understood by his parents that they would move in with them if they ever married. At this point in their relationship, Jamal's parents have not moved in, because Jamal and Suzanne have never made the formal commitment to get married. But, now is the time to make a commitment (at least in Suzanne's mind) and this commitment brings the issue of Jamal's parents to the fore.

Over the past year, the issue of mutual commitment has become even more poignant because both of them have increased their commitments outside their relationship, which provides further evidence of an open relationship. Suzanne recently returned to college and is opening a small boutique. Jamal has become a partner in a flower shop and has decided to extend his graduate studies to include a doctoral degree. When asked why they made these additional commitments during the past year, Jamal quickly replied that he is pursuing the flower shop for extra money and pursuing a doctoral degree so that he can eventually teach at a university. Suzanne hesitated before she said that maybe it was a "safety net." She went on to explain that she was filling- her

life with other commitments in case the relationship with Jamal did not work out. Jamal did not seem to be surprised by this statement. They had obviously talked about this.

Suzanne then looked at Jamal for his approval before she continued. He nodded and she went on to tell the interviewer that she had set a deadline for making a decision about getting married. She feels that after six years they have to make a decision as to whether they will eventually marry. From this perspective, the issue would seem to be one of unwanted disengagement. She wants the relationship to have firmer boundaries and a greater longevity and commitment. Yet, the decision also hinges they can agree to a compromise about Jamal's family. He wants his parents to move in after they are married. Suzanne doesn't want them to move in. Suzanne summed it all up when she said: ". . . and then we're back to square one again."

Previous parts of their interview suggest that they have established a rich and caring relationship with one another. They have built a life together', have weathered many storms and genuinely love each other. They have moved several times through the processes of forming, storming, norming and performing. They are now at yet another turning point in their relationship. In many ways, this is the most important point, for it moves them to a central question regarding the boundaries of their relationship. Are we an autonomous couple or are we an integral part of Jamal's extended family? Do we live alone or with Jamal Is parents? Suzanne is tired of living without a firm commitment from Jamal, yet she knows that obtaining a commitment of marriage from Jamal means that the boundary issue must finally be resolved.

Conversely, Jamal has been hesitant to discuss a lifelong commitment with Suzanne. In keeping with his culture, Jamal doesn't feel comfortable in making more explicit the nature and extent of his commitment with Suzanne. He feels that "she would know" that he would not be with her for so long a period of time if he did not love her. As in the case of Tevye's wife (who comes from another traditional culture) there is no need for Jamal to discuss the matter of commitment, given that two people have lived together for many years. Yet, Suzanne is asking for just such a discussion and has set a deadline for an explicit decision. Like Suzanne, Jamal is hesitant to get married because it will bring the issue of his parents to the surface. As long as he and Suzanne just live together, they wouldn't have to make the difficult (if not impossible) decision to invite

his parents to live with them.

From Jamal's perspective, Suzanne is forcing the issue and may destroy their relationship. From Suzanne's point of view, this is a double-bind. She wants a clear commitment from Jamal regarding marriage, but knows that either this demand for a clear commitment could drive him away or that the attendant problem regarding his parents could lead to a dead-end. Thus, like many of the couples we interviewed, Jamal and Suzanne face yet another difficult decision in the midst of a relationship that up to this point has endured. Will they make it past this most difficult point and forge a new relationship and new marriage?

To turn to the other extreme, relationships often tend to be closed with regard to the relationship between a couple and the outside world if many or at least several very important constituencies in the outside world look with disfavor upon the relationship that this couple has established. The most common cause of this disfavor, at least in the past, has been dislike of one of the partners by the other partner's parents, family or friends. Sometimes, this disfavor is mild and soon overcome. At other times, as in the case of Romeo and Juliet, the disfavor is profound and sometimes leads to tragic consequences. Many a Hollywood movie has been based on this familiar scenario: boy meets girl, girl's parents don't like boy, boy and girl see each other in secret, boy and girl eventually elope, boy and girl do something special to win the favor and support of the parents, family or friends. The movie ends with a happy ending. Everyone is warm and cozy.

We found from our interviews that this process sometimes does occur (with some modifications) in real life. Clyde and Gertrude have been married for fifty-five years, and first met in their youth group at church in 1935. At the time they were both "going with" other people, but they soon broke up these other relationships and began dating each other. Their attraction to one another was immediate and strong: "Clyde told me that he was going to marry me when we were on our first date." After dating less than a year, they eloped because Gertrude's parents would not give their permission for them to marry, believing that she was too young.

The story of their elopement has become central to the definition of their relationship. It begins

with a long weekend in July. Clyde and Gertrude left Wyoming (the state where they were born) and drove to Nebraska hoping to be married. They couldn't get married, however, because the legal age for marriage was 21 in that state, and Gertrude, who was only 18, "wouldn't lie about her age." They then drove to Colorado, where a former pastor of their church lived. He did marry them and they immediately drove back to Wyoming because Clyde had to work the next morning. They told Gertrude's parents and then spent the night in Clyde's room at his father's house.

The next morning after Clyde had departed for work, Gertrude came down to breakfast to find that her father-in-law had left a single rose at her place. This was to be the only flower that Gertrude received in celebration of her wedding, yet it was an important statement of her acceptance into Clyde's family. This acceptance was critical for both of them, for Gertrude's family continued to have problems with Clyde. It was also important in terms of Gertrude's relationship with Clyde's father, for he was later to live with them during the last years of his life. The care and support that Gertrude gave him built upon this generous gesture of support he offered to her in the form of a breakfast rose.

Sadly, the issue of disfavor has all-too-often centered on the mixing of races, religions, ages, or socio-economic levels in a relationship. Men and women had to keep their relationship "under wraps" because their parents, family, friends or community would disapprove of their commitment to another person of a different race, religion, age group or socio-economic class. We would like to think that this type of narrow thinking is a remnant of a bygone era, yet we found that several of the couples we interviewed were still struggling with these difficult issues.

Dan and Sarah have established a relatively closed relationship because of differences in their religious backgrounds. Reflecting back on twenty years of marriage, this couple indicated that they met when she was just out of high school and was working as a waitress to save money for college. Dan was thirteen years older than Sarah and was already established in a professional career. She was Russian Orthodox and he was Jewish. Additionally, he had been married and was the father of three children. With all of these differences and potential conflicts, they got together as a couple and lived together for four months prior to committing to marriage.

They immediately ran into family problems. Her grandfather (a lay church leader) strongly objected to her marriage to a Jew. Her mother opposed Dan because of his age and previous marriage. Even her brother gave Dan a cold shoulder, worrying that Dan would take advantage of Sarah's youth and inexperience. Despite extensive resistance to their marriage, Dan and Sarah decided to get married. They paid a heavy price, however, in that Sarah isolated for many years from her family and the two ended up establishing a relationship that was quite closed, at least with regard to communication with family members-.

The differences in background (religion, age, previous marital experience) also created problems inside their relationship, Dan and Sarah had to learn much about each other before they could truly be accepting of one another. They knew little about each other when they were first married since they shared so little in common. Tied into a closed relationship, Dan and Sarah had very few external resources to which they could turn individually or collectively for insights, reassurance or simply a "breather" from one another. As a result, they had to work out their differences directly with each other. They had to rely on each other for patience, tolerance and persistence. Fortunately, for this couple, the relationship was strong enough to endure the difficult years, and the differences between Dan and Sarah served as rich sources of new learning and maturation for both of them.

In more recent years, strong, but closed, relationships have often been established among homosexual men and women. Gay men and lesbian women often must place a protective shield between themselves and other people. While our society has made great progress in recent years regarding increased knowledge about and acceptance of differing sexual orientations, the massive onset of AIDS during the decade of the 1990s produced new, irrational fears and led to renewed protectiveness among many gay couples and even some lesbian couples

In the case of Mary and Ruth, a closed system was needed for many years as they protected themselves from the prevalent prejudice in their community regarding lesbian relationships. The existence of strong shared values on the part of Mary and Ruth provided reassurance for them during these early, difficult years together with frequent discrimination, they readily

created a mutually reinforcing picture of their distinctive relationship as a lesbian couple. However, they were unable to share this distinctive identity with many family members, friends or colleagues at work. Furthermore, they would become very angry regarding the need to even consider being cautious in disclosing their relationship to other people.

In reflecting back on this difficult period of time, Ruth indicated that:

. . . .given the nature of the relationship, there was a lot of stress and strain that evolved. It wasn't how I expected my life to go, and I don't think you [Mary] did either. So there was a lot of inconsistency. What are we going to do? Major, major problem.

Both Mary and Ruth felt very ambivalent about keeping their relationship secret. They wanted to share their joy and excitement about one another, yet felt compelled to often hide this very special set of shared feelings. Mary pointed out that humor was often the saving grace for the two of them: "I would be ranting and raving [about discrimination against lesbian couples] , so [Ruth] would put on a red [clown's] nose to protest and it made me laugh. So, she got the message across."

The joint purchase of a house was a particularly important marker event for Ruth and Mary, leading to the emergence of a much more open system for this couple. The new home represented a public statement about their legal existence as a couple. It came only after they had been together for nine years. In many ways, this purchase symbolized the mutual resolution of their ambivalence about "coming out" regarding their relationship. It occurred at a point when the other norms in their relationship had been firmly established, and they had settled on an acceptance of their life together. They now had a public identity for themselves as a couples which provided them with the strength to face future discriminatory problems together. While their early experiences of prejudice forced them to pull in together as a rather closed system with very strong boundaries (as expressed in the secretive nature of their relationship) , they were eventually able to open up their system and survive the public visibility of their mutual commitment.

Even couples who face no open discrimination because of religion, race or sexual orientation, sometimes decide to establish a very closed system, which tends to isolate them from other

people. Kathy and Dave have made many provisions to ensure that their largely closed relationship remains intact. Kathy recently quit her job to be closer to Dave. She never ventures to friends' houses or even for that matter to do the household shopping without Dave. Kathy was recently diagnosed as suffering from a panic disorder, resulting in part from sexual harassment at work (which re-invoked memories of her first, physically abusive, husband). Dave, who works the late shift as a truck driver, now assumes all shopping responsibilities including the other activities which may bring him beyond their front door, such as gardening, checking the mail box and mowing the lawn.

As a couple they are regressing back to more primitive modes of functioning as a result of the closure of their relationship. As in the case of highly enmeshed relationships, couples like Dave and Kathy that block off the external world are likely (as closed systems), to soon fall apart under the weight of increasingly interlocking and mutually destructive patterns of interaction. Without some fresh air from the outside world, most couples fall into habitual ruts that typically bring out the worst in the relationship.

Kathy has gained an excess of forty pounds and admits she smokes and drinks more than ever. Kathy and Dave used to enjoy taking vacations and playing golf together. However, because Kathy is no longer willing to leave her house, they have ceased to enjoy their shared interests. Dave has also gained weight which he attributes to spending most of his leisure time with Kathy in front of the television. He also has a serious alcohol problem and, as a result, has suffered major liver damage. Until very recently, Dave refused to attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, denying the fact he indeed had a problem with drinking. Kathy and Dave began fighting during this phase, as she voiced her fear to him that if he continued to drink, he would soon die. Dave revealed during the interview that Kathy had been close to a nervous breakdown when she had to confront the fact that she might lose him (much as she lost her first boyfriend, who died in an automobile accident).

Dave has successfully overcome his drinking problem; however, Kathy still refuses to leave her home, so the two of them must once again reform their marriage if they are to move into a less toxic relationship. They must open up the system that is their marriage and allow in the outside



world. Kathy must agree to travel outside their house or the two of them must bring the outside world into their home in a way that is less passive than constant television viewing. They could re-establish relationships with friends (inviting them over for regular activities), build a more varied life for themselves inside their home, or perhaps even invite Dave's children to spend more time with them. A remarriage is essential for the health of this couple and both partners.

## KEY CHAPTER POINTS

Enduring couples:

- Focus on developmental tasks in a stage called performing once norms have been set and are working.
- Frequently readjust and experience one or more remarriages with their partner.
- Find their own special ways to reaffirm the power of long-term, intimate relationships and do so with small rituals or habits.
- Wrestle with issues of enmeshment and disengagement and eventually achieve an interdependency between the two.
- Struggle with interconnectedness between the couple and the outside world and eventually identify as either an open or closed couple.