LOVE LINGERS HERE: INTIMATE ENDURING RELATIONSHIPS

XVI. PLATE THREE: DECIDING WHAT'S IMPORTANT (IDENTIFYING SHARED VALUES)

William Bergquist

This third plate is closely related to the first two. In pure form, it often only emerges fairly late in the life of a couple, though issues concerned with values are intimately involved in all aspects of a person's or couple's life. Early on, most young couples will make decisions about spending priorities, political affiliations, recreational preferences and other matters related to values based on the preferences and affiliations of their parents. They will either uncritically accept their parent's values or will react against their parents by selecting opposing values. In either case, the couple is dependent on parents for definition of central values. Later in life, men and women are much more likely to form independent definitions of central life values. Furthermore, the clarification and enactment of these values usually become increasingly important to the partners in a relationship.

The values plate is closely tied to the individual developmental stages of the two partners, hence this plate often continues to change throughout the life of the couple. Several adult development researchers (notably Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan) have provided extensive evidence indicating that adults continue to struggle with and change personal values throughout their lives. As couples mature, their mutual decisions and commitments regarding values tend to become increasingly unique. Their values structure reflects their own distinctive life experiences, rather than the socially-prescribed expectations of their culture, society or friends, or the values and priorities of their own parents. In this sense, the values structure plate is likely to move further away from the socio-economic plate as a couple matures, sometimes leaving a rather formidable and alienating chasm between a couple and the people with whom this couple has affiliated over the past twenty to thirty years.

While the values that individuals hold and that a couple shares tend to be among the most enduring aspects of life span development, there are changes that occur over time. Typically, people rarely change the values they espouse, unless they have experienced some kind of religious or quasi-religious conversion experience. Rather, the values that they already hold dear tend to shift in priority. Specific values (for example, family, career success, sexuality) become less important or more important, in comparison to other values over time. Important values rarely are abandoned or newly adopted. They simply become more or less important. Men and women in their forties and fifties have been found to often shift in terms of the priorities that they assign to certain aspects of their lives—especially family life and alone time as opposed to time at work.

There are also distinctive changes as a function of gender. Men and women tend to change in different ways as they grow older. In general, men tend to become more interpersonally-oriented and more interested in family and spiritual matters as they move into the second half of their lives, whereas women (at least until recently) tend to become more interested - in careers, achieving greater autonomy and moving into relationships outside their family, Whereas the central developmental issue for many men at mid-life is learning how to establish meaningful relationships, the central issue for many women is learning how to establish a separate, individual identity. These shifts in values as a function of age or gender have a major impact on many couples and define some of the most important conflicts and points of growth for many couples over the lifespan.

In a newly-formed couple, one partner is likely to define the values of the couple in a specific domain, while the other partner is responsible for another domain. Frequently, the domain over which each partner reigns is closely linked to traditional sex role stereotyping, though this is becoming less often the case. A classic cartoon shows the harried housewife indicating to her friend that “my husband makes all of the important decisions in our marriage, about war, peace, and crime in the street. I make the less important decisions about where our children go to school, how we spend our money . . . “This cartoon speaks to the nature of values in many 21st Century societies as these values are actually being acted upon (rather than just espoused). One partner may be responsible for the selection of values in domains that have no immediate impact

on the couple. The other makes decisions that may seem less important but impact in an immediate way on the actual behavior and priorities of the couple. One partner may be responsible for decisions about expenditures, while the other partner attends to political matters. One partner picks out the living room furniture, the other selects the church they will attend. As a couple matures, the partners will often begin to define and act on values through mutual discussion and consent. At this point, the third plate becomes more visible.

When the fourth plate (child rearing) is prevalent, the values often are placed on a back-burner. Decisions about values and priorities often are based on the needs and demands of the children. When child-rearing couples look with envy upon the lives and activities of their childless friends, they often focus on issues of values and priorities: the way this other couple is able to decorate their home without having to childproof everything, the type of vacation this couple is able to take ("they can afford to be happy!"), or the time that is available to work on a particularly important social cause.

After the child-rearing plate has become less prevalent (usually with the exiting of the last child from the home), a couple is often faced with values-related decisions and may find these decisions to be particularly stressful: "Who are we as a couple without our children?" "What do we really stand for, independent of our children?" "What do we really want to do, now that the kids have left home?" The so-called "Empty-nest syndrome" has received a great deal of attention over the past twenty years, precisely because of the stress associated with transition into the values plate.

The marker events for this plate are often subtle and hard for a young couple readily to identify (perhaps because this plate is usually prevalent later in life). Early marker events include major "nonessential" purchases, decisions about recreational activities or vacations, joint membership in specific social or political organizations, or selection of mutual friends. Much more dramatically the case of many gay and lesbian couples, the marker event is “coming out of the closet." While they may have been living as gays or lesbians for many years, it is possible to hide or at least avoid acknowledging their sexual preference in their interactions with parents, siblings and old friends. Typically, the commitment to another person, as not only lover but also life

partner, necessitates the public acknowledgement of one's sexual preferences. Such a commitment holds many implications and usually helps to define and establish a set of critical values regarding honesty (about one's sexual preferences) and support for a more accepting and open sense of life options with regard to not only sexual preferences, but also marriage, the rearing of children, and other central life choices.

In later life, values--oriented marker events often center on major increases or decreases in salary, which lead, in turn, to expansion, contraction or shifts in life style options. A mature couple, for instance, may purchase a cabin in the mountains and decide to spend weekends and summers at this location, or they may decide to go out to dinner once a week. Other couples may decide, more dramatically, to abandon their current life structure in order to devote several years of their life to public service (Peace Corp, mission work) or world travel.

Forming: When and How Do We Break Away From Parental Values and Models?

The issue of parental values is critical to most young couples as they forge their relationship. In some instances, such as the relationship established between Bessy and Bill, partners remain together precisely because they still fully support the values of their parents and continue to admire the commitment that both sets of parents made to their own marriages. While Bill had rebelled against his parents by taking up a career in music and Bessy had rebelled by agreeing to join Bill in this lifestyle, both of these people built their relationship firmly on the value base and models provided by their parents.

In other cases, the couple finds unity in their movement away from parents. They are not so much rebelling against their parents as they are finding their own distinctive identity, this identity in part being forged in their partnering experience. Bill and Rebecca offer an excellent illustration of this movement from parental values to values that are distinctive and shared by the couple. Though they are still relatively young people (both being in their early 30s) and are still struggling with their own identity independent of their parents, Bill and Rebecca have been together as a couple for ten years and have two of their own children. They have thus had ample opportunity to struggle over and find their own, identity and values as a couple. Rebecca

observes that: “we are more like each other now that we were [when we first met.] Before, I used to share the values of my parents, but now the discussions that Bill and I have are much more relevant to me than my parent's views on the same subjects."

This forging of distinctive and individual values is all very well and good when it comes to couples who live in cultures that support autonomy and independence for young couples. But what about cultures that encourage continuing, close relationships between parents and children? Where mother and father are to be honored and served for a lifetime? What about couples who are more radical in their departure from their parent's culture? Who choose a very different life style? And what about gay and lesbian couples who often must fight against major opposition from parents in order to even establish their relationship in the first place?

Many of the couples we interviewed who grew up in very traditional cultures found that their culture firmly enforced the commitment of children (even when adults) to-their parent's values. Many of the older couples, like Clyde and Gertrude grew up in another era in American life, when traditional, church-related values were central to their individual life, their life as a couple and the community in which they grew up. Clyde and Gertrude met at a church gathering, have remained in their church throughout the fifty five years of their marriage, and have raised their own children within the church. Even though Gertrude's parents never accepted Clyde as their son-in-law, both Gertrude and Clyde fully accepted the values of her parents, for they were also the values of his parents and of everyone who lived around them. There was simply no other alternative in the community of believers in which they were raised.

Maria and Roberto are much younger than Gertrude and Clyde, yet they share similar experiences, having been raised in traditional families in Chile. As in many traditional cultures, Maria and Roberto refrained from sexual intercourse prior to their marriage. Like most of her female friends, Maria was a virgin when she married Roberto. Furthermore, Maria's family was very protective of her and did not want her to have a steady boyfriend—especially if that boyfriend was Roberto. According to Maria, her parents “did anything possible to pull us apart in our relationship." Furthermore, Roberto "was not welcomed to my house until we got married. They still aren't very happy with him." While the resistance of Maria's family to her marriage to

Roberto was a hassle, it was not a major deterrent, in part because at the time most of the parents in Chile seemed to be overprotective of their daughters.

Roberto readily accepted the resistance of Maria's parents to his courtship of Maria. However, he did resent the strong push exerted by his own parent's and Maria's parents for them to get married (despite the opposition of Maria's parents to their relationship!):

> . . I didn't want to get married and in the honeymoon the resentment appeared. I didn't need marriage for a paper and this made me feel very upset. My mother wanted to do a big party. I was the first son in getting married . . . I didn't like all that proceeding . . . this situation made us feel very unhappy in the honeymoon.

Maria concurred that:

> . . the honeymoon was filled with fights and tears. This unpleasant experience made me change the airplane tickets . . . and we canceled the trip five days before the time scheduled [to return home.] Later, everything was forgotten

Like many young men and women from their country and many other countries in the world, Maria and Roberto had to fight against their parents in order to establish a successful marriage. Yet, they complied with the wishes of their parents and had a miserable honeymoon.

Now living in the United States, Maria and Roberto have decided not to have children, in part because they don't want to replicate the struggles they had with their own traditional parents. At another level, Maria and Roberto have decided not to have children as a powerful statement to their parents that they are not going to comply with any more of their traditional values? They agreed to get married to meet their parent's wishes, but are not going to take the second step of having children in order to continue meeting their parents' expectations. As in the case of many young couples, their relationship is built in part not on the shared commitment to parental values but rather on the shared rejection of and rebellion against these values.

Alice and Fred exemplify the struggle experienced by many young couples in choosing between the acceptance and rejection of parental values. During their interview, Alice talked about being pregnant when she and Fred became engaged. They decided to have an abortion and, according to Alice, based this very difficult decision on economic grounds: "[we] just weren't economically

ready to start a family." Several weeks after the interview, however, Alice informed her interviewer that she and her therapist had just been working on this topic. She now realizes that the reason she got an abortion is because when she called her parents to tell them she was getting married, her mother's first words were:-"You aren't pregnant are you?" -- to which Alice falsely replied, "No." Alice now realizes that the reason she had the abortion was because she "couldn't live with the lie," and thus she changed reality to fit the lie.

At this early point in their relationship, Alice and Fred were clearly influenced profoundly by her mother and the values advocated by her mother. While it is hard to admit to these early influences in a relationship, particularly at a later point in one's life, when these parental influences usually have declined, it is important to recognize their important role early in many relationships. The relationship is likely to undergo major change and stress as the couple begins to define distinctive values as a couple, independent of either set of parents.

We can look to the lives of several gay and lesbian couples to get a clearly and even more dramatic sense of a couple breaking away from traditional, parent-based values. Marianne and Heather spoke of not only having to establish their connection as a couple, but also coming to accept their own individual identity as lesbians. Most “straight” people confront their values individually and then communicate these values to their partner and hopefully find a way to integrate these values with those of their partner. The values associated with being a gay or lesbian, by contrast, deeply embedded in the context of being a couple, much as values associated with child-rearing can rarely be separated from the couple's existence.

Heather spoke of the experience of moving in together as being difficult because of these inherent value issues. Marianne agreed: "Yeah, gay life was all new to me. And for you too, basically." At various times during their relationship, Marianne and Heather were caught by surprise in terms of the adjustments they needed to make in their personal and shared values systems. For instance, at the point when they both wanted to purchase a home together, they became very sensitive about their relationship, recognizing in a concrete manner that they had truly left behind their traditional notions about home, parents and family. Each of them suddenly realized that they were about to buy a home together with another woman rather than with a

husband. They were going to buy the home together and pay for it with the salaries that they both earned. By contrast, both women had grown up with mothers who didn't work and with fathers who controlled the finances. The act of buying and paying for a home together triggered a wide range of issues regarding alternative life and family values.

Marianne and Heather also spoke of the joys associated with this new relationship for both of them and the new values they were identifying and living by, even if in private. Heather observes that:

> I'd never been in the 'gay community.' . . . It was like you had this secret society. Like I'd see you at a bar and we'd have a fun evening and then the next day I might see you walking down the street and I'm all in my gussied clothes and you're in your suit and I'd say, "Hello Marianne," and. you'd say, "Hello, Heather." And we'd look at each other and wink because we'd know that we played like hell together the night before and then all of a sudden today we were straight, all the way. It was sort of fun.

While their relationship was not "clandestine" (since neither of them were unfaithful to another person), it did have the magic and excitement of a forbidden affair, because of the broader social disapproval of lesbian relationships. The "clandestine" relationship added intrigue and energy to their relationship, while also helping to define their mutual values associated with a lesbian life style. Initially, they found this intrigue to be "fun." Furthermore, they were able to forge their individual identities as lesbians while also forging their relationship as a couple. This is one advantage held by gays and lesbians in their initial relationships with partners of the same sex.

While many couples (especially those who meet as young people) initially identify with one another primarily with regard to the values (of their parents) that they do or don't want to share, the recognition of shared values (often building on shared cultures and backgrounds) also provides an early "glue" for a relationship and helps hold it together during particularly stormy times. The obvious example of shared values, dreams and interests is the classic "boy/girl next door" –which is typically represented as the young man and woman who grew up together in a small, mid-west town. While we did find a few examples of these "childhood sweethearts" in the interviews we conducted, it was much more common to find partners who grew up in different

communities, but shared a common heritage.

Mary and Ruth, for instance, live in a so-called "nontraditional" relationship, as a lesbian couple; yet, they share many common, traditional values:

> We share midwestern roots. There is this whole thing we share. We also like midwestern people. There's something real basic about them, real solid. We were both brought up in the Christian tradition and we've both gotten away from that, but I guess we both consider ourselves sort of spiritual people. The general concept of money and what it's for and what you do with it are very, very similar. Friendships, I think, are important. Both friendships with other couples and also friendships that we have, individuals, separate friendships. Politically, I think we're very much matched.

With these deeply-rooted, commonly-shared values as a base, Mary and Ruth have been able to weather storms associated with the darker side of these same set of traditional values, namely, discrimination against homosexual sexual orientations. Mary and Ruth find refuge in their shared interests and dreams: "We laugh a lot. We take great vacations. We've never had a bad vacation. When the going gets rough, we take a vacation: We know how to play real well." Another couple revealed somewhat tongue-in-cheek, "If we ever divorce, the divorce decree will have to state that we will continue to always take vacations together as a couple! We are perfectly matched on vacation - love the same places and things to do; share the same novels."

Storming: How Do We Negotiate Priorities and Interests?

Conflicts regarding values inevitably center on issues of priority. Something of great value is given higher priority than something of lesser value. This, in turn, means that we devote more money to it or more time to it. Values-oriented storms, therefore, often build around such issues as: "can we afford this?" "do we really have to do this?" and "if you think it's so important, then why don't you take care of it!"

Many of the conflict regarding values center on the vernacular domain that we highlighted in the second section of this book. These are conflicts regarding such day-to-day issue as: Who is going to take out the trash? Who does the house-cleaning? The dishes? The shopping for food? These

discussions often center around values issues because at the heart of the argument typically is the question: how important is this task? While arguments may focus on who does what when, and who has the right to tell the other partner what to do, there is often a much deeper issue concerning the importance placed on a particular area of responsibility. We argue about the cleaning of our house in part because we have different standards regarding how clean the should be and, in turn, regarding the priority that should be to this area of our shared life (in comparison with other such as recreation, relaxation, work and so forth).

At the beginning of their relationship, Karen and Ben didn't like the same things. Karen hated baseball and football, while Ben liked both of these sports. Because Karen agreed to agree with Ben, she chose to like baseball but not football. Currently, both Ben and Karen are avid fans of their local major league baseball team, but neither of them watches football. This couple has agreed to value and do things that they can enjoy together rather than apart. This is at the heart of their relationship.

When asked to indicate what is special about them as a couple, Ben replied: We like to have fun. I don't know -- the main thing is that we never get bored of each other, you know?

Karen: It's like being best friends. You're not really an individual when you're together.

Ben: That's what makes it the best. I know some people that have separate relationships. Saturday night they're out with the guys and that to me is a joke. If yo4re married, you are buddies. You do everything together. Like I said, "this winter, I'm going to go to Canada to go fishing with Todd" and she said.-."Well then I'm going to Florida with Gwen." I said “No way;” She said “no way.” We'd just be missing out. We try and get into things together. And it seems like things that I enjoy and did enjoy . . . I don't do them so much. Not because I don't like them (or maybe I don't like them anymore!)

Karen: It’s just evolved more into what we can do together.

While many other couples are very successful in doing some things together and other things

apart, Ben and Karen have worked out a formula that makes sense for them. They do things together and gradually begin to convince themselves that activities which they don't do jointly are somehow less interesting than they used to be.

Norming: How Do We Agree to Agree and Disagree?

Couples often discover in establishing a life together that there are certain areas in which there will always be a difference of opinion with regard to values. Denise and Joseph are a happily married couple who have come to terms about several differences regarding personal values. As we noted in an earlier chapter, both Denise and Joseph were born in the Philippines, Denise formerly worked for a food store and a bank, now she works in a day care center. Joseph was employed for many years as a salesman for a manufacturing firm. He is currently unemployed.

With very little money coming in, they are very concerned about supporting their children, though fortunately their children are now adults and are able to be financially independent. Despite their financial worries, Joseph enjoys entertaining friends in the traditional Filipino manner, which can be quite expensive. In the Philippines, Joseph notes, "there are no pot-lucks." The host and hostess supply everything. When he invites friends to go out, he serves them dinner, pays for the transportation, the tickets to the show and "hotel hopping" afterwards. Joseph loves to go out and entertain. Denise adds that Joseph has to get the most expensive seats and the most expensive food. Joseph adds, "you might as well spend a little extra to get the best seats."

Even though she doesn't personally care about going out, Denise supports Joseph in his interests: "Yes, Joseph loves the night life and to be the host and the life of the party. I never cared for going out. But he loves to spend, spend, spend." In discussing this apparent area of divergent values and potential conflict, Denise looked intensely and lovingly at Joseph and he returned her affectionate glances. Throughout the interview, there were many examples of similar contradictions: differences in tastes, opinions and values expressed in the most humorous and caring manner.

What keeps this couple together, with passion and understanding, given all of these differences

and financial pressures? At one level, we must look to their shared cultural background. Men in the traditional Filipino family are expected to entertain and spend money, while the wives stay home and tend the family. A second factor concerns their long history together and their close family ties that enable and encourage them to remain together when struggling through the hard times.

As Denise notes, "we were childhood sweethearts. He lived next door he was the oldest of five brothers and the troublemaker on our block. His brothers and relatives didn't like me because they saw me as cutting his wings, chopping off his horns. They thought I was the dominant one and bossed him around and made the decisions." Clearly, Denise knew what she was getting into when she began spending time with the "troublemaker." She also knew that she could have some influence over this strong personality, and perhaps even become dominant in the relationship.

Throughout the interview, Denise and Joseph balanced their two dominant personalities, Joseph was presented as the decision-maker and Denise as the power behind the throne. Denise always took the practical, doubting and corrective position, while Joseph spoke romantically, with a strong dose of adventure and curiosity. Yet, they did not argue in a contradicting or devaluing manner. The way in which they talked about the individual characteristics of each other suggests that they not, only accept, but are fond of, these varying characteristics. Each partner's individuality is given more meaning because of its role within the relationship. At the same time, it is obvious that they share the role of nurturing, doing household chores and earning a living. Joseph and Denise talk about their relationship as an entertaining story. Denise presents the narration and Joseph provides detailed examples of particular situations. They enhance each other's part of the story and keep their story lively, never fixating on one topic. Each of them talks about the other in the context of an experience, not as the subject, *per se*.

According to the interviewer, it almost seemed as if Joseph and Denise were one person. They were debating with and balancing off different parts of a unified but varied personality. This personality was, in fact, the third entity—the couple itself speaking with a single voice that had been established in a single, unified culture. A voice that was further refined over a long history of child-rearing, financial hardships and adaptation to a new culture and set of social values. In

their relationship, Denise and Joseph have found the best in one another and have found a way to use these strengths in their own individual and collective survival.

In many instances, partners like Denise and Frederick defy some of their parent's customs early in their relationship and end up adopting values that their parents held. One gets a clear sense, however, that they are adopting these values not for expedience sake (to somehow appease their parent), but rather because these values have now become their own values. They have personally incorporated a treasured set of values and assumptions about quality of life from their local community or culture. Robert Bellah and his colleagues wrote several decades ago about this sense of shared values and community. They saw this as central to the formation of the American character ("habits of the heart') and as a vanishing element of the contemporary American culture (except in unique "enclaves").

Frequently, these retained parental values and the supportive community that provides or builds off of these values are religious in nature. Two partners may share a common religious heritage or church membership, or one member of the couple may have been converted to the faith or creed of the other partner. The church of which they are members often provides the foundation for their own relationship, defining projects that are of mutual interests, producing shared friends, providing values-oriented education for their children, and, ultimately, even providing solace and support for the surviving partner after the death of his or her loved one.

Kathy and Tim exemplify this commitment to shared religious values that were forged in their families of origin. Both Kathy and Tim were brought up in devout Catholic families. They have remained active in their local church and attend mass every Sunday with their sons. Embedded in their commitment to the church is a strong sense of responsibility for social justice as well as the importance of family life. As a result, both Kathy and Tim are very involved in community activities with their boys. Kathy has also become a political activist in the town where they live. Tim is very proud of Kathy's activism and helps take care of the kids so that she can attend meetings in the evening. Because of their overarching commitment to the principles of their church, Kathy and Tim have been able to effectively blend family, community and political activism -- priorities that are at odds among many other couples.

In many other instances, we found through our interviews that a couple has built their relationship not on the religion of their parents, but rather on their own, distinctive religious commitments (often in opposition to their parents and their communities of origin). Derrick and Catherine exemplify this centering of a relationship on nontraditional religious values. From the day they first met, Derrick and Catherine have enjoyed deep and lengthy conversations about life. She was cooking in a small vegetarian restaurant at the time, and Derrick was a student.

They entered a relationship very cautiously and used their long conversations as a means of buffering themselves against precipitous leaps into a doomed relationship. They also checked out their horoscope and found, to their great delight, that there was great potential in their relationship. Derrick, however, was on his way to a nontraditional medical school and they bid farewell to one another. They remained in contact and Catherine decided to begin meditation and mindfulness training (Derrick also being an advocate of mindfulness and meditation)

Ironically, with all of their nontraditional perspectives on life, it took a nudging by Derrick's parents for him to call Catherine and propose that they live together and consider marriage --- on Christmas Eve! Yet, even after a wonderful summer together in a meditation training program, neither was ready for marriage. Their highly idealistic and individualistic perspectives on life led them both to be very cautious in all matters, especially marital commitments. They finally did get married; though they continue to lead their own individual lives and come together primarily around their spiritual quest and their shared love for and attention to their daughter, April.

Whenever there are crises in their marriage they turn to their spiritual guides for assistance and continuity. Five years into their marriage, for instance, they visited with a clairvoyant in order to gain some insights into the stresses of their relationship. The psychic offered them some very practical advice, encouraging Derrick to become more decisive in his commitment to the marriage. He suggested that Derrick decide consciously every month whether or not he wants to stay in his marriage. If he wants to stay, fine; if not, Derrick should move out for that month. The psychic, in essence, encouraged Derrick (and Catherine) to move into a remarriage phase. By testing his commitment each month and risking the loss of his wife and family, Derrick became

more appreciative of his life with Catherine.

The psychic also encouraged Derrick and Catherine to use their talent for and shared interest in conversation and reflection. They were to reflect on what love is all about for the two of them. They struggled with the ideal of romantic love and came to the conclusion that their relationship is built on a different kind of love. Catherine feels that her love is wrapped up not only in Derrick but also their daughter, April. She loves her role as mother and finds that April has brought purpose to her life. Both Catherine and Derrick see their love also wrapped up in their shared value, which is their spiritual quest. Derrick, in particular, looks forward to the day when they can meditate together (which is not possible while April is still at home).

Like Derrick and Catherine, John and Nancy came together around shared religious values, and they now build their relationship on these values and a community of family and friends that also abide by these values. Like Derrick and Catherine, they found that their conflicts (regarding child-raising) can be endured in part because they have established such a strong base of common values regarding domains in which they experience no conflict at all. When asked what they "mutually value," John looked at Nancy and asked: "Do you want to go first?" "Our faith," she responded. John added, "Family values." He elaborates:

> . . . following more traditional patterns for family living, and vocational honesty. To expand on that, you could say we each were taught to follow the Biblical standards of life. We have each accepted these standards for ourselves. We try to follow them, too. Things like the Ten Commandments. We aren't too great on keeping the Sabbath, but we still work on it. I don't think it's a completely outmoded commandment.

John thought for a while, then continued:

> Other areas [of shared values] would be like that of mutual friends. We get those from Sunday School. Even though Sunday School is old-fashioned, I still think it's of great value. For years we weren't members of a couples class, but now we think that's where your true friends are. That's where you get support from others for your marriage, and those are the people who stand by you when things get tough.

Performing: What Are the Little Things We Do Together Which Keep Us Together?

We discovered that couples continue to thrive in terms of their individual and shared values when several components exist in their relationship. First, they find something of great value to both of them that they can do together. Second, they are inclined to make the relationship itself a priority—a jewel of great beauty and value. Sondheim wrote a song during the 1970s about the "little things we do together" as the ingredient which makes "marriage a joy" and keeps people together. Heather and Marianne spoke during their interview of the ongoing joy they experienced in working together as travel agents for a large agency. They not only worked alongside each other for many years (at times one of them being the boss and at other times the other being the boss), but also taught other travel agents together as a training team. This common work experience might drive many other couple crazy. It was a source of shared value for Heather and Marianne and was made even more magical because most of their co-workers were unaware that they were living together as lesbians.

We found that the little things we do together can be very big (as in the case of two people who work together for a common cause) or they can be quite mundane. One couple we know was going through a divorce and had to decide how to distribute all of their worldly goods. No problem with the house, the furniture, even the retirement funds. They did run into a big problem, however, when it came to the distribution of their highly prized season tickets to the San Francisco 49ers. They had been going to the games together for many years.

As a result, they had some of the best seats in the stadium, and both of them were ardent 49er fans. So, they finally decided to keep their own individual season tickets and reluctantly agreed to attend the games together, since neither of them wanted to give up their ticket. They would meet at the game, root together for the 49ers, get angry together at the officials, mourn together when the team lost and celebrate together when the team won. And fall in love again together! They have reunited and credit their shared love for the 49ers as a central catalyst in their reunification and their continuing commitment to one another and their relationship.

While a football team may be a powerful source of reunification, we found more often that enduring relationships build on somewhat more transcendent values. Nancy and Erik [28]-have lived a life that seems to exist primarily in the values domain. Like many men and women who met during the turbulent, politically-active period of the late 1960s, Nancy and Erik initially defined their relationship in terms of their shared beliefs and values. While the debates and causes have changed somewhat over the years, the importance of shared values and the debates regarding differing values continue to provide Nancy and Erik with the core of their relationship.

This couple of the 60s lives in a West Coast community that is well-known for high levels of political activity. Erik is now 45 years old and works 20 hours a week as a museum aide and sometimes an additional four hours as a carpenter. Nancy is 41 years old and works fulltime as a licensed social worker in a community agency. She is also working on a novel and has published several short stories. They have been together for 7 1/2 years and were married on Halloween six years ago. Neither had been married before. They have lived in the same house for seven years, and have no children or pets.

The values-orientation of their relationship was in their shared political activism. Erik recalls that they met after getting out of a local jail following an anti-nuclear demonstration at a nearby weapons research laboratory. Following a support group meeting after their release from jail, Nancy gave Erik a ride home. There was a very immediate physical attraction between Erik and Nancy. She came over to Erik's house for the weekend and, according to Nancy, there was "instant combustion!"

Nancy: The day I brought him home from the meeting, we talked for about 3 1/2 hours in his kitchen. . . At the door, he said "Can I give you a hug?" So, we hugged and I thought, shit, I want to spend the night with this man and I don't even know him [Erik laughs with embarrassment] [Nancy turns toward Erik] Then you said, "I want to give you a hug every day for the rest of your life',

Erik: It just came out!

Nancy: And I said, "I'll bet you say that to everybody" and he said, "No, never before."

They fell in love quickly and spent most of their time together for the next five months. "It was real surprising to both of us," observed Nancy, "cause we were both pretty independent and loners."

The founding story of Nancy and Erik specifically describes their mutual attraction and spontaneity. Yet, underlying this passion was their mutual passion about politics: 'I [Erik] think of it in terms of how we met. For me, that's a big dimension of our relationship. We went to jail for our beliefs. That was part of the attraction." They still agree on most political issues and share many common values and ideals; however, there are also several major differences in terms of life style preferences that have confronted Erik and Nancy during their relationship. Nancy notes that:

> Erik is a very gentle, loving person. He's very giving emotionally, in certain areas For a long time, we didn't even share money. . . .Money was the last frontier . . . When I first met Erik, I was a workaholic . . . My self-esteem was inextricably tied with my work . . . I did not want to be that way . . . Meeting Erik helped . . . He has a premium on having fun. I didn't know how to have fun. I began taking pieces of Erik and putting them in Nancy. There were a few brick walls I ran into. One was that Erik always wanted to have fun. He never wanted to sit down and talk about economic realities, which got to be a real headache and power struggle, even now . . Erik didn't want to take on [more work]. I wanted to divest [work], but . . . the money has to come from 'somewhere. I didn't have a partner who was willing to assume the work past a certain point.

It appears that Erik's values with regard to lifestyle ha6/ had a tempering influence on Nancy and vice versa. She has given-up her workaholism to move more toward his need to enjoy daily life with a minimum of competition, to be free to be spontaneous. As they were when they first met: "A value for me [Nancy] as a person and a value in our relationship is spontaneity and the ability to be flexible enough to go kind of with the flow, to no my fears get in the way and halt the process."

Erik, in turn, has taken on more responsibility for Saving money and has already begun to make plans for their eventual retirement (blending his interest in independence and—spontaneity and her concern for financial security). Erik has also taken on more responsibility for household duties so that Nancy can find time to relax and be spontaneous when she isn't working: “I [Erik] do all the laundry and the grocery shopping so that Nancy . . . has more time apart from work. I don't have a problem with that, because I have the time to do it.”

Increasingly, Nancy and Erik have also identified and built mutual commitment to other emerging values:

> We have a lot of values that [Erik and I] share in common, like good communication, play, having fun with each other on many different levels, good health . . . having a loving relationship as a couple, the companionship, that's real important . . . Begin a loving couple. . good sex . . . having similar world views A style of negotiation . . . working through differences . . . We have a certain level of commitment to attempting to integrate the differences into the relationship.

While many other couples would probably agree with Erik and Nancy regarding these central ingredients of a successful relationships, this man and woman are a bit different in that they speak of these ingredients not in terms of what they do with each other in their relationship, but rather in terms of the value they assign to each of these actions. They are people who greatly appreciate a clearly stated set of principles that they expect themselves and other people to emulate in their daily activities. Though they value spontaneity, they also value consistency and want to know that they will be there for each other in a world that might at times seem to be rather hostile toward their political values or other lifestyle choices.

As in the case of the other developmental plates, couples seem to successfully perform in the values domain when they share respect for one another and genuinely appreciate and rely on their important differences / .4'even during the difficult storming stages of a relationship. According to Erik:

> The main thing that everything else comes from is high regard for one another. We

> really respect one another and have retained that respect for the whole 7 1/2 years. That's helped us to get through a lot of really hard times . . . We do share a similar world view . . . We are able to give each other space when we need it and time apart when we need it. We play well . . . We're able to really relax . . . We've been able to establish some real good, sophisticated negotiation skills. It was with a lot of work. We went to couple counseling two or three times, with different counselors. It took a lot of sitting at this table. for three or four years . . . for three hours at a time. . . It was painful at times.

Much as they have patiently continued to struggle for major social reforms, Erik and Nancy have fought hard for their own relationship.

First of all, Erik and Nancy are quite purposeful about finding time together for the nurturance of their relationship:

> Erik has given me a foot rub almost every day of my life . . . We hug each other every day. We spend some time every day talking. . We play a lot . . . We act silly around the house. We play as part of the way we exchange affection and have sex . . . We nourish one another by respecting the other person's need for alone time. . . . We have sex several times a week. When we go for a week just on once a week, we get really weird. We get irritable and snappy. . We write notes to each other [pointing to some hanging from an archway].

Second, Erik and Nancy make use of negotiation skills (such as active and empathetic listening) that they learned in their training as social activists. They have been willing to work through conflicts, rather than avoid them. According to Nancy:

> We do it pretty much right out of the textbook. I talk first and I say my feeling or opinion. Then we respond to each other and sometimes in that initial sitting down we can come to an agreement. Sometimes what it is for one of us or both of us is being heard as to how we see it, having the other person validate that [Conflicts where we want the other to come around to our way of thinking] have taken a much longer period of time. We have a whole series of strategies. If we're in the middle of discussion . . . and we feel it's escalating we have a magic word, "flowers," and that

> means the discussion is off. We'll regroup an hour later and check out whether we're willing to go on with the discussion. . If we're really polarized and really stuck, [Erik suggests a method] of having us exchange view points and talking about it through the other's point of view to see what the other person is so insistent on . . . what is so hard to let go of.

Erik offers an example of Nancy's complaint regarding working forty hours a week, while he only works twenty hours:

> I'll say, well, I'm really not into working that much. I really enjoy my time apart from work, and I'm not into money so much. I'll do the chores . . . Then we'll switch positions .. . I can get some empathy for her point of view [when I imagine working 40 hours a week]. What we've done is establish a real process to deal with stuff and I think' it comes from that mutual respect for one another .. . We have safeguards, the "flowers," the "time-outs" . . . But we did have to set some kind of limits, because otherwise it would just stay at a power struggle. We'd never get anywhere.

Nancy and Erik also recognize the occasional need for outside assistance. They met at a support group meeting following the stress of incarceration and still see a counselor when working through the stressful transitions in their relationship as a couple. Nancy reveals that their early struggles concerned not the state of world politics, but rather something much more mundane and immediate: "The early [conflicts] were around chores." However, even in these instances, Nancy saw the issue as much more complex and basic to their future relationship as a male and female:

> . . . it had to do with power struggle, and who was going to define the relationship, and how was it going to get defined . . . We had real different standards of cleanliness . . . I didn't want to be a woman in a relationship . . . who wound up doing all the chores. That was what my mother had, and I was going to be damned if I was going to have that. That isn't feminist!

While many men and women during the late 1960s (and earlier during the Civil Rights era) tended to recreate -traditional and often repressive gender roles while trying to liberate everyone

else in the world, Nancy was not going to let this happen in her relationship with Erik. They were not only going to work toward the liberation of other people, they were going to create a relationship for themselves based on principles of equity and mutual respect. According to Nancy, during the first four and a half years of their relationship:

> . . a big value for us was the idea that we were recreating what a relationship could be between a man and a woman . . . fifty-fifty . . .. we were very purist . . . and everything was fifty percent, adding to the relationship.

Erik agrees with Nancy regarding this period of time in their relationship: “I think we were kind of creating as we went along . . . We had to do all that [learning how to negotiate] ourselves without having any role models." They had many conflicts during this storming phase of their relationship. According to Nancy, they had "fights like you wouldn't believe." However, like other successful couples, "from the word 'go', [Erik and I] recognized that we were in a committed relationship." This commitment to their relationship, together with commitment to a central set of values enabled Nancy and Erik to successfully negotiate the mine fields of the values plate and to move into a long-running performance stage in their relationship.

While neither Nancy nor Erik would suggest that they have a perfect relationship, they would agree that they would rather be with one another than anyone else in the world. This is what a good relationship is really all about. One can almost see the majestic mountains rising as their value plate clashes with their other plates (economic, children, establishing a home), producing earth-quaking discussions about how much time they each have to spend working, how little money they need to live without feeling insecure, and how they can find a way to equitably distribute the work load in their relationship. There is an imperfect harmony, as with all intimate relationships described in this book. One can hear the clang of the "money/time" bell in the clear mountain air and the early seismic rumblings of new conflicts regarding retirement and old age. Gentle reminders that the maintenance of any contemporary relationship is an unending and challenging process.

In many cases, enduring relationships are built on a particularly firm foundation of shared values because the relationship itself is the most valued aspect of life. Obviously, making the

relationship all-important can at times be problematic. Heavily enmeshed relationships in which men and women spend all of their time together and literally can't live without one another make for great romance novels but lousy lives. Similarly, people who care only about their relationship are particularly vulnerable when the relationship goes through the inevitable transformations that we are describing in this book. We need something else that's important in our lives if we are to survive remarriages in our significant relationships.

Bettina and Neil both speak of their relationship as the most important part of their life. Bettina indicates that their marriage has been their "number one commitment." Neil similarly states that "marriage is our highest priority . . . If something I desire to do gets in the way, then I program myself to say I won't compromise our marriage." Yet, this placement of marriage at the heart of their individual and collective lives caused them major problems when they went through one of their own transitions. Neil had begun participating in a sensitivity group that was sponsored by their church. Bettina was not included and began to feel very threatened when she felt that a woman in the church was becoming very attached to Neil: "I felt like he was having an affair right under my nose. I was feeling apart and very threatened. I felt numb. Something had happened to my relationship."

Given the central role played by her marriage in her life, the threat of another woman's attention was viewed not as a potential source of new learning and maturation for Neil, but rather as a debasement of their one shared value (their marriage). "There was lots of pressure," according to Bettina, "for Neil to get involved in the group. I was so upset. I even went to the minister to talk about it, but there was no way he could understand my feelings. No one got what I was going through. It was very disruptive to the church. We all decided this was not what should be done. It was like setting off a bomb." Neil directed his remarks toward Bettina: "I was perplexed as to what your problem was. I didn't understand what you were feeling or where you were coming from." Bettina responded: ""You sure didn't!" Despite this difficult transition point for Bettina and Neil (and the obvious, continuing feelings of Bettina about this episode), the two of them have continued to place their relationship at the center of their world of values and have found ways to accommodate to shifts in their own individual development and joint development as a couple.

The valuing of our partner and our shared relationship can be extremely important, especially if this valuing is flexible enough to take into account the shifting nature of contemporary relationships. Bettina and Neil's statement concerning commitment to their marriage is not just an idle statement, for both Neil and Bettina have many interests outside the home that could distract them from their marriage. Furthermore, they differ significantly in what they value and what interests them outside their home. This is not unusual among the couples we interviewed, given the enormous diversity of images, activities, diversions and entertainments that inundate us every day in our postmodern world (Bergquist, 1993). It is probably quite smart that Neil and Bettina have "programmed" themselves to always go back to their one shared value. Namely, their marriage.

Bettina also noted that this shared commitment is flexible, given that it shifted when they had children. The children became the center of attention for both Bettina and Neil, as is the case for many couples we interviewed. If both Bettina and Neil don't make the shift then conflict can occur. One of them remains committed to the relationship as the primary value in their life, while the other partner shifts attention to the children. This shift is often viewed as a betrayal unless it is mutual as it apparently was in the case of Bettina and Neil.

But what happens when the children grow up and leave home? Once again, Bettina and Neil have remained flexible. Bettina notes that they both felt less like a couple when they had children: "but once the kids leave it seems that you are more of a couple. For me it's a more pronounced feeling of being a couple when we don't have to think about anything else." Neil enthusiastically agree It, "That's right! That's right!"

KEY CHAPTER POINTS - PLATE THREE: SELECTING VALUES

Enduring couples:

- Choose values structures that reflect their own distinctive life experiences rather than those imposed by society, friends or family.
- Hold deeply rooted, commonly-shared value(s) as a core of their relationship.

- Negotiate with their partners over the priority or importance of their individually held values and their joint values.
- Tend to make the relationship itself a top priority.
- Accept their individual differences in values and are fond of such varying characteristics each other holds.
- Find the best in one another and find ways to use these strengths in their survival as a couple.