

LOVE LINGERS HERE: INTIMATE ENDURING RELATIONSHIPS

XVII. PLATE FIVE: SEPTEMBER SONG (GROWING OLD AND FACING MAJOR LIFE CHALLENGES AS A COUPLE)

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While each of the four developmental plates we have already discussed tend to absorb the attention of couples during the early and middle years of their relationship, this final plate moves to center stage during the years when either a couple have reached their senior years (usually after age fifty five or sixty) or one or both partners face a major intrusive life event that is either life-threatening or potentially disruptive of the relationship. In either case, the partners are faced with the task of preparing for major changes in the ways they relate to one another.

During the senior years, there are dramatic shifts in life structure brought about by retirement from a job or household responsibilities. In addition, couples typically must deal with the death of their own parents during the first phase of their senior years, and, later, with the death of one of the partners or at least the extended absence of one of the partners as a result of illness or shift in role of one partner to that of caretaker for the other, newly disabled partner. Until very recently, these difficult transitional issues in the life of a couple were rarely addressed in the popular media, nor, for that matter, were they addressed in a systematic and thoughtful manner by researchers in the social sciences.

The common image has usually been one of a somewhat humorous older couple drifting off blissfully into senility. Today, we know better. We know of the challenges that many older couples face when one of the partners is afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. The recent case of President Reagan has brought this challenge forcibly to mind for many Americans. In plays and movies such as *The Gin Game*, *Love Among the Ruins*, *Robin and Marion*, and *The*

Whales of August we have been shown how romantic love can very much be a part of relationships among men and women in their senior years. Other plays and movies such as *On Golden Pond* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* describe ways in which long--term relationships must continue to adjust in the face of ongoing problems and new realities regarding children, spouses of children, and grandchildren.

This final developmental plate is clearly complex and often elusive, for it involves four of the personal issues that we must face in our lives> What did I spend my life working for? Why am I alive? When will I die? Will I live alone before I die? In this chapter we will first address the challenges associated with preparation for retirement and other tasks of our senior years, then turn to preparation for the death or illness of a partner.

Forming: What Will This New Situation Be Like?

When one or both partners in a relationship retire from their job, it impacts on both partners and on the relationship. There is also an important retirement process that occurs when one of the partners who has primarily served in the role of parent and homemaker must adjust to children leaving home, living in a smaller home or declining physical capacity to take care of the home. Each partner, in his or her own way, must adjust to shifts in their own life and the life of their partner as they approach the final life stage.

Typically, at some point in the life of a couple, most of the plates (such as establishing a home and raising children or completing a project) are no longer at center stage. There are now no longer distractions from the two fundamental questions: What are we truly about? What would I do without you? Alice observes that: “. . . after giving [our] attention to the children, to the remodeling [of their home] and to [Fred] losing his job for a worrisome period of time before finding new work, now we can concentrate on ourselves again.”

In addition, at this advanced stage in the life of most couples, time is often set aside for individual growth and development. Alice has initiated her own twelve-step recovery program from alcoholism and both Alice and Fred together have participated in several personal growth workshops for couples in recent years.

This focus on personal and interpersonal growth is often related to the new freedom a couple acquires when bidding farewell to live-in children, a demanding mutual enterprise or individual career. Accompanying this freedom are fears that the children might return home, having been unwilling or unsuccessful in living an independent life, or that their mutual project suddenly needs the couple's attention again.

Storming: How Do We Handle Our New Situation?

Many women and some men are accustomed to working alone at home, without their partner being "under foot." Now they must anticipate or even live with the reality of a partner who is also at home. This can lead at times to new forms of conflict. Suddenly, they have to interact with their partner twenty-four hours every day. They also have to find new things to talk about, new things to occupy their shared time together, and new ways to budget their now stable or diminished income, most importantly, both partners have to examine and hopefully talk with each other about expectations regarding new roles to be played by each partner in their changing relationship, home and family life.

An unexamined shift in expectations is facing Robert and Fiona, the couple who met at a London pub. Robert retired from the Air Force ten years ago, and had to negotiate with Fiona regarding his new role in the family and the way in which they were to relate to one another. Fiona had previously taken full responsibility for their three children. Robert hated to discipline his two boys and daughter, so Fiona had taken full charge of the children while he was in the service. The boys were teen-agers now and Fiona became very angry when Robert still didn't offer to give her a hand, despite the fact that he was back in civilian life. She wanted Robert to help out with the boys and not just let her do everything. Fiona reports that she felt hurt and angry all the time for several months. Finally, according to Fiona, the situation led to a major argument.

Robert picked up the story at this point: "I was hunting real hard for a job; tried lots of different things." Then Robert decided to go back to school and get a degree in electronics. Now he was working days and going to school in the evening. This meant he was almost

never home. In the meantime, Robert was becoming aware of the fact that things had changed within the college system during the years he was in the service. He was an older man and was shocked at the way young men and women behaved on campus. Even the professors left much to be desired. Sometimes he thought they were as irresponsible as the students. On top of this, he was experiencing substantial discord at home.

So, Robert decided that he would quit school, stay with his job at a nearby military base, get an electrical contractor's license, and take over some parenting jobs with the boys. Robert claims he never regretted that decision. "Now," adds Fiona, "he is great with the kids even though they're grown up. I just let him handle whatever they want. They know he tells it like it is. Sometimes, though, I wish he would give a spoon full of sugar with what he says. But he never does; so, when it's necessary, I just smooth it over a little. I'm good at that."

Robert's decision to retire from the military created a crisis in his relationship with Fiona. This crisis was perhaps more complicated than is usually the case when one or both partners retire, for Robert was still a relatively young man. He still could find another job and, like many retired military personnel, start second career. Yet, Robert's retirement could also be viewed as a time for reassessing the child-rearing plate and, potentially, other plates as well in the lives of Fiona and Robert. Fiona did not stand aside. She used Robert's retirement as a time for her own reassessment. Apparently, Robert viewed the transition differently. Initially, he didn't see his retirement as an opportunity to spend more time with his children and take some of the load off his wife; rather, he immediately began looking for another job (which no doubt was both stressful and distracting for him) and prepare, through additional education, for a second career. Thus, quite different expectations regarding retirement led to new levels of stress in Fiona and Robert's marriage.

What did they do about this? How did Fiona get Robert to stay home—to be more "under foot?" Actually, she didn't seem to be very successful in her own efforts. The heated arguments she had with Robert didn't seem to have much of an effect. Perhaps he spent even more time away from home (purportedly because he was both working and going to school) precisely because he wanted to avoid Fiona's anger. Yet, a change did occur. But it seems to have come from Robert himself and his own personal development. Like many

men at middle age (cf. Bergquist, Greenberg and Klaum, 1993; Bergquist, 2012), Robert came to two important realizations. First, he recognized that he was no longer a young man. Robert's experiences at college seem to have forced this realization on him. This, in turn, encouraged him to reexamine priorities in his life. Second, he seemingly came to an appreciation of the role of parenting. He wanted to spend more time with his children and less time pursuing a career.

As in the case of many major transitions in the lives of couples we interviewed, this change occurred not because the two partners came to any mutual agreement regarding the change that was needed, but rather because one of the two partners gained some personal insights. With these insights, Robert made some changes in his own life style that had an impact on the couple and broke through an interpersonal impasse with Fiona. In some cases, a retired person "gets under foot" in a way that causes problems for their partner; in other cases, the retired person's reassessment of personal priorities and a renewed or first-time interest in family matters is a belated but welcomed change for a long-suffering partner.

Norming: How Should We Plan for Our Future?

The later stages of life are often described as a time for assessing life purposes and reflecting on life values. In many cultures, men and women in their maturity turn away from the world of commerce and government to the worlds of teaching, and the study of philosophy and religion. We found that the older couples we interviewed often viewed their later years together as a time for assessing their own purposes as a couple and for reflecting on the values that they held in common. The norming stage of their relationship, therefore, is often particularly important and core to their vitality as a couple.

As they grow older together, most couples begin to speculate on their future life together, especially their years after retirement. Often in this speculation they must come to terms with the lifestyle that their own parents adopted in their later years. Typically, these early images of the future are filled with ambivalent feeling. On the one hand, they both look forward to "peace and quiet;" on the other hand, this may seem quite dull and only appropriate for "old people--not us!" Mary provides a wonderful portrait of this ambivalence with regard to her

own retirement with her partner, Ruth:

[We will be] Lucy and Ethel [as in the TV show *I Love Lucy*] retiring and playing . . . go on vacations . . . living in a nice home in [suburbia]. We're always reading, and we're always ferreting out information. If you're [Ruth] not working and I'm not working, we're going to have to be doing something! So that will probably mean taking classes or volunteering. One thing we could do is take a travel class. Teach a travel class. The perfect vacation is what we'll call it. Maybe that's when we'll write our book. Yeah, we'd probably like to write a book. Can't tell you what we'll write on, though. It changes year to year.

On the one hand, Mary looks forward to the life of "Lucy and Ethel" with nothing but comedic crises and the absence of real-life problems of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Yet, Mary doesn't see herself (or Ruth) sitting still. As is the case with her current life, Mary hopes to remain quite active and make full use of their best current strategy for renewing their relationship, which is taking vacations together. Like many of the men and women we interviewed, Mary is bringing her current life style into her images of the future. While this is very understandable and appropriate, it will also be important for Mary and Ruth to begin thinking of ways in which their future life together will be different from what it is today, given potential health problems, loss of income, shifting personal values and interests, and so forth.

Other couples we interviewed have already begun to specifically prepare for their "retirement years" together. They are confronting realities associated with money, health, housing and the potential continuing support of their children or pet project, rather than just the hopeful fantasies of their earlier life together. John and Nancy are just such a couple. when asked to describe their "typical day," John indicated that their days at present were certainly not "typical" of their lives together. This was due to the fact that all the children are now away from home and retirement years are approaching rapidly. Therefore, John and his wife, Nancy, have decided to "put their nose to the grindstone" and pay off their new house in just a few years. In doing so, they hope to increase their financial security for the years to come. Unfortunately, the days that John and Nancy described, consisted of two adults working different hours, passing like ships in the night. In building for their own future, these two

people seem to have forgotten their present life together. Perhaps they have grown accustomed to subordinating their own interests to their children's interests, and have decided (explicitly or tacitly) to continue diverting their attention from themselves as a couple to some other project -- in this case, their future financial security.

John and Nancy do possess something, however, that keeps them from falling apart as a couple. They always reserve Sundays as a time to be together. On that one day, they go to church, have lunch, and then have an "adventure." According to John:

It's those weekly adventures that help keep us going. We may go to a movie, or to an amusement park for the first time in fifteen years, or something else. So even though we are working long and hard all week long, we are doing something memorable together every weekend. Before, we certainly worked fewer hours between the two of us. However, we also had fewer "adventures." As a result, I think we enjoyed life a lot less.

John and Nancy haven't taken steps that will ensure that during the years that do remain until they are ready to retire, they will find more time together, without ignoring their desire for greater financial security. John indicated that he hopes to use computer link-ups to continue doing business from his home, as a consultant. In this way, John and Nancy won't always be like ships passing in the night. John and Nancy also plan to remain active outside their home after retirement, though they want to spend more time together. Nancy plans to at least do volunteer work at the hospital where she now works. She also looks forward to keeping her household to her satisfaction, and hopes to work more on her home's landscaping and have time to sew. Then, together, they added: "yes, and we hope to have much more time to visit all those grandchildren!"

The days of many men and women in their senior years are filled with recollection of previous life experiences. Rather than daydreaming about the life to come, they reflect back accurately or inaccurately on the life that they have already lived. Long-term couples are similarly inclined to reflect back on their relationship together. A lovely scene in the movie "Gigi" concerns the recollections of two former lovers, played by Maurice Chevalier and Hermoine Gingold, about their special moments together. "Ah, yes," exclaims Chevalier, "I

remember it well!" (having just confused dates, locations and perhaps even lovers!)

These moments of recollection are to be cherished by couples and certainly represent some of the richest sources of deep gratification for long-term couples. The home that they have created together, their cherished possessions and unique rituals all serve as reminders of the things in life that they value and the character of the relationship that they have established together through their daily, vernacular life (Moore, 1994). Yet, it is truly sad to listen to older couples reflect back on their life together with fondness and nostalgia while discounting the wonderful moments they still can spend together, particularly now that they have more free time, fewer distractions and, sometimes, more financial security than ever before in their lives. This is the developmental plate that opens the rich and rare opportunity for partners to live fully with one another and fully savor their mature relationship.

Tom and Maxine have lived together for fifty-three years. After this length of time they have much to say about their life adventures. They talk in an easygoing, bantering fashion about the way they are as a couple. Tom begins by noting that "it's been fun!" and repeatedly introduces this theme as they speak, in particular, about their current life together. They focus in more on special moments together. They take time to sit and talk together, go for moonlight walks, and toast the moon with glasses of wine. They also keep in close touch with friends and family. "We've always been very social and tried to create great parties for our friends and colleagues," according to Maxine; yet, they now enjoy each other's company more than ever before in their life, find their different personalities to be sources of enjoyment rather than conflict, and retain a sense of humor and playfulness toward each other and toward life. The interviewer noted that she felt drawn into what seems to be their embracing of life. Their appreciation of each other and of being in the world. A wonderful model of an enduring intimate relationship.

In the case of Heather and Marianne, the transition from work into retirement was difficult. They have not embraced life as joyfully and playfully as Tom and Maxine. Their transition was problematic, not only because both women had been working full-time (a common problem for many contemporary dual-career couples), but also because the two of them had worked closely together for twenty-five years as travel agents in the same organization.

Suddenly, they had to relate to each other without their shared work identity. A facet of their lives that they had shared for so long was now gone and it took them a while to adjust.

They now had so much more free time that they could spend together away from work. Heather had gotten used to having more free time when she retired four years earlier, but Marianne had still gone to work. Suddenly they had no restrictions. But they felt adrift without their shared work experience. Even after Heather retired, they could at least talk about Marianne's work, and they both still knew the cast of characters at work. Now what do they talk about? What about the "elicit" excitement of being lovers (in private), but co-workers (in public)? What would happen now that their public relationship is no longer separate from their private relationship. This forces them to invest everything in their private relationship? Will it work? What do they do with themselves, given that they are no longer the sprightly, passionate, secretive lovers of old? So much of their identity individually and collectively was wrapped up in their work. And what would other people think of them now that they were both retired?

If the interview is an accurate reflection on their relationship, the transition has apparently been successful. According to Heather:

We probably come off to you like your-grandparents. And that's really OK. But Marianne and I are content. That's how I'd describe the way we feel about each other. Contented. We're very comfortable with each other. We've already had the passion where all you want to do is make love and be intense. That part has been gone for a while. But a relationship or marriage of quality does change. It's the intensity that has changed, that's all. There is no one else I'd rather be with than Marianne. And a quiet life with her in our home with the cats is just fine with me.

We leave this "marriage of quality" impressed with the flexibility and commitment exhibited in the adjustment of both women to a quite different lifestyle and relationship.

Performing: How Do We Best Learn From Each Other?

Couples who remain together for many years together often spend their last years together

learning from one another. Carl Jung suggests that this may be one of the most important functions that a long-term marriage can serve. While some observers of contemporary intimate relationships focus on the capacity of the relationship to provide each partner with happiness, Jung and his associates (Gugenbuhl-Craig, 1977) Sanford (1980) suggested that intimate, enduring relationships are meant primarily to serve the process of individuation, whereby mature men and women begin to reclaim and reintegrate into their personal psyches those aspects of the that they had projected out to other people and institutions.

A woman in her 60s, for instance, may reclaim her right to ideas of her own, or a man in his 70s may for the first time since his childhood give himself permission to cry. When we are young, the tendency is to accept what other people say about the things we are and are not supposed to think, feel and act on, as a function of our age, gender, race, social position, job, size, abilities and so forth. We are told by others and we tell ourselves that we are supposed to be “realistic” and "get along" if we are to be successful in life. By the time we reach our 50s, the “voices from other rooms" (Bergquist, Greenberg and Klaum, 1993) (that are neither realistic nor socially acceptable) demand to be heard, after twenty to thirty years of neglect. In our 50s we often return to ideas and dreams that we abandoned in our twenties, and so begins the process of reintegrating parts of ourselves that were set aside at a much earlier time.

This process of reintegration and individuation call be aided greatly by one's partner, for we usually picked a partner who is different from us. This person often exhibits those characteristics that we disowned much earlier in our life. The strong dominant male executive looks for an expressive and creative life partner. A woman who is very industrious and practical in her work as a small business owner falls madly in love with a dreamer who wants to transform society. A man who decided early in life to be a somewhat reclusive college professor marries a woman who is a great athlete and lover of automobiles. Later in life, the executive can learn about expressiveness and creativity from his life partner, while the practical small business owner can become more of a social activist, courtesy of her dreamer-lover. The college professor can learn more about his own body and about mechanical self-sufficiency from his outgoing wife.

At an even more basic level, heterosexual men and women in the final stages of their life

often turn to their partner to learn about feminine (in the case of men) or masculine (in the case of women) aspects of themselves whereas older gay and lesbian partners often learn more about both the masculine and feminine aspects of themselves from their life partner. As we have noted in this book, two life forces, according to Jung, lie at the heart of the process of interpersonal intimacy. These forces are the "anima", (feminine energy or archetype) and "animus" (masculine energy or archetype). They are called by many other names "Yang" and "Yin" the Light and the Dark, the Active and Receptive. Each these forces resides in each of us, according to Jung, but only one of the forces usually plays a dominant role in our life when we are young, largely because our society expected us as men to be directed by the animus and as women to be directed by the anima. It is interesting to speculate (as Ursula LeGuin has done in her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*) on what a society would look like in which everyone is androgynous (a well-integrated mix of anima and animus) or in which everyone can switch between being a male or female.

During our mature years we give ourselves permission to learn about the other side of ourselves -- what Sanford (1980) calls our "invisible partner"-- and when we are in an enduring intimate relationship there is no one better to learn from than the person with whom many years ago we fell in love (often as a result of becoming captivated by the opposite gender force in them).

The individuation process involves the reintegration (for the first time since childhood) of the anima and animus forces in ourselves. This becomes the central purpose of the last years of our life:

to achieve this union of the opposites within ourselves may very well be the task of life, requiring the utmost in perseverance and assiduous awareness. Usually men need women for this to come about, and women need men. And yet, ultimately the union of the opposites does not occur between a man who play out the masculine and a woman who plays out the feminine, but within the-being of each man and each woman in whom the opposites are finally conjoined. (Sanford, 1980)

Thus, we find that men and women often become more alike as they grow older not just because they have lived through the same experiences in their adult lives, but also because

they have learned from each other, and have each reclaimed (in part through the informal teaching and modeling of their partner) those aspects of themselves that they disowned at an earlier time in their lives.

A classic example of this process of learning from and becoming more like each other is offered by Dora and Jim. These partners have for many years lived with distinctive differences in the ways in which they relate to other people. Dora is "a great dancer and likes to be in the spotlight," stated Jim with considerable pride. Yet, he also rioted that he doesn't "like being in the spotlight," and has lived vicariously off Dora's interpersonal skills and enthusiasm. Yet, in their senior years, Dora and Jim are becoming more like each other. Dora and Jim both agreed that right now their traditional roles are switching. Dora is pulling herself more into the background, and Jim is putting himself more into the spotlight. Both of them believe that this is important in their individual and collective development.

George and Betty are 68 and 64 years old respectively. They have been married 43 years and refer to each other as Mama and Daddy), reflecting their primary identity as parents of six children. George was a dentist and though Betty ran his office, she has always thought of herself as a housewife. The interviewer began by mentioning that couples often seem to go through cycles. George immediately interrupted: "yeah, one with kids, one without kids. That's the real one. Another is work and retired." Betty agreed. George went on to express his concern about possible demands that their children might make on them in the future. He indicated that child-rearing was a very taxing experience for him and he is glad that they are finally all out on their own and doing well. He loves his children but worries that they might try to impinge too much on his and Betty's lives and finances. Betty always goes along with George's fears, so as not to upset him further. For George (and perhaps Betty), the shift to another stage in their own development as a couple was clearly welcomed. They no longer need to focus on children, and both are now retired from most work both outside and within the home.

George and Betty have now settled into a stable post child-rearing pattern. Betty takes care of the finances, while George putters around the house completing small home repair projects. George has always been worried about money; however, Betty is an excellent bookkeeper and

enjoys keeping track of every penny spent. George is proud of Betty's ability to handle the finances and frequently praises her for doing such a good job. Betty's subservience to George's financial concerns has kept the socio-economic viability plate in the background. There have been no earthquakes or eruptions along this plate. In this way, George and Betty have established a complementary relationship, with George's worries being matched by Betty's competencies. Much as Betty reassures George about possible demands that the children might make on them, she also reassures him about the finances.

The complementarity that has been- established in this relationship seems very mature and it works very smoothly, making the interplay between these two people seem almost invisible. One wonders, however, what would occur if Betty were to die before George. He doesn't seem to be learning from Betty, hence does not yet seem to have the capacity for "self-assurance." Perhaps Betty also needs to learn from George about worrying. She may be so concerned with assuring George that things will work out and dependent on George to discover the things about which they should be worried, that she has not had to develop her own problem-detecting capacities. Some mutual instruction may be in order.

While Betty and George are closely linked together with regard to child-raising and finances, they tend to assert their independence and differences from one another with regard to other life interests. Betty enjoys reading books, while George watches television -- sports, news, wildlife programs and, in particular, travelogues ("That's how I've been around the world -- no waste of money.") Both Betty and George seem to enjoy these differences and appreciate each other's unique qualities. The focus throughout their relationship seems to be on building each other up, always making the other person feel loved, wanted, needed and useful. It seems as though the underlying game plan of the relationship based on providing a sense of mutual security, love, and respect for each other.

With all of this mutual respect, it is still apparent that this is an old-fashioned relationship in which traditional sex-roles are clearly upheld. George is defined as the breadwinner, even though he is now retired, and. Betty has always taken care of the business side of his dental practice. Betty is defined as the homemaker, though George, like other men, is given the task of puttering around on "men-type" projects. One wonders if this type of relationship could

survive for very long among younger couples. Furthermore, both Betty and George seem to accept their roles on the surface, but there has been an underlying threat of Betty becoming a "woman's libber." This is no joke for George.

Though George says he like to tease Betty about it, the fact remains that George has been very concerned that Betty might get "funny ideas." He does not want his wife doing anything other than homemaking (ignoring the fact that she has been a very successful business person for years in running the dental practice). Betty has never had the courage to assert herself, though there are many thing she would have liked to have done, Simple things, like joining a bridge club, taking a class in accounting at the university, taking a part-time job at a nearby dress shop. George didn't want any wife of his out running around. He wanted her home. Betty stayed home for her lifetime in order to keep the peace. She had literally no social contacts outside her family

Yet, the two have survived and even thrived in their own uniquely constructed relationship. They went through many hard times in creating and recreating themselves as a couple. Outside the interview, Betty indicated that "marriage is a series of mini-divorces." She had considered leaving George several times during their marriage, but never mentioned such personal crises to George. It seems as if Betty has taken on the remarriage process single-handedly, which may have been typical of many women of her generation. This couple has remained intact because the two partners established a complimentary relationship of master/servant and boss/employee, parent/child. This is supported and maintained through loving symmetrical communications of mutual respect and praise. Their relationship seems to be working, as both feel very fortunate. They really mean it when they say that they love each other. Privately, Betty reveals a darker side of the relationship when she speaks of the almost total sacrifice of self on her part. She indicated outside the interview that her mother had told her: "Honey, for a marriage to work, the woman must give 90% and the man 10%." Betty's experiences have shown this to be the case.

Does not growing together through several developmental stages require two participants who are willing to help the other with their own growth and maturation? What happens when one of the participants has more or less given up her "self" for the sake of the other or for the sake

of the relationship? Then you have one person going through the stages of his or her life with the help of an obedient appendage who has sacrificed his or her own identity. Betty and many other women of her age and era have experienced this sacrifice. Their husbands have an identity and even the couple has an identity (often primarily through child-rearing). The primary the primary role of wife is to support these two identities rather than establish her own. Such a state of inequity will hopefully not be tolerated among younger men and women of a new era.

Preparing for Death: Parent, Partner or Oneself

In many marriage ceremonies in Western Societies, the phrase "for better or for worse; in sickness and in health" appears. This is probably a good thing, for committed, long-term relationships often exist only among couples who are willing and able to weather enormous adversity together ---- financial hardships, career reversals, major illnesses and, in particular, death. There tend to be two or three types of death that partners in an enduring relationship must face during their many years together. First, they must face the death of their own parents. Second, they must face the death of their partner. Third, they must face their own death (either before or after the death of their partner). Each of these experiences places all other developmental stages and plates in a new perspective and encourages deep reflection on and maturation of life purposes and values.

Erik Erikson suggests that the primary developmental task of the last stages of our personal lives is to come to terms finally, with our own parents and the long-unresolved conflicts that we have had with them. Ultimately, according to Erikson, we can only come to terms with our own life and our own impending death, when we have come to terms with our parents, When we have forgiven them for their inadequacies, then by extension, we have forgiven ourselves for our own inadequacies. From a more spiritual perspective, Moore (1994, pp. 76-77) similarly observes that:

Our task as adults . . . might be to search for whatever it takes to forgive our parents for being imperfect. In some families those imperfections might be slight, in others severe, but in any case, we each have to deal with evil and suffering in our own lives, without the benefit of a scapegoat. In fact, our lives would be all the richer if we could

let go of the excuse of parental failure; we could make interesting adult lives out of the challenge of a world in which evil and suffering play a role. . . . Another benefit of releasing our parents and other family members from responsibility for our fate is the possibility of establishing a satisfying relationship with them —no small achievement for the soul. . . .Forgiveness clears the way for some kind of connection—tenuous and slight in some situations, profoundly satisfying in others.

Men and women typically do not begin to think in a serious manner of their own death or the death of their partner until such time as they are faced with the death of parents, favorite aunts and uncles, or other people who played significant roles in their lives. Certainly, this emerging awareness of one's own mortality is a central theme in the life of most middle-aged men and women. At the point when men and women begin to confront the death of significant others in their lives then they will inevitably begin to consider the potential death of their partner prior to their own death. This is particularly likely among women who marry men who are of the same age or older.

The death of a parent or other significant person in one's life tends to either open up or finally resolve some powerful personal issues that can't help but impact on one's relationship with a lifelong partner. Sam, for instance, spoke about the recent death of his father. Sam's father died of liver cancer several months before the interview. He had been an alcoholic. Sam reported that he hated his father vehemently and continues to hate him even after his death. Sam was notified that his father's death was imminent, yet Sam refused to go to the hospital to see him. He attended the funeral but returned home promptly after the service ended, refusing to go to the graveyard for the committal service.

Neither Sam nor Caroline had much to say about their own potential death, though it was quite clear throughout the interview that Sam felt the relationship with his father to be unresolved and (now) unresolvable. He is resistant to any advice from other people (particularly from either his mother or Caroline's parents) with regard to his own career or life choices. Sam seems to be stuck and unable to move ahead with his own life. Given the centrality of his career (as choir director) in the life of his family and, in particular, his marriage, the further development of Sam and Caroline's relationship may have to await his

coming to terms with his own father and their estranged relationship.

Like many couples, Ruth and Mary have given some thought to the potential death of one another. Ruth indicated that:

I think we both feel that if we had to . . . if something happened to you or something happened to me, we would get along somehow, run our lives. We would be able to live afterwards, in some way. I kind of have that gut feeling. We are both survivors, it's true, but I've never had to survive in quite that . . . close, a big one. I think I could do it, but I'd probably be miserable for a while, a long time. At least every Sunday night [laugh]. But I think you know that if I weren't here, I would want you to enjoy your life. Yeah, and I know that you would too [laughing].

Most men and women who wish to spend the rest of their life with one other person will someday have to help their partner face the death of a parent or other cherished friend or relative. They must also face the prospect of their partner's death. Fortunately, for most of us the potential death of one's partner is a life stage issue that can be deferred to the last half of life. For some couples, unfortunately, the issue of life and death and massive intrusive life events occurs much earlier in the life of the couple. This is certainly the case for many gay couples who were facing the horrors of AIDS during the 1990s.

Martin and Victor are just such a couple. They have been partners since the early 1980s, when they met in New York City. They had been living on the east coast until about ten months prior to the interview when they decided to move west. Martin has been living with AIDS for many years and received chemotherapy treatment for lymphoma over a one-year period of time. Victor was tested for the AIDS virus during the 1990s and is HIV-positive. Martin's illness was the reason they decided to move to San Francisco. They both felt that it was important to be in a community that was on the forefront of combating the AIDS epidemic. Such a community, they hoped, would provide them with the services and support they knew that they would need.

In telling their individual and collective life stories, Martin and Victor noted that they both came from disrupted family lives. As a result, they were both looking for a stable home life,

with a house and somebody on whom they could depend. There were no positive role models for these two men, given that their family was dysfunctional and most members of the gay community in the east coast city where they lived were "in the closet:"

. . . we would look at our families and then look at Donna Reed's family and think that Donna Reed's family and the Beaver's family were a little too far gone, but somewhere in between there's something that should be supportive and adult, without playing all these games. [You] should be able to sit down with the person that you love and say I feel this way about this, without them getting real upset.

When they did look to other gay couples for role-models, it appeared that most gay relationships revolved strictly around sex and all other aspects of the couple's lives were completely separate. Martin and Victor realized that their relationship was much different and therefore the other gay couples they knew offered no insight.

They did manage to build a relationship without the aid of role-models, but faced yet another transition point during the 1990s, without any role models. How do you confront the potential death of one or both partners when you are still at the prime of life and are still at the relatively early stages of the relationship? How do you suddenly establish a mature relationship that can hear all the grief and love associated with death? How do you learn how to grapple with AIDS? There certainly were many other gay couples living around them in San Francisco that were coping with similar problems during the 1990s, and they were probably smart to move to a city where they were not alone in their struggles. Yet, at the time no one seemed to know how to handle this new intrusive illness that was threatening the very core of many communities in the United States and elsewhere in the world.

For both Martin and Victor, acceptance by other people (and, in particular, their parents) was essential, if they were to cope with this massive intrusion in their lives. Both men point out that acceptance has played a major role in the formation of their relationship. Martin observed, that meeting Victor's family "was a big thing in starting to think of us as a couple. It was shortly after that [Victor's] brother started referring to me as his sister-in-law. I still have to get even with him for that." Victor noted this acceptance took quite a while. Members of both their families started treating them as a couple at the point when they were accepted by

Victor's family. They started to get invitations as a couple from many different sources at this point in their history.

Obviously, Martin's hospitalization with AIDS-induced illness served as another marker event in their relationship. It forged a new level of commitment and intimacy for Martin and Victor as it does for many men and women who must share an intrusive life event with another person. When the interviewer asked how AIDS changed their relationship, Victor indicated that part of the change related back to Martin's relationship with his family:

When Martin was in the hospital and I took control of his family. That was a major change in the way in which I viewed our relationship. Up until that point, we hadn't had anything serious happen. That was the first time that we had a crisis and how we dealt with that was important. It changed our relationship. We both realized that we were there for each other, that we could support each other in a crisis, that we weren't going to run. And, I think we were surprised in some respects.

Martin commented at this point that he was in fact quite surprised (and gratified): "Oh yeah, I had completely prepared myself for the idea that you were going to say 'I packed all your bags and you need to make other living arrangements.'"

Victor, however, was very much there for Martin -- "for better or worse, in sickness and in health":

When I called him [Martin] at the hospital, he said he would understand if I left and I said "what are you talking about?" And I think then we understood that this was for good, and we were going to make it work. I don't even remember making a conscious decision that "yes, I was going to be committed to him through this". There was just no question.

This was certainly a marker event for Martin and Victor. They had previously come to define themselves as a partner because of their parents' recognition and acceptance of them as a couple. The identification and acceptance of other people of a relationship, and even the acceptance of one partner for the other is important; however, commitment rather than external acceptance is the essential ingredient in enduring relationships and the support of

Victor for Martin at this point is clearly a marker of this commitment:

That was a very important point, because I [Martin] changed dramatically after that . . . all of a sudden I had someone in my life who I was sure of, and I was able to become stronger because I had someone that would support me no matter what . . . and it's like our relationship really grew from that, because I think at the same time Victor really realized that he had never really cared for someone that much.

Shortly after this mutual commitment, Martin and Victor went for HIV testing and found that they were both HIV positive, suggesting that each of them might soon need the support and understanding of their partner. Victor observed that the tables are now turned, and that he is greatly appreciative of Martin's commitment to him. Martin observes that:

. . . it was the same thing now, with Victor being sick. He was always saying he's so glad that I'm going to stay with him, and to me the idea of leaving was just too foreign. I said to Victor: "You know, of course I'm going to stay. Our lives have become too intertwined to leave."

What is the nature of this remarkable, enduring commitment that Martin and Victor have made to one another in facing these two parallel intrusive events? Martin describes the two of them as a "family":

I really do think we became family at that point, we went further than being a couple, we became family. We became the center and everyone else became bit players. Even in the way our family treated us became very different.

Apparently, their families of origin began to recognize that something special was occurring between Martin and Victor. As a result, Martin and Victor began to take on different roles with each other and with their families. They have even now become role models for their own siblings. It seems perfectly appropriate and somehow just that two people who recognized the importance (and absence) of role models in their own lives, were able to build a relationship that is now worthy of the admiration of others. In Martin's words: "It's amazing with our families . . . Victor's brother and my sister look at us as the most stable couple they know. Victor's brother in particular views us as a role model in his own marriage."

As they came to face their own personal life challenge, as well as the challenge facing their partner, both Martin and Victor ironically, found a new sense of independence, perhaps needing this in preparation for the potential loss of their partner. Martin observes with considerable insight that:

. . . we are becoming much more caring about each other and also becoming a lot more independent than we were. It's like the "leaning on" part is gone. We don't feel like we need to lean on each other anymore for support. And that's being replaced by something a lot nicer. It's hard to explain what it is. The only word I can come up with for it is love. It seems to be intensifying a lot more. I don't know if it's because of Victor being sick or just what the reason is but it just feels like it's. . . I thought I could never be more in love with Victor before, and I'm finding that every day I'm loving him a lot more than I did.

Victor concurs in expressing his own growing, maturing love: "The more I see you becoming an individual and taking care of yourself, the stronger my love for you grows. We are individuals, but so closely tied."

There is much to be learned from this couple about the nature of commitment and about the very essence of love. Martin and Victor have learned much about themselves and have much to teach the rest of us as a result of the intrusive life events they have experienced. Their experiences have galvanized their commitment. Victor claims that "there's nothing at this point that would stand in the way of our relationship." This commitment has stood the test of time. They are both still alive—to tell a tale about their own enduring relationship. [Martin] felt [during the 1990s] like we may have another 40 years or we may have another six months, but there was that feeling that was going to last a lot longer than however long we had and, basically, more or less we knew that we could face just about anything and come out of it okay." Clearly, the developmental processes of this couple have been neither stable nor always pleasant. They have produced a relationship, however, that is truly exceptional and enduring. We can ask for little else from any contemporary American couple.

The experiences of another couple, Bernard and Gwen, further exemplify in highly dramatic fashion the impact which intrusive life events can have on the way in which a couple is formed and sustained. On October 19, 1991, Bernard and Gwen were comfortably situated in

a beautiful Oakland, California home overlooking the San Francisco Bay. They had assembled many material objects that reflected their interests in sports and the arts, as well as photographs and letters that reminded them of the rich variety of their past lives. One day later all of this was gone. The Oakland fire-storm destroyed their home and all of their belongings.

Bernard later reflected that very little energy was available during the first few days after the fire for experiencing any strong feelings:

At the time, attending full to the moment meant accepting this condition, not trying to change it. Accepting what was true became our main way of coping and finding meaning in the chaos of the events. Initially, we denied the reality of our loss by holding out hope that our house had somehow been spared. Our house was nearly at the center of the fire area, yet this thought persisted. Monday morning [one day after the fire started], as everything was still burning, and as we still held out our irrational hope that our house was okay, we began looking for a new home. This seemed our first priority. It wasn't until late Monday afternoon that we stopped to buy some clothes to wear. By Tuesday evening we had rented a house . . . For the next two weeks we shopped till we dropped.

For Bernard, the loss of his home and possessions was very difficult: "it is amazing how much we take for granted on a day to day basis. The amount of stuff [one owns] is staggering. It was very stressful making all the mutual decisions about our new belongings."

By contrast, Gwen reports that:

From day one, I felt relieved, freer than I had felt in months. I had been on the top of one of life's curves, living in a beautiful house, making lots of money, but I suffered anxiety that "the big fall" was coming. After the fire, I felt empowered. I had seen the beast. I had felt its hot breath, and I had escaped unscathed. I suffered the loss of everything I owned, and yet I was okay! I actually reveled in how simple life became all of a sudden. Our worries were reduced to putting a roof over our heads and buying clothes. It was actually nice to be able to fit everything I owned in my car again.

The fire brought out new understanding and appreciation for Bernard as well as Gwen. Bernard came to recognize "how much of my self-image was tied up with my special belongings: skis, kayaks, mountaineering equipment, carpentry tools, etc." Without all of these "toys," Bernard felt that he could- no longer express an important part of himself. Yet, like Gwen, he found that these things were not essential to his enduring sense of self: "I have not been diminished even though it may be quite a while before we can replace our expensive toys."

Even more importantly, both Bernard and Gwen discovered their own inner strength, the strength of their relationship, and the strength of the support and love showed by their friends and family. Bernard recalls that: "On Sunday, two weeks after the fire, we had an open house party in our new home. Our friends brought gifts, including multiple sets of kitchen gadgets and a great deal of love." He later wrote a letter to these friends and indicated, in part that the fire separated the world into two categories for him:

. . . we got to see the difference between that which is eternal and that which is simply the stuff of this place, and of this lifetime. One of the things that clearly fell into the light and will from now on be recognized as its true nature is the love and compassion from all of you.

Even with this abundant support from friends and colleagues, Bernard:

. . . began to feel weary and sad. I was depressed as I realized how long it might be before we could replace the toys I used most often. I started to return to work a little and school [Bernard has returned to graduate school] was continuing. I was upset at falling behind and at having to drop one course and probably have to take incompletes in the others.. . I was feeling overwhelmed.. . It now seemed impossible to shut away or set aside the intensity of my emotional experience.

Conflict returned to Bernard's relationship with Gwen. They seemed to be out of sync with each other and the different ways in which they approached the world now seemed to be exacerbated and disruptive to their relationship. They both learned much about and from each

other during this difficult phase of their relationship. Bernard indicates that:

We had to find a way to work together to accomplish the extra work that still remained, and we had to be respectful of our individual process. Extra sensitivity and respect have been discovered for each other. Since the fire, two important aspects of our relationship have been altered. The first is the recognition of a shared vision of our basic human condition . . . The second is a deeper respect for each other's way of being in the world. This became possible following our acceptance of the powerful events of these past few months.

Gwen expressed similar sentiments, in slightly different terms:

Two months later, I can say the fire was undoubtedly the best thing that ever happened to either of us. I had already realized that "things" couldn't bring me happiness, and was on my way to understanding that happiness was within me somewhere, buried under layers of defenses and anxieties. Now I know from experience, what other people can only conjecture that nothing you can "own" matters. Only that which cannot be taken away has meaning.

While many relationships are destroyed when intrusive life events impact on the lives of those in the relationship, strong, enduring relationships will be strengthened by adversity. As Gwen observes about her own life with Bernard: "like the fire that forges iron into steel, our marriage has been forged by this experience, and we have barely begun to feel the truths that will come of it."

KEY CHAPTER POINTS - PLATE FIVE

Enduring couples:

- Prepare for major changes in the ways in which they relate to one another as a result of a major life transition (retirement, illness, etc.).
- Respond to a major intrusive life event by finding new ways to work and live together to accomplish joint goals.
- Continue to adjust to on-going problems regarding children, spouses /partners of children and grandchildren.

- Grapple with core issues like "what are we truly about?" and "what would I ever do without you?"
- Find new things to talk about, new ways to occupy their shared time together, new ways to budget their static or diminished income.
- Cherish recollection of joint previous life experiences.
- Savor their mature relationship with each other.
- Embrace life.
- Reintegrate, both consciously and unconsciously, the male and female sides of themselves learned from their life partner.
- Enjoy their respective differences and appreciate each other's unique qualities.
- Help their partner face the death of a parent or other cherished friend or relative.
- Demonstrate in daily behaviors their commitment to their partner and to their relationship as a couple.