INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP AS PATH

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Men and women seeking to find their way together today face a unique set of challenges and difficulties. Never before have couples had so little help or guidance from elders, society, or religion. Most of the old social and economic rationales for marriage as a lifelong relationship have broken down. Even the old incentives for having children—to carry on the family name or trade, or to contribute to family work, providing an economic asset—are mostly gone. For the first time in history, for many of us, the relations between men and women lack clear guidelines, supportive family networks, a religious context, and a compelling social meaning.

Until very recently, the form and function of the male/female relationship, and marriage in particular, were carefully prescribed by family, society, and religion. One's family always chose or at least had veto power over one's choice of a marriage partner. Every couple had a set of defined roles within an extended family, which in turn had a place in a close-knit community or village where people shared similar social, moral, and religious values and customs. Situated at the center of these wider networks, marriage always had a definite role and function: by providing a stabilizing influence, it supported society. In turn, society supported it: if a marriage was unhappy, community pressure held it together.

Only in the last few generations has this situation changed. Now that marriage has lost most of its traditional supports and couples are increasingly removed from family, community, and

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widely shared values, there are few convincing extrinsic reasons for a man and a woman to sustain a life's journey together. Only the intrinsic quality of their personal connection can keep them going. For the first time in history, every couple is on their own to discover how to build a healthy relationship, and to forge their own vision of how and why to be together.

Those of us who are struggling with questions of love and commitment today are pioneers in territory that has never been consciously explored before. It is important to realize just how new this situation is, so that we do not blame ourselves for the difficulties we may be having with our relationships. Recognizing this, we can begin to appreciate the new kind of opportunity that these difficulties present us with. In former times, if people wanted to explore the deeper mysteries of life, they would often enter a monastery or hermitage far away from conventional family ties. For many of us today, however, intimate relationships have become the new wilderness that brings us face to face with all our gods and demons. It is calling on us to free ourselves from old habits and blind spots, and to develop the full range of our powers, sensitivities and depths as human beings—right in the middle of everyday life (Welwood, 1985a).

TOWARD A NEW VISION OF RELATIONSHIP

Traditional marriage achieved stability by serving a prescribed societal function. Yet now that marriage is based on feeling rather than function, how can it find a stable footing? Romantic feelings, while inspiring, are also fickle. Since feeling by its very nature ebbs and flows, rather than remaining constant or continuous, how can we create stable marriages based entirely on feelings? What new ground, beyond social duty or hopes for perpetual romance, can serve as a basis for long-term relationships today? We need a new vision and new context that can help couples find fresh direction and new inspiration.

I suggest that we can best cultivate a new spirit of engagement between the sexes by recognizing and welcoming the powerful opportunity that intimate relationships provide—to awaken our deepest human resources. If relationships are to flourish, they need to reflect and promote our deeper being, beyond any image of ourselves concocted by family, society, or our own minds. They need to be based on the whole of who we are, rather than on any single form, function, or feeling. This presents a tremendous challenge, for it means undertaking a journey in search of who and what we are. Our connection with someone we love can be one of the best vehicles for that journey.
When we approach it in this way, intimacy becomes a path—
an unfolding process of personal and spiritual development.

If form and feeling, earthly duty and heavenly romance, have
been thesis and antithesis in the historical dialectic of marriage,
the new synthesis we can now begin to contemplate is: marriage
as a conscious relationship. Since men and women have only
rarely looked at each other eye to eye, as equals, as whole
human beings, apart from roles, stereotypes, and inherited
prescriptions of all kinds, conscious relationship between the
sexes is a radical new departure.

Yet the notion that relationship can help us learn important life
lessons is not entirely new. Underneath our romantic hopes and
ideals, most of us have some understanding that intimacy takes
work and that though "you can't always get what you want" in
a relationship, nevertheless if you keep at it, "you just might get
what you need." Instead of being shocked by love's outrageous
demands and reluctantly forced to deal with them, I am
suggesting that if we recognize and welcome this path
dimension of relationship at the very outset, we will be better
prepared for the challenges we meet along love's way. Indeed,
our current difficulties may allow us no other choice. Relation­
ship simply no longer works very well when we try to proceed
on automatic pilot.

The Greek myth of Eros and Psyche suggests what the journey
of conscious relationship may entail. Eros becomes Psyche's
lover on the condition that she must never attempt to see his
face. He visits her by night, and for a while things go smoothly
between them. But, never having seen her lover, Psyche begins
to wonder who he really is. When she lights a lamp to see his
face, he flies away, and she must undergo a series of trials to find
him again. When she finally overcomes these trials, she is
united with him again, only this time in a much fuller way, and
their love can proceed in the light of day.

This myth points to the age-old separation between conscious­
ness (Psyche) and love (Eros). Traditional Western marriages
have been like love in the dark. Yet now that relationships no
longer function smoothly in the old familiar grooves, they
require a new quality of awareness. Like Psyche, we are
presently undergoing the trials that every advance in conscious­
ness entails.

THE NATURE OF PATH

Path is a term that points to the great challenge of our

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existence: the need to awaken, each in our own way, to the greater possibilities that life presents, and to become more fully human. The nature of a path is to lead us on this journey.

Becoming fully human involves working with the totality of what we are—both our conditioned nature and our unconditioned nature (Welwood, 1985b). On one hand, we have become conditioned into a number of habitual patterns that cloud our awareness, distort our feelings, and restrict our capacity to open to life and to love. Our defensive postures, which we originally fashioned to shield us from pain, have become a dead weight keeping us from living as fully as we might. Yet underneath all our conditioning, the basic nature of the human heart is an unconditioned awake presence, a caring, inquisitive intelligence, an openness to reality. So each of us has these two forces at work inside us: an embryonic wisdom that wants to blossom from the depths of our being, and the imprisoning weight of our karma (all those conditioned personality patterns that narrow our perception and keep us half-asleep). From birth to death, these two forces are always at work, and our lives hang in the balance. Since human nature always consists of these two elements, our journey must involve working with both of them.

Intimate relationships are ideally suited as a path because they touch both these sides of us and bring them into direct, energetic contact. They inspire our heart to open—when we fall in love, when we connect deeply with someone and suddenly feel drawn outside our own little world. And they also activate all the pain and confusion of our karmic entanglements. They stir up our most painful unresolved emotional conflicts from the past, continually bringing us up against things in ourselves that we cannot stand—all our worst fears, neuroses, and fixations—in living technicolor.

If we emphasize only one side of our nature at the expense of the other, we have no path and cannot move forward in any meaningful way. And we wind up distorting our relationships as well. If we focus only on the loving side of a relationship, we may become caught in the "bliss trap"—imagining that love is a stairway to heaven that will allow us to rise above the nitty-gritty elements of our personality and leave behind all our fears and limitations: "Love is so fantastic! I feel so high! Let's get married; won't everything be wonderful!" Of course these expansive feelings are wonderful. But the potential distortion here is to imagine that love by itself can solve our problems, provide endless comfort and pleasure, or save us from facing ourselves, our aloneness, our pain, or, ultimately, our death.
Becoming too attached to the heavenly side of love leads to rude shocks and disappointments when we inevitably return to earth and have to deal with the real-life challenges of making a relationship work.

The other distortion is to try to make relationship a known quantity, something totally solid and safe, to treat it as a finished product, rather than a living process. This is the security trap. When we try to make a relationship serve our needs for security, we lose a sense of greater vision and adventure. Relationships may become a kind of business deal, where everything must be negotiated. Or if we collude to play everything safe, they may become totally monotonous. Once we have lost a larger vision, we may try to fill the void that remains by creating a cozy materialistic lifestyle—watching television, acquiring upscale possessions, or climbing the social ladder.

Eventually, however, a life devoted to everyday routines and security concerns becomes too stale and predictable to satisfy the deepest longings of the heart. Digging themselves deeper into their habitual patterns, a couple may fall entirely asleep. After twenty years of marriage, one of them may wake up wondering, "What have I done with my life?" and suddenly disappear in search of what has been lost.

Neither of these approaches provides a path. Neither of them really goes anywhere. The heavenly bliss illusion may allow us to ascend for awhile, but we eventually crash when our relationship inevitably comes back down to earth. The security illusion keeps us glued to the earth, so that we never venture to reach out beyond ourselves at all.

Being on a path involves recognizing both sides of our nature, or, in other terms, joining heaven and earth (Welwood, 1984). When we bring together our expansive nature and our personal "stuff," things start to happen. There is ferment, there is alchemy, there is the possibility for change, renewal, movement in new directions.

Love is a transformative power precisely because it brings the two different sides of ourselves—the expansive and the contracted, the awake and the asleep—into direct contact. Our heart can start to work on our karma: rigid places in us that we have hidden from view suddenly come out in the open, and soften in love's blazing warmth. And our karma starts to work on our heart; in coming up against difficult places in ourselves and our partner, our heart has to open and expand.
looking beyond comfort and security needs in new ways. Love challenges us to keep expanding ourselves in exactly those places where we think we can't possibly open any further.

From the perspective of bliss or security, it seems terrible that relationships force us to face so many things in ourselves that we would rather not look at. But from a path perspective, it's a great opportunity. Intimate relationships can help free us from our karmic entanglements by allowing us to see exactly how and where we are stuck. When we live alone, we are often unaware of our habitual patterns because we live inside them. A relationship, on the other hand, heightens our awareness of all our rough edges. When someone we love reacts to our neurotic patterns, they bounce back on us and we can no longer ignore them. When we see and feel the ways we are stuck, in the environment of a loving relationship, a desire to move in a new direction naturally begins to stir in us. Then our path starts to unfold.

So even though the current upheavals going on between men and women may seem daunting and perplexing, they are also forcing us to become more conscious in our relationships. In looking beyond comfort and security needs, we can begin to appreciate the pure essence of relationship, which is to bring together the polarities of our existence—our buddha nature and our karmic tendencies, heaven and earth, unconditioned mind and conditioned mind, vision and practicality, male and female, self and other—and heal our divisions, both inner and outer.

TAPPING LARGER QUALITIES OF OUR BEING

If our heart is like a flame, our karma or conditioned habits are the fuel this fire needs in order to blaze brightly. Although the burning up of old karma creates great turbulence, it also releases tremendous energy. As our habitual patterns start breaking down, we gain access to a wider spectrum of our human qualities.

All the most universally valued qualities—such as generosity, tenderness, humor, courage, or patience—help us become more fully human, by enabling us to be fully present with what is. Generosity, for instance, allows us to extend ourselves to what is going on around us, while patience enables us to let it be. Tenderness is a willingness to be pierced by reality, while humor is a way of playing with what is, taking it lightly, instead of making it solid and heavy. Each of these qualities allows us to engage with a different facet of reality. The more of them we
have access to, the more we can embrace the whole of life-in its joys and delights, as well as in its difficulties and sorrows.

Each of us has access to a whole spectrum of these human qualities, at least as seed potentials. Yet most of us have developed one sort of quality-such as strength-while neglecting its opposite-such as tenderness. In this way, we are somewhat lopsided and incomplete. This sense of incompleteness is part of what draws us to relationships. We often feel most strongly attracted to people who manifest qualities we lack or who challenge us to develop a greater fullness and depth of being than we have yet discovered.

As our habitual patterns burn up in the fire of intimate relationship, our genuine human qualities are released. For instance, when we find that we can no longer get away with our usual selfishness, we may feel quite raw and vulnerable without this old shield to hide behind. Yet in the very rawness and nakedness we feel when we realize the necessity to leave behind old defensive patterns is our heart, our openness to reality, and the qualities we most need; in this case, generosity and expansiveness. That is how love's alchemy works.

THREE LEVELS OF PATH: EVOLUTIONARY, PERSONAL, AND SACRED

Relationship as a path has three different, interrelated dimensions to it. At the collective level, the development of conscious relationships has an evolutionary significance. Centuries of imbalance between the masculine and feminine ways of being have left a deep wound in the human psyche. No one can escape the effects of this wound-which pervade both our inner and outer lives. Inwardly we experience it as a split between heart and mind, feeling and thinking, tenderness and strength; outwardly it manifests in the war between the sexes and in the ruthless exploitation of nature that is endangering our whole planet. Until human consciousness can transform the ancient antagonism between masculine and feminine into a creative alliance, we will remain fragmented and at war with ourselves, as individuals, as couples, as societies, and as a race.

Developing a new depth and quality of intimacy in our relationships today is an important step in healing the age-old rift between male and female and bringing together the two halves of our humanity. As we begin to move in this direction, the man/woman relationship takes on a larger purpose, beyond just survival or security; it becomes an instrument for the evolution of human consciousness.
Secondly, relationship as a personal path involves moving through our individual barriers to openness and intimacy, contacting a deeper level of our being, and gaining access to the full range of our human qualities. By helping us become more fully available to the creative possibilities of life as a whole, intimate relationship refines and transforms us as individuals, and makes us more fully human.

Beyond that, the love between man and woman presents a sacred challenge-to go beyond the single-minded pursuit of purely personal gratifications and tap into larger, universal energies at work in life as a whole. By helping us discover what is most essential and real-the mysteries, depths and heights of human experience-relationship is also a sacred path. I don't mean to suggest that a relationship in and of itself is a complete spiritual path that can substitute for other awareness disciplines. But if we have some aspiration and dedication to wake up to our true nature, along with a practice that helps us do that, then in that context, relationship can be a particularly potent vehicle to help us contact a deeper level of truth in our lives.

In this light, the difficult challenges that men and women encounter in joining their energies together are not just personal travails. They are also invitations to open ourselves to the sacred play of the known and the unknown, the seen and the unseen, and to the larger powers born out of intimate contact with the great mysteries of life.

REFERENCES


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