Families Coming Apart: A Process Approach to Divorce and Other Transitions

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Many years ago, I had a clinical supervisor who believed that couples with children should always try to work out their problems and stay together. A few years after we finished our work together, I went back to her for further supervision. She had been learning some new methods and her basic approach had changed. The new rule of thumb was that if couples weren't happy, they should split up.

These two approaches represent polarities that often exist in couples' therapy. Both approaches have good reasoning behind them and both can be helpful to the couple. The reasoning behind couples staying together is that divorce is a major life change that can be quite traumatic for children. In my experience, children who go through a divorce where the parents and family have done therapy seem to have a far easier time making the transition than children from families who haven't done a significant amount of therapy before the divorce. The disadvantage of this approach is that it may pressure even couples who have received therapy and are clear that they need to separate to stay together, often for the sake of the children. My experience has been that children who live in a family that is staying together solely for the children often don't fare as well as children whose parents make a conscious decision to come apart, and who structure the separation in a way that is good for the whole family.

The alternate approach that couples should split up if they are not happy also has good reasoning behind it. People may be stuck in their relationship life, work life, or other key parts of life that aren't nurturing. By encouraging couples to make happiness a main criterion upon which to base their being together or apart, the therapist helps free the couple from societal pressures to stay together. This approach makes sense for couples who are staying together when their hearts are no longer in the relationship. The downside of this approach is that it may not give the needs of the children adequate consideration. In addition, this view may neglect the depths of relationship processing. Relationships are not always happy. Exploring beneath the surface will bring up pain, tension, and suffering, and couples need to be able to go through these states. While being stuck forever isn't desirable, neither is treating one's relationship like a plastic fork that you use and then throw out for a new one. In Eugene, Oregon, where my main practice is, there was a joke in the therapeutic community that if a couple wanted to split up, you sent them to one therapist, and if they wanted to stay together, to another well-known therapist. This may reflect the fact that focusing on one route may not serve all couples, and using only
one approach may leave out valuable aspects of
the other.

**Process work with relationship: key concepts**

Process work offers a third approach, a middle way in relationship to these perspectives. There are several key concepts on which a process-oriented approach is based. The first important idea is that there is no positive or negative value placed on either splitting up or staying together. Instead, the emphasis is placed on following the signals and dreams of the couple. Any decision to split apart or stay together comes from the couple, with the process worker facilitating this decision as it emerges.

Before going further, I would like to make clear that when I refer to families, I refer to all kinds of couples and families, including heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual. I refer to traditional and nontraditional couple and family relationships. I use the terms marriage and divorce to refer to both legal marriages and to marriages that are not legally approved.

A second important concept is the emphasis that process work places on the moment-to-moment unfolding of a relationship, in contrast to emphasizing a final decision such as separating or staying together. Marriage, divorce, and separation are important legal constructs, but they do not accurately reflect the emotional reality of the couple. The process worker follows the momentary flow and evolving dance of the couple, so that separation, divorce, and togetherness become momentary, fluid processes. From this perspective, today a couple may be very close. Tomorrow, they may need to be separate, and another day they need a middle ground. Sometimes these momentary places indicate that it actually is time to make a decision to be married or divorced or separated, but there is also flux and change even when these major decisions have been reached.

For example, I remember working with a couple who came in complaining that they couldn't stand being together. Each partner drove the other to the brink of insanity. At these moments, I said that it looked like time for a divorce. The couple took my comments seriously, started moving apart, and became very separate. After a while they would remember how much they loved each other and come back together, full of love and desire for connection. At these points, I commented that the time for marriage was back. The couple moved back and forth between these states, and their work involved picking up the rhythms of coming together and moving apart in their relationship and learning how to develop the fluidity to move back and forth.

With another couple, the switch happened just once—I followed them to the point they became legally divorced. They called me several months later to say that they were living together again and were very puzzled by what was happening. I helped them accept that they needed to think of their relationship not as a steady state, but as alive and changing, and to open up to the changes that were happening. This couple has now been together again for a long time.

A third key idea in process-oriented relationship work is that relationships have both a material, everyday part and also an eternal aspect. From this perspective, relationships don't ever end. Even if the daily relating decreases or disappears, an eternal part goes on in a changed form. This perspective parallels a spiritually based approach to physical death, which says that while the physical body dies, some eternal spiritual part continues. Postulating an eternal part of relationships has the potential to change our whole perspective on couples coming apart. I will examine these three concepts by drawing on process theory, experiences with clients, and my personal experience with a relationship transition.

**Fluidity as an approach to relationship**

The idea that there is no absolute right or wrong if relationships come apart, and the idea that relationships are not fixed but always changing, are two sides of the same coin. As we move away from imposing a set model of what is right or wrong, we move to a perspective of following the evolution of each unique couple's relationship.
One of the difficulties this switch brings up is how to define a couple. One advantage of the static legal relationship paradigm is the clear definition of married heterosexuals as couples. (This advantage has a concurrent disadvantage of invalidating homosexual relationships and unmarried heterosexual pairings.) In the legal paradigm, a legally married heterosexual couple is considered married even if they are no longer sexual or rarely interact. In this model, the level of intimacy does not define the relationship. If a heterosexual couple is legally divorced, they have been considered divorced in all aspects of life. However, many of the couples I have seen, when legally divorced, are still intimate in physical and other interactions. Legally divorced couples may be more intimate than some people who are considered legally married.

A process-oriented approach puts more emphasis on the feeling-level connection between couples. Thus, legally married couples may at times feel blissfully together, but at other times may need long periods of separation or intense conflict. Heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual couples who are not legally married also experience a range of relationship needs. In this fluid perspective, couples define themselves from moment to moment. Some couples may often feel close, others may fight constantly, and both types may consider themselves coupled (or not). In this view, the power of definition lies with the individuals rather than with the state or church.

A personal perspective on relationship transition

The process-oriented acceptance of all states in relationship is a step towards a fluid definition of relationship, but at this point in time there is still a great deal of pressure on couples to clearly define themselves as married, separated, divorced, or dating. For the past ten years I have been involved in a new phase in my long-term marriage. This transition looks from the outside like a separation. While this has been painful, I have learned a great deal about both what keeps people together and what pulls them apart. I have also learned about the growth that can come from valuing and learning from each stage of the transformation.

One evening ten years ago, I returned from an intensive training on process-oriented relationship work and had a fight with my partner, who stated that it was time for us to split up. That fight was a definitive point in a major shift that we had been moving towards for a long time. Since that moment, although we remain legally married, some split has occurred. Today, we have separate houses and share an office. The old relationship continuously transforms into something new and vital as we work on the relationship issues that come up between us, our feelings, our dreams, and our body symptoms.

One of the most difficult parts of our transition has been dealing with pressure from friends, the public, family, and ourselves to define what we are doing. If I had to define it, I would say we are following nature. However, this definition is not always useful and at times it causes difficulties. Sooner or later, everyone asks, “Are you single, married, or divorced?” It is difficult to answer this question without launching into a three-hour discussion of following nature in relationship. The most interesting and accurate descriptions have come from my daughter. During the time we began to separate houses, we were all filled with feelings about the changes. I asked my daughter, who was then six years old, if she wished things would go back to how they used to be. With the Zen-like wisdom of a child, she simply said, “Not too close, not too far.” When she was about ten, her friends began to ask her lots of questions about whether her parents were married or divorced. We had all talked about what to say when people asked. Again her definition was the closest to truth. She said, “My parents are very close and will always be friends, but they aren’t as close as they used to be.” Her statements were koans for me to meditate on. It occurred to me that she is free to say and believe in whatever is, while I still struggle with mainstream ideas about relationship.

My daughter’s perspective has also changed my basic view on working with children in relationship transitions. I was taught that children,
like adults, go through stages of denial, grief, anger, and eventual acceptance when they face any loss. I was also taught that children who do not appear to be suffering terribly during the present are in denial, shock, or some other traumatized state. My daughter and other children have taught me that if you really follow what is going on with children, they will show amazingly diverse responses which span the range from devastation about the changes to relief or neutrality about the situation. In many families this diversity is present in each child at a different moment. Sometimes each child in a family will have very different reactions. For example, in one divorcing family, one child was devastated and needed individual as well as family work, one child was mildly sad, but very philosophical about the whole thing, and the youngest child was relatively disinterested. Learning from these children, I believe that we need new terms and new ways to view relationship transitions that reflect the diversity of reactions to change.

Valuing all states

In *The Dreambody in Relationships*, Mindell summarizes this open attitude. Speaking about his attitude as a therapist, he says

If I focus upon the changes a person goes through, then I avoid the behaviorist tendency to recommend that he change and develop new personality traits or behavioral patterns. By siding with change, I side with awareness of what is happening in any given moment and thereby avoid programming the person to be whole and balanced. On the other hand, I must be flexible enough to realize that a given behavior program might be just the process some people need! (1987: 108)

Mindell talks about the importance of following the moment, and yet reminds us that sometimes it is the couple's process to be definitive and say, "now it is marriage time, now it is time for separation or divorce." The difference between the approach that Mindell presents and a more mainstream approach is that the process-oriented view does not suggest change as an outer solution, but supports changes as they emerge from the couple's process.

Working with couples has helped me develop a more flexible attitude towards following the momentary flow. I have been surprised many times by couples who, in the midst of divorce, mention that they are suddenly making love again. I have worked with couples who have tried all kinds of arrangements as part of separating—living in the same house, having separate beds, having separate houses, having other partners, even having new partners live in the same house. I have learned about all kinds of relationship forms—committed threesomes or foursomes, people who appear permanently estranged happily reuniting, and couples who appear happy and present few problems in therapy who end up divorcing. Exposure to a wide range of possibilities in relationship transition has helped free my mind from past conceptions I had about the limited options for couples in transition.

Forces in the world: the collective and coming apart

Mindell talks about the forces involved in coming apart. He says that

Integration of unconscious aspects of the personality and growing through early patterns strains a relationship. But there are other psychic changes which also manifest themselves as relationship problems. An entire culture may be in the midst of change, and the dream dreaming up a given couple may begin to change in accordance with the changing times. Such changes change and destroy relationships. (1987: 90)

When we begin to process our own or our clients' transition times in relationships, many forces are present. For example, I often encounter something like the following scenario in rural areas where I work. A heterosexual couple comes to see me in the midst of their separation. The woman is upset with the man for not paying attention to her. He goes off and does his own thing on the weekends, hunting and fishing with the guys. He is upset with her because she is changing and becoming outspoken about her needs. She is no longer willing to just let him run freely with no regard for her. I have seen this kind of couple repeatedly over the years. They are pretty much done
with a certain part of their relationship. While they were raising their children, she played the traditional woman. She has now grown out of this role. Her husband has also grown to assert what he wants, which is the traditional, subservient woman he married.

As a therapist, at this point, I can only say what I observe and then see what happens. Often, once the situation is clear to both people, much of the work is done for this phase, and the man goes off to try to find a traditional woman. I often wish that he, like his partner, would grow out of entrenched sex roles, yet he is free to do what he wants. She goes off to live her own life, no longer dependent on him for her finances or her sense of self. In such a couple’s coming apart, we see elements of what Mindell refers to as personal and collective shifts.

Part of the shift in their relationship is a result of personal growth. But this couple, like many others, is also doing collective work around men and women’s issues. It is our role as therapists to point out how the couple is growing—how the people are growing as individuals, how the unit is developing, and how the people are working on collective issues. People need to know how the world is dreaming them to work out part of its drama. They need to be encouraged to talk to other people in the community and learn how others are dealing with the same challenges. Therapists need to learn to speak of the cultural forces present—the force of tradition, the forces of sexism, homophobia, racism, the forces of mainstream thinking, the forces of liberation, freedom, and change. These collective winds blow through relationships and change them, and if they are not named, couples often feel victimized by their experiences.

For example, much of the couples’ work I have done over the years has focused on sexual difficulties. I have seen an enormous number of heterosexual couples in which the woman has stopped wanting to be sexual. If the man defines this as the woman’s problem, then communication therapy, focus on sexual therapeutic techniques, and numerous other interventions don’t seem to work. A key to turning this around has always been to get the man and woman to see elements of sexism present. For example, let’s say the man wants the woman to do what he wants when he wants in bed. This includes moving quickly into intercourse. The woman feels the need for more connection, and to have her rhythms followed and needs addressed. The man feels pressured to produce both his and his partner’s orgasm, but wants to do it quickly and in his way. Often the woman has to go on strike as a drastic measure to have her needs taken seriously. The man may be locked into cultural stereotypes of what a man is and what male sexuality has to be. When the chains are taken off, and minds and hearts open up, then people tend to open up their bodies to each other. Understanding of the unconscious role that sexism plays allows the couple to make these deep changes. Understanding cultural forces can help couples not only polarize into opposite camps, and can help them see their sexual difficulties as more than personal.

In my current relationship I am working out some new ways of being together and coming apart. While it is a tremendous challenge to grow personally, I know that I am also working on a new way of coming apart not only for myself but for the world. I have seen so many couples who are suffering from traditional divorces. I remember one couple who could only drop their children off in each other’s driveways. There was so much unresolved anger and hurt that any more contact was impossible.

Growing up, I also was part of this “drop each other” approach. As a young person I learned from my environment that if a woman didn’t want to continue being my partner, I should have nothing to do with her. During high school and college I was very much in love with a woman who was not in love with me, but I couldn’t just drop her. When I went to a spiritual teacher for advice on how to handle this, he gave me the same formula—drop her. I tried, but on another level I didn’t; I still dream about her twenty years later. When I was in my thirties I again fell wildly in love with a woman. When this relationship ended I
went to another spiritual teacher, this time from an eastern tradition. Like the western teacher I had spoken with years before, he also advised me to drop the woman I had loved. Ending relationships definitely has much collective support.

My current relationship partner has also challenged me to learn to go beyond just dropping the relationship. As I have learned to stay and process each moment, I have also learned to be a much more effective therapist for couples I work with. What I have learned to drop is my program for what should happen in relationship and moments of major transition. This program-free realm is at times scary and painful. There is nothing to hang onto but the moment. I find myself and the couples I work with in territory where there are few models, few guides besides one's own instincts. Yet the core of a relationship like this is a sense of incredible freedom that opens the relationship up to all kinds of creative forces and potentials; death and rebirth become possible daily, within the context of the relationship.

**Matches made in heaven: eternal relating**

This leads me into the third concept in process work with relationships, which a friend of mine recently expressed very clearly. Both of us had been experiencing relationship transformation for several years. When I asked her how her relationship was going, she said that in a way it never ended—it just changed. This reminds me of many spiritual traditions that say that while death exists, there is also no death—only transformation. In relationship, this means that parts of a long-term relationship do need to die. To take a simple example on the material plane, let's talk about two people who live together. Let's say that is not the best arrangement; they do not do well together. But let's say they are musicians and make beautiful music together, or they are great lovers. If we approach the relationship flexibly, the part that is no longer working may die, while the part with energy lives on. This couple might want to give up living together but keep their musical or physical relationship alive. In the old model, the entire relationship must end, except for certain legally prescribed forms such as parental rights. I think in many cases this is all or nothing approach is a terrible shame—we put so much energy and work into relationship that I would hope we could enjoy what still works well.

At a more esoteric level, these outer manifestations of an ongoing connection reflect the deeper dreaming process that continues after the formal death of a relationship. Relationships have an eternal side in that they are guided by myths reflected in the early dreams and dreamlike experiences of the relationship. For example, I remember a couple who said that their earliest relationship memory was that they were out to dinner, and the man tried to do a magic trick where he pulled the tablecloth out from under the dishes on the table. The magic only partially worked, and the dishes went all over the place and created a huge mess. These two main elements of magic and mess became two key elements that organized much of their relationship. The central difficulty of the couple was when there got to be too much mess and not enough magic, the woman would become disillusioned and they would have bring in more magic. When things got too orderly and not exciting enough, the man became disillusioned. This relationship was not just about two people, but about two different energy states, magic and order, interacting.

I remember another couple who worked on the first dream that one partner had had about the other, in which the dreamer dreamt the partner as a drill sergeant. When working on this dream, the couple said that the whole question of authority and who was in charge was central to their relationship. They broke into laughter as they took turns playing the drill sergeant with each other. One of their central tasks was to integrate leadership, discipline and power into their relationship in a conscious way.

Myths are the central dreaming background to relationship. When certain myths are lived out, couples can move on from each other, or they may discover new myths to work on with each other. Some couples have myths that need
to be worked on for their lifetimes. For example, a couple's first big experiences and major dreams might be about world change and social action.

This is a relationship myth one could spend lifetimes fulfilling. Having a myth that takes long-term work to fulfill brings up the eternal side of relationship connections. Eternal connections are not bound by convention, time, space, or marriage certificates.

Similarly, spiritual bonds are not made in the legal realm and can't be canceled in the legal realm. I have seen many couples who have done everything possible to destroy their connection, yet the connection still lives. This is not just codependency in which two people live off each other to form a whole. In contrast, deep spiritual connections are built on two beings who are individuals and also strongly connected. I have worked with many couples where a partner threatens, "If you don't do this, or if you ever do that, I will never have anything to do with you again.” Then the other partner has an affair, or makes a career change the first partner prohibited. Despite all the threats to end the relationship, the forbidden act, when processed, may lead to an even more powerful connection. Relationships that are meant to continue in some form can withstand all kinds of relationship dynamite. This sort of endurance is not codependent, such as when an alcoholic and her partner support each other's denial. In a spiritually rooted connection the couple has to work through all that happens. They do not support each other's denial, but are instead intimately involved in helping each other wake up and become more aware.

Determining which parts of a relationship persist because of the spiritual power behind the guiding myth and which parts endure because of codependency is a difficult task. The best way to differentiate between these two possibilities is to observe the ongoing dreams of the people in the relationship. Codependency will appear as a repetitive problem in both people's dreaming. These kinds of dreams disturb one or both partners, irritating them into waking up. For example, in one of my relationships, whenever I slipped back into a codependent pattern, I would begin having relationship nightmares, which would stop only when I moved towards breaking the addictive pattern that failed to provide the happiness I wanted.

In contrast, some relationships are dedicated to helping people become free of their personal and shared addictions, and these are very powerful connections. If a relationship like this is interrupted on the daily physical plane, through separation, divorce, or death, it will continue in dreaming. I remember a time my wife and I were separated due to her traveling overseas. We had incredible moments of feeling our connection with each other, through the air, thousands of miles away, and somehow we always reached each other by phone at the time when one of us needed to talk. Even death doesn't stop an eternal connection. I have worked with adults who have lost a parent, and after the death have felt enormous shifts in the relationship with that parent. In therapy and in their dreams, they are finally cutting through old issues, and moving into increasingly loving feelings with their parents.

I remember one couple saying to me recently that their relationship had had no honeymoon period. From the first moment together they were working on deep issues. Such relationships not only focus on interpersonal issues, but the issues constantly challenge both people to develop their whole selves. Such couples will often say, “Why am I with so and so when they push every button I have?” In fact, this button pushing can be a sign of two Zen students in relationship with each other, each supporting the other's enlightenment. Often from the outside these relationships appear to be filled with conflict and suffering, and external observers are often frightened by or disapproving of the intensity present. The relationship may go through many periods of death and renewal, and may need frequent help from a therapist. People who have this as their relationship myth seem to have little choice—they either work with their
connection willingly or the relationship difficulties become so great they are forced to do the necessary personal growth and relationship work that is being asked of them.

**Accepting death and change**

Another side of recognizing the eternal aspect of relating involves accepting death and change. Buddhist teachers often say that the first lesson of Buddhism is the wisdom of impermanence. Everything changes, and our attachment to holding on to the way things are is a major cause of our suffering. Relationships are constant teachers of this principle. Couple after couple I have seen talk about how they suffer when their relationship changes, since they were sure that this relationship would last forever in its current form. People are angry at their partner, God, and everyone else when a relationship changes.

As a process worker, I see my job as helping people work with their attachment, pick up their detachment, and stay in touch with the eternal spiritual background of their relationships that will continue no matter how the form changes. Relationships that welcome death as part of the process also allow for rebirth. As the old parts of the process and old structures die, the potential for the new grows. A therapist who helps couples embrace moments of death in the connection opens the door for possible moments of rebirth. Therapists who try too hard to help couples hang on to the old forms and patterns may seem compassionate, but in helping the couple avoid death they maybe also limiting the potential for something new and exciting to regenerate the relationship.

For example, in my own relationship, I am very attached to co-parenting. No matter what other changes occur in the relationship, my attachment to working together with my wife to raise our child remains. However, both of us seem increasingly detached when it comes to our fights—what used to take three weeks of fighting now often takes three minutes. We used to both be very excited by having a worthy opponent to battle, and finding a worthy opponent was part of the myth of the first ten years of our marriage. After ten years, the myth of the worthy opponent started to shift. First my wife lost interest in the fights, and then I went through an important personal shift that freed me from this internal pressure to fight.

Throughout all of these changes, we are both in touch with the eternal nature of our relationship. Our eternal connection includes deeply loving each other, a commitment to our own personal growth, and a vision of our relationship as a vehicle for personal development. This theme of the relationship as a spiritual practice for awakening was there from the beginning, in our early experiences and dreams, and was the core of our marriage vows made fifteen years ago. This eternal connection continues even through our current separation. Many times our therapist has been a guide who reminds us of what we are doing together, even as we come apart. Like the guides in the Tibetan Book of the Dead, who lead those who have recently died, the goal of the guides in process work is to remind people, married or divorcing, living or dying, of the wisdom of impermanence and of the eternal spirit behind all momentary experiences, no matter how awesome or terrifying this spirit may seem.

The therapist's ability to bring awareness of both the impermanent and eternal aspects of relationship is crucial. Relationships that lack the fluidity to accept change can die of stagnation. Individuals may experience such despair over major relationship changes that self-destructive behavior ranging from addictions to suicidal ideation may appear. Many couples cannot let go and embrace change without a deep personal sense of the eternal and of spiritual life, and often this requires a direct experience of the spiritual nature of relationship.

Spiritual traditions sometimes refer to death as the great awakening. Major relationship transformations, including divorce and separation, may also provide an opportunity for great awakenings. Such changes have the potential to awaken people to their own nature, the nature of relationship and the nature of life. In my own relationship, our separation has been a great teacher for me. I have learned an immense amount about my own programming
around anger. Partially due to my childhood and partially to years I spent studying with a Gestalt therapist and living in a Gestalt community, I had elevated anger to a status it does not deserve. I saw expressing anger as necessary for good health and relationship. Even when I saw myself destroying aspects of relationship by getting angry, I worshipped my anger like a god. Separating from my partner launched a series of dreams that eventually helped me free myself from my programs around anger. I feel free around anger for the first time in years—I express my anger when I want to and when I feel it fits the situation, but I also have many other options.

My separation also taught me to trust and follow nature, even when society or my close friends were giving me other advice. I did not simply bolt out of the relationship, but came and went in accordance with my feelings and dreams. Through this rhythm, I have learned a great deal about death and transformation. I have been able to utilize my knowledge not only in working with couples, but also with clients who are dying. Recently one of my clients was told by his doctor that he would soon die. My client grew very depressed and almost died. In therapy, I was able to help him see dying as a process rather than a program, and to see that while on some days he feels like dying, at other times he feels full of life and takes on new projects. In the death process, and in relationships, nature herself lies beneath the changes. Learning to follow nature in these moments is an enormous awakening for many people.

These ideas on the eternal nature of relationship are not meant to marginalize the importance of knowing when and how to end a relationship. When relationships become physically, psychologically, or spiritually destructive, it is time for them to transform or move on. When relationships are destructive, the daily connection often needs to be broken, while something in the dreaming world will continue. In situations where a relationship is no longer working, I look for signs that both partners are willing to work with and transform the situation. Often, one or both partners is finished and can't let go. Letting go then becomes the teaching. The couple's job is to learn the importance of letting go. When couples can let go, the pain is often great, and so is the relief. I remember one couple I worked with where both partners threw a giant coming apart party, which was a wonderful celebration for them.

Relationship addiction can also prevent people who need to separate from letting go. People stay together, even in damaging relationships, because they are addicted to each other. I am defining addictive relationship as the kind of relationship (or phase in a relationship) in which there is a large gap between the dream one person has of their partner and the reality of the partner. In addition, an addictive relationship is physically, psychologically, or spiritually harmful.

The most common pattern I have found in addictive relationships is that one or both people gives their partner enough of something to keep them hooked, but not enough to satisfy. This partial satisfaction is very powerful. If someone meets almost none of your needs, it is easy to let go, and if a partner truly meets your needs, there is no reason to let go. However, someone who meets your needs in flashes or moments, or almost meets your needs, or plays with meeting your needs, offers a powerful hook. At some point, the pain of the frustration becomes so great that it hurts one or both people. It is the therapist's job at this point to point out that what is happening is not love but addiction, and challenge the couple to break the addiction.

For example, a couple I worked with had the following pattern. The man had intermittent problems with alcohol. Finally the woman woke up to the reality of his alcohol problem and started to push him to grow. As he began to grow, she found new areas to criticize. She gave brief bursts of love and then returned to criticizing him, saying it was for his own good. She needed him to change, but her rejection was so demoralizing it made it extremely difficult for him to change. He stayed with her for the moments of love that reminded him of how the
relationship once was, despite his present experience of the relationship as miserable. This couple needed to work on the addictive nature of their relationship, so that the pattern of frustration, criticism, and dreaming that the other would change could be broken. Addiction looks like love, but it is a cheap imitation. People often don't realize this until they enter a truly loving relationship. The therapist often needs to provide information and support in the transition until people realize how incomplete and dissatisfying the addictive relationship was.

Addictive relationships, like any addiction, can be difficult to transform. It is the therapist's job to both bring awareness of the addictive pattern and to keep confronting the addiction. It is easy for the couple to slip back into the old groove, but there is a moment when an addiction must be faced and broken. Outer signs of when it is time to break the addiction include when one or both partners develops physical symptoms related to the relationship; develops substance addictions; becomes depressed or anxious, or has other psychologically difficult states that become an ongoing pattern. At such times, it is important to check in with a person's deepest feelings in order to discover a direction. In my own relationship, I knew I needed to move on from addictive patterns by watching my dreams. Many addiction theories say that the only way to break an addiction is to have a spiritual transformation, where we are set free with intervention from a higher spirit.

Our job as therapists is to help couples and families have the courage and awareness to follow nature. As therapists, we need to be aware of the societal pressures couples face. Despite these pressures, people will be drawn to follow their own natures, and our job is to support them in this important task.

Carl Jung said that people don't really individuate and become themselves until they leave the familiar patterned roads their families and society have laid out for them to follow (1977: 287). The same could be said about couples. I personally am excited to see so many people steps onto unknown paths in their relationships. The rewards can be immense, not only for the individuals and for the couple, but for all of us who are creating more vital ways of being in relationship with each other.

I believe that if all of us could follow nature more closely, relationships would be more full of learning and there would be much less pain in the world. I have seen many adults and children hurt in the wars of divorce. One reason that relationship is so scary is that people have been hurt by relationships coming apart. In addition, many relationships seem to die because the relationship expectations of mainstream culture are suffocating for many people. Living as a traditional couple is wonderful for many people, and for others is a death sentence. I have worked with many men and women who say they were in love with their partners until they married, had children, gave up their own creative projects and spiritual practices, or started working sixty hours a week. We need new models that help individuals feel connected to their vitality in relationship, not only at the exciting beginnings, but throughout the relationship, including at times of transition and ending. Then people could really obtain the full benefit of relationship as the great awakening.

References

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