

Making Love Last

Love and Intimacy are a Human Birthright



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MAKING LOVE LAST

Creating and Maintaining Intimacy in Long-Term Relationships

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Love and Intimacy Are a Human Birthright

But Today Relationships Aren't Working!

Relationships today are in serious trouble and we know it. So we ask ourselves what can we do about it? Maybe we can learn to communicate better. Maybe we can spend more time doing things together. Maybe we should talk to someone or get some counseling. But we've been through all this before. We've had failed relationships in the past, but we didn't really understand what went wrong there either—so what's wrong with this picture? Whose fault is it? Or is anyone to blame? How did we get to this place? How do we get out of this place? Maybe we'll have to throw in the towel, again. And so it goes....

"Other people have good relationships. How do they do it? What's wrong with me?" Herein lies the heart of our confusion and anguish—the center of our self-deceptions about relationships. We can't *have* relationships. Because relationships aren't a thing we can possess or own. And we can't *do* relationships. Because relationships aren't activities we can perform. And when a relationship fails no *one* is to blame because relationships require the participation of *two*. While it may be true that two people together can work towards creating a good relationship. It is not true that any of us can have or do a good relationship. Or that a relationship failure is *anyone's* fault. Yet these simple deceptions cause us endless pain and suffering. We've all been there. You may be there now or fear going there again. Where do we start untangling this tough knot we call failing relationships?

But if Love is Our Birthright, Why Does Love Fade Over Time?

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. Love is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. Love always protects. Love always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

—Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

If what Saint Paul tells us about love is true, then why is love known to fade over time? People with different opinions say love fades over time:

- Because love is based on idealized fantasies that are necessarily illusory.
- Because time brings reality and with it love's inevitable disappointments.
- Because love thrives on novelty, mystery, and danger.
- Because time and success are love's enemies.
- Because love breeds familiarity and familiarity breeds contempt.
- Because the raw sexuality that often drives love is difficult to reconcile with mutual caring, respect, and admiration.
- Because love turns so easily into hatred love cannot prevail indefinitely against aggression.
- Because love by nature is like fireworks in the dark night, thrilling but transitory.
- Because in any relationship the other's narcissistic self-interest is always our enemy.
- Because with time people inevitably betray one another.
- Because life is basically tragic so that sooner or later we all end up singing the blues—blaming the collapse of love on either our own shortcomings or on the failings of the other.

Each of these explanations for why love fades has wide currency and contains partial truth. What these many explanations for why love fades over time make clear is that intimate relationships and lasting romance are anything but easy to achieve. The bottom line is that we can only work toward giving ourselves over to love and loving as fully as possible. And then hope for a partner who is ready to work with us on loving and being loved as well. But even if we do find a promising partner and we are mutually given over to loving one another, the question remains how can we make love last?

Technological advances now reveal that all humans are capable of emotional intimacy from before birth and that all humans are born desiring and seeking out loving intimacy. But love can only last if and when we and our partners can develop together ways to continuously negotiate mutually satisfying and enriching emotional experiences on a daily basis! How do we create in our loving relationships the continuous negotiations necessarily involved for creating and maintaining lasting intimacy? When we

are blocked in our intimate loving feelings in later life, it is because we have come to fear rekindling the dangers of emotional relatedness that were once experienced as frightening or hurtful in the course of growing up. But it is possible in committed relationships to unblock those closed channels to emotional intimacy and to resume our growth as loving human beings. The question is: what exactly is involved in developing or restoring our capacity for loving relationships—how can we re-claim our human birthright?

Cultural Deceptions About Relationships

Not long ago I was having dinner with my good friend Marty Klein who is a couples' therapist in Palo Alto, California. Marty reminded me that we are at present struggling simultaneously with three cultural beliefs that are absolutely unique to our time and place. To begin with, said Marty, we believe that life-long, satisfying, committed relationships can be based on romantic love. In the entire history of the world no culture has ever operated on this premise before. Secondly, we have been conditioned to believe that we can have frequent, wild, and hot sex with our committed partner forever—certainly an unrealistic expectation given all that we know about sex, sexuality, and relationships. And thirdly, we expect to enjoy good mental and physical health for many years longer than any known population in the history of the world. In prior times and places most marriages have been arranged according to whatever dimensions benefited the ruling order. But even when culturally enforced monogamy has partially worked, it has only had to last until age 30 or 40, not until age 90 or 100.

Marty's point—as we got to our Key lime pie and coffee—was that we live in a relationally experimental era. We simply have no basis for believing that our received assumptions about relationships, sex, and monogamy have any human validity. Worse, even the great experts on couples' work still hold forth the promise—implicitly or explicitly—that if we just work hard enough we can have successful relationships. But there is simply no solid basis for this claim, Marty reminded me. First, because even if I am working at relating there is no ongoing assurance that my partner will or can work as hard. And second, just because two people are working doesn't mean they can overcome all of their incompatibilities. The current cultural expectation that working hard in relationships will yield good results leaves most people feeling guilty that they aren't trying hard enough or else feeling like failures because their relationships aren't fully working. I found myself agreeing with Marty when he said that

there's simply too much we don't know about intimacy and about relationships to warrant such naive conclusions.

But there's good news! Stunning new scientific technologies and advances in relational psychotherapy are now revealing things about human nature that we have never known before. These startling new findings clearly light the way for how two people can co-create and maintain intimacy in long-term relationships. This relationship territory is essentially new and experimental. But the late, breaking news is that we now have some powerful new tools to work with. So let me start our journey into this newly discovered relationship territory with a personal story based on one of these new technologies—ultrasound video that allows us to actually watch human life as it miraculously unfolds in the womb!

An Intimacy Illustration: My Grandson Smiled at Me!

At 5:15 on Sunday August 26, 2007, both families gather in front of Baby's First Photo studio in downtown Riverside, California. We have been told that the fifteen-minute, four-dimensional ultrasound viewing of the baby will begin promptly at 5:30—so no one arrives late. On the drive eastward out of Orange County there is an unexpected summer shower that raises a rainbow over the city of Riverside. As the eleven of us wait in front of the photo studio, the full moon of summer rises on the eastern horizon—so the day is now totally enchanted.

The emotional atmosphere is charged with the kind of high-energy excitement that one experiences in a maternity ward. This day is full of miracles. The first miracle is that we live in a time and place where two women can openly love each other and arrange with a sperm bank and a fertility clinic to have a baby together. Then there is the ultrasound technology that now permits an actual 4-dimensional color viewing of a 16 week-old baby.

Accompanying the rainbow and the full moon rising, there is the further miracle of family love. Each of us here expects to emotionally bond with this baby whom we are about to experience for the first time.

My daughter Breta, usually the family videographer, is carrying the baby and so has entrusted me

with her new video camera that I am fumbling with figuring out how to use. On the sidewalk in front of the studio I zoom in on each family member and each best friend with, "Is it a boy or a girl, and why do you think so?" Everybody gives the camera their best hunches—a jolly game with lots of fun and laughter.

At exactly 5:30 the doors open and we all file into the studio theater—a thirty foot square room darkened by blackout curtains over the windows. A hush falls over the room as Nancy, the technician, closes the door and takes her seat at a video console that looks vaguely like a space ship with all its buttons and flashing lights about to take off.

As cameraman, I am standing with my back to the black curtained windows. On my right on a large, comfortable medical examining table propped up and bare-bellied is Breta. Next to Breta is her partner, Marcie, hovering across her looking at Nancy's monitor on the other side. Directly ahead of Breta, to my left and high on the wall, is a 100-inch flat-screen video monitor, the largest any of us has ever seen. Straight ahead of me, enthralled and sprawled out over two large sofas and ottomans, are the immediate families and best friends—all positioned so they can see the big screen.

The monitors begin with the by now familiar black and white triangle image of the ultrasound wand—appearing like a churning ocean while we wait with baited breath for the miracle we are about to witness. Suddenly the monitors explode with brilliant color and there before us is a beautifully formed baby—completely visible in color and alive with movement as Nancy moves the wand across Breta's abdomen. The baby, at first curled up in a tight fetal position, slowly begins stretching. A yellow throbbing line appears on the screen—"that's the heart beating," says Nancy, "it's a good strong beat." By now the emotional atmosphere in the room is electric—filled with all sorts of "ooh's" and "ahs!"

"When we begin," announces Nancy, "There is a 50% chance of a girl, and a 50% chance of a boy." There are more hypnotic oohs and ahs from the crowd! "Oops, that looks like a scrotum—now it's a 60% chance of it being a boy." More ooh's and ah's. "It's hard to tell on this one, its legs are tight together—sometimes they're spread-eagled, so sexing them is easy—Oh, look—that looks like a penis!" Promptly a white arrow appears on the screen. "That's 70%." Excited murmurs from the crowd—"It's a miracle...I can't believe...who would have ever thought...?"

Then we hear “80 %”, and then it stays “90%” for a while with gathering excitement. At about 12 minutes Breta asks if it ever goes above 90%. Nancy says “no” because there is always the chance of an artifact—“But I’m pretty good at sexing them, and I’m just sure it’s a boy.” A cheer goes up from the crowd—especially since Marcie is from a family of all girls.

Meanwhile, I’m doing my best behind the video camera to capture Breta and Marcie, Nancy and her console, and the video monitors while zooming in and out on family action in a room that is fairly dark. I’m trying my best to get all the family cheering action when suddenly I burst out from behind the camera hollering at the family—“Hey, you guys, this boy is someday going to see this video, let’s welcome him into our family!” A loud spontaneous shouting fills the room—we certainly all know how to behave in front of video cameras these days! There is a jumping up and down, with wild waving, and enthusiastic shouting, “Welcome—welcome to our family—welcome to the world—you’re my grandson—you’re my nephew—welcome, welcome—we’re so glad you’re here—we love you!” I am, of course, zooming in and out trying to capture all of the action. As the joyous pandemonium subsides, the greatest miracle of all occurs.

I slowly pan the camera left from the crowd and upward toward the 100 inch monitor. There on the big screen is a beautiful baby who has turned his head toward me and the shouting crowd and is grinning ear to ear! I’m so startled I do a double take. Then I look at the monitor from outside the camera to be sure that I’m seeing what I think I’m seeing. This child is smiling—not a snapshot smile, but a deep, joyous, grinning—in direct response to the welcoming joy and excitement of the family. “Would you look at that baby smile...” someone says with delight—more oohs and ahs. But our fifteen minutes are up and, overwhelmed, we all file out.

In front of the studio I aim the camera at Marcie, asking the boy’s name. “Jaden Don,” she says, almost in disbelief. One grandmother is wildly hugging everyone in sight and the other is shrieking into her cell phone, “It’s a boy! It’s a boy!”

At The Old Spaghetti Factory across the street after our orders are taken, I ask Breta and Marcie if they realize what they have just seen? “Well sure, Dad—but wait, what do you mean?” I know I am the only professionally trained observer present, but nevertheless I want to validate what I have just seen.

The whole family around the table leans in across their drinks as I recount how Jaden's smile had been in direct spontaneous response to our cheers of welcome. Jaws drop. We had all seen it. But it had happened so fast that I was the only one to fully catch the significance of the sequence. "I want to see that video first thing tomorrow to see if I really saw what I think I saw." We were all deeply moved by the realization that this 16-week-old had heard our welcoming joy and responded. That night Breta called. "You were right, Dad, there was only a four second delay between the shouting on the camera and when you panned up to catch the smile on the monitor—he is really alive and responsive now!"

The most precious gift of our species is this inborn capacity for spontaneous, inter-penetrating emotional responsiveness—for human intimacy—which we now know is present before birth and can be carefully nurtured for a lifetime. It is by now clear that babies are highly emotionally responsive to their human environment by the third trimester. Ultrasound studies of twins demonstrate mutual interpersonal sensitivity in utero by late in the second trimester. But who has ever imagined that interpersonal emotional sensitivity begins as early as sixteen weeks!

Jaden has yet to open his eyes or to know anything about smiles or human communication consciously—yet he clearly is capable of receiving a joyous emotional message and instinctively turning toward the joy and mirroring it with a reflexive smile. How early did this capacity for emotional responsiveness, for interpersonal attunement and mirroring, begin? How much more emotional responsiveness is Jaden capable of and robustly engaging in already that we don't know how to observe or interpret?

My story of Jaden is intended to illustrate our newly established knowledge that we are a species capable of mirroring complex emotional expressions from the get-go. Further, our newly discovered genetically-determined neuronal capacity for mirroring allows us to reach deeply into the emotional life of others and to respond with a knowledge of their inner life and how it touches our own inner life. This capacity for emotional intimacy has been evolving for millions of years since the first mammals began to communicate through emotional responsiveness. This capacity expanded exponentially with the primate development of complex gestures, vocalizations, facial expressions, and community socialization. At the human level emotional engagement has given rise to language, thought, and reflective consciousness as well as to a rich appreciation of the truth, beauty, love, and spirituality that surrounds

us. I think of the wonderful portrayals of these deeply emotional primate and human achievements in the animations of the recent film *Where the Wild Things Are*. Max falls asleep hurt and angry. In his dream he runs away to the land of the Wild Things where he struggles with his inner conflicts of anger, hurt, and love. Max's wild things immediately recognize him as king and deeply empathize with his plight and each in turn shares his or her own inner emotional turmoil. The facial expressions, voice inflections, and bodily posturing achieved by computer animation are a truly amazing reflection of emotional exchange processes we all know so well.

As we consider what we need to do in order to re-claim our human birthright of love and intimacy—how to make our relationships work better for us—there are a series of truths about intimacy that modern technology has revealed that can help us.