

Intimate Relationship as Transformative Path

by [John Welwood](#)

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Couples seeking to fashion a life together today face a unique set of challenges and difficulties. Never before have they 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, the relations between intimate partners lack clear guidelines, supportive family networks, a religious context, and a compelling social meaning.

Until 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. Marriage had a central place in the community, providing a stabilizing influence and supporting the social order. And society supported it in turn: 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 cut off from family, community,

and widely shared values, there are few convincing extrinsic reasons for couples 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 face in our relationships. 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 relationship has 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.

TOWARD A NEW VISION OF RELATIONSHIP

Traditional marriage achieved stability by serving a prescribed societal function.

Modern marriage, by contrast, is based on feeling rather than function. No wonder it is so unstable. Romantic feelings, while inspiring, are notoriously fickle. Long-term relationships clearly need a new foundation, beyond social duty and romantic intensity. We need a whole new vision and context that can help couples find fresh direction and inspiration.

If we are to cultivate a new spirit of engagement in our intimate relationships, I suggest that we need to recognize

and welcome the powerful opportunity that intimate relationships provide— to awaken to our true nature. If relationships are to flourish, they need to reflect and promote who we really are, beyond any limited 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 our deepest nature. Our connection with someone we love can in fact 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, which joins together heaven and earth. 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.

The Greek myth of Eros and Psyche suggests what the journey of conscious relationship may entail. Eros becomes Psyche's lover by night on the condition that she must never attempt to see his face. Things go smoothly between them for a while. 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 tension between consciousness

(Psyche) and erotic love (Eros). Traditional Western marriages have been like love in the dark. Yet now that relationships no longer function smoothly in the old unconscious grooves, they require a new kind of awareness. Like Psyche, we are presently undergoing the trials that every advance in consciousness entails.

THE NATURE OF PATH

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

Becoming fully human involves working with the totality of what we are—both our conditioned nature (earth) and our unconditioned nature (heaven). On the one hand, we have developed a number of habitual personality patterns that cloud our awareness, distort our feelings, and restrict our capacity to open to life and to love. We originally fashioned our personality patterns to shield us from pain, but now they have become a dead weight keeping us from living as fully as we could. Still, underneath all our conditioned behavior, the basic nature of the human heart is an unconditioned awake presence, a caring, inquisitive intelligence, an openness to reality. 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 karmic patterns. From birth to death, these two forces are always at work, and our lives hang in the balance. Since human nature always contains these two sides, our journey involves working with both.

Intimate relationships are ideally suited as a path because they touch both these sides of us and bring them into forceful contact. When we connect deeply with another person, our heart naturally opens toward a whole new world of possibilities. Yet

this breath of fresh air also makes us more aware of the ways we are stuck. Relationship inevitably brings us up against our most painful unresolved emotional conflicts from the past, continually stirring us up against things in ourselves that we cannot stand—all our worst fears, neuroses, and fixations—in living technicolor.

If we focus on only one side of our nature at the expense of the other, we have no path, and therefore cannot find a way forward. This also limits the possibilities of our relationships as well. If we only emphasize the wonderful aspects of relationship, we become caught in the “bliss trap”—imagining that love is a stairway to heaven that will allow us to rise above the nitty-gritty of our personality and leave behind all fear and limitation: “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 all 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 have to deal with the real-life challenges of making a relationship work.

The other distortion is to make relationship into something familiar and totally 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. Relationship becomes a business deal, or else totally monotonous. A life devoted to everyday routines and security concerns eventually becomes too stale and predictable to satisfy the deeper longings of the heart.

Once a couple have lost any sense of larger vision, they may try to fill the void that remains by creating a cozy materialistic lifestyle—watching television, acquiring upscale

possessions, or climbing the social ladder. Curling up in their habitual patterns, they 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 leads very far or provides a path. The illusion of heavenly bliss may allow us to ascend for a while, until we finally crash when the relationship inevitably comes back down to earth. The illusion of security keeps us glued to the earth, so that we never venture to reach beyond ourselves at all.

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: Coming up against difficult places in ourselves and our partner forces our heart to open and expand in new ways. Love challenges us to keep expanding in exactly those places where we imagine we can't possibly open any further.

From the perspective of bliss or security, it seems terrible that relationships confront us with so many things in ourselves we would rather not look at. But from the perspective of path, this is a great opportunity. Intimate relationships can help free us from our karmic entanglements by showing us exactly how and where we are stuck. When we live alone, it is often easier to remain blind to our habitual patterns because we live inside them. A relationship, on the other hand, provides a mirror that heightens our awareness of all our rough edges. When someone we love reacts to our unconscious 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 context of a loving relationship, a desire to move in a new direction naturally begins to stir in us. Then our path begins 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, its capacity 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 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 of old karma creates great turbulence, it also releases powerful resources within us that have been locked up in our habitual patterns. As these 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, strength, courage, or patience—allow us to be more fully human, by enabling us to meet whatever life presents. Each of these resources 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.

We each have access to a whole spectrum of these human qualities, at least as seed potentials. Yet most of us have developed one type of quality—such as strength—at the

expense of its opposite—such as tenderness. In this way, we are lopsided and incomplete.

This sense of incompleteness is part of what draws us to relationship. We often feel most strongly attracted to people who manifest qualities we lack and who challenge us to develop a greater fullness and depth of being than we have yet discovered.

As our habitual patterns burn in the fire of intimate relationship, our genuine human qualities become released. For instance, when we can no longer maintain our old guardedness with someone we love, we may feel quite naked and vulnerable without this old shield to hide behind. Yet this nakedness also makes us more transparent to our true nature. The less we need to hide, the more we can come forward as we really are. And this deeper connection to ourselves also provides access to the inner resource we most need in letting down our guard: true strength, which comes from within, rather than from having the upper hand. This is how love's alchemy works.

THREE LEVELS OF THE PATH: EVOLUTIONARY, PERSONAL, AND SACRED

The path of conscious love has three different, interrelated dimensions. At the collective level, it has evolutionary significance. Centuries of imbalance between the masculine and feminine ways of being have left a deep scar 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 mindless ravaging of nature that is endangering our 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 this age-old rift and bringing together the two halves of our humanity. As we begin to move in this direction, intimate relationship takes on a larger purpose, beyond just survival or security. It becomes an evolutionary path— an instrument for the evolution of human consciousness.

Secondly, as a personal path relationship involves moving through our individual barriers to openness and intimacy, contacting deeper levels of our being, and gaining access to the full range of our human resources. By helping us become more fully available to the creative possibilities of our life, intimate relationship refines us as individuals and can transform us into more awake, fully developed human beings.

Beyond that, the love between intimate partners presents a sacred challenge—to go beyond the single-minded pursuit of purely personal gratifications, to overcome the war between self and other, and to discover what is most essential and real—the depths and heights of life as a whole. Through helping us heal our alienation from life, from other people, and from ourselves, relationship becomes a sacred path. I don't mean to suggest that a relationship in and of itself is a complete path that can substitute for other spiritual practices. 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 this light, the difficult challenges that couples 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 the larger truths born out of intimate contact

with the great mystery of life itself