

In the deeper reality beyond space and time, we may all be members of one body.

Sir James Jeanes

This book provides several views about the nature of individual well-being, but what would an extremely healthy intimate relationship be like? Johanna and Deane Shapiro point out that most traditions are surprisingly silent on this point. Indeed, a few seem somewhat disparaging, suggesting that the heights of psychological development may best be reached alone, through the forsaking of special intimate relationships in order to devote all one's energies to self-mastery. Only then, these traditions suggest, is it most profitable to return to full engagement in the world, and even then the ideal may not be one of a few exclusive relationships, but rather a selfless and nonexclusive service of all. This model is by no means true of all traditions, and some embrace intimate and sexual relationships as beautiful and joyous vehicles of learning and liberation. It is this latter perspective which the Shapiros describe, suggesting a balance between personal and interpersonal, inner and outer work, and in so doing they provide a useful balance to the other contributions in this book.

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In the context of their committed, intimate (sometimes more and sometimes less) relationship, the Shapiros travelled and lived in Asia for 15 months studying Eastern disciplines; simultaneously pursued professional careers in the field of psychology; and for a period of two and a half years exemplified a commuter marriage, with Johanna working in Southern California and Deane in Northern California. The Shapiros currently have three children and live together as a family in Laguna Beach.

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Well-Being and Relationship

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and

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A quick review of the contents of this book reveals an implicit assumption about the nature of exceptional psychological well-being. This assumption is that exceptional psychological well-being, whether it be called enlightenment, satori, personal power, path of heart, developing the third eye, or uncovering the sacred unconscious, is primarily a personal task. For example, Globus and Globus describe the man of knowledge as a *solitary* bird. Further, when intense interpersonal relationships are mentioned, they are generally those between teacher and pupil (e.g., Rajneesh, Deikman, Globus and Globus).

The pursuit of transcendent or transforming experiences is often posited as antithetical to relationship. Indeed, great lovers of humanity in the abstract, such as Mahatma Gandhi or Albert Schweitzer, have not always been overly successful in their most intimate family relationships. In the meditative tradition, it is generally described as the task of the *individual* to cultivate right living, right thoughts, and right habits. In the Sufi tradition, it is again an *individual* task to develop the intuitive seeing eye of higher con-

sciousness. The meditative and spiritual traditions emphasize the importance of each individual following the path of moral purity; they talk about nonattachment, a letting go of fear and greed and ego, but little mention is made of how this is manifest in intimate relationship.¹

The environment of a monastery also focuses on the personal worth of the *individual*. For example, in Vipassana meditation retreats, eye contact and talking with others are prohibited. The mere presence of a significant other is often seen as a distraction to spiritual pursuits.

In many of these self-actualizing and spiritual traditions, there is an explicit proscription against intimate relationships.² For example, Gandhi, a Hindu, became an ascetic in order to give more selflessly of himself. In Catholicism, becoming a priest still requires strict celibacy. Renunciation of one's sexuality and living an ascetic life are often seen as ways to further develop one's "higher consciousness" and thus have complete energy to contribute to one's inner work and to society. Sexuality in the chakras of kundalini yoga is seen as a lower form of consciousness. In another example, Herman Hesse's Siddhartha must renounce the pleasures of the flesh to attain enlightenment. The arahat, a person of extreme psychological well-being in the Buddhist tradition, renounces the world in order to first attain enlightenment. The bodhisattva, who may have reached a similar level of well-being, chooses not to renounce the world, but to help humanity. However, even this is a helping of humanity in general rather than involvement with, and service to, one specific other.

The task of trying to be a bodhisattva, i.e., offering selfless service to all humanity, involves compassionate giving to many individuals. By comparison, cultivation of an intimate relationship may be seen as of lesser value. A single intimate may be perceived as more frustrating, more demanding, less rewarding than giving impartially to all humanity. It is almost as if the spiritual traditions seduce one into thinking, "How much easier to be a wise saint, compassionate and full of knowledge while living alone, than to be a mediocre human, living and struggling within the daily foibles of a relationship."

For some, less developed than a bodhisattva or an arahat, an experience of heightened psychological well-being may somehow be marred or reduced by trying to explain it to another, especially when that other is an intimate supposedly in tune with one's innermost feelings. Experiences of this nature are difficult to put into words and are often termed ineffable.³ There may be an ensuing sense of frustration that the partner is not able to participate in or understand one's own altered state experience. There may also be the controlling urge to force one's partner along one's own path. Two members of a couple may even begin to compete to see who is most enlightened!

Thus, it is by no means automatic that extreme personal psychological

well-being will be transformed into relational intimacy. Indeed, as we have seen, the two may appear to be directly threatening to each other. The question must be raised: What is the connection between the path of the warrior attempting to live an impeccable personal life and the path of closeness, trust, and love between two individuals? Must the images of extreme psychological well-being be only those of individuals struggling alone or in relationship to a teacher? Are passion and sexuality antithetical to spirituality integrity? Is intimacy itself unrelated to extreme psychological well-being, or is it something which can allow the expression and even foster the development of well-being?

What is the Value of Relationship?

Most individuals, regardless of their social class, occupation, sexual preference, and religious or political beliefs, agree on the value of an intimate relationship, a close and loving relationship with one special person.⁴⁻⁵ Despite changing sexual mores, a soaring divorce rate, and a cultural emphasis on the importance of one's own professional and personal growth, most people still value the cultivation of interpersonal relationships.

A recent survey⁶ did a cluster analysis of some of the rewards of intimacy between two people. On a personal level, subjects reported the feeling of being loved and needed, an inner sense of harmony and well-being, a sense of fulfillment, completion, and wholeness, a sense of personal freedom and liberation, and an opportunity for growth, change, and maturation. Interpersonally, subjects noted the importance of unconditional acceptance and understanding from another, the experience of sharing and trust, authentic and deep friendship, and being able to give and nurture as well as receive. Finally, subjects reported that such intimacy at times led to feelings of transcendence, of being at one with the world. This last is similar to Bhakti, in which one reaches the transcendent through relationship, and to the Kabbalah or to Tantric Buddhism, in which sexual practice provides a door to the transcendent.

The benefits of such intimate relationships have been extolled by poets and philosophers for ages and need not be elaborated here. Fromm⁷ points out that true love and intimacy can unlock the human potential of both participants and stimulate them to increasingly creative and meaningful living. It has also been pointed out that such relationships, nourished and expanded over time, may provide both safety and mutual understanding as a context for exploration and growth.⁸

Sullivan notes that valuing and experiencing affectionate and sympathetic feelings for others are distinguishing traits of the healthy person.⁹ Characteristics such as mutuality, intimacy, loving, and ability to form deep

and lasting relationships, are commonly identified as defining psychological health. Researchers such as Vaillant¹⁰⁻¹¹ have found that psychologically healthy persons have warmer, more loving friendships and closer relationships with their children and spouses than do psychologically unhealthy persons.

Further, there is now a well-substantiated research literature suggesting that there are negative medical consequences for social isolation, such as protracted rehabilitation or convalescence, and increased risk of illness and death. James Prescott maintains that parents who are physically affectionate with their children may decrease chances of later violence in their offspring. Ethology research suggests that intimate bonding is biologically derived, implying that intimacy may be part of our genetic makeup.¹²

Thus, we would suggest that intimacy is an important value on a variety of dimensions and that the skills of learning intimacy, what Heath refers to as allocentrism, are important for the development of the individual. In addition, as has been confirmed by some of the sources cited above, we believe that in fact the pursuit of extreme psychological well-being need not be antithetical to developing deeper intimacy. Emotion and compassion are, of course, a part of the spiritual traditions. Certainly they can be applied to the committed intimate relationship as well as to humanity as a whole. As Kahlil Gibran noted in his now-classic poem *The Prophet*, love consists of two individuals who are strong enough to be able to come together and to respond to this experience as a personal and spiritual opportunity. Indeed, it can be through the daily struggle of an ongoing relationship that self-actualization occurs. It can also be the final challenge to a self-actualizing being, the final risk of applying one's spiritual lessons to that part of life closest to one's personal, psychological core.

We would suggest that personal psychological growth, often through individual retreat, introspection, or physical withdrawal, may be a necessary first step toward the development of exceptional relational health. However, as an end in itself, we believe that withdrawal or purely personal self-cultivation, without an element of engagement, a returning to the world, resembles narcissism in a vacuum—empty and meaningless. We prefer a more activist philosophy based on the assumption that a prime way to actualize a truly exceptional state of psychological health is through living in the world, in relation rather than in isolation. Of course, there are many ways of relating to, and being engaged in, the world. Here we are discussing only the way of intimate and enduring relationship with a significant other.

Limitations

In attempting to write about exceptional levels of health and relationship, we encounter several problems. The first and foremost problem derives from a

shared belief system that one can only teach what one knows and experiences. However, as we look to our own relationship—for insights and problems—we are aware of the significant discrepancies between current reality and the vision to which we aspire. Therefore, we acknowledge a certain self-consciousness and humility at our limitations in attempting to discuss exceptional relational well-being.

A second difficulty is that when we look to the literature (or to life!) we find few examples of individuals who provide models of relationship mirroring extreme psychological health. The thoughts we are offering here must necessarily then be a suggesting of the importance of this dimension and a sharing of our beliefs and hopes about the forms it might take, rather than a detailed description or analysis.

Our Vision

We would suggest that exceptional levels of relational well-being will be found to be the product of two individuals who have been able to reach an extremely high state of individual psychological health. Further, we would suggest that without individual work, people who on a personal level are controlled by attachments, greed, insecurity, and ego, have little hope of moving beyond these problems when working within the context of a relationship. Paradoxically, by developing one's true self, one may be able to become like the mirror in Zen—more selfless, empty, and giving. This selfless self might be able to move beyond both traditional and liberated, male and female identities and roles, resulting in forms of androgyny in which both individuals could act with equal scope and flexibility.

Relationships in this stage would be seen not as a means for aggrandizing the ego, but as an opportunity for giving and service. The relationship might be pursued less for what one could get, and more for what one could give. Further, this loving closeness with another would also serve to stimulate the personal process of awakening oneself to new heights of psychological health and well-being. Each interaction would be perceived as containing a lesson to be appreciated and absorbed. Thus, difficulties and conflicts within the relationship, which undoubtedly would still exist in some sense, nevertheless would be transformed. Instead of representing struggles for ego enhancement—power, control, status—they would be perceived as opportunities for growth and a source of feedback about one's own behavior and intentions. Indeed, in this sense, the relationship would be valued by both partners as a kind of miracle, like the life of a growing child, which one realizes one cannot take credit for, but to which one must contribute to the utmost of one's ability, which one marvels at and is privileged to be a part of.

This stage is one which can be seen as a type of karma yoga, in which the individual engages in relationship to mutually facilitate awakening and ser-

vice. This context and purpose transform the meaning of all interpersonal difficulties; anger and sadness are seen as feedback to both the individual and the relationship; power struggles are seen as gifts. While it may be easier to love humanity in the abstract than in the specific, to serve the poor rather than to serve our spouse, to guide and teach rather than to be led and learn, the healthy individual might well want to attempt both. Indeed it might even be that such a relationship could provide a foundation from which both partners could more effectively love, serve, and teach at a universal level. For the majority of us, this remains only a vision, but one which we may all be able to consciously move toward.

A Concluding Parable

In conclusion we would like to offer a short parable about the seeker after knowledge Naciketas:

Naciketas, bereft of heart after separating from his love of many years, sought solace and wisdom from a master. He set out on long pilgrimage to the mountains of Nepal, where it was rumored that a person wise in the ways of love and relationship could be found.

Many tears were shed along the path; many blisters formed as the pilgrim sought this wise one to ask the truth about the self, how to be strong and powerful and also able to develop a truly mature relationship—accepting, compassionate, nurturing, and caring.

The wise one had lived within his small cave nestled deep in the Himalayas for many years, cultivating a deep sense of compassion and love for other human beings, learning to still the mind and cultivate a warmth of heart.

One day the young pilgrim passed the cave, and only by chance looked in and saw the wise one sitting peacefully and staring in a fixed yet kindly fashion at a small candle.

Now, after so long a pilgrimage, and so close to the goal, the young pilgrim felt fear. Summoning all the courage possible, leaning his arm against the entrance of the cave, the pilgrim peered in and said, "Excuse me for interrupting you."

"No interruption, I am pleased you came, come in," said the wise one, almost as if he were expecting this individual.

"I had difficulty finding you," said Naciketas. "The air is thin, the weather cold and there is no other person for miles around. Why, master, you who are so famous, do you endure such hardships in this cave? And why, if I may be so bold, why do you live up here alone?"

The master thought for a moment and said, "To cultivate deep wisdom and compassion for others."

"But why don't you share that compassion?"

"I am, now, with you."

"But why not where more people can be near you? Or with another in a deep and enduring relationship?"

The wise one smiled, looked over at Naciketas, and said, "Let me share with you the secret of true compassion and relationship."

The young pilgrim sat near the master, watching the candle flame, feeling cold and yet with a sense of excitement as the master began to talk.

"First, for there to be love and true intimacy, you must learn to control your own mind, to silence its fears and doubts. This task is yours and no one else's, and you can ask or demand, but no one can do it for you."

"But what happens when this mind is still?"

"When your mind is sufficiently stilled, you will hear the sound of your own heart. Listen to it. For, until you hear your own heart, how can you hear the heart of another?"

The student spent many years studying with the master, and finally felt prepared to return to the world. Naciketas felt the lessons were learned and on the day of departure recited to the master a summary:

Love requires the clarity of a polished mirror, self-aware, but not self-preoccupied—able to attend to what is around.

Love requires the fearlessness of a samurai warrior going into battle but not afraid of death.

Love requires the wisdom of the Taoist sage who is willing to trust the process, let the stream flow without trying to alter its progress.

Love requires the precision of a scientist; and the endurance of an ascetic who can patiently travel miles through a burning desert, bare soles on hot sand.

And finally, love requires the softness and gentleness and freshness of a smile in a child's eye.

The master smiled graciously and said, "You have learned much, you have practiced hard, and there is only one more ability which you need have. As you go forth, realize the delicate humanness in us all, remember our frailty, hold your knowledge lightly, hold your own self lightly, and keep a sense of delicate joy and humor, a cosmic chuckle, along your path, for love requires this also.

"Now go, and bless you. . . ."

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