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Love at the Crossroads

From "Couples at the Crossroads"

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Loving bonds give us shelter, make us feel safe in facing life's uncertainties and challenges and more, much more. They give us strength, excitement and security. They provide us with physical and emotional safety, and are enriching and nurturing. They make us laugh or cry. They are playful, yet they can be serious. They make us "human", encouraging us to search within so we can better understand who we are, who our friends and partners are, and how we can relate to them in healthy ways, shaping us -- and them -- from cradle to grave.

Our need for emotional connections propels us to search for mates and plan life-long partnerships that, though initially influenced by sexual attraction, go beyond it and reach the deepest recesses of our hearts and souls. We are attracted to what is new and exciting that catches our sexual interest, but at the same time we look for calm, security and a feeling of belonging. If our needs for safe haven are met, we feel comfortable and our interests in exploration and adventure can be expressed and pursued, individually and together, as energy is released from focusing on the relationship to the environment around us.

Additionally, as each relationship connects us to past ones, there is continuity in the views of ourselves-with-others. Childhood experiences of connection and love, in fact, act as templates for adult ones, providing us with the ability to appraise other people's expectations and our own abilities to relate. And, because our maternal parent reflected back to us how we felt when we were still unable to express our emotions on our own, she taught us how to identify emotions. In this way, we come to understand not only what we feel, but what other people feel as well, and learn to empathize with them. Through empathy, we can anticipate others' actions and reactions, responding more appropriately to their needs and emotionally resonate with them.

Childhood templates are different from each of us, being inclusive of all the benefits and distortions inherent to our earliest attachments. And, as we tend to unconsciously repeat old patterns, whether healthy or unhealthy, because we are attracted to what is known and familiar to us, there are similar patterns between the different relationships we establish throughout our lives. If we are not aware of such patterns, we are stuck in repeating them over and over. However, with increased awareness of such repetitions, comes the opportunity to

examine, understand and correct what went wrong in earlier relationships, providing us with the opportunity to change. Love is the most transformational force we encounter as, by reconnecting with the past, it can help us heal old wounds.

Through love we get in touch with core emotions that would be overwhelming if we had to face them alone, but that we can manage if our loved one is there with us, affirming, comforting and encouraging us. This ability to mutually regulate our emotions is the most important gift that intimate relationships give us. When achievable, it provides a feeling of calm, authenticity, spontaneity and emotional safety.

The Crossroads: Failure or Opportunity?

Love relationships are not static but evolve. They start from the initial infatuation where mutual idealization prevails, where lust and the feeling of being in love are predominant and the two lovers live in a fantasy world that reflects to them what they want to see. They then reach calmer times when partners may lose the intense mutual passion of the beginning, and shift toward being attachment figures to one another.

A lot of people regard their initial in-love stage as the most rewarding and sublime, and lament its disappearance as a loss that cannot, ever again, be reclaimed. They may thus get stuck in futile attempts to bring it back, but in doing so they are living in the past, not in the present, in fantasy, not in reality. Alternatively, they may chase after new relationships, in the illusion of re-experiencing the same intense emotions of the beginning in-love phase, often only to find themselves in the same places of disappointment and disillusion later on, with someone else, when these intense emotions wane. And, when they subside, different feelings such as disappointment, hurt, anger, fear, shame and guilt are often felt in their stead. These are difficult times because partners have to face a reality that seems no longer to fit their fantasized views of each other.

Couples can reach this point through a slow and gradual process of disenchantment or a sudden change due to external stressors. In either case they are forced to shed each other's idealized views, and take stock of how they are in the naked light of reality.

All love relationships reach this stage at one point or another, at times more than once. This is so because, when the initial passion is over, old, unresolved issues that had been brushed aside by the intensity of the initial infatuation come to the fore. The very attributes that attracted a person to another at the beginning of a relationship may at this point turn out to be irritating, changing the whole landscape of love, and leaving both persons confused, disappointed and unhappy. These issues often stem from partners' individual past experiences of attachment and intimacy, which determine their expectations

and limitations. These difficult times force couples to a crossroad in their relationship: should they stay together or move their own separate ways?

Each partner may feel, deep down, that having reached this juncture is an indication of failure in the choice of the lover, in the ways difficulties are handled, in the inadequate efforts put forward by one or the other to work things out, or both. Each partner may feel alone and scared. Each feels it is no longer emotionally safe to open up with the other, because a rift now exists between them. Each wonders what can be done to heal their wounded relationship. Each may ask what went wrong, when did things start to be different from the way they were at the beginning of love, and why the initial feelings seem now to be gone. Partners may think they made a mistake and the person they thought they loved is no longer, or never was. They may feel angry, hurt, confused and unclear as to how to proceed. Everybody, however, at one point or another reaches the crossroads, as this is part of the evolution of love in long term intimate relationships.

Is there a way to recover from these difficult times? We believe there is, and this is where the real couple work begins. The crossroads, in fact, are bridges between what was and what will be. And while they can be overwhelming, difficult and disappointing for the two partners as they go through them, they are also the means of taking each relationship to the next level of closeness and intimacy. They thus signal a new beginning, not the end.

If one is at the crossroads in a love relationship and feels lost and without a clear direction, it is important to remember that there is an internal logic to our emotional life, even though we may not understand it. We need to give it ample room to express itself and work its way through the challenges and difficulties of this relational phase. There is an inner movement that we cannot control and that begins with surprise when we are hit with something unanticipated. We feel astonishment and panic in the face of the unexpected. Then disillusionment may set in when we have to give up our previous views, and mourn our partner's idealized image that we held in the past. This process is followed by reorganization and acceptance, as we use the recent information to connect with the past. The ability to go through these steps exists in all of us if we trust and let it unfold, even if experiences we had in the past are deep seated and left deep wounds.

Growing Beyond the Crossroads

The occurrence of the crossroads forces us to abandon the superficial, short-term easy-fix attitude that most of us tend to have about relationships, and turns us toward more reflective, mature and steady ways of connecting. It is often through pain that we grow the most, acquiring sensitivity, empathy and insight, as well as new appreciation for what we have.

We don't mean to say that all relationships are fixable and that one should stay in a relationship no matter what. But at the crossroads we are given an opportunity to understand what happened that led to this point. And, there is something to be said for the kind of love emerging from the work done together. It brings a deepened knowledge of each other and the re-creation of love through the experiences, discussions and mutual understanding and acceptance of the reality of the crossroads.

But how are we to learn from the crossroads?

Over 95% of what moves us and influences our feelings and behaviors is non conscious to us. If we stay on the surface, therefore, we risk missing valuable information that can help us correct repetitive unhealthy patterns that limit understanding and stunt our growth. If we go beneath the superficial, conscious level, on the other hand, we have the opportunity to explore those areas of our emotional lives that can provide us with deeper understanding and emoting, and this can help us to make good decisions.

When couples cannot, by themselves, bring back the feelings of emotional safety to continue the process of healing, counseling can help them along. Being in therapy together provides an environment of safety and security, where feelings can be brought out into the open. Couple counseling can help partners find a meaning to their struggles, and develop healthy and appropriate ways of coming to terms with them.

Part of this process of deep inner exploration includes to reconnect with our past attachment experiences, all the way back to our first attachment to our primary attachment figures and subsequent ones, in order to tease out patterns of similarities and differences between then and now, as there is consistency between childhood and adult ways of creating and maintaining emotional attachments to other human beings.

This process can help uncover of parts of ourselves we did not know existed, or that we were too afraid to explore, or did not know how to handle. It will help us understand how our partner and we connect or not with one another, and what happens in the interpersonal space of love. Being in love is easy and effortless; it is the loving that is difficult, but is also the most rewarding and everlasting.

The process of re-building after the crossroads involves several steps:

- First of all, couples need to take stock of what is lost and what is left. This entails letting go of old ways of communicating and interacting and explore new ways of building bridges between each other that are more appropriate to the current situation.

- Second, we need to reinforce the value of emotions in love relationships and express them appropriately. Often we express these emotions – hurt, fear, sadness, loneliness – via anger. When we express anger, we are likely to get an angry response back from our partner, setting up a cycle of mutual attacks. We become defensive when together, building barriers to protect ourselves. Each partner is waiting for the other to stop this cycle. Unless YOU start, nothing will happen.
- Third, once these barriers are in place, there is no emotional safety in the relationship and with one another. Without emotional safety there is no sharing, hence no intimacy. Couples need to be aware of this and focus on increasing their sensitivity to those behaviors, actions and words that are aimed at fostering secure attachment to each other.
- Fourth, understanding the meaning of what happened and why allows partners to reconstruct, together, the events that led to the crossroads. This joint narrative provides a forum for couples to understand their actions and reactions, and reinforces their joint efforts at turning past difficult experiences into opportunities for learning more about each other. Feeling remorse, gratitude, kindness, and forgiveness and sharing them with a partner is fundamental for the re-establishment of intimacy, the re-awakening of passion and the re-building of trust.
- Finally, a renewal of commitment to one another, based on current needs, feelings and anticipation of the future needs to be set in place. This commitment recapitulates partners' joint history and reinforces common goals and objectives.

In order to achieve these goals, a shift occurs at two levels. One is letting go of each partner's need for control and be open to things happening when they are ready. The other is trying to see and appreciate the same situation from the partner's viewpoint.

When we are able to shift in the two areas discussed above, we emerge from the crisis of the crossroads into a calmer and more reflective phase that promotes union and reflection. The ability for self-reflection is an indispensable ingredient for couples to reach a mature balance between closeness and individuation. Self-reflection is the ability to see the other as a separate individual from us, not as a reflection of who we are, with thoughts and feelings of his or her own. When we can see our partner as separate, we can appreciate his or her motivations, desires, goals and intentions and see how he or she sees us. This view of ourselves through another's eyes, not through our own, gives us perspective and creates healthy mirroring. We feel understood, cared for and held in our partner's thoughts and heart, while maintaining our separate individuality, with separate needs, intentions and desires.

Partners can now learn to forgive one another for past hurts and insensitivities, and be mutually available and emotionally responsive to each other's needs. Trust and security are now possible again, as they are based on the deep values of friendship, a new form of loving and a mutual appreciation for having been through this long journey together. This experience is enriching for both partners, both personally and interpersonally, and they are they can now be appreciative of it. This is the hard-earned love based on knowledge and understanding of oneself and the other that can give each of us the feeling of being part of something bigger than who we are individually.

This is not the end result, we warn, as loving is a process constantly in flux, like life itself, a spiral that moves toward a goal but does so in a circular fashion, visiting and revisiting the old and integrating it into a new vision of our partner and ourselves.

Sex at the Crossroads

Sexuality is the invisible wire that pulls two people together, a special thread that makes what is between them unique, and facilitates emotional attachment and growth. So, when problems in the relationships arise, and the initial passion is on the wane, what happens to sex?

At the crossroads, often sex is the last thing, but also the first thing, both partners may think about. There is too much hurt, anger, sadness, doubt and regret for couples to want to be physically close to one another again. It seems as though sex, at this juncture, does not have the power to draw the two partners together as it did at the beginning of their relationship. Or maybe one partner wants closeness, but the other rejects it. Partners may no longer be on the same page on sex: one may long for it; the other does not want to think about it, as sex may have a different meaning for each.

At the crossroads, partners are distant and may believe they are no longer attracted to their mates. Partners might have been treating each other like old shoes for quite some time, no longer going on dates, not dressing up for special occasions together, no longer making time for sexual exploration and mutual enjoyment. For instance, they might go to the movies or a fancy dinner, but not move towards physical intimacy. They have lost their desires because their minds and hearts are elsewhere. Sexual distancing is often seen by them as further proof that the magic that existed before is now definitively gone and cannot be resuscitated.

What happened? The zest between them went awry through lack of attention, hurt and misunderstandings. It is easier to be distant than close. One excuse leads to another and nothing happens.

After the crossroads, on the other hand, there is a renewed interest in sex as part of the move toward deeper intimacy. The changes that occur at this stage reflect a renewal of body, mind and soul, as all aspects of each partner are up for examination and fulfillment. This renewal also contains hope of recovery from earlier traumas, and relief from the suffering.

The lessons learned from the crossroads include finding what may still be preventing the relationship from developing. It means relearning to talk to each other, listening without judgment or defense, looking at what did not work, what can be changed and what cannot, staying open and recognizing and expressing uncomfortable feelings in constructive ways.

An important element in the reconstructive process that leads to healing is conveying to partners that they are important, that their opinions count, and so do their feelings. Both partners need to feel valued and needed by each other. Supporting one another in their positive endeavors, providing encouragement at challenging times and positive feedback for successful experiences are important steps in re-building individual self-esteem and trust and security in one another, strengthening the love bond.

This process is particularly relevant in sex after the battering of the crossroads, when a lot of energy was spent in doubting, being cautious and tearing each other down by devaluing, minimizing the positive and exaggerating the negative.

Death and Re-Birth

Safety is revived through a complex process of death and rebirth, the process that led up to the crossroads and brought about a new mutual commitment. This process is similar to the natural cycles of death and re-birth that occur yearly with the change of seasons. There cannot be spring without winter, as winter provides the opportunity for spring to take place. Not only personally but culturally as well, tales of death and rebirth abound, expressing the transformation out which new potentials emerge.

The Egyptians saw this process in the metaphor of the yearly flooding of the Nile. It was only after the destruction caused by the flooding that creation could take place, as the waters of the Nile deposited nutrients in the earth that allowed seeds to germinate and grow. Many of their rituals were aimed at re-enacting these processes of destruction and creation, reaffirming the cosmic order by mimicking nature with its cycles of destruction and rebirth. From chaos, order is born, as relationships come back together after being de-centered and off course at the crossroads.

There is an ancient story with such a universal appeal that variations of it exist in Egyptian, Assyrian, Japanese, Chinese, Russian and Native American

versions over a span of several thousand years of human history. It is the myth of the Phoenix, a large mythical bird with vermilion and gold plumage and a melodious cry, which lived by a well and would appear every morning during the dawn hours to bathe in the cool waters of the well. While bathing, it would sing a song that was so enchanting that even the sun god would stop his chariot and listen to it. It lived on dew alone, killing nothing and crushing nothing it touched, and surrounded itself with aromatic woods.

Only one Phoenix was alive at any one time. When the end of its life approached, after 500 years or more, the Phoenix would build a nest with cinnamon, myrrh and other spices, lay in it and set it on fire. Out of the ashes a few days later another Phoenix was born and, when ready to fly, it would lift from the nest and carry the ashes to the city of the sun and offer them to the sun god.

In the Chinese version, the Phoenix is called Feng-huang and is a symbol of high virtue and grace, provides power and prosperity to those who respect it and contains both yin and yang elements. It represents everything that exists in the universe, both material and immaterial.

This myth has survived for such a long time because it addresses the theme of death and re-birth, paralleling the personal and relational process of creation, renewal and transformation taking place daily for all of us, no matter who and where we are. It teaches us that we have to let go of what was there before and is no longer useful in order to create something new that includes elements of what was there before as well as new elements that are borne out of this experience of renewal and transformation.

After the crossroads it becomes quite apparent that the ideal of unconditional love is fallacious and hoping for it will lead nowhere. This revelation invites a less romantic but more realistic view of the relationship. Each partner understands that the feelings and expressions of love are affected by one's behaviors in the relationship, even when unconscious. So, for instance, if a partner expects to be loved by the other even when he does not make any effort to be sensitive and emotionally present, or if she drinks excessively, uses drugs, or explodes in rages, his or her expectations are obviously not realistic. As adults, we are all responsible for our behaviors and need to own our part in the problems.

And after the crossroads partners come to realize that there is no magic formula, but there are ways to create flexible patterns of give and take that are sensitive to the needs of each, and that also create enough space in between for their individuality.

Like the space between a mothering parent and her baby, the space between romantic partners expands and contracts according to the needs of each person. When there is a stressful situation, adjustments are made to get

closer in order to get protection, reassurance and comfort. Likewise, when there is no danger, the space between the two stretches to create opportunities for each person to explore their inner and external environment, as true intimacy requires not only the ability to be together, but also to be apart, as separate individuals.

We all need private space to follow what attracts our attention and to develop into the individuals we are. When used in the service of connecting, this temporary disengagement brings about increased engagement, as the affirmation of one's self also can become an affirmation of the other and the relationship.

The true meaning of being oneself and being in a relationship requires that both aspects of each partner's interests and needs – the personal and the interpersonal – get expressed and sufficiently met. And, finding a common language means learning how to comfort and soothe and, above all, be emotionally present and available to our partner as well as ourselves.

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