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## Nurturing Healthy Attachment

In 1984, I established a counseling practice in Cary, North Carolina. Several years before I arrived, an incident occurred in the next building. I was told about it from neighboring tenants in the building. A lady was visiting with her attorney to prepare for a divorce from her husband. While they were meeting, her husband unexpectedly showed up wrapped in dynamite, all wired up and holding a contact switch. The attorney dove out of the office while the husband wrapped his wife in one last embrace. He then blew both of them up along with a large section of the side of the building. He was very attached to his wife. I tell the preceding story to provoke some thought. Not all forms of love or attachment are constructive and beneficial. The man in this unfortunate story obviously had an intense attachment to his wife. Unfortunately for her, it wasn't one of the better types.

**We rarely ask the question,  
“What part of us is being loved?”**

Most of us have heard and read about different types of love. We usually ask the question, “What does it mean when someone loves us?” Then we try to answer the question by categorizing different types of love according to different roles that we see, such as brotherly love, parental love, romantic love, and loving friendship. However, there's another radical angle from which we can try to view love. We

rarely ask the question, “What part of us is being loved?” We probably don’t ask this because most of us subscribe to the myth of having a homogeneous self. It seems obvious. You might say something like, “There’s only one **me** and I’m so-and-so. I’m a kind, generous, and competent person. When someone loves me they must appreciate all that.” But consider the following ways that another person can be attached to you:

**You have some trait that your partner disowns from his/her experience (e.g. aggressiveness).  
You “complete” your partner.**

**You enhance your partner’s social status. You look good as a husband or a wife.**

**You’re the mother/father of your partner’s children. You preserve and complete the family.**

**You do a lot of things that make your partner’s life comfortable. You keep things clean and orderly.**

**You supply your partner with sex.**

**You keep your partner from feeling anxious by supplying a warm body that makes him/her feel safe and not lonely.**

**You give your partner financial security.**

Yuk! It’s pretty vapid stuff and not very satisfying in the long-run. Yet these are some types of the attachments that many people really form. They’re all examples of love from an egocentric level of consciousness: “I love you because you meet a need that I have.” What’s missing from these examples of primitive love is the core of what constitutes you. What’s being loved is some operation you’re performing for the other person. You perform this operation for them and they’re going to appreciate you for it. That’s what makes these examples of low consciousness. They’re examples of commodity transactions.

Heterocentric loving involves a lot more than merely considering your own needs. It involves your empathically appreciating how your partner feels and experiences in his or her own world. It’s an

appreciation of the partner's separate mind and at the center of the mind of what he or she wants and loves. In all of my decades as a therapist, I've never found anything more at the core of self-esteem than what a person wants and loves. We previously discussed how the organization of the self is more like a potato and less like an onion. That was referring to how our memory and states are organized. However, for visualizing domains of self-esteem, it's better to use the conventional onion metaphor.



### **The onion metaphor of core self and levels of self-esteem**

Self-esteem is a useful construct for tagging which level of self is being loved. Think of self-esteem as organized into three levels. The most peripheral sense of self occurs on the external, behavioral, and exhibitory level. This level of self yields very little steady satisfaction. You may get some temporary highs, but this level alone will also yield long periods of depressing inadequacy. I've observed a frequent example of this among some extraordinarily beautiful women. These women had initially relied on their beauty to attract attention from others. However, many of them eventually come to resent their physical beauty because they fear it symbolizes their superficial and insubstantial character. Clearly, their beauty wasn't doing the job of making them feel very adequate. Similarly, some very prosperous men have shown a parallel phenomenon. One of the wealthiest clients I've seen used to privately complain, "I'm garbage at my core!" I feared for his life because he was so miserable. It didn't matter that he was a CEO of a large, successful corporation that he had built from scratch.

## **Arctic Hare**

I like to use the following metaphor to illustrate a statement about human nature. It relates to what part of our self we value and seek to have loved. When I was in graduate school, I would often tire of my studies and go exploring other parts of the library. One day I happened upon a book on wilderness survival. In the book I found many interesting tips for how to survive in the wild, such as eating beaver tail for nutrition and instructions for building dead fall traps. What I found particularly interesting was a story pertaining to fur trappers who would trap beaver in Canada during the 1700s. In the spring, the trappers would head up the rivers into the wilderness. After they did their trapping in the fall, they would have to be careful to get down the rivers and back to civilization before the freeze. Sometimes they wouldn't make it in time and they'd be locked in by ice and snow for a long, hard winter. After eating up their food stores, they'd have to live off of the land by hunting and trapping. This was very difficult. However, there was always a certain animal that was easier to hunt than any other. It was the prolific arctic hare. It's a snow-shoed relative of the rabbit that turns pure white during winter and is able to run over the top of the ice crust without breaking through.

The story goes that these now trapped trappers would go out and kill arctic hare to bring back to their shelter. They would skin them, prepare them, and roast them up for sustenance. The meat was quite palatable. They would continue eating hare, but noticed that they were starting to lose weight. So, they would stuff themselves with more arctic hare in an effort to rebuild their own body fat. It wouldn't work. The more they ate, the more they would waste away. Finally, they would die stuffed with the delicious arctic hare. Because no matter how delectable it tastes, no matter how filling and satisfying it seems, arctic hare doesn't provide some of the necessary amino acid complex when it's digested in the human body. This phenomenon became known as "hare starvation."

I like to tell this story to clients who try to build their self-esteem by feeling proud of their achievements. The story is also a metaphor for the paltry sharing of peripheral self with which some of us try to nurture attachment in our relationships.

## **Our Experiential Core**

What correlates with self-esteem is a person's appreciation of their emotional experience and especially of what they love and want. People who openly express what they love and want are usually

people who feel more substantial. I never hear these people say, “I don’t know who I am.” Our attachments lie at the core of who we are. They define us more than anything we do or show. When I use the term “attachments,” I’m using it in a very liberal way. I’m not just referring to external attachments such as things or people. I’m referring to internal constructs. These include the hopes and dreams we have for the future, the values and principles by which we want to live and the meaning of our past experiences. As we develop maturity and a level of consciousness beyond childhood, our attachment systems become more sophisticated and abstract. When we start life, we initially want to attach to that big Mommy thing in front of our eyes. In mid-life, we may want attachment to the meaning we find in promoting our children. At the end of our lives, we may want attachment to the larger spiritual realm that transcends space and time: truth, integrity, honor, spirituality, contribution, creation, service. These can all be attachments if we incorporate them into our field of meaning. They can become part of our core.

So the relevant question is, “Are you and your partner attaching to each other’s core selves?” If your partner is asking you about what you want and prefer, what you love, what you hope and dream about, what you remember and the meaning you place on those memories, and if your partner also shows excited delight in her face and eyes as she hears what you say and asks questions so that she can receive even more...then it’s a good bet you will feel loved. It won’t take much of that kind of experience to feel loved unless you’re one of the poor unfortunates who have been shamed to the core by early trauma. If not, then your partner’s delight in exploring these attachments in your mind is probably the most profound way you can feel connected. Physical sex can momentarily drop more opiates into the reward centers of your brain, but intimate reception is a more enduring way to sustain the sense that you’re truly loved.

## **Adult loving has more to do with receiving than giving.**

Nearly thirty years ago, my own therapist mentioned that adult loving has more to do with receiving than giving. Since then, I have learned what he meant. It’s the curious pursuit to receive our partner’s experiential core that is the most powerful way to nurture the sense that we’re close. That’s the essence of intimacy: to communicate by our pursuit of our partner’s experiential core that we really value his essence.

## **Autonomous attachment means you don't have to rely on your partner to define or complete you.**

Intimacy isn't easy. Many people just plain lack the emotional capacity for it. In order to sustain intimacy, you will need to be highly receptive and comfortable with yourself. Dan Siegel has written prolifically about the neuroscience of the mind. His term "autonomous attachment" refers to the capacity to attach while simultaneously maintaining a separate self. Autonomous attachment means you don't have to rely on your partner to define or complete you. Instead, you run off your own battery pack. If you have to define yourself by attaching to your partner, then you will probably wind up fighting about how he's doing such a poor job. Conversely, having your own personal autonomy gives you the internal security so that you can respect your partner. It allows you to let go enough to love. Sound familiar?

### **Modalities of Attachment**

Intimacy isn't the only way to nurture attachment. Even though it's the most powerful way for conditioning affection, there are other modalities that shouldn't be overlooked. Touch, sex, symbolism, anticipation, and affiliation are all useful ways to nurture attachment. We spend more time affiliating than we do in all of the other attachment modalities combined.

## **When we're intimate, we're facing each other and looking into each other's minds.**

There's a big difference between affiliation and intimate communication. When we're intimate, we're facing each other and looking into each other's minds. Our main focus is our partner's mind. When we affiliate, we're side by side, looking out on the world and comparing notes. The main focus is

the outer world. If we're smart enough to sometimes do this in a free paratelic state, then we'll gradually condition some affection into our relationship. If we affiliate in a responsible telic state, it doesn't count because affection can't build. Unfortunately, this happens to be most of the time with nearly all couples. The dictates of life require that we tend to survival first. We may affiliate cooking dinner, paying bills, working on the house, doing laundry, minding the children, and working on the computer. However, affection doesn't build nearly as much in these responsibilities as when you go out together to share a picnic, enjoy some dancing, explore a new restaurant, or party with some friends. When you compare notes with each other during these free paratelic activities, you're likely to build some emotional connection. You're doing some head connecting when you share the experience. But remember, your eyes are directed out there on the world most of the time. You're only occasionally connecting heads to compare your experiences. This means that, relative to intimacy, free paratelic affiliation is only thin gruel. It doesn't stick to your ribs as well. I like the following metaphor: one minute of intimacy equals one hundred minutes of affiliation.

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one hundred minutes of affiliation.**

Most of us feed attachment into our relationships through a mix of affiliation, intimacy, sex, touch, anticipation, and symbolism. When we start our relationships, we use a tremendous amount of all six. Intimate communication is frequent. But over time, the rigors of living together make things more difficult. We take shortcuts to get things done. We step on each other's toes and our emotions begin to bruise. As our covert inhibition and shame accumulate, there's a tendency for intimacy to wane. Our unconscious knows that it's safer that way. We're not as likely to get bruised. When the children come, there's usually an even larger quantum drop in affection because all modalities of attachment take a hit. Energy levels become tapped and opportunities for spontaneous sex get squashed. The magic of anticipation, which so powerfully fuels early *in-love* feelings, becomes supplanted with routine and fatigue. Affiliation time dries up when the black hole of child care sucks down all discretionary time.

Rick and Sylvia were a British couple who had originally been quite content. They both came from wealthy families and were quite comfortable financially. In the early years of their marriage they would go skiing in Norway, sailing in the Caribbean, and traipsing all over the globe. They felt affection for each other with all of this fun affiliation time being spent together. Their problems started when

children first came on the scene. The couple settled down, and Sylvia became a full-time mother. Rick became the CEO of a US company and was soon preoccupied with all the corporate intrigue. All of their leisure time was gone, and their affiliation time was now all responsible telic. When they finally came to me, their relationship was a basket case.

Rick and Sylvia are typical of many marriages. Early years of affection can be sustained on affiliation, but relationships deteriorate when free paratelic affiliation time disappears after couples have children. For this reason, I like to tell couples that they need to switch to a higher octane than mere affiliation. Remember? One minute of intimacy equals a hundred minutes of affiliation. When you no longer have much free paratelic time, you need to make it count. That's why planning for intimacy is efficient and smart when life gets complicated.

### **When life gets complicated, planning for intimacy is efficient and smart.**

Planning for intimacy? Does that sound like sacrilege? Many people think that intimacy should be spontaneous. After all, you don't want to make it a routine chore. This is where some people get confused. Of course you don't want to make it a chore. But there's nothing wrong with setting up routines that efficiently get you set up for intimacy. Then, when you're in the zone, you can be your own free agent. Think of your intimacy time like a free paratelic bubble in time. You can be very methodical in setting it up. When you're both finally in the bubble, you can both temporarily forget about the chores and focus on each other. Getting to this state will probably require a weekly schedule involving babysitters or grandparents. However, having it as a weekly default makes all the difference. If you have children and you don't have weekly routines for intimate connection, then there's close to zero chance that it'll happen. The law of inertia will usually hold.

What you want is a mix of all the attachment modalities in your schedule. On a daily basis, there are usually two main connection points in people's schedules. Dinner time is one of the few times for free paratelic affiliation after everyone sits down to eat. If there aren't any children, then the time can be more intimate. With children present, the experience is usually more affiliative. Even so, it still helps. Bed time is the other main connection point in daily schedules. This is a good time for touch, especially if both parties are too brain-dead to talk. Hugging, stroking, massage, and back-scratching are all great nonverbal ways of nurturing attachment. Bed time is obviously a good time for sex as well. But while

sex can be nurturing, it's not necessarily so in every case. The psychology of intimate sex will be discussed later in this book.

On a time-scale longer than a daily or weekly cycle, it's smart to have some get-away planned in your more distant future for a couple of reasons. First, your initiation of a get-away plan is a powerful symbol of your pursuit. It's not just that you spend time together. It's also the fact that you *thought* up the idea which indicates that close attachment to your partner has some priority in your mind. The second reason it's a good idea is that it pays emotional dividends over time. Many people don't realize the power of anticipation. It's the gift that keeps on giving. If you suggest going out together at the last minute, it doesn't give the same sense of importance as something you set in motion a week before. If you let your partner know that the getaway is for intimacy and not just affiliation, then the benefit will be even greater. If your partner has agreed on a getaway two weeks in advance, then they have two weeks of awareness that you both will be connecting. That knowledge itself, even if it's just operating in the unconscious, will nurture some sense of attachment. Remember that attachment is experienced in the mind. Anticipation can provide that. This is also an important message for divorced dads to hear. Telling their children of specific plans a week ahead of their scheduled visitation can help them to feel psychologically connected. Children get to feel more attachment over the preceding week, knowing that Dad is looking forward to those plans with them.

Symbolism is the remaining modality for nurturing attachment. Here we might source up romantic images of dressing up, flowers, jewelry, chocolate, Hallmark cards, saying the *right* words for the occasion, etc. On second thought, let's not. Let's junk the term instead! I personally hate the word "romantic." I see the concept hurt many relationships by discouraging creativity. Romance is a concept that is heavily merchandized by the media and an alliance of various industries: the jewelry trade, candy corporations, chain restaurants, and greeting card companies. They all have a stake in limiting your vision. Most people approach romance from the disempowered position of compliance and not authority. The media tells you how to be romantic. Think about it. How long has it been since you've sent a blank greeting card with only original sentiments that you personally wrote? On Valentine's Day, how many of us creatively deviate from doing our compulsory duty. Romance is so heavily indoctrinated into our minds that we've lost the essence of it. I recommend throwing out the concept. "Creative sentiment" is a better term. It's much more empowering, although I'll admit it doesn't have a convenient ring.

**The more external justification you have for expressing sentiment, the less it will mean to your partner.**

Here's a question for you. When's the best time to send flowers? Consider this: the more external justification you have for expressing sentiment, the less it will mean to your partner. This doesn't necessarily translate to forgetting your anniversary. That would become a different kind of symbol, and one you won't likely live down for a long time. But it's still true that sentimental symbols that aren't provoked by the situation will generally nurture more attachment. So, that means that the best time to send flowers is when absolutely nothing is happening. No Valentine's Day, no post-argument make-up, no anniversary. Nothing! The same reasoning holds for expressing the words, "I love you." If you say those words in response to some sentiment that your partner has expressed, it won't mean as much to them. That's because we all attribute motives to people's behavior. We intuitively know that there's a difference between creatively expressing affection from a passionate motive versus expressing sentiment to meet expectations. The latter is really being done out of compliance and fear. We're trying to do what we *should* do and we're in a more child-like emotional state trying to put authority outside of ourselves.

"Authority" is an interesting word and one that's relevant to our discussion. Most people think of authority as pertaining to social status and power. The authorities have determined this or the authorities have legislated that. Through its common usage, we've associated it with power and status. But think of what it means to author something. An author writes a book. It's a creation. Authorship in its essence is really more about creativity. When we author a symbol of affection for our partner, it carries an extremely powerful message. The authorship of meaning is what it's really all about.

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One of the most enjoyable experiences in my own marriage occurred the evening before we were about to fly to our twentieth anniversary getaway in the Bahamas. I took my wife Helen out to dinner the evening before we were scheduled to leave. While having desert and coffee, I presented her with a jewelry box bearing the trademark of a local jeweler. It was the size and shape for a necklace or bracelet but it contained neither. The box was actually a diversion. I had gone to the jewelry store to get the jewelry box merely to enhance the surprise. It worked! Instead of jewelry, the box contained two tickets to swim with dolphins which had been a long held wish that Helen had hoped to fulfill sometime in her lifetime. The memory of that experience *and the fact that I had understood and remembered her special desire* remains one of the highpoints in our common story.

So what's the point? The point is that creative sentiment may not be romantic in the classic sense but it's even more intimate. When you symbolically celebrate the meaning in your partner's mind, it generates a powerful sense of connection. It's the unnecessary sentimental symbol that nurtures your partner most.

## Guidelines for Intimacy Exercises

While other modalities of attachment can help supplement the experiential diet of your relationship, there's no more effective modality for nurturing attachment than intimacy. For this reason, I've included some intimacy exercises in this book to help "prime the pump." These exercises are designed to merely get you started. They're not meant to keep you regimented in any ongoing mechanical solution. The reason they're so highly structured is that they're designed to help you get past your own inhibition. It can be safely assumed that anyone reading this book has some internal fear and resistance to intimacy. Some will have so much inhibition that the exercises won't work. They may feel too alien, too silly, too anxiety provoking. "The Great No-No" may be too powerful an influence and curiosity that your partner can't ignite. But what the hey! Let's give it a shot anyway!

In order to do emotional intimacy well, you both need to be in "the mood." This means being in a free paratelic state without guilt or anxiety about what tasks you're leaving undone. For this reason, it's important to get out of the house, without children, and be away from all those responsibility cues. Try to find a quiet little coffee house or perhaps a restaurant that's slow enough to let you sit for several hours. It's best if you sit across from each other so you can look at each other. If you're dining out, don't start

your intimacy exercise until you've finished eating. Coffee or tea is OK. You need to be alcohol free so that all your frontal lobe is on-line. You want at least an hour without distractions for each exercise.

Just before starting your exercise, make an agreement that you will both avoid discussing any problems or responsibilities. The Big Five are especially taboo:

1. Work
2. Children
3. Money
4. Any problem-solving whatsoever
5. The relationship

Many people are surprised about the fifth taboo topic—the relationship. It's a common mistake to think that analyzing and discussing your relationship brings you closer. It might if your relationship is something you can both truly celebrate. If not, then discussing your relationship will bring on defensiveness and problem solving rather quickly. Save this type of discussion for one of your business meetings, not when you're trying to build affection.

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You can add any other topics that you think might get you into conflict. If you've had conflicts about sex, put that on the list. In my own community we have many residents who have migrated from the Far East. Having come from a much more extended family culture, these clients are noticeably more conflicted about their in-laws. For them, in-laws are #6. You may know of other conflict-generating topics specific to your relationship. The reason you're avoiding these topics is that they'll quickly lead you into a responsible telic state and problem solving. Actually, your unconscious may try to steer you into a responsible telic state because it may actually feel less vulnerable than a state of intimacy as if your unconscious wants you to hide in these familiar topics rather than risk shame in a free paratelic state.

The state you're trying to create consists of curiosity and wonder. This is a very fragile state that is necessary for intimacy. It's quickly snuffed out by any anxiety from conflict or even just from focusing on responsibilities. The following exercises are designed to nudge you past your unconscious inhibitions

and ignite your curiosity about each other. They both use a 10-minute preparation period to help you transition to a more receptive state. However, these exercises are not fail-safe. If either of you have very strong core shame from early childhood relationship trauma, you may still feel too anxious to be curious. It's best to do the exercises a couple of times before you decide if this is the case.

## Q & A Intimacy Exercise

After you've finished your meal and you have at least a full hour with no distractions, proceed with the following steps:

**1. Preparing your Q & A list.** Each of you should start with a pencil and a piece of paper in front of you. For 10 minutes you will list questions that you can use to quiz your partner. You're going to ask your partner to guess the answers. The questions are about what's in **YOUR** mind and memory, usually involving preferences, fantasies, and the meaning of your memories. Here are some examples:

- What's my favorite color?
- What's my favorite food?
- What's my favorite song?
- What's my favorite book?
- Where would I most like to go for a vacation if I could go anywhere in the world?
- What do I most want to accomplish before I die?
- What was my most embarrassing moment?
- What regret would I most want to reverse if I could?
- What was the happiest moment in my life?
- What achievement in my life brings me the most pride?
- What was my biggest loss?

As you compose your list, you will be disinhibiting yourself. You may notice that your questions become less concrete as you get yourself into the zone. It's important to use the full 10

minutes to write. It's not just the written product that's important. It's also the neuro-hormonal state that you're creating in your body and your brain while you write.

2. **Flip a coin to choose who starts first.** One partner does NOT volunteer the other to go first!
3. **The first partner asks the second to guess the answer.** The second partner gets up to three guesses. Usually the partner won't be successful, so expectations need to be kept low. There should be no recriminations and no criticism about not knowing the right answer.
4. **The first partner elaborates on their answer.** Whether or not the second partner guesses the correct answer, the first partner elaborates on the answer. It's OK for this to take a long time, especially because the first partner is allowed to ask expanding questions. These are questions that help the first partner to share more details about the answer. However, the second partner should not venture any opinions or criticisms or talk about his/her own reactions. Here's an example of my own elaboration about my favorite color:

“Green is my favorite color and I know why. When I was a small child, I always looked up to my brother. He was six years older and I always wanted to be ‘cool’ like him. He was popular, good looking, and of course much stronger. When he reached high school, he became a letterman for wrestling. The school color was green, so he used to wear this neat green letterman’s jacket with the high collar flipped up in the back. He also used to wear a lot of green in his outfits to match. Even before I reached high school, my brother taught me to wrestle. He trained me so well that I became a letterman and even won some wrestling tournaments in my freshman year. So I got to wear the cool green jackets like him. Starting in college, I wanted to cultivate a relationship with my father. I knew he wouldn’t be around forever. So, we used to hunt together each fall. Hunting was his big passion. We used to hunt in the forests of Maine and Canada. He was an artist and often pointed out the beautiful colors and textures in the forests—the green forests. So, green has been closely associated with these two relationships. It’s something I associate with all this male bonding I was fortunate to have. I associate it with love.”

Notice how my elaboration isn't just about concrete events. It also involves my interpretation of my own personal meaning. This is the essence of intimacy: shared meaning.

It's hard to risk exposing this stuff because you can be so easily hurt if it gets criticized or ridiculed.

5. **The second partner asks the same question of the first partner.** That's right. Each question goes in both directions. In the example above, it would now be my turn to venture three guesses about my partner's favorite color. It's important that the second partner actually verbalizes the same question even though both of you know what it's going to be. It's also important that all of your questions be sex neutral. You shouldn't use questions like "Who's my favorite quarterback?" or "What's my favorite perfume?"
6. **The second partner elaborates on his/her answer.** This is just like step #4 but now with the other partner.
7. **The second partner chooses a new question from their list.** You've finally squeezed all the juice out of the first question by elaborating its answer in both directions. It's time to get a new question to start the process again. This time, the second partner starts it.
8. **Steps 3 through 6 are repeated.**

Repeat the Q & A exercise for at least a full hour. An hour and a half is better still. It's highly structured and may seem hokey because it's so unnatural. However, its structure is designed to help you from defeating yourselves by unconsciously hiding in a responsible telic state. The task of requiring three guesses is designed to stimulate curiosity by manipulating a psycho-physiological variable known as "significance." This variable has the potential of turning on curiosity, if you're not too anxious.

You may want to do this Q & A exercise several times before moving on to the less structured Wonder Exercise. This next exercise is less structured and more closely approximates natural intimate conversation. However, its looser structure makes it easier to avoid intimacy if you're too inhibited.

## Wonder Intimacy Exercise

This exercise starts like the Q & A exercise with the same guidelines and initial preparation up to the point that you both write for 10 minutes. These are the steps:

**1. List out your “wonders” for 10 minutes.** Start at the top of your paper by writing the words “I wonder...” Then finish the sentence with something you can wonder about in the moment. It doesn’t have to be serious. You’re free associating, so let the ideas come to you without evaluating them. If you try too hard to deliver a “good” or a “right” wonder, you will lock yourself up with anxiety. Here’s an example of what I might start for a list:

- I wonder if there’s life on Mars.
- I wonder if I’ll still be alive when we get to Mars.
- I wonder if I’ll still be able to climb onto my sailboat when I’m 85 years old.
- I wonder if I’ll get my book finished anytime soon.
- I wonder if we’ll ever sail as far as Jamaica.
- I wonder if my first real girlfriend ever thinks about me.
- I wonder what would have happened if I hadn’t run from that other girl at age 16 when she told me she had been raped by her uncle. Would she have been my first true love?

Notice how my associations evolve to more meaningful material. This commonly occurs as partners become less inhibited and gradually turn on their receptive curiosity. The 10-minute preparation is a kind of intimacy foreplay. It helps you to transition your brain to a more receptive state.

**2. Flip a coin to see who shares first.** Remember—no volunteering the other guy.

**3. The first partner shares a wonder and elaborates on it.** The second partner helps by asking expanding questions. No opinions, criticisms, or reactions are given. This is a collaborative effort of expanding the details and meaning being shared. I’ll give an example of what this might look like after I describe the next step.

**4. The second partner picks a wonder from his or her own list and elaborates on it. You both continue taking alternate turns to share wonders from your lists.**

Here's the example I promised of a shared wonder. It's from the last item on my list: "I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't run from that other girl at age sixteen when she told me she had been raped by her uncle. Would she have been my first true love?"

This is something that I've wondered about from time to time. I harbor this regret from my youth. When I was sixteen, I started dating this girl who was a year younger. She was cute but, above all, very honest and genuine. Her parents were immigrants from some eastern European country. They lived in a little cottage next to a forest. I would ride my bike over to her place to visit. One night I rode over to her place and her parents weren't home. We had a wonderful time making hot chocolate and listening to her record from a new folk singer named Joan Baez. When it came time to leave, she walked with me to my bicycle outside. I went to kiss her goodbye but was shocked by her drastic response. She made a horrible grimace and started flailing her fists on my chest.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

She lowered her head and slumped shoulders with a pained look on her face.

"I'm fighting you off," she replied.

"Why do you have to do that?" I asked. "I was only going to kiss you goodbye!"



**She made a horrible grimace and started flailing her fists on my chest.**

She got this sorrowful look on her face. “I’m so confused.”

She started to cry and told me her story. Her uncle had sexually molested her for several years starting at age 11. She said she was only doing what she thought she should do by defending herself. We talked for awhile about her reaction, but, unfortunately, I wasn’t as sympathetic as I now wish I’d been. I thought she should leave such matters in the past and get a better grip on herself! (Not a very auspicious start for a future therapist.)

After a lengthy conversation, we said goodbye again. This time she kissed me long and passionately as if trying to make up for her earlier debacle. Surprised again, I tried to make light of it. “You don’t have to make like I’m going to spend the whole night!”

After a few days, I talked with her again about how she was doing. In a subdued voice, she told me she was trying to get used to the idea that she wasn’t going to see me again. And the sad thing was, she didn’t. I ran from the relationship and what I considered to be all of her defects. Besides, I was also insecure about my own sexuality, and this girl obviously wasn’t going to help me. This was my level of narcissistic thinking at the time. Decades later, I look

back and wish I could take a time capsule back to the moment that these events occurred. I fantasize holding her that night in a completely non-sexual way, just letting her feel my affection and acceptance despite her obvious injury. It was a lost opportunity for healing and possibly for a wonderful relationship based on beautiful honesty. I wish I could somehow go back and undo the compounded injury I must have caused her by my rejection. But now all I can do is add the experience to my wisdom and avoid hurting others in a similar way.

Pithy stuff! I chose this story to illustrate what can be done with the exercise if you're willing to share your own personal meaning. If you're not ready to share at this level, then don't. If I were a more vulnerable person, then I might have chosen a less disclosing item like "I wonder if there's life on Mars?" Intimacy depends on the emotional states of the people sharing as much as what's being shared. If you're fascinated with the personal meaning of what is being shared, then you're probably in the zone.

You're NOT in the intimacy zone when you're analyzing the problems in your relationship. Many men have learned to feel terror in their hearts when they hear the dreaded words, "We need to talk!" These words conjure up the specter of having their social inadequacies verbally dissected. This isn't a way to nurture attachment.

## Nostalgic Memory Exercise

This exercise is a bit daring because it opens up a lot of complex emotion. It's not the best exercise if either you or your partner is too reluctant about reinvesting in the relationship. The exercise may bring you too close together. If you both are willing to risk exposure, then both of you might collaborate as follows:

- 1. Talk with your partner and decide how long your "happy honeymoon" period lasted in the beginning of your relationship.** If you say four years and your partner says two years then go with the shorter period of time.
- 2. Find a moment in time that you both can remember.** This will probably be a memory that has some emotional experience for both of you. For example: "Remember when we had just moved

to Urbana (for graduate school) and classes hadn't started yet. Remember we didn't know anybody, and we were exploring the town for the first time. That Saturday night we decided to ride our new bikes across town to see "M\*A\*S\*H." Remember?"

3. **Both of you discuss the sensory components of the episode.** For example: "I remember us trying to stay out of the traffic on those little bikes, then trying to find a safe place to lock up the bikes so they wouldn't get stolen while we were watching the movie. Do you remember that? We waited in the lobby of the theater for at least a half hour. Remember how they let us in the lobby because it was starting to sprinkle?"
  
4. **Both of you share whatever you can recall of how you were thinking during the episode.** For example: "I remember thinking how odd it was that we had been seeing the poster ads for M\*A\*S\*H in the subway in New York for months. Remember that funny poster with the sexy legs on the bottom of the figure and the victory sign with fingers at the top of the figure. Then we were finally seeing the picture out in the cornfields of Illinois. I remember thinking about how strange that was. Subways to cornfields. I recall thinking about how much fun it was going to be to explore more of what the town had to offer. I know I was still worrying about whether the bikes were safe where they were chained in the parking lot."
  
5. **Both of you share what emotions you were feeling during the episode.** For example: "I remember feeling excited and a bit scared at the same time. Here we were starting our new lives together, really getting away from our families and being on our own. It was a new beginning with a lot of new things to explore in a new town and with new friends to make. We had to really depend on each other more than before. But I remember feeling scared that I didn't know how I was going to do in graduate school. I kept wondering what our future was going to be like. Excitement and a bit of anxiety. Those feelings were going through me around that time. That and my worry about the bikes in the parking lot."

There are a couple of pointers for doing this exercise. It will work best if you both spend time elaborating each of the steps three through five. There's benefit in the details. You're both stimulating your memory systems. You should realize that you're not just trying to recall. You're actually working against a part of your mind that doesn't want to recall! That's why it's important to magnify seemingly trivial details and spend time on each step. I highly recommend that you both agree when you've

exhausted each step before moving on to the next one. The simple way to think about this exercise is: sensory to thought to feeling. That's the order, but don't rush it. Develop each stage fully before going to the next.

The next pointer has to do with emotions that might be released. You need to be prepared for a mixture of ambivalent emotion. Most nostalgia brings about bitter-sweet feelings. If your relationship involved a positive honeymoon period followed by later struggle, then the bitter-sweet feelings may be intense. Don't panic and don't be surprised if tears start to flow. If you can tolerate the intensity, then consider it a good thing. Whoever is tearful is actually beginning to "thaw out." Emotions are starting to come out of dissociation. The brain is reconnecting. It's a step toward risking more trust. The positive memories are surrounded by a field of subliminal associations. These subliminal associations are about loss and missed opportunities. They may not be explicit but they still activate in the unconscious and give rise to emotion. If you don't know what to say when your partner becomes tearful, consider some form of reassuring touch such as holding hands.

Once you have thoroughly milked one memory for its sensations, thoughts, and feelings, then move on to another that you both can recall.

## The Curious Regeneration of Love

This chapter has offered some ideas about how to go beyond the mere expression of love. Most self-help literature about relationships says that communication is the key to growing affection. "Say this. Do that. Give your partner these symbols of your undying devotion." I believe that this emphasis is misplaced because it ignores a partner's experiential core and overemphasizes external behavior.

Some authors say that you should know your partner's closely held sentiments in order to nurture her affection. That's certainly desirable, but such a static model is very limited. A more dynamic perspective is that adult nurturing is more about *exploring* and *receiving* a partner's experience than merely having knowledge about it. This is a difficult concept to grasp because it's so intangible. We're usually much more focused on tangible outcomes instead of process. It's also one reason why men and women often get stuck in their communication. A man may want to solve the problem with a concrete solution while the woman wants the experience of being heard. The man is in a telic state and the woman wants them both to share a paratelic state.

Curiosity is an extremely important resource in a relationship. It allows us to momentarily forget about ourselves and to really pay attention to the person in front of us. This receptive attention is the most powerful way that we can reinforce love in a relationship. It allows us to tune into our partner's core and reflect back our nonverbal signals of delight. It's a subtle but powerful process. Couples who do this keep regenerating their love.

This chapter has offered some intimacy exercises to help you kick start your curiosity about your partner. If you find that your curiosity turns on, then it's important to keep scheduling your intimacy meetings. You may eventually find that you can maintain intimate curiosity without the structured exercises. That's great! Just keep doing it. If you find that your curiosity stalls and won't run, you will need to discover what's keeping you stuck. It may well be "The Great No-No" of covert shame and inhibition. In the next chapter, I'll describe how this hidden assassin can gradually kill a relationship.