

The Couple's Journey
By
Bruce Palmer LPCMH

We are all aware that the “Happy Ever After” endings to romantic comedies and fairy tales tend to be filtered through rose colored glasses and are less than realistic approaches to long term loving, commitment and intimate relationship. Neither, of course, are the tragedies of ‘Romeo and Juliet’ or ‘Tristan and Iseult’ what we hope for! The question remains; How do we navigate the ups and downs of the couple’s journey over the years? What are our expectations and are they realistic, or skewed by either fairy tale or mud splattered lens?

I personally tend to be a bit of a romantic and harbor the belief that relationships can be loving and meaningful over our lifespan. Of course there will be issues and differences that create difficulties (unless you are involved with a clone of yourself-and that would be quite boring!). The challenge is to meet and confront these issues as they arise, doing so from a position of respect and the cooperative approach of ‘brainstorming for mutual resolution’. It is extremely difficult however to set aside the usual ‘I’m right, your wrong; My way is better than yours; If only you would... ; Once I convince her of the logic she will change; and the infinite varieties of one-upsmanship and lack of true respect for the ‘otherness’ of the other. Whether by a dismissive, demeaning comment, a roll of the eyes that clearly states ‘you are an idiot’ or sandbagging and ignoring the needs of the other, when we engage in expressions of disdain or attack as the usual response to disagreements we are clearly on a relational downhill spiral. The question remains however, How did we arrive at this place, what happened to our romantic expectations and feelings, why not ‘happy ever after’?

To explore these questions and to provide a broad overview of the couples journey I refer to “ Becoming a Couple” by Schwartz and Schwartz, (Prentice Hall, 1980) We are all aware of changes we experience through the life span, childhood development as well as our developmental changes as adults. What we tend to not notice is the normal developmental patterns of relationship. Schwartz and Schwartz note 5 stages of relationship which can be distilled into three, i.e. 1) Handsome Prince, Beautiful Princess i.e. illusion---2) What is this frog doing in bed with me i.e. disillusion---3) Oh... he/she is wonderfully and magnificently human and has blemishes and weaknesses i.e. loving reality and hopefully I finding myself wanting to be with this person in mutual love and delight! In other words the journey is from Illusion to Disillusion to Loving Reality.

The first stage of relationship is of course Falling in Love (illusion) and being swept away by the grandeur of loving and being loved. It is a joyous time, one of feeling connected so closely to our beloved that it is though our very thoughts and feelings are one, when even the poetically challenged are able to put together resounding love sonnets, when passion, desire and sensual ecstasy take us to new heights of awareness and bliss. It is a time of feeling complete, whole and fully alive. A time when colors are brighter and even rush hour on I-95 is bearable! Even though most folks recognize cognitively and objectively that our beloved is not the perceived masterpiece of perfection, our emotions continue to support the idealized images and illusions in spite of reality. It is as though one has been smitten by a ‘magic potion’ and is no longer in control of ones’ life, which is often a great rush, as long as it doesn’t occur with someone

else while in the midst of our current ongoing committed relationship. The non-romantic view of this magical time is of course the hormonal drive towards propagating the species. As accurate as this may be, I nonetheless prefer the romantic ‘swept away’ approach. Most folks really do love falling in love, even though the quest for the ideal partner can be frustrating, difficult and at times ‘not fun’. Some folks however, can become addicted to the sensations associated with this stage and become ‘serial monogamists’. When the Romantic stage begins to evolve into the next stages of relationship, people can become convinced that they have ended up with the wrong person, rather than understanding this is part of a natural progression towards the development of committed loving. At times of course you *may be* with the wrong person and the relationship needs to end. If however one has an ongoing history of falling in love with wrong persons, perhaps it has to do with our own continued search for personal ecstasy and meaning through a symbiotic relationship with the ‘other’. Most of us are aware through self help books and advice columns that we need to find personal meaning from within rather than through the relatively short lived romantic stage of relationship, and *then* bring our internal personal joy and aliveness into relationship with our significant other. I support this view, yet the issue still remains—how do we get there! During the Romantic stage we tend to project our own longings, our hoped for happiness and bliss, and often our own best traits that are not yet fully recognized, onto our beloved. When we are with him/her and the ‘two merge into one’ we feel whole, complete and fully alive. And if we can maintain this ideal over the course of an entire year, what wonderful luck! I would like to note that six months to a year is about average for the romantic stage, especially for a couple experiencing marriage or serious relationships early in their life span. A number of mid-life and elder clients in my practice, who have experienced previous marriages, report a rather briefer encounter with the ‘Illusionment’, stage and move more quickly into the Reality stage of ‘Human Love’, as opposed to Romantic idealization. For most, including myself, this involves recognizing and accepting the deep sadness, the feeling of loss, being let down and disappointed, followed by the relief and joys of discovering and sharing the blossoming of the internal aliveness previously noted.

Kicking and screaming (figuratively speaking) we slowly and surely move towards the Disillusionment stage of relationship marked by ‘The Honeymoon is Over’. This paradoxically is a time of both recognition and denial. At a gut level we recognize, intuit, and sort of feel, the crack in the cosmic egg of harmonious bliss. At a conscious level however we don’t want the intensity to decrease, we don’t want to give up the idealization of our partner, and we certainly don’t want them to give up their idealized image of ourselves! Advertising folks, who I must admit are rather psychologically sophisticated, really play on this stage. If you wear the proper clothes, the right scent, 6 pack abs, perfectly sculpted body..... not only will you attract the right person, but you will keep them, living together in eternal happiness. However the crack in the egg does exist and all the king’s men can’t repair the inevitable damage. Inevitable, because no real life human being is able to live the illusion for an extended length of time, not with the daily closeness of living together. Early on in the relationship we tend to be on best behavior, wanting to impress and attract the significant other, trying to live up to their projected images. As this begins to wear thin, we begin to doubt the other, or ourselves. We are still, however, unwilling to let go of the illusion that the other can make it all

better for me, and provide that wonderful aliveness experienced in stage one, and so we try even harder! This next stage is often marked by increased romance, going out of the way to make the other happy in the hopes that I can seduce her/him into living up to my impossible fantasy expectations. Couples often will go on a second honeymoon, only to feel slightly disappointed that the magic was not quite the same.

As a quick preview of upcoming segments the next developmental stage is one of anger. It is here that couples who have only been together for a few years split up. The underlying dynamic is ‘if I’m not able to seduce my partner into living up to my illusion then maybe I can bully them into being who I think I want’. This is a really tough stage to negotiate. It can be done however as long as both folks are mindful and can develop openness and positive communication styles. More on this next month!

Advice for the month---enjoy the romance of being in love, and if you’re not currently in that place with your partner, please remember that you ‘once upon a time’ were and how wonderful that can be!

THE COUPLES JOURNEY PART 2

Hello again! In previous edition we introduced the curious and interesting stages of growth experienced in the evolution of a loving committed relationship. (Illusionment, Disillusionment, Loving Reality) As noted, the first stage, “Initial Romance and Falling in Love” is well documented in the plethora of ‘happy ever after’ fairy tales and romantic comedies. Certainly a wonderful experience, and one which helps create the glue and the initial bonding that encourage a couple stay together as they navigate the more difficult and stormy aspects of relationship. The second stage, ‘Honeymoon is Over’ involves the recognition that my beloved does not quite live up to the fantasy projection that he/she should meet my (almost) every wish and provide me with feelings of full aliveness (i.e. the way we felt during the Falling in Love stage). During this period we continue to hold onto the illusion, but with an undercurrent of desperation, trying our best to be ‘super nice’, in the hopes that we can continue the blissful romance.

The next stage is one of the most difficult. The “Angry Time” is when we move fully into ‘Disillusionment’ and often attempt to bully our partner into living the projected wish fantasy. The cognitive thinking patterns often becomes, “I’ve done everything I can do, I’ve been extra nice, tried to do everything he/she wants, and she/he still leaves shoes in the middle of the bedroom floor!” (Hair in sink, toothpaste tube tops, more interested in football than me, hours on the phone with friends...the list is endless). We begin to feel somehow betrayed; our partner is not living up to the unconscious contract of whom we believed them to be. We can become quite angry and belligerent as a result. Of course, most folks do not like the physical and emotional sensations associated with anger, so we try to repress or move away from angry feelings as quickly as possible. (At this point I must acknowledge that there are a very few individuals who become addicted to the adrenaline rush of being angry. Rather than feelings of discomfort and wanting to return to a calmer balance point which is the norm, they appear to enjoy the physical changes associated with anger, even if they later feel and express remorse. I would recommend treatment, including possible medication, for those who recognize

they fall into this category) Most of us however prefer to move away from our anger and 'make up' as soon as possible, which is wonderful, especially when it leads to passionate interludes of renewed romance. Anger however will quickly re-surface when it becomes clear that our partner still hasn't changed to meet our beliefs about how they should be. A more difficult style to deal with is when a person denies their anger. How often have we experienced someone growling through gritted teeth and facial grimaces, "Damn it I am not angry!!". If we don't acknowledge our anger/annoyance it tends to go underground and squish out around the edges like applesauce in an apple press. Anger *will* find a vehicle for expression and it is much easier to cope when it is up front and out from under the rug.

The positive side of this angry stage is that it provides the necessity of adopting the ongoing life skills of conflict resolution and self soothing. It is also the time to 'normalize the process' by recognizing that anger is a necessary part of the evolution of relationship. We do need however to express anger assertively, without aggression and judgmental putdowns. "I'm really angry at you for...vs.....You're such an idiot" or "You put the Tupperware in the dish cabinet! I'd like you to put it in the Tupperware cabinet.... vs... When are you going to learn to put the Tupperware in the right place? (unspoken, "You dummy!"). Often questions are used as a put down. At times we have all had to deal with the, 'What's the matter with you anyway? (idiot!)' comments which induce/invite shame and invariably result in defensive anger or withdrawal that interfere in building a loving relationship. "I would like, I'd really prefer, would you be willing to, I don't like it when" are clear statements of preferences and wants that lead to a better understanding of each other. At times people tend to use passive aggressive styles such as using sexuality as part of a punishment/ reward system, or replacing interactions with our partner with sports events. While these expressions of anger may avoid direct confrontation they rarely lead to increased intimacy.

The other half of conflict resolution skill is being able to really, really, really, hear the other. Not just sort of listen but to focus upon and take in what the other is truly attempting to communicate, *without becoming defensive* and automatically pushing back. It is amazing how many folks believe that if someone is angry at me I need to be angry at them. If you are angry at me for something I have done (or not done) our default setting often leads us to a reverse attack. Now *I* will find something *you* have done so I also can be angry. (Usually not a difficult task!) It is like snatching a dart coming your way and throwing it back. It is my experience that mutual dart throwing contests rarely achieve anything but wounds that need healing. It is important to listen to the anger of the other and deal with the presenting issue, working towards resolution, even if it is to agree to disagree, before we toss our hat into the 'anger ring' in retaliation by bringing up an issue that we find annoying. "You did this...Yes, but you did that" rarely works. Individuals need to acquire the skills to 'self-soothe', to put our knee jerk reactions aside so our emotional charge decreases prior to problem solving. This does not imply burying issues but rather developing the ability to delay our own immediate gratification in service of love. Conflict resolution is the ability to approach difficult anger or anxiety laden situations from a position of non-judgmental respect. Self soothing includes the ability to set aside our default settings of defensive anger in favor of resolution. Self-soothing is the ability to place my immediate needs on hold, or find ways of meeting them myself, rather than expecting all my needs to be met all the time by my partner. For example, I

experience a stressful day at work and feel the need for some TLC from my partner, only to find upon my arrival home that he/she also had a crappy day and is looking to me for soothing. So, feeling disappointed and respectful of the other, we both shift to finding ways of self care. It does become obviously problematic, if I or my partner, rarely if ever, is willing to meet reasonable needs. This may indicate long standing unresolved conflicts, lack of open communication regarding needs and disappointments that they are rarely met, or sadly perhaps we are with someone who may not be the best match.

The anger stage is difficult to successfully navigate and is often the source of the early demise of relationship which occurs within the first 2-5 years. It is helpful to realize that anger is a normal part of the growth of a relationship, and requires moving through by learning coping skills. It does not necessarily mean the relationship is flawed or should end. It is important at this time to reaffirm love and commitment and to remember the wonderful aspects of falling in love. As noted previously it is valuable to revisit those experiences that were shared in the initial stage of Romance as part of the bonds and glue that help a couple stay together though difficult times. Now is the time to take the second honeymoon, not as an attempt to brush issues under the rug, but rather to remind oneself that, in spite of angers and the other not living up to 'my' expectations, I do love this strange, unique, and at times frustrating other. To misquote Barbara Streisand, 'I finally got my husband to be the person I wanted him to be...and then I realized I was missing the man I fell in love with.' I invite you to remember that the woman/the man you fell in love with is still standing beside you.

And so, we move through the Initial Romance of 'Prince Charming and Helen of Troy' towards and hopefully through the Disillusionment stages of 'Honeymoon is Over' and 'Angry Times', and onward in the couples journey towards 'Loving the *Reality* of the Other'.

The Couples' Journey Part 3

I hope you have enjoyed the first 2 parts of the Couples' Journey and that you remain curious regarding the joys and challenges of growth as an individual and as a couple throughout a committed relationship. To do a quick re-cap: The initial stage is falling in love and idealized romance in which we project onto our beloved our own images of hoped for perfection, in order to feel whole and complete with our significant other. As this begins to wear thin and we recognize the other as human, neither the Goddess nor Prince Charming, we will often attempt to 'seduce' the other into living the fantasy. When they (and I) continue to fall short, remaining a flawed human, the anger stage of relationship will often arise. 'If being really nice doesn't make them change then I'll try to bully them into meeting my desired image'. This is usually not a conscious decision, nonetheless we find ourselves becoming easily irritated and annoyed by trivial issues which we once found 'cute' as well as a growing awareness of the need to confront more serious difficulties and differences that arise from being with someone other than a clone of oneself. (What a choice! I can be bored to tears looking at and relating to my own Narcissistic reflection, or I can be with a strange 'other' with whom I disagree! I personally opt for the more alive approach.) Conflict resolution skills and the coping strategies of self-soothing become the important techniques to move through this rather

stormy stage of 'being with', skills that are imperative to develop and integrate into the very fabric of ongoing relationship.

And so! The relationship has lasted 5, maybe even 7 years and we recognize this is not a 'starter' marriage. The couple has moved into an acceptance that the 'other' is not, nor will become, Ms/Mr. perfect, but hey, they aren't so bad, could have done a lot worse. We aren't struggling with addictions, physical or sexual abuse. We are managing ok enough, and if it's not the most exciting relationship ever known to human kind it is still pretty good. Besides, we have a child and a mortgage and a life together, let's hang in there and make this work. Yes. We have moved into the next (but thankfully not final) stage of relationship, "Hanging In". This actually is an important aspect of relationship building in which we (hopefully) learn the humble lessons of acceptance of the other, as they are in reality, not just the screen upon which we project our wishes. I know my partner fairly well by now, I can predict with some accuracy the kind of mood they might be in after a difficult day at work. I am in a familiar 'comfort zone', aware of the preferences and likes/dislikes of the other. Saturday soccer with the kid, still able to get out for the occasional Friday happy hour, Wednesday night yoga or Tai'chi, Monday night football at the local sports bar, hanging out with friends. This is the time to settle in with our significant other, and to solidify mutual goals, plans and dreams for the future. There is a certain undeniable comfort in developing fairly consistent patterns, of knowing that my spouse will be home in another half hour, and if not he/she will give a call and let me know they are meeting up with a friend or having to stay late at work. This is a time of relaxing into trusting and deepening commitments to each other. My partner (and of course myself) continue to engage in the irritating and annoying 'stupid behaviors' that had been so difficult to deal with and were the source of numerous arguments during the angry times, but somehow they don't seem to be quite so annoying these days. Examining life from the current perspective, dishes left in the sink, hair clogs in the shower, power tools on the kitchen floor and (my favorite) spouse not logging off the computer after use, thereby creating an extra 20 seconds of effort on my part, while still annoying are just not worth the hassle of major confrontation. Although we are still quite able to make pointed remarks and throw a few darts back and forth they don't seem quite so hurtful, except of course during those times when we as individuals are most vulnerable or in the throes of our own anxieties, issues, and complexes.

There is often a tendency to revert back to earlier stages of the couples' journey especially when we are experiencing high degrees of stress or going through particularly painful and difficult times in our lives. Most folks recognize stressors such as job loss or change, moving, death or illness of family members, accidents and financial hardships result in difficult times and greatly strain our coping capabilities. Less recognized and acknowledged are events such as planned trips and vacations, winning the lottery, family reunions and holidays, which have also been shown to result in increased stress. Any change, even positive change, means stepping out of our carefully constructed comfort zone. The proverb "Change, a fate worse than death" does resonate for many. The counterpoint however is also true. As folks who are familiar with the Chinese text the "I Ching" know, the Chinese word for life is the same as the word for change. Hence the title is translated as the 'Book of Change', or the 'Book of Life'. Change creates the environment not only for stress, but also for the excitement of full aliveness. This

paradox then becomes the background for the delights and dangers of the ‘Hanging In’ experience.

When individuals experience stressful times our natural tendency is to seek comfort, usually (hopefully) from our partner. The difficulty often arises that we have so much become ‘one’ that it is easy for both individuals to move into a ‘communal stress’, each wanting the other to provide the sought after ‘magic answers’. When stressed, either from the external world or from our own internal baggage or demons, it becomes easy to revert back to the fantasy that somehow there is someone out there who can rescue or support me in a way that makes all things right. When both individuals in the couples’ relationship are in the same place of stress and looking for rescue that is not forthcoming it becomes very easy to return to the earlier stage of feeling betrayed that the other is not living up to the initial fantasy agreements. I again note that this is rarely a conscious decision but an aspect of unconscious expectations. The path through is of course to recognize that we are caught up in our unrealistic expectations, and move back to the acceptance of the nurturance and affection that my partner does provide (at least some of the time), reconnecting with the ability to self-soothe and to keep communications open, returning to the equilibrium of ‘we’re doing ok’. There will always be disappointments and differences within a relationship, yet there are also those truly magical moments that appear to arise out of some strange and mystical place, looking into the eyes of our beloved and recognizing the depth of our love for this person, and experiencing ‘loving fiercely’. To use the language of David Schnarch, PhD in his book “Passionate Marriage” (W.W. Norton & Co, Inc.1997) which I highly recommend, “I want to want you and I want to be wanted by you”.

As discussed, this ‘Hanging In’ stage is not so bad. It is the time to really learn how to live with someone, how to move into an acceptance of their quirky behaviors that are sometimes annoying, sometimes entertaining. A time to recognize that the proverbial toothpaste tube squeezed from the top is really no big deal in the larger schema of life. It is the time to build a solid foundation, a life together based upon mutual values and goals, respect and trust. However, as noted previously this aspect of relationship, while feeling safe and secure can also begin to feel confining and perhaps even a little bit dull as we ask the disturbing question, “Is this all there is?” Our thoughts go back to the memory of Initial Romance and intense passion, when we felt so alive, excited and joyful. We want that again. Fear not! Living in full aliveness is do-able! We must however not only let go of the fantasy projection that our spouse carries the magic to ‘make it so’ but to recognize that the ability to live in aliveness is a function within myself and is not carried by any another person. We must turn inward, not search ‘out there’. More to come on the impact this can have on relationship, both positive as well as acknowledging some traps and sidetracks to our Couples’ Journey.

THE COUPLE’S JOURNEY PART 4

Most of us are familiar with the image of a couple walking down the street, grey haired, wisdom lines creasing their faces, perhaps even needing the assistance of a cane, yet smiling, and laughing with deep affection, obviously enjoying each others

company and clearly experiencing the joy of being in love. This couple has either just met and are experiencing the initial romance stage of relationship or have been together for some time, having successfully traversed the Journey, ending up with both the comfort and the joy of a long term romantic relationship. I want this! We have also, way to often, seen the couple that has evidently been together for quite some years, walking down the street with a dour look upon their faces, perhaps arguing and glaring or even worse ignoring the presence of the other. Clearly not living in joy or aliveness, experiencing life together as a necessary burden, hanging in for years, perhaps decades, too fearful to participate in the next steps of the Journey. I don't want this! I want more! I believe we can have more and achieve the life long romance and joy that has been promised in the fairy tales. Unlike the fairy tales however it takes a commitment to personal mindfulness, the willingness and ability to confront our own buried issues and irrational beliefs instead of staying constricted by unachievable fantasies that someone else will 'make it so'. Fairy godmother isn't going to do it for me, nor will my spouse. The final stage of relationship making is divided into two parts, 'Doing My Own Thing' also known as separation and differentiation of Self, followed hopefully by the climax although certainly not the end, of the journey 'Coming Together' (sorry-I couldn't resist) in which my spouse and I make the conscious choice to be together in service of love and growth, rather than out of fear of ending.

After a couple has been Hanging In for a while (usually a few years) one or the other individuals will invariably begin to feel "itchy", a bit out of sorts and generally dissatisfied. Of course, life being what it is, rarely do both folks happen to be at the same place in the journey simultaneously. This often results in one person feeling bored and wanting more, while the other is feeling satisfied with the way things are, desperately holding onto and maintaining the status quo. A potential recipe for disaster! The 7 year itch (or perhaps the 14 or 21 year itch) has struck again! This is a normal part of our Journey as a couple. I repeat this is normal, as long as we handle it with proper awareness and don't do anything sillier than buying a new sports car! (Or the Gibson Les Paul guitar I've been drooling over). Many psychologists have recognized that one of our primary motivations is the existential movement towards individuation or self-actualization in which we achieve a sense of wholeness. It is this psychological development that is the basis of the 'wanting more' feelings. This time period is often marked by a separation within the marriage. Hopefully the couple will not physically separate, as statistics indicate a rather low rate of re-connection when this occurs. There does however need to be a movement apart, an emotional distancing, a 'Doing Your Own Thing' in order to fully develop ones sense of an independent Self. Remaining in a one plus one equals one relationship (*confluence* in psycho-babble language) interferes with our potential for full growth and personal development as well as keeping us forever stuck in Hanging In. The ideal of course is one plus one equals three. There becomes a complete me, a complete you, and a loving us. In order to engage fully in this process of 'Becoming' we need to disengage from confluence and the notion that we as a couple need to be joined at the hip in everything we do. It becomes important to spend thoughtful time by (with) my self, answering the question of "Is this all there is?" with further questions. "What do I really want? Who do I wish to become? What is important to me? What do I find of value? How do I want to be when I grow up?" I remember a friend of mine was in rehab recovering from a hip replacement. His roommate was a retired physicist recovering from

a stroke and having difficulties in verbal expression. In spite of the roommates' background one of the nursing staff insisted on talking down to him like a child. My friend at one point asked his roommate, "Hey Charlie, How do you put up with her talking down to you like that? I'd be really angry." The response was "That's ok, I know who I am." I want to be like Charlie when I grow up!

It is important to take this time for self-reflection and a deepening of the relationship with oneself in order to nurture and enhance the deepening of intimacy and closeness within the relationship. If there is no clear 'me' how can there be an 'us'. This stage of the journey often entails a review, perhaps even a re-ordering of priorities and values. By now we recognize that we are not immortal, we notice our parents aging and approaching their own final decades of life, and we again ask "What *do* I want?" There are many ways of seeking the answers depending on your particular preferences and personality styles. The more organized and externally directed folks may want to write out goals and priorities, not just in terms of achievements but what brings a deep sense of personal meaning, what touches our heart, what helps one to feel the excitement of the young child, the Buddhist 'beginners mind', the full experience of being alive. Those whose preferred search mechanism is more internal and intuitive may wish to start recording and examining dreams or participate in journal writing to engage the knowing of what I really want. Both styles can benefit from dialogue with trusted confidants who can be objective and not caught up in their own agendas. And if the answer to what I *really* want turns out to be a new sports car, or a new affair, we have somehow missed the mark, and are continuing to expect the magic answers from 'out there'. Regrettably many folks, although they have let go of the illusion that their spouse has the power to 'make them feel whole' *have not* let go of the fantasy that out there someone does have that power. This becomes the danger. Way too often a partner prematurely ends what could have been a very fulfilling relationship by seeking the answers 'out there' instead of from within. This is when mid-life affairs occur, usually with rather disastrous results. Whether an actual physical affair, or the ever growing popularity of internet long distance 'emotional affairs' our energy is not being directed towards current relationships, either with our spouse or with ourselves. This results in a regression back to the first stage of relationship development, Initial Romance, and we once again find ourselves feeling wonderful, for at least 6 months, only to find ourselves re-traversing the stages of relationship once again. David Snarch, PhD in his aforementioned book "Passionate Marriage" notes that the people with whom we tend to have affairs have the same basic psychology, issues and differences as our current spouse, so why not devote our energy to completing the Journey with our partner.

The most effective way of moving through 'Doing Your Own Thing' (Self Making) in order to arrive at 'Coming Together' is to keep an open dialogue with your spouse, utilizing and continuing to develop authentic and honest communication, conflict resolution and the self-soothing skills that were necessary in earlier stages while exploring your own newfound sense of being. It is imperative to keep your spouse intimately informed of what may be stirring within, and to make your own daily commitments to keeping the relationship alive and healthy if at all possible, as long as you can do so without having to cut short or cease your own growth process. It is a truly wonderful and intimate feeling to share the depths of your process and to recognize that your spouse is supportive, in spite of his/her fears, of you becoming the person you are

meant to be. This is of course a mutual process, with you in turn supporting/nurturing your spouse in their growth. Sadly there may be the decision to part company and go separate ways. If so and we have gone through the stages of relationship this decision is likely to have been made, not out of unconscious or fantasy driven issues or expectations of the other, but rather out of a deep sense of needing to move into a different chapter of your own life. Leaving a relationship for someone else, as noted earlier is most likely an indication that we are still holding on to illusions. Most of the time however, if a couple has mindfully progressed through the Journey, continuing in-depth honest sharing and conscious decision making the result is a 'Coming Together' with renewed passion, generated from our own inner awareness and shared with our beloved in delight and joy .

And so, this series, an overview of the stages of relationship, comes to an end. I hope you have found the information to be thought provoking and enjoyable reading. As in any subject there is a wealth of information on couples and the intricacies of relationships, as well as personal development. I leave you and myself with the fun question of 'Now what?'