



You Don't See Me

POLLY YOUNG-EISENDRATH explains why our earliest relationships set us up to fail as couples, and how standing by each other with mindfulness and equanimity can help us find not only each other but true love.

LOVE ALWAYS TAKES PLACE IN COUPLES. We come into life as a couple, in the sense of being inside someone else, and we are sustained in our earliest form by a parent-child bond. The first gaze of the newborn infant is into the eyes of its caregiver, and forever after we want to find ourselves in the eyes of someone else. Regardless of whether we know it or admit it, we are paired up. We get started in an imperfect pair and we continue to make imperfect relationships for the remainder of our lives. For these reasons and more, all couples should study the Buddha's first noble truth—life is inherently unsatisfactory—so they know, from the start, that their relationship will be stressful and it's not their fault.

Consider a couple we'll call Muriel and Kent. They sat facing one another in their first therapy meeting with me, and Muriel said, "You don't really know me. You have ideas about who I am, but you don't seem interested in finding out what I really think

or feel. We've been together for ten years and I can count on one hand the times I have felt you really wanted to know my experience or point of view." Kent shrank back in his chair and replied softly, "You always say that. I do my best. It hasn't been easy being in a relationship with you because you have all these standards for how you want me to talk with you and what you think I should say and do with our kids. I just feel really hemmed in and unable to be myself."

Muriel is thirty-eight and Kent is thirty-six. They've been married for eight years and a couple for ten. They have two children: their six-year-old son and Muriel's thirteen-year-old daughter from a previous marriage. They both meditate. Muriel has taken refuge as a Buddhist and belongs to a local Vipassana sangha; she attends at least one weeklong retreat a year and has a daily practice. Kent considers himself to be "Buddhist-oriented" but hasn't taken refuge and doesn't go on retreat. He watches the children while Muriel is on retreat and during the Sunday morning sittings that she attends. Both try to practice "nonviolent communication," a skill Muriel brought into their relationship.

Muriel is a school counselor and Kent is a carpenter. They each like their work, but Kent makes less money than Muriel and feels

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humiliated by having to depend on her financially. Their leisure time is out of sync because Kent's work is seasonal and he has more free time in winter, while Muriel has more time for family life in the summer. They came for therapy because they hadn't had sex for three years. Muriel says she doesn't "trust Kent emotionally anymore. He just doesn't really talk to me, seems to be angry or aloof all the time. I don't enjoy his company." Kent says he "feels rejected and judged by her. Everything I do spontaneously just seems to fall short. I don't like who I am when I'm with her

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and I don't think she appreciates anything about me anymore."

I can feel their passive aggression—their withholding, criticism, stonewalling, and implied contempt for one another. It's uncomfortable to be in their presence because they seem not to like each other. What could be happening with such well-meaning, upstanding, and careful people that they have become alienated in a marriage that seemed very promising when it started?

EMOTIONAL HABITS AND PROJECTION

We all develop habitual emotional patterns in our earliest pair bonds (with a mother, a father, or other caregiver) that keep us from clearly knowing, seeing, feeling those experiences that threaten us emotionally. And we must surely have seen our earliest beloved—our original caregiver—in an idealized way because we had to trust that person (no matter how untrustworthy she or he might have been) to relax into our own being as an infant. It's no accident that many fairytales begin, "Once upon a time there was a King and a Queen." From our earliest fantasies, we develop later wishes for a perfect partner, our "other half" who will see, know, and accept us unconditionally.

As we mature through childhood and perceive some of the reality of our actual emotional circumstances, we form a psychological immune system sometimes dubbed "defenses" through which we perceive just enough reality to keep going safely, but often not enough to change our views of who we and others are. This, plus our early idealizations, causes us to form hidden emotional templates that get us into muddles and troubles later in life.

When we pick a partner or come to know our new infant, we begin with an "idealizing projection"—assimilating the other person to our own emotional and perceptual needs, often feeling the other will somehow complete or heal us. Projection, a psychological term, simply means that we impose our own hidden template on the ways we perceive another, especially when emotions are charged. Idealizing our beloved is a normal part of falling in love. But the other person must eventually fail to measure up to our idealization because another human being

cannot be a figment of our emotional imagination. If she or he tries to be, that person sacrifices her or his development, autonomy (self-governance), or identity. Our beloved should break our heart in clarifying how she or he is different from what we hoped and prayed for.

The broken heart of disillusionment, and the power struggles that ensue, are the first opportunity for us to truly know our beloved. Obstacles to doing so abound, however, because idealizing projections quickly morph into devaluing and fearful projec-

tions once our beloved falls off the pedestal. At that point, we begin to relate to the other person in terms of our most unhealed and wounded

emotional and perceptual templates. Like Muriel and Kent, we may feel betrayed. The person whom we loved now seems to fail or reject us. As we did when we were children, we feel powerless and then we do what we can to protect ourselves, like retracting our interest and intimate contact.

Take Kent, for example. He grew up as the younger son of a father who was a very successful architect. Unwilling or unable to express love directly, Kent's father was distant and aloof with his children although kindly and protective. Kent admired his father's success and apparent gentle kindness. But his father never praised Kent or seemed to see what was favorable and creative in his son. Kent suffered greatly and never felt he measured up. Now Muriel has stepped into the internal spot of Kent's father. Kent shrinks away from her advice and suggestions because he feels she disapproves of him. Unconsciously, Kent feels that Muriel forces him to choose between his autonomy and her love—a double bind in which he is damned whichever way he turns. Although Kent is unaware of it, this double bind repeats what he experienced with his father.

From Muriel's side, she was the competent and ambitious first daughter of a mother who had drug and alcohol problems and never found a way of life that worked. Muriel's mom was warm and affectionate, but she was irresponsible, disorganized, and often turned to Muriel for advice. Now that Kent resists Muriel's ideas about family and communication, he has stepped into the internal role of her mother, leading Muriel to see him as irresponsible. Repeatedly she says that Kent "won't stand up and be a father." She tries to give him the same kind of advice that seemed to work with her mother. Because Kent is aloof now, Muriel also feels rejected (a contrast to the warmth she'd felt when she helped her mother). The most painful part for Muriel, though, is that she feels superior to Kent, as she did with her mother: she feels as though she knows and understands life, their children, and the world better than he does. This is a bitter pill for both Muriel and Kent. The projections creating the biggest obstacles for this couple are from the parents of the opposite sex of the partner, making Muriel and Kent unsuspecting of their strong tendencies.

KARMA, EQUANIMITY, AND LOVE

I am a Jungian analyst, a psychologist, and a couple therapist who's written books about couples. Also, I'm a long-time practitioner of Buddhism and a meditation teacher. Carl Jung said that psychological karma is unconscious emotional patterning that is passed along the generations in families. With or without words, our emotional communications unintentionally transmit both our most painful wounds and our un-lived lives to our children. We long for our children to heal us and we often push them to carry out the dreams we didn't fulfill for ourselves. As a result,

True love means accepting our beloved as they are, and doing the same for ourselves.

there is an intergenerational transmission of relational pain in every family.

From a Buddhist perspective, though, karma is the way our intentional actions—including our speech and some of our thoughts—create consequences in our lives. As the Buddha taught, often we cannot clearly see these consequences because they are complex and entangled. The emotional history of Muriel and Kent, as seen from the outside, reveals how their actions are linked to fixated unconscious mental formations, something Jung called “unconscious complexes.” In Sanskrit, the word for such a fixated tendency is *sanskara*, which metaphorically means a deep mark or cut in a stone. These rigid motivational patterns constrain our perceptions and feelings in ways that lead to repetitive actions and ideas. From a Buddhist perspective, such patterns may carry over not just from early conditioning in this lifetime, but from a previous lifetime we do not remember.

An intimate relationship offers innumerable opportunities to discover how an unconscious complex has captured

our mind. To do so requires some fundamental skills and a vow, a setting of our intention. To truly love someone whom we have promised to love, we must vow to remain interested in them. Even in times of acute emotional pain, we promise to remain open to seeing, hearing, feeling, and knowing what is being expressed by our beloved. Although we cannot fulfill this promise perfectly, we set our intentions to be an attuned witness, accepting and forgiving him or her just as he or she is. We all want a partner who witnesses us accurately and inquires into our experience, is a companion in our daily activities, and joins our life story with a desire to know and understand us. This is what I call *human love*, and it rises far above our instincts for sex and survival or our desires to procreate. True love requires that we become mindful and accepting of our beloved, opening the door to doing the same for ourselves.

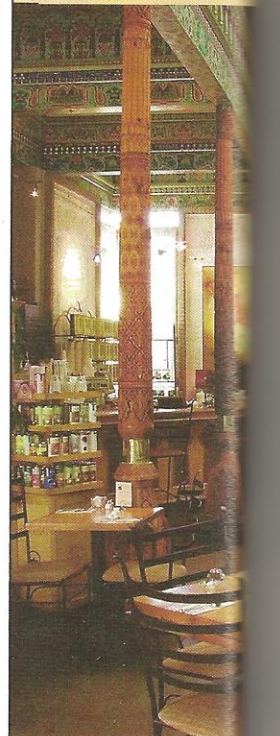
Mindfulness practice provides the foundation for love to become a true spiritual path. The ability to concentrate allows us to focus our minds even in times of emotional stress, and equanimity refines our ability to remain a friendly audience to any and all experiences. Equanimity can itself be known as love because it is the matter-of-fact, gentle acceptance of things just as they are. I often teach that relational love equals equanimity plus knowledge of the beloved. Equanimity allows us to relax and keep open, and concentration refines our ability to pay attention to our beloved's words, needs, feelings, and gestures, and to remember them. Together, equanimity and concentration are the necessary supports for any communication or listening skills we attempt to bring to conflict resolution; without mindfulness, our skills fall apart when we are triggered into habitual reactive patterns.

As Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein has suggested, the spiritual path of love could be nominated to be the ninth of the eightfold paths. Becoming a mindful and attuned witness to our beloved—keeping open even during emotional pain and a desire to withdraw—is a worthy test of our spiritual practice. ♦



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