CENTERING AND
THE ART OF INTIMACY

HANDBOOK
A New Psychology of Close Relationships

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Part One

A NEW PSYCHOLOGY
OF CLOSE
RELATIONSHIPS
Introduction:

In the Laboratory of the Human Heart

This book has been written in a time of unprecedented opportunity for growth in relationships. Walls have crumbled all over the world, including in the realm of human interaction. If anything is clear in this changing world, it is that relationships are desperately in need of transformation. The game has changed; now a new set of rules must be created.

The transformation of relationships has consumed the interest of the authors for many years. Based on our two-and-a-half decades of experience in counseling couples and single people, we have developed a psychology of close relationships that moves people toward greater harmony and creativity. Our book Centering & the Art of Intimacy laid out the theory, and now we offer the workbook to help our readers put it into practice. We offer you the essence of what we have found works best in workbook format because we want to put these new techniques directly into your hands. The material is written so that the individual, as well as the group member or leader, can easily use the activities and ideas presented.

The old saying tells us that there is nothing new under the sun, but in light of the miracles we have seen couples accomplish in their relationships over the past two decades, the old saying might just be wrong. There has been so much learned in the psychology of relationships in the past several decades that we, the authors, are in awe of and made hopeful by the transformative possibilities now open to all of us.

AN ERA OF INTENSE CHANGE

Relationships have changed utterly and enormously in recent years-some would say for the worse, others for the better. From our perspective as relationship therapists, we say yes to both points of view. Those who are committed to changing their relationships are soaring to new highs, while those who resist changing are finding the ground buckling beneath them.

In technological societies, relationships seem to be the final frontier. We have gone to the moon, but have yet to map out the territory of the human heart. It is sobering to visit Tokyo and New York and see the dash between space-age technology and stone age human communication. How could a species that can build a jet plane or a bullet train be so obtuse in their dose relationships? How can a scientist who ponders the mysteries of cold fusion by day go home at night and be so inept at the warmer fusion of family life? Never before has there been such a gap, and never such a crying need to bridge it. Unless the gap between technology and communication in relationships is healed, the human experiment on this planet may be doomed.

A WINDOW ON RELATIONSHIPS

As therapists, we have a window on communication that is unique. We are present to the worst and best in human interaction, as well as everything in between. For example, we counseled a couple who had not exchanged a kind
word, much less a tender caress, for several months. In an hour of intense, carefully guided communication, they said things to each other that have been hidden beneath the surface, unknown even to themselves. They were healed and left our office hand in hand. Another couple came to us in similar tight-lipped silence, but their efforts to communicate fell short. They left as much or more estranged as when they came in. Perhaps another day will herald a breakthrough for them, but until then they remain stuck. It is in this laboratory of the human heart that the ideas and activities in this workbook were conceived and tested. What is presented here for your use has passed the test of helping real people heal their very real relationship problems.

As practicing therapists, we are faced with the problem of relieving immediate pain. People come to us to feel better, to improve their lives and their relationships. People do not pay therapists to develop theories. However, as authors and contributors to the development of the profession, we have a strong interest in developing a useful and testable theory of relationship therapy. Our theory was developed from the inside out. By cataloging the various techniques that led couples to greater happiness and harmony, we gradually compiled a catalog of interventions that worked. As this catalog grew, a theory emerged. The interventions organized themselves into coherent categories, suggesting a powerful new theory that will keep researchers busy for a long time.

OUR OWN RELATIONSHIP

Our relationship has been both proving ground and direct beneficiary of the concepts and processes described in this and our earlier book. We met and married at the beginning of the eighties. Now, well into the nineties and the second decade of our marriage, we are deeply grateful for the amount of love and creative energy that the ideas expressed here have given us. We live and breathe these concepts every day of our lives. We use them in our work and in our relations with family and friends. Used skillfully, they are the foundations of a very powerful approach to living. The fundamentals—awareness, honesty, commitment—can be applied anywhere in our lives. In normal human existence, these simple things are often more conspicuous by their absence than their presence.) But when they are practiced and held high as the standard, they provide a beacon to guide us in our journey toward better relationships.

Our relationship has become a source of ongoing fun and spiritual growth, far beyond our initial hopes and dreams. As therapists, the ideas in the book have become the backbone of our entire approach to helping our clients. We appreciate your interest and commitment to relationship growth and invite you to participate wholeheartedly in this work with us.
CHAPTER ONE
The Essentials of Close Relationships

You can learn either by wisdom or experience. There is nothing wrong with learning through experience-in fact, there are plenty of things that can only be learned that way. Try learning to make love or hit a golf ball solely by thinking about it and reading the instruction manual! But there are lots of other things that can best be learned through wisdom and by taking a careful look at the rules and regulations before going into the field of play. Learning to cross the street is one area in which learning by wisdom and not solely by experience is preferable. Few of us would be here if our parents had said, "Just go out in the street and experiment. See if you can find something that works." Yet that is the way we frequently enter the realm of relationships.

Too many of us make the same mistakes over and over in relationships. Some wise person once pointed out that life is not one thing after the other, it is often the same thing over and over again. Nowhere is this problem more acute than in relationships. Some of you may remember the popular TV movie of a few years back that starred Farrah Fawcett as a woman who poured gasoline over her abusive husband and torched him as he slept. It was based on a true story, and, predictably, much publicity ensued. In the movie the woman was depicted as a victim and a heroine who dared to strike back after years of beatings and abuse. However, practically no attention was paid to the real-life woman on whom the story was based. Not long after the movie appeared, she married another abusive man, who allegedly molested her daughter. As therapists, we see examples week in and week out of people who are unconsciously repeating the same patterns in one relationship after another.

We would like to illustrate this problem with an example from our own relationship. In the first year we were together we found ourselves recognizing patterns that we had seen in our past relationships. One of the most troublesome patterns was one that we have since seen many other couples repeat. We would get close to each other, then find some way to destroy the closeness. At the end of a busy week, with a long weekend of potential closeness ahead of us, we would get into some kind of wrangle on Friday night. Then Saturday and Sunday would be spent sorting it out. As we looked into the source of this problem, we both learned crucial things about ourselves. First we had to acknowledge that it was not anybody's fault. Although we were both firmly convinced that it was the other person's fault, we realized that we each had to take complete responsibility and not blame the other person. When we stopped focusing on blame we had more insight into which of our own dynamics were causing the problem. In Gay's case, he found that he had a lot of fear that would emerge when he got close. To avoid dealing with the fear, he would get angry. Kathlyn would assume that she had done something wrong to provoke Gay's anger. She would be scared of his anger and would try to be inconspicuous. Naturally, these patterns prevented any possibility for intimacy.

During our first year we made an agreement that has served us very well. We decided that we were going to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth to each other. We were not going to edit or sort the truth, but instead go to great lengths to say anything we had going on in our minds or bodies. Some people might think this would be boring, but to us it was endlessly fascinating. As we became skilled at telling the truth we made remarkable discoveries about how much we had withheld the truth in past relationships. Gay discovered that he had been using anger to
mask his fears for most of his life, while Kathlyn learned that she had been hiding from men's anger at least since she was four or five years old. By speaking the truth we were able to talk about these patterns until we understood them and ceased to repeat them with each other.

THE TWINS NEEDS FOR UNITY AND AUTONOMY

By exploring issues like this one we learned one of the great truths of relationships. People have deep needs for closeness and for separateness. We yearn for unity with another person, and we also yearn for complete individuation, the development of freedom, autonomy, and a personal connection with the world. Both of these needs are absolutely fundamental, but they are also fraught with difficulties. Most of us have had painful experiences with getting close and with getting separate. We have been wounded trying to achieve one or both states. At some time, possibly even in the first few minutes of life, something may have happened that established a flinch reaction to getting close. Later, during the development of our autonomy, we may have experienced events that kept us from its full expression.

Certainly traumas cause flinches, but they are not the only cause for our difficulties in close relationships. Slow learning, in the form of things we see going on around us over time, is just as likely to cause flinching. For example, Gay grew up in a family where there was little touching. He remembers being surprised to see his grandfather touch his grandmother's arm at the funeral of her brother and recalling that it was the first time he had ever seen them touch. Later this showed up in his relationships in several ways. Kathlyn grew up in a much more touch-oriented family. In early courtship, Kathlyn would take Gay's arm out in public, and he would notice a wave of discomfort.

The growth of a close relationship resembles the early stages of childhood development. The infant's task when it arrives here on earth is quite simple: Being. It must master the art of being close to another person and getting its needs met. If all is untroubled in the primary relationship (nearly always with the mother), the infant will learn that this is a place where it can get its needs met. Later in the first year of life, separation occurs as the infant learns its second major lesson: Doing. The infant, in its second six months of life, learns to explore and to act on the environment in a variety of ways.

The parallels found in later close relationships are very clear. During the initial stages of a close relationship, the emphasis is on Being. We are learning whether this is a person we can trust. Can we get our needs met here? Usually there is great emphasis on body contact and being together in essential ways: eating, sleeping, dancing, walking. Then a movement toward autonomy begins. We need to find out if this is a relationship in which we can experience both unity with another person and the development of ourselves as separate beings. Can we be close and be ourselves at the same time?

In to this key period rushes the power of our past conditioning. As therapists, we cannot count the times we have heard something like this: "For the first few months everything was great, then everything seemed to change overnight. Suddenly she/he seemed to change personalities." It is as if the closeness we achieve in the first stages of a relationship flashes a signal to some part of our minds that says, "Time to bring out the hidden aspects of you!" At this point the controlling side of ourselves, or the dependent, or the violent, emerges, and the power struggle begins. When these aspects of ourselves emerge it seems "obvious" that they do so because of the other person. After all, the aspects weren't there before the person showed up, were they? People lock into power struggles over whose fault it is or trying to get the other person to change. The struggles sap the creative energy of the relationship and set the stage for dissolution or rigidification. Having helped approximately fifteen hundred couples through this difficult period, we can say with certainty that it is one of the most challenging things you will ever be faced with in life. If this passage in a relationship is negotiated successfully, there is no upper limit on how much love and creativity will be expressed; if not, great pain is often the result. One of our clients was a prisoner of war during the Second World War who was tortured by his captors. When asked to compare that pain to the pain he was experiencing in the wake of his
wife's departure, he unhesitatingly said that the pain of the terminated relationship was far worse. "At least I had a way to deal with the pain of physical torture. I could take it, or I could pass out. But this ... there's no way out."

All of us can sympathize. We know the difficulty of handling emotional pain. It is complicated by the lack of training any of us gets in how to be in dose relationships. Unless you went to a very unusual school, there were no classes on how to solve relationship problems, how to deal with feelings, and how to communicate with the hidden sides of ourselves. But the very nature of emotional pain provides another barrier. With physical pain, there is a clear solution: Remove the stimulus causing the pain. With our emotional lives, the problem is much trickier. Are we victims or volunteers? Much of the pain we experience is due not to the actions of others but on how we see the world.

Pulling out some therapy files at random, we find the following issues that emerged, seemingly from "nowhere," as people got closer in relationships.

- A deep fear of being abandoned
- The fear of being overwhelmed, engulfed
- Rage about childhood violations
- A desire to be taken care of completely by the other person
- Hypersensitivity to criticism

In each of these cases and hundreds more like them, clients swore to us that they did not know the issue was a problem until it popped up in the relationship. None of these issues would cause problems in relationships if we simply said, for example, "Honey, I just became aware that I have a deep fear of abandonment that is coming up now in our relationship. I hereby commit myself to taking full responsibility for clearing it up." Instead, when the issue comes up it looks like the other person has been the vehicle for its entry into our lives. In other words, we tend to project blame onto the other person.

PROJECTION PRODUCES BOTH PAIN AND POSSIBILITY

Here lies the crux of the matter. The major stumbling block in the relationships of the majority of the couples we have counseled has been projection. Projection in this context is when A blames B for something that actually belongs to A. An example: Marjorie blames Bill for flirting with Susie at the party. Bill blames Marjorie for being on his case and trying to tell him what to do. In counseling they find that this problem is rooted in projections on both of their parts. Marjorie and her mother were abandoned by her father when she was a child, resulting in great hardship for her. Based on this experience, she is hyper vigilant toward any move Bill might make toward leaving her. She is an abandonment waiting to happen. She sees Bill's conversation with Susie as flirting. Bill's background, having grown up in a military family with an authoritarian father, makes him hyper vigilant toward people telling him what he can and cannot do. He is a criticism waiting to happen. When they come in for counseling, they have no idea what the real issues are. They truly think it is the other person's fault. Imagine the relief of finding out what the real problem is! But, like many strong medicines, accepting personal responsibility can be tough to swallow. It is not something that many people know how to do with grace. Especially when it seems so obvious that it is the other person's fault! Many people—even the nicest and most intelligent people—prefer to stay locked in power struggles rather than look into the true source of the struggle within themselves.

Before rushing to judge projection harshly, let us all remember that projection gives us the possibility of change. Without projection, we would have a hard time seeing our hidden selves. The hidden self can be discerned in
dreams, in our fantasies, in our body language and verbal language, but to interpret these elements of ourselves requires special skills. However, it takes no training to turn our attention to the repetitive patterns in our close relationships and see our hidden selves come to light. Any pattern that produces dissatisfaction can be seen as a projection from some past event. If we pay attention to those patterns we can readily see the areas of ourselves that require fine-tuning or major overhaul.

This is easier said than done. A great deal of commitment, courage, and practice is required to start viewing all our problems as projections. It is always very tempting to disown responsibility, to point the finger of blame, to claim victimhood. Nature has given us the wonderful gift of awareness, but many of us use it sparingly or unwisely. Every time we repeat a pattern that does not yield satisfaction and closeness in relationships, it is possible to use our awareness to look carefully into the issue. If we approach ourselves with an attitude of humble inquiry, there are great rewards in terms of relationship learning. But all too often we use these opportunities for growth as justifications for holding more tenaciously to our old positions, the positions that do not bring happiness but are simply familiar.

THREE POWERFUL STRATEGIES

We have found that there are three things that people do that entrench them more deeply in the ruts in which they are stuck. Thousands of times in therapy we have seen that problems are caused by not accepting feelings, by not telling the truth, and by not keeping agreements. By turning these three practices into their positive opposites, three very powerful prescriptions for successful relationships come into being. They are:

- Feel all your feelings (and allow others to feel theirs).
- Tell all the truth.
- Keep all your agreements.

The first one is absolutely essential for healthy living in general. When we do not allow ourselves to know and experience our feelings, we are put into conflict with ourselves. When the truth is not acknowledged and spoken, a fundamental disharmony dominates the relationship. Complicating this problem is the fact that human beings are a lot more intuitive and telepathic than we might think. We often know when the truth is not being spoken, but we often avoid confronting these hunches.

This principle has resulted in many amusing incidents for the authors. On the talk show circuit we have become indentified as the couple who advocate absolute honesty in close relationships. The producer of a popular show called our offices one day and said, "These people are the truth doctors, aren't they?" When we first began talking on radio and TV about telling the truth, we were not prepared for the controversies that would arise. It seemed obvious to us that if you tell the truth you have a relationship; if you don't, you don't. A relationship is between two equals who are telling the truth to each other. Anything else is an entanglement, not a relationship. Our first due came in the early eighties, during one of our first television appearances. We were chatting on about the need for honesty when we noticed that the host, an extremely handsome, suave, and cool guy, had sweat pouring down his face. On the commercial break, he leaned over, mopping his brow, and asked us if we meant that people were supposed to tell the truth about everything. It seemed that we had touched a nerve with him.

It has turned out to be a sore spot for society in general. There is currently a backlash against honesty. We have always said that truth is the strongest aphrodisiac, the way to keep the romance flowing in a close love relationship. Recent popular relationship books advocate lying to your partner and not even trying to keep romance alive. The truth is dangerous, say these authors, and as for enduring romance—forget it! Of course, we know that this point of view is absurd, but we can see where it is rooted. There is tremendous fear of the truth in society at large. Some say that lying is the glue that holds the whole operation together. Political analysts have pointed out that the American
solution to dissatisfaction with Richard Nixon—when he lied the sweat literally rolled down his face—was to elect a professional actor to play the role of president. Actors are well paid for being able to lie so effectively that we believe it. As Laurence Olivier put it: "It took me a while to figure out that the secret of acting was honesty. Once I learned to fake that, I had it made."

In close relationships we all have to get skilled enough in telling the truth that we see that truth produces greater aliveness. Probably the most common resistance to telling the truth that we hear in therapy is that people are afraid that if they tell the truth their partners will be hurt. When we go deeper into this issue with them, they invariably discover that the real truth is that they do not want to have to put up with the other person's reaction. It seems that many people prefer the deadness of ritualized truth hiding in their relationships to the raw, electric aliveness that telling the truth produces.

One way to keep a relationship in stasis or in uproar is to break agreements. Many people use this as their main strategy for relationship misery. It took the authors a lot of looking to see that not keeping agreements destroyed the potential for creativity. In our own relationship, we found that underneath many upsets with each other was some agreement that had been forgotten. As we began to pay attention to this problem in ourselves, we began to see how prevalent this problem was in our clients. One of our clients with a closed head injury actually traced her accident to a broken agreement. She had agreed not to spend time with a former lover, an agreement she had made with her partner but did not feel committed to keep. She sneaked out of the house one evening, spent time with the lover, and was hurrying back home. She was preoccupied with rehearsing various strategies for lying about where she had been when she rear-ended another car that she simply did not see. Looking carefully at this situation, we can see why she might be an accident waiting to happen. Her consciousness was divided in two: not here, not there. Part of her was at home, trying to explain a situation without actually telling the truth. Part of her was trying to drive a car. There was not enough of her available to do the job at hand. How many accidents come from just this sort of division?

The three fundamental requirements of close relationships experiencing feelings, telling the truth, keeping agreements—are ways of staying in unity with ourselves and others. When we shut off our feelings, we divide ourselves in half. When we do not tell the truth, we divide ourselves from others. So it is with failing to keep agreements. Some part of us and others is always keeping track of the agreements we have made and the agreements others have made with us. When those are not kept, we have to confront the broken agreements or shut them out of our awareness. Confronting our own broken agreements and those others have broken is scary. It is not a popular choice, nor easily done. It is much more likely that we will swallow the confrontation, preferring to avoid the possible unpleasantness. But this is a troublesome move, guaranteed to put us out of harmony at a fundamental level.

In our therapy practices, we work quite a bit with people who are in chronic pain or who have longstanding physical problems of psychological origin. In the case of headaches, for example, the person often has a history of swallowing important communications, such as anger. The boss will make a demand, the employee will feel angry about it but will not say anything, only to go home from work early because of a headache. How many million hours of lost productivity each year are the result of just this sort of misplaced communication? We have shown hundreds of people how to clear pain out of their bodies by communicating the truth of their feelings in nonthreatening ways.

There is an old saying: The truth will out. If the truth of our feelings and deeds is told, a healthy relationship is possible. If the truth is withheld, it will eventually find some way out into the light. Even after many years of choosing the truth, we are still faced with the choice every day. We find in our personal relationship that there is always something new we are learning about ourselves—we are continually finding a new edge—and that a continued recommittment to the truth is necessary. Now, at midlife, both of us are discovering many layers of ourselves that we buried long ago in order to survive in our early family life. For example, Kathlyn left behind her creative side at an early age in order to be Mother's helper. She had to grow up quickly at the age of nine, when her mother became ill.
This event was not good or bad: it simply was. Her new role took on a life of its own, and she adopted a persona that she now calls Supercompetent.

We all slip into personas, just as we slip into a raincoat on a stormy day. It protects us from the elements, but it is not essentially who we are. Kathlyn’s Supercompetent persona concealed a creative artist. Now the Supercompetent aspect of herself, though very successful, is no longer satisfying to her. In other words, she wants greater freedom of expression. She wants to give energy to parts of her other than the reliable hard-worker. Here in lies a major problem for many people. Some of us are able to shed a persona gracefully when it is no longer working. Others of us wrestle with our persona raincoats as we try to remove them. Or, just as likely, others wrestle with us, trying to keep them on. Family and friends can get just as attached to our personas as we do.

One of the big messages life brings us is: Be yourself. As life proceeds, and especially as we get into our thirties and forties, we get strong hints from the world around us that it is essential to uncover who we really are. If we remove our masks successfully, we are able to uncover parts of ourselves that we can draw on for the energy to fuel the second half of our lives. If we do not, we are likely to circulate through the same personas long after they are tired and worn out. Certainly this problem is visible to us as therapists every day. People come in, stuck in personas they have been wearing for too long. It is often extraordinarily difficult to get them to try out a new way of being. Often we have marveled: Why would we humans become so comfortable with, attached to, and afraid of giving up something that is producing so much unhappiness?

To find the answer to this crucial question, we need to look at how the personality is built.

WHERE OUR PERSONALITIES COME FROM

As people work on themselves-through the self-inquiry of therapy and other procedures-they become aware of an aspect of themselves that is frequently lost in childhood. The word we use for this aspect is essence, the part of us all that is free, clear, and uncluttered with the learning processes of life. Essence simply is: It is pure consciousness, with nothing added. When in touch with essence, human beings may have feelings, for example, but the feelings do not overwhelm them. Similarly, we may wear personas, but if we are in touch with essence, we wear them lightly. When out of touch with essence, our personas overshadow us, leading us to become attached to them.

Personas may then develop a life of their own. They work. At a certain stage of development, they may be our only choice. As we use them over and over again, finding that we can get some of our needs met by these false selves, we gradually forget that they are not really us. We mistake them for our true selves, only to wake up later in life wondering: Who am I? Where did I go? How did I lose touch with the part of me that is real? These questions can serve as the stimulus for our return to essence, but sometimes they are never asked or encouraged. All too many people go to their graves without answering the fundamental questions of their existence. They settle for the small pleasures of life-the search for the ultimate cocktail, dessert, or sitcom-rather than becoming the agents of their own destinies.

In our travels we have been surprised to find that this lack of self-knowledge is often greater in affluent societies. One would think that citizens of the Third World would be too caught up in the struggle for food and shelter to ask the bigger philosophical questions. But the exact opposite seems to be true. On a train in India, for example, practically anyone-traveling salesman, pauper, sweater-will be happy to engage in a dialogue about the subtleties of human existence. It is much more unlikely to strike up such a conversation on a Swiss train or a New York subway. In fact, simple eye contact is often avoided in such settings.

When we have strong feelings—fear, anger, grief—our essence is often overshadowed throughout the duration of the feelings. If we develop an effective method of clearing feelings from our bodies and minds, we can then return to essence. When essence is strong, we know that while we may have feelings, we are larger than they are. When essence is overwhelmed, our feelings seem larger than we are. In growing up there is little useful information
available about how to clear ourselves of feelings. If we had a guardian angel, when we are grieving, for example, our angel might say, "Let yourself feel the sadness deeply. Don't resist it. Contact it in your body. Breathe deeply with it. Communicate it clearly to someone who'll listen non-judgmentally." Unfortunately, guardian angels are in short supply, and society seems too often to teach us the exact opposite behavior.

We tell our clients who are immersed in feeling: Don't flee or fight-flow. In other words, tune in to feelings and be with them until they pass. Feelings are like thunderstorms, with a beginning, a middle and an end. Unless impeded, they will move through, even cleansing the air. However, the anti-feeling messages of society cause many problems. By teaching us to withhold feelings from ourselves, and especially by teaching us to conceal them from each other, we set the stage for relationships built on concealment rather than revealment.

This problem brings us to the next element on which personalities are built. If we are out of touch with essence and the feelings that obscure essence, we need to come up with strategies to relate to people around us. In other words, if we find that being real does not work very well, we need to come up with something that does. These strategies, which we call personas, are the masks we learn to wear to get our needs met. As we work with clients we find that they learned to wear many such masks, because there are many people and situations that may require different faces as we grow up. It would be ideal, perhaps, if people saw our essences as we grew up. If they saw who we really were, and went about the task of nurturing our essences, then we might not need to put on false faces to get recognition. But in the real world of family interaction, we are often split into many parts. We may learn to adopt a Supercompetent persona with one parent and a Victim persona with another. On another day we may find that getting a sore throat works to avoid some responsibility, so we begin to use a Get Sick persona at various stressful times in life. Some personas are highly rewarded, others are frowned upon by society. A person may cling to his Delinquent/Rebel persona for a lifetime, even though it has brought nothing but misery to him. Why would he cling to such a persona? A persona is not simply there to get external rewards, it serves a complex inner function and stays in place by a certain way in which we use it in social relations. Personas are used to control feelings; while they are in place we do not have to confront the often stormy or deadly feelings on which they are based. We often gravitate to a particular persona at a time in our lives when we have an awesome amount of inner rage, fear, or grief and no way to express it effectively.

Personas are also used as ways of being right and making other people wrong. When in the grip of a persona such as Rebel, it is quite likely that we will band together with fellow Rebels, forming a club based on a shared perception that we are right and they are wrong. Then, regardless of what happens to us on the outside-judge, jail, or junkiedom-we are able to preserve a sense of self, albeit one founded on a false and costly view of who we are. We become willing to trade happiness, peace of mind, and success for being right.

Nowhere is this phenomenon more apparent than in the counseling of couples. People come in who have not drawn a happy breath in their relationships in years. Upon exploration, they find that the whole time they have been choosing to remain in personas that do not work, simply to be right and to make someone else wrong. Being right and making wrong is best thought of as an addiction. We notice that when people give up this habit it frequently brings on something that looks very much like withdrawal symptoms, sometimes including physical symptoms. For example, we pointed out to a couple a deeply ingrained tendency to make each other wrong. This tendency was so habitual that it had never occurred to either of them that the "make wrong" was going on entirely in their respective minds. When we pointed out that there was nothing intrinsically "wrong" with either one of them, they looked at us with mouths agape. We encouraged them to begin to focus on their respective minds as the culprit, seeing their wrong making machinery as the problem rather than the other person.

We got a call two days later from one of them, who said, "I don't know what to do now that I'm not criticizing [the mate]. What am I going to do with all my time?" We suggested that they turn their attention to finding out how they could enjoy life and how they could produce something creative for the world. This problem is the same one faced by many recovering addicts. The addiction structured their time and their lives. Without it, how would the time be
filled? Some make the happy discovery that the same amount of time and energy formerly wasted on the addiction can be turned into productive actions. Others do not get their free energy channeled in a satisfying way that yields creative results.

PROJECTION AND PERSONAS

Projections flow from our personas. Once we lock into a particular persona the world-and the people in it-look different. For example, Dependent/Clingy people see others as those to whom they can cling or those to whom they cannot. A Ramblin’ Man-fearing commitment and engulfment-sees people as those who will give him space or those who will not. One person comes into a party and sees people being phony. We see what we believe, not what is actually there. Granted, there are times when we see what's really there, but the wise person will first consider that everything he or she sees is a projection.

The problem of projection needs to be mastered if dose relationships are to be successful. What is the best way to find out what your projections are? The technique is simple but maddening at times: Just look at what you most complain about in others and apply it to yourself. Gay, for example, complained constantly about the anger that a former relationship partner beamed at him: "My programming led me to suffer in silence. Her programming led her to suffer loudly, operatically. Pretty much from the day we met the focus of her anger became me. According to her, her life had been unblemished until I entered. Oddly enough, I maintained the same thing. Friends would ask me why I just didn't walk away. I couldn't tell them why at the time, but now it's dear to me that I needed to learn about a key projection in my life. Specifically, I had disowned my anger, holding it inside. I buried it under tension and overeating. In the relationship I stuffed myself constantly, and when it ended I lost a hundred pounds in a year. Finally one day I woke up to what is now painfully obvious: What I most complained about in her was what I most needed to learn about in myself. I needed to learn about anger, how to feel and how to express it. As long as it was so deeply bottled up in myself, I needed to see it dramatically in others. How else could I learn about it? The relationship effectively ended one magic day when I stopped pointing the finger at her and brought it back around to aim at myself. I asked: What is it about me that keeps creating this situation? It was painful to look at, but what I got was that I was angry myself. I quit thinking that our relationship problem was her anger and instead took on the project of working on my own angry feelings."

Facing the projection issue is one of the most courageous acts anyone can ever make. It is so tempting to blame and justify. The august U.S. Senate, in the wake of the Clarence Thomas affair, went to the trouble of appointing a special person to find out who leaked the story! Many concerned citizens probably wondered why the senators did not put a special consultant onto the problem of how to reveal the truth rather than conceal it. We have watched many couples in therapy struggle with this issue. Almost everyone comes in with an agenda of blame and projection. Each person is pretty well convinced that it actually is the other person’s fault. Each of them must loosen the grip on this projection to solve the problems in the relationship. Each must abandon the pointing finger and look inside. The moment we ask the question: What is it within me that is contributing to this problem? the projection loses its stranglehold on us. The alternative question: Why is this other person (and the world) doing this to me? Puts us in an unequal victim position to all of life.

The corollary of dropping projection is taking full responsibility. But it must be a certain type of responsibility. It cannot be a definition of responsibility that involves blame in any way. Some people think of responsibility in terms of "Who's to blame here?" Assigning blame is based on a very primitive understanding of responsibility, but it is an association that is often impressed on our minds due to childhood traumas. After all, when we break the cookie jar while stealing cookies, we often hear "Who's responsible for this?" in a blame context. Admission of responsibility is followed by punishment.

If responsibility does not involve blame, what is it? What is an understanding that serves us in close relationships? In a phrase: Responsibility is a celebration of wholeness. In order to claim responsibility we must open up to every hidden part of ourselves and look within to find out how we are creating the situation we are in. A relationship is between
two or more people who are 100 percent responsible for their lives; anything else is an entanglement. Note that we have not said that you need to take 110 percent or 152 percent responsibility. In couples therapy, we urge people to let the other person have room to take 100 percent. We have worked with many people who took too much responsibility. They were martyrs who did not demand that others be responsible. An extreme example is the depressed middle-aged woman who rode a bus across town each week to deliver her thirty-six-year-old son’s ironing to him because she didn’t want to trouble him to come get it. For years she had wanted to ask him to pick up his laundry, but she was afraid he would be upset. If your life is based on such a cockeyed set of assumptions, depression is nearly assured.

Nor will 99 percent responsibility do. Any time we are coming into a situation with less than 100 percent responsibility we are requiring someone else to pick up the slack. It is possible to take responsibility even in extreme circumstances. For inspiration we sometimes read the books of Viktor Frankl. Frankl was incarcerated in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. Most of us would agree that this is a situation in which one could rightfully claim victimhood. But he did not stop there. He decided to take responsibility for being happy and creative even in such adverse conditions. And he did so, turning his experience into a remarkable journey of growth and service. Later he went on to become one of the most distinguished therapists of our time.

A healthy relationship is one in which both people are absolutely committed to their own wholeness. They realize that an entanglement occurs when one person or the other avoids full responsibility. The potential for creativity is enormous in a relationship. The potential for destructiveness is enormous in an entanglement. M. Scott Peck, in his widely read book The Road Less Traveled, puts it very succinctly: Mental health problems are basically disturbances of responsibility. Neurotics take too much; people with character disorders take too little. We would go further to say that almost all of us take the wrong kind of responsibility. As human beings, we tend to understand responsibility as a burden, or we see it as a restriction of our freedom.

AN EXAMPLE OF A CHOICE FOR ALIVENESS

What we often do not see is that true responsibility is the path to greatest aliveness. When we can celebrate the awareness-I had a role creating all this!-we have the greatest possible space for growth. Accepting full responsibility for the way our lives go also gives us the most power to change any aspect of life we do not like. We saw a beautiful example of this issue not long ago in therapy. A couple came in at the point of splitting up. They agreed to three sessions of therapy to find out if they could salvage the relationship. At first, neither would take any responsibility for the way the relationship was going. They could only agree on one thing: It was, without question, the other person’s fault. For her, his inability to speak the truth, particularly about his feelings, was at the root of the problem. Also, she was sick of his lack of responsibility. For him, the relationship was a disaster because of her endless criticism. It took a whole session just to get them each thoroughly ventilated. We did not attempt to do much besides listen to their complaints about each other.

But at the beginning of the second session we popped a big question to them. Would they be willing to do whatever was necessary in themselves to heal the relationship? After some deliberation, they said yes. This agreement gave us the freedom to ask a deeper question. To him we said, “Would you be willing to find out your role in perpetuating your wife’s critical strategy?” To her we said, “Would you be willing to discover your role in your husband’s difficulty in speaking the truth of his feelings and in being responsible?” Both exploded into a rage of denial, vehemently maintaining that they had nothing to do with each other’s issues. We rode out this eruption, then firmly reminded them that they had agreed to look at their own roles in perpetuating the problems in the relationship. Slowly they reined themselves in and began to focus inward. For the first time, they began seriously to entertain the possibility of true responsibility.

She broke through first. Could it be, she mused, that she had some role in his difficulty expressing feelings? We quickly put this insight to the test. We asked her to listen to him expressing a feeling. We asked them to face each
other. Tell her something you're scared about, we said to him. He closed his eyes for a moment. "I'm scared you might leave me." A split second later she howled sarcastically. "Oh, sure. Like I'm really going to walk out and move into some dinky little studio apartment and leave you sitting in a $250,000 house that I've spent the last ten years decorating." She went on in this vein for another thirty seconds or so.

When she came to a halt, we pointed out that no one in their right mind would tell the truth about his feelings if he got that kind of reaction. Of course he would keep them bottled up, even if there were no other reasons to do so. Her jaw literally dropped. We went further. When did this critical part of you come into being? She told us a story of a perfectionist upbringing, where she was criticized seemingly on a minute-by-minute basis. We turned to him. How is it inevitable, given your learning history, that you would invite someone into your life who criticizes you a lot? His past involved a critical mother and a sloppy father. His growing up was fraught with their battle, until they split up in his early teens.

The couple's relationship began to heal when they quit pointing the finger of blame. They took the same energy that was being eaten up by accusation and used it for exploration of themselves. By the end of their third session they were excited about using their relationship as an arena for self-discovery.

THE ART OF INTIMACY

Our whole approach to relationship therapy grew out of inventing our own relationship. Most of us have too many models for poor relationships. Few of us have an abundance of healthy models. When we got together in 1980, we looked around us for models on which to base our relationship. We did not find any. We were very clear about what we didn't want. But where to look for heroes? Not finding any gave us impetus to design what we wanted from scratch. The first thing we did was to sit down after dinner one evening and come up with a list of the things on which a healthy relationship could thrive. Now, well over a decade later, this list has grown considerably. Based on our current state of evolution, here is what we think constitutes a good relationship.

• Both people are totally committed to employing the relationship as the arena for self-knowledge.

• Both people are committed to being close.

• Both people are committed to their own ultimate individual development.

• Both people tell all the truth, all the time. Anything else is an entanglement. No exceptions.

• Both people take full responsibility for themselves. There are no victims and no villains.

• Conflicts are resolved in a win/win manner. No one has to lose in order for someone else to win.

• Both people consistently demonstrate that they choose having a good time over being right and making the other person wrong.

As we have watched couples switch over to living this new way, we have marveled at how powerful such simple things can be. On the surface each of these points looks easy, yet each involves lifetime commitments. Frequently couples come up to us at workshops to tell us that they have been working for two years on learning to tell each other the truth or communicate what they want to each other. Sometimes the simplest things can be the hardest to learn. But they are often the most powerfully transformative learnings. We have seen cancer go into remission when the person learned how to speak the truth. We have seen a cold and sore throat disappear within an hour when the person said "I forgive you" to his partner. We have seen thousands of people who have made the choice to move toward health and happiness in their relationships. It is deeply moving to us to see how quickly people can progress when they have an outline of the goals they are seeking. After all, it only took humans a hundred years to go from
locomotive to moon rocket. The speed at which people are moving to transform their relationships has given us, as therapists, authors, and fellow-inhabitants of the planet, a great deal of inspiration to continue the work.