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Chapter Five The Dynamics of Intimate Relationship

“Sometimes I forget completely
 What companionship is.
 Unconscious and insane, I spill sad
 energy everywhere.”
 Rumi, “Sometimes I Forget”

TURN ON THE CAR RADIO tomorrow morning, to something other than the local news or sports station. Listen to the music. What is it about invariably? Why, “love,” of course, and the search for the one who will make your life work. Is that not the deepest of our fantasies, the one that infiltrates so many other levels of our lives? Is not the hope that we can find him or her who will make it right, who will heal our history, who will really be there for us and resolve our strongest private need? I recall one woman, who was in an impossible relationship, saying, “I will not let go of this hand until there is another hand there in the darkness.” I knew what she meant, and yet I also knew that it was her challenge to face the darkness, without rescue, and that the journey of her soul depended on this courageous act. But what self-help book or well-intentioned friend recommends facing darkness, rather than offering ways to flee it? The flight from the darkness will drive one into someone’s arms, any arms . . . but the darkness only grows.

I have had the privilege of speaking to many groups in many states and several countries, and invariably, no matter what the announced topic, the question of relationship always comes to the surface. Why is this so? The obvious answer is that relationships are important, as indeed they are. But is it also possible that we make relationships too important? How could relationships be too important? Perhaps the clue may be found in noting that whatever comes up repeatedly, perhaps obsessively, is charged from another time, another place and has gained an autonomous foothold in our lives. In other words, relationship evokes powerful complexes. Since all insistent, obsessive desires are first fueled by an anxiety of some sort, what then is the hidden agenda behind our preoccupation with relationships?

Of all the ideologies that possess the contemporary soul, perhaps none is more powerful, more seductive, and possibly more delusory than the romantic fantasy that there is someone out there who is right for us, the long-sought soul mate, what I call “the magical other,” the one who will truly understand us, take care of us, meet our needs, repair the wounds, and, with a little luck, spare us the burden of growing up and meeting our own needs.

This fantasy is in us all, and is the most virulent ideology of the modern world, even more powerful than its chief rival: the fantasy that material goods will bring us happiness. Perhaps the combination of romance and affluence are surrogates for belief in God. In earlier epochs the notion that one might find fulfillment in this life was considered laughable, even impious. This world, our predecessors believed, was a “vale of tears” and could only be compensated for by an afterlife. Today there is less clarity about an afterlife, and despite the uncertainty that sells popular theologies, just as many distracted souls have scant interest in spiritual questions, and romance and material abundance are therefore served religiously. As an ideology, the compulsive preoccupation with sex and love stands virtually unchallenged and is not only embraced by our popular culture, but has a special place in the heart of all of us. After all, the ancients considered Eros a god, sometimes described as the oldest of the gods because he was the foundation of all things, and sometimes as the youngest since his presence was felt anew in all moments. So it is not that we can ignore Eros, for, as Jung metaphorically suggested, a neurosis is an offended or neglected “god.” The question, then, is not avoidance of the demands of desire, or the more complicated question of relationship, but how to live with them consciously.

As a therapist, I have worked with so many broken relationships, so many “soul mates” who were discovered— surprise— to be merely human after all. What is going on here? Why this obsessive fantasy? Why do we, longing for relationship, repeatedly sabotage the few we have? These are questions too important not to ask. And yet, in asking these questions about relationship, I find many who, while agreeing with the logic of the questions, stoutly resist the necessary conclusions and the agenda for personal responsibility that they ask of us.

It is far easier to be disappointed in the other than to call ourselves to account. Indeed, recent statistics indicate that traditional marriage is in significant decline. Currently, only 56 percent of adults in America are married, compared to 75 percent thirty years ago. Some are divorced, some are gay (and blocked by ignorance and prejudice from legal marriage), but many more are choosing not to get married. Married or not, in my view the two chief causes of relational discord are imposing inordinate expectations on each other and transferring old baggage into the present, thereby burdening the fragile new relationship with too much history. In both cases, whatever history we bring to the relationship occasions the attraction, the pas de deux, and thereby the often predictable outcomes.

The Psychodynamics of Relationship

At least two psychodynamic stratagems are present in all relationships, at all times, though in varying degrees, namely projection and transference, phenomena therapists are trained to identify, but as fellow human beings we are no more inoculated against their toxins than the next person.

All relationships begin in projection. While each moment is wholly new, one of the ways in which we are able to function without having to reinvent ourselves over and over is to reflexively

impose past experience, agenda, and understandings onto each new person, each new situation. These are projections. Unfortunately, as we look to each new situation, each new person through the lens of the old, we risk compromising its unique character with our historic experience and distorting its essential reality in service to the unfinished agendas of the past. And as projection is an essentially unconscious phenomenon, we do not know that we are externalizing our internal experience onto the other person. Through projection, our inner life plays out before us as psychodrama, a magic lantern whose phantasms simulate reality and repeatedly bewitch consciousness.

The second psychological mechanism employed in relationships is transference. As historically charged creatures, we have a tendency to transfer those historical patterns, and their predictable outcomes, into every new relationship. Fundamental values are always brought into the new setting and impose themselves on the relationship: attraction/ repulsion; love/ hate; passivity/ aggression; trust/ distrust; approach/ avoidance; intimacy/ distance; and many others. As one has experienced the primal relationships of childhood, so those core ideas and reflexive strategies, with their predictable outcomes, are brought into the present.

Initially, we are incapable of recognizing that we are experiencing another person reflexively through the refracting screen of our history, especially those parts that are similar to the new situation. This is why we see so many repetitions in our relationships. These fated relationships occur and reoccur, often with a tragic sense of inevitability and a strange familiarity.

If projection recognizes a familiar profile in the other, a set of characteristics that derive from us not them, then transference is the script, the old drama, the programmed repetition that is most likely to follow that projection. Initially, we are incapable of recognizing that we are experiencing the other person reflexively through the refracting screen of our personal psychologies. This is why we see so many repetitions in relationships. Incredibly, the abused child will unwittingly seek out either an abusive partner or one who has no spirit whatsoever and is easily controlled. Either choice is dictated by the unmetabolized events of childhood. Or the person who grew up with an impaired parent will be drawn to another troubled soul and reenact the familiar role of caretaker or enabler. These kinds of patterns are repeated in so many lives with so many variations and, because they are unconscious, produce such tragic inevitabilities.

If we are sincere, and really do wish to improve relationships, as so many popular books and magazines claim, we may usefully ask: "What do we project, and what do we transfer onto the other person?" What is projected and transferred most is our intrapsychic imago as charged and programmed by our history. An imago is a very deeply charged image. An image becomes an imago when it activates an archetypal energy field, and thereby touches on not just this present occasion, but activates our whole history as well. Our intrapsychic imago of the beloved other will most commonly have been shaped by our most primal experiences of relationships. This imago most likely derives from our experience of our parents, although other experiences, traumatic or healing, can affect this primal data. A common misconception about therapy is that it obliges endless, reductive discussion of one's parents and an unsparing dissection of their

alleged failures. Far from it, most therapy is reality-based, present-oriented. Nonetheless, our first experiences of relationship, our messages about security, trust, predictability, expectations, and other strategic dynamics, will derive from these archaic experiences with our primary caretakers and role models.

Because of the magnitude of the parent/ child relationship— since every child's sensibility is so dependent, so malleable, and so unaware of alternatives— these archaic, childhood messages about self and world have enormous purchase on our souls, and astonishing staying power. As we recall the twin categories of our universal wounding, feeling overwhelmed or invaded by life, or insufficiently met, even abandoned by life, so all the varied strategies ingrained in our deepest imago of self and other will likely show up as the prevailing style, the pattern-generating dynamic of the present relationship. In the face of the core trauma of being overwhelmed, one will have a tendency toward avoidance of intimacy, be caught up in the need for control or, even more likely, be overly compliant and accommodating to the other. Carrying the imago of abandonment, one is likely to elect a self-denigrating or self-sabotaging role in the duo, exercise inordinate power over the other to wring what one desires from them, or be caught in an anxiety-ridden search for the impossible and overburden the relationship with expectations. It is not that we consciously choose these strategies, but that they have an opening through the unconscious to insinuate themselves whenever we are not wholly conscious, wholly in the present, which is much if not most of the time.

Of the tens of thousands of persons whom we will meet in our lifetime, only dozens, perhaps, will activate this powerful imago enough to produce strong attraction or repulsion. But all relationships will carry some imprint of these first, most influential messages about self and other, and how we relate to each other. The earlier and more powerfully charged the script, the more archaic and less susceptible it will be to consciousness. All of these behavioral stratagems rise from the archaic power of history, and are stoutly defended by rationalizations when challenged. In fact, the surest evidence that a complex-ridden imago is in charge is the ready availability of a rationalization to justify it. These dynamics show up most powerfully in the field of intimacy. In other arenas we are likely to have more filtering devices in place. One does not show one's undefended self very often at the factory or office for it might prove costly, though even there it leaks out from time to time. And, of course, intimate relationship comes closer to our original, primal experience than more distanced, filtered relationships will.

I am not asserting that we are only prisoners of childhood history. Many other experiences of relationship in the course of our life have the power to modify this intrapsychic imago of self and other. If this were not so, we would remain infants, and could not mature, or experience healing, and would remain victims of fate. On the other hand, the power of those old imagoes cannot be ignored. When they remain unconscious, we are most likely consigning our choices of partners to history not present reality, enacting a familiar pas de deux, and repeating the dynamics of our family of origin.

Our programmed, psychic radar is on at all moments, scanning the world and identifying those persons who can attract or activate a projection and perhaps for a while carry the burden of our unconscious agendas and transferred history. This search, this fantasy, is the chief fuel for our culture—the fantasy of romantic love, the fantasy that there is this other who will make our life work for us, heal us, protect us, nurture us, and spare us the world's trauma. At the same time, the other transmits his or her historic material onto us as well. No wonder that relationships get so complicated, and are so easily sabotaged. If we could see all the imagoes we project onto each other, and the transference histories with their predictable outcomes as well, it would look like an air traffic controller's screen at O'Hare at rush hour.

When person A meets person B, say on an airplane or at a party, each is able to relate to the other from conscious intentionality. Sometimes this is the sole level of relationship engaged, as occurs in most of our superficial social transactions. But each has brought his or her history, "memory's unmade bed," to the party as well. The mere presence, appearance, action, or context of person B can activate the unconscious of person A, triggering a projection, with its attendant transference history. When this engagement occurs, powerful emotion, be it attraction or repulsion, is activated. Person B may or may not know that he or she is receiving all this energy, but it will affect both parties nonetheless. Remember, the unconscious screens the exterior world constantly, and asks of all new encounters: "What do I know of this other person?" "When have I been here before?" "How do I react to this person?" Once two people have met, each of them is already affected, already changed, though neither may be conscious of such a transformation of the space between them. Not only do individuals relate to each other in these powerful but unconscious ways, but so do groups and even nations, often with tragic, repetitive outcomes. How much historic horror has come about between religions, ethnic groups, and nations because of what each has not faced within? What we do not know about ourselves nearly always proves a terrible burden on others.

When two parties are caught in a mutual projection they may have strong repulsion to each other or strong attraction. One woman I worked with reported a strong negative transference to a professional football coach whom she had only seen on television. After months of this confusing emotion generated by a total stranger, she finally recognized that his curled lip reminded her of her mother's grimace when she belittled the child. Here is one stranger disliking another stranger, and all because of the amazing power of history to impose itself unconsciously upon the present. When, however, the projection is of attraction, a strong desire to merge with that other occurs. This projective identification is called "romance," and people everywhere intensely desire its effect on their spirit, their slumbering endorphins, and their deeply resonating agenda for repetition.

Who does not seek "love"; who does not wish to "fall" in love? Moments of projective, romantic history, from Dante first espying Beatrice on the banks of the turgid Arno in Florence to "some enchanted evening," when one meets a magical stranger, are highly celebrated. People even fall in love with movie stars whose only reality for them is a spectral two-dimensional image on a screen. John Hinckley sought to murder a president so that a movie star might pay attention to

him and find him worthy. And we think we do not live in the world of symbols! Folk wisdom observes that lovers are fools, lovers are blind; we also speak of a folie a deux because in this mutually projective state, the person is acting not out of a conscious relationship to reality, but out of the archaic and often overwhelming power of personal history. Such behavior, as we know, often leads to disaster. Yet note how this disaster is desired, as expressed by Rumi, centuries ago:

I would love to kiss you.

The price of kissing is your life.

Now my loving is running toward my life shouting,

What a bargain, let's buy it.

I recall a client who indulged in a series of romantic escapades with dangerous outcomes. In hoping that she might more consciously weigh the costs of her decisions, I suggested that she watch the movie *Damage*, which depicted a French diplomat who brought ruin to his life, his career, and his family through a compulsive affair. She came back to the next session and said, "That is exactly what I want." High passion, great cost, great damage: "let's buy it."

For the faithful, even in the face of multiple disasters, it still seems blasphemous to the popular religion of romance to suggest that it is fueled almost wholly by fantasy through the mechanism of projection. And we all know the next chapter of this story. Behind our projection is, surprise, surprise, a mere human being like us. Whoever they are, whatever they are, their imperfect reality will inevitably wear through the projection until a different picture emerges. "You've changed; you're different; you are not the person I thought you were," we hear, and so they are different, as they always were. They are always something different than what our projections and our psychological agenda presumes. (It is possible, of course, that something profound, something for which we might rightly reserve the word love, may survive the collapse of a projection. But this happy discovery is no sure thing.)

The erosion of the projection's power causes it to fall back into the unconscious, after which each person experiences confusion, disorientation, and irritation, and perhaps ramps up controlling strategies to sustain the projection as long as possible. Rarely does one truly analyze the phenomenon and discern the humbling truth, that some dynamic, script, expectation, or project from our consciousness has been unwittingly projected onto the other. In reality, whether they are a celebrity seen from afar, an office mate, or perhaps a neighbor— all of us are truly strangers. If we so barely know ourselves, how can we know the other? Yet the almost supernatural power of the projection is fascinating.

Who would not be drawn to a missing part of their psychological life, for that is what a projection carries, and who has not felt the power of this phenomenon? (No wonder the phrase soul mate has become such a cliché, for aspects of our soul are involved, but we can mistakenly think we

actually see them in the other.) The weaker the consciousness of a person is, the more he or she is likely to get fixated in the projection, even when the reality has long departed from it, and he or she will remain captive to the power of history, the agenda of longing, and the wheel of repetition.

These possessions by our unconscious history are the stuff of movies and romantic theater, but their outcomes are seldom benign. A compelling enactment of this projective power is found in the phenomenon of stalking. I once had a client, an officer of the court, who stalked his beloved after she had rejected him and his possessiveness. Even in the face of disbarment by the court for violating a restraining order, he continued his obsessive pursuit. Spousal violence similarly derives from the failure to honor the reality of the other when it does not conform to projective expectations. A weak ego can only tolerate discrepancy by resorting to violence. Each city has its women's shelter, and the sad phenomenon of violence, physical or verbal, haunts too many breakups. Violent men don't have the strength of consciousness and character to own responsibility for what is missing in their own psychological life. They pummel others for not carrying their own anguished souls.

In a similar vein, I saw a patient drive his loving wife away because he could not believe that she would be faithful to him. Despite her professed and apparent fidelity to him, his capacity to appreciate her was undermined by the memory of his mother leaving with a stranger in front of his eyes when he was eight years old. He never saw her again. That imago, programmed by the actual experience of abandonment, was so powerfully charged that it was transferred to his wife, and sure enough, history was repeated. She had no choice but to leave this obsessive doubt and distrust, and the childhood imago was tragically confirmed. For my patient, neither reason, nor interpretation, nor medication proved stronger than this archaic imago.

The most critical element in this dynamic is the relationship of our conscious life to what is unconscious within us. What we do not know can and will undermine the presumptions of conscious life, and will provide the content of the projection. Who wishes to hear this admonition, especially since falling in love is so easy and so pleasant? How often are we willing to pay attention to our processes working in the moment? How often can we see what we are asking of this unknown other, and own that agenda as ours not theirs? Typically, only when the projections fall away is one likely to begin asking this question, if even then. And many, even those in therapy, having explored their relational history and understood the dynamics of their past relationships, still easily walk into the same blind place all over again. In fact, it is virtually impossible to do therapy with a person "in love," just as one cannot work with a drunk. Often, they suffer more than an intoxication; they are temporarily psychotic and cannot reflect, own, and sort through their lives until enough of the projection has worn away that the ego consciousness resumes its proper function. The fantasy of "love" has everyone in its grip, especially the person who is lacking resolve to look within and to take responsibility for meeting more of his or her own needs. Moreover, and this is seldom noted while in the throes of desire, our projections depersonalize the other whom we profess to love. They become objects, artifacts of our psyche, and in those moments we are no longer in ethical relationship with them.

We have mutual effects upon each other whether we are conscious or not— sometimes for good, sometimes not. Sometimes, the mere presence of the other can have a healing effect, as therapists and hospice workers, or parent and child especially have observed so frequently; sometimes, the mutual unconscious activity can have a pernicious effect as what is hidden has a strange and compelling power over an otherwise conscious being. We find ourselves repelled by a stranger, a character in a sitcom, and for what reason? For the moment that unknown other carries aspects we wish to repudiate in ourselves or dilemmas we wish to distance as much as possible. Generally speaking, whatever moves us, whether consciously or not, will somehow be found as touching a deeply buried aspect of ourselves.

The secret goal of “falling in love” is fusion with the other, and the obliteration of the individual consciousness is the outcome most desired. (*Le petite morte*, the French expression for orgasm, is, after all, “the little death.”) While the desire for obliteration is an inescapable by-product of the rigor and hardship of our journey, when it prevails we are infantilized, regressed, and dependent, and secretly wish to be so. But in the light of day, it does not seem so pretty. The much greater risk of truly loving the other presents a quite different agenda, a more demanding summons, as we shall see.

When we look at this problematic question of falling in love, we see a number of implications emerge. First, what we do not know about ourselves, or do not wish to know, has a tendency to be projected onto our “beloved.” Second, we have a predisposition to project our childhood agendas, our infantile longing, and the burden of our assignment for personal growth onto the other. Thirdly, since the other cannot in the end, and should not ever, carry responsibility for the task of our life, the projections inevitably wear away and the relationship has a tendency to deteriorate into a power struggle. When the other does not conform to our relationship agenda, we often seek to control them through admonishment, withdrawal, passive/ aggressive sabotage, and sometimes overtly controlling behaviors. We profess innocence when confronted, for we usually believe our own rationalizations, but the other whom we profess to love has in fact been victimized by us. An analytic colleague, Alden Josey, once employed the telling metaphor that secretly “we wish to colonize the other,” and like most imperial powers, we are flush with rationalizations to justify our agendas of self-interest. And thus fourthly, it only stands to reason, that the best thing we can do for ourselves and for the other is to assume more of the developmental agenda for ourselves. In other words, to have a grown-up relationship, we have to grow up! How difficult that is when the unconscious relational “contract” may precisely be designed to help us avoid growing up. When we are able to sincerely ask the question “What am I asking of my beloved that I need to do for myself?” we have not only begun growing up, but may then be expressing a loving attitude toward that other after all.

This all makes sense on paper, but to work it out in concrete lives is another matter. Part of the difficulty of couple’s therapy is getting each party to look rigorously at the psychodynamics they bring to their disagreements without continuing to blame the other. Even more difficult is bringing two diverse parties to the point where each can undertake that fourth principle by relinquishing

their infantilizing agenda and taking on the full measure of their life's journey, with all its empowerment and nurturant tasks, rather than burdening the other.

As we saw earlier, every failed projection is experienced by the ego as a frustration and a defeat. But every projection is an aspect of ourselves that has come back to us. What are we going to do with that quantum of energy, that agenda of growth or regression? Asking this question seriously, and trying to live it, provides the possibility whereby a relationship can actually grow toward genuine intimacy, as well as support the growth of each person within it. The inescapable truth of any relationship is that it can achieve no higher level of development than the level of maturity that both parties bring to it. If I can bear to accept this truth, this challenge, I not only free the other whom I claim to love, but I begin to free myself from the shackles of childhood dependency. It is not a fault to have a childish region of our psyche, for we are all recovering children, but it is a culpable act to impose that disempowered, narcissistically driven history on the present beloved.

So then, one is obliged to ask, what would a mature relationship look like; what would promote an ethical, loving relationship, with a chance of enduring? Why, if we are exercising responsibility for our own journey, is there even a place for another person? Fortunately, there are persuasive answers to these questions. What another really can bring to us, their greatest gift, is not an imitation or confirmation of our limited vision, but the gift of their quite different vision, their otherness as otherness. The immature psyche needs confirmation to be secure, a cloning of interests and sensibilities, and there is no surer path to staying immature and undeveloped than seeking agreement in all things.

A more mature relationship is based on "otherness" itself, on the dialectical principle that demonstrates that my one and your one together create the third. The "third" is the developmental process that results as we influence each other in turn; we grow by incorporating that influence into our private sensibilities. We do not learn and grow by all subscribing to the same school of thought, copying the same values, or voting the same way. We grow from the experience of our differences, although in insecure moments we quickly forget this. The capacity to include those differences, even incorporate them into an ever broader, more sophisticated range of choices, is the chief task, and gift, of an evolving relationship.

The "in love" state, great narcotic as it is, numbs consciousness, retards growth, and serves as a soporific to the soul. Consciously loving another obliges risk, courage in the face of ambiguity, and the strength of tolerance. Whoever lacks these qualities will never truly have relationship. Whoever lacks the capacity for a mature relationship will never fully be in his or her own life. In the encounter with the other, we begin to realize the immensity of our own soul; by encountering the immensity of the other's soul, including the parts we do not like, we are summoned to largeness, not the diminishment that our infantile agenda seeks. Like personhood, the gift of relationship is not so much a gift as it is an achievement to be earned.

When we are able to bring the mystery that we are to engage the mystery of another, then we are in a developmental, dynamic process that enlarges. As Jung expressed it, "The unrelated human being lacks wholeness, for he can achieve wholeness only through the soul, and the soul cannot exist without its other side, which is always found in a 'You.'" What Jung is suggesting is much more subtle than we might see at first glance. He is asserting that wholeness only comes through relationship with another. Only in such fashion can the third appear. If we have only a conversation with ourselves, as a hermit might, we can easily get caught in the looping tape of our own madness, or our own stagnant, self-confirming neurosis. But Jung relates this paradox not only to relationships with others, but also to our relationship with ourselves, without which we have little to bring to the table. If we talk only with the other, we impose upon the other all that is unresolved, unconscious within us. The dialectical conversation with the other must include conversation both between our separate selves and within ourselves. If a relationship does not promote and support the growth of each, even to risky, unpredictable places, it is not a mature relationship; it is a regressive folie à deux.

There is a telling paradox at work here. The more we wish another person to repair our wounds, meet our needs, and protect us from having to grow up, really grow up, the more dissatisfying the relationship will prove over the long haul. It will swamp in stagnation. If, however, we can see that the relationship is a summons to growth, in part by encountering the otherness of our partner, the relationship will support each person risking, stretching, and growing beyond the point where they entered.

Allison and Jennifer were two working professionals in a relationship where they were continuously angry with each other. They would pick fights over trivial issues and withdraw into sullen camps. When I saw them individually, I was struck by how remarkably similar their complaints about each other were. Each thought the other was depressed; each thought I ought to identify the other as the real patient; each thought she was unable to separate long enough to pursue her individual interests for fear of seeming to abandon the other; each was resentful at this apparently controlling behavior on her partner's part. With their separate permissions, I wrote two letters, each summarizing one partner's position, and presented them to the opposite partner in their presence. To their amazement, I gave each an identical letter, signed by the other partner. As they read the letters, they first expressed astonishment, then hilarity as the absurdity of their trouble hit them. Each felt inordinately responsible for the other's well being; each wished only to be supported in her efforts to be more and more individual; each was afraid this quite reasonable hope would be perceived as selfish; each sabotaged her own developmental agenda; and each had grown resentful, blaming, and withdrawn. Their stagnation was inevitable, given their failure to recognize that in fact they subscribed to the same idea of relationship. Thereafter, the bramble was cleared, and the relationship became much closer to what it was meant to be, a mature association from which both parties grew.

I wish it were possible to say that all therapeutic interventions could evolve toward such mutually developmental agreements. Too many, alas, continue to flounder on the recurring parentification of their partners. Projections and transference phenomena have enormous

staying power, and continuously supplant the possibility of what we might oxymoronically term “disinterested love” with the unfinished business of childhood narcissism.

Yet, after the inevitable projections unavoidably fall away, we are re-summoned in a relationship to the immensity of our own journey. Romance may be replaced by something worth being called love, as a result of the humbling encounter with the challenges that our withdrawn projections bring home to us. This is why love requires big persons, not kids. Kids fall in and out of love at the moment’s whim. Big people can ride the shifting tides of life, range between intimacy and distance, defense and openness, and grow through their mutual toleration of ambivalence and ambiguity. Love asks that we confer on the other the freedom to be who they most profoundly are, even as we wish the same for ourselves.

I have sometimes been asked what I have against romance. Actually, nothing. It is the confusion of romance with love that occasions our problems. If by romance one means sensitive attentiveness to the other, to the atmosphere in which the relationship transpires, and to those sentiments that form from aroused feeling life, then romance can well nurture and renew a relationship. But if by romance what is meant, as seems most common, is that one is swept off one’s feet by the other, then it is only a matter of time, and intrusive reality, before one falls back to common earth. Sentiment in relationship feeds the soul. Romance as the gilding of the other may be a delightful deception, for a while, but will lack the staying power demanded of genuine relatedness. The problem is not romance, but what extra baggage romance is obliged to carry. As such, romance, which feeds on projection and hidden agenda, can actually obscure behind a rosy cloud the essential mystery we really are. While romance can arouse a psychic high, for it intimates the possibility of soul, it cannot sustain the connection, and inevitably leads to disappointment. A life lived only in a search for highs will prove in the end to have been a transient, superficial life. Romance, which frequently serves as a secular religion, does not serve for long. What person would consciously seek a short-term religious stance, yet as a culture we seem to rush to this temple of romance over and over, sleeping again and again in memory’s unmade bed.

We can see that when a relationship is lived in the context of the soul, rather than that of the genitals, the complexes, or as a planned palliative for the generalized anxiety disorder that is our human condition, we are asked to confront the essential mystery that we are with the essential mystery that our partner is. When we can tolerate this mystery, we are already becoming a larger person.

The chief disorders of our time are the fear of loneliness and the fear of growing up. The flight from loneliness drives people to mill amid malls, to stay in bad relationships, to abuse substances and worst of all, to avoid a relationship with the self. How can we ever have a good relationship with another when we cannot have a good relationship with ourselves? The flight from ourselves will always mean that we will be uncomfortable with another. What we fear in ourselves we will fear in the other; what we avoid addressing in ourselves we will avoid in the other; where we are stuck with ourselves we will be stuck with the other.

Growing up means taking psychological responsibility for ourselves, and not just economic and social responsibility—that is the easy part. Growing up means that we take spiritual responsibility for ourselves. No other can define our values, become our authority, or protect us from necessary choices. Until we accept this responsibility for ourselves, we are asking others to be a shelter for our homeless soul. As understandable, and universal, as that desire may be, remember that others will then be asking the same of us as well. How ingrown, and stagnant, such a relationship will prove to be. The immense soul that dwells within each of us will, in time, chafe and fret, and produce symptomatic messages of dismay. And in time, whether or not we stay outwardly bound together with a partner, we will psychologically leave the relationship by the diversion of Eros's energy to work, to another, to other projective possibilities, or invert it as depression or somatic illness.

An irony is found in recognizing that what our popular culture promotes as a solution can only result in our profound unhappiness. What passes for conventional love is fusion between two incompletes, both of whom are in service to a regressive agenda. How different this is from the poet Rilke's notion of a soulful relationship as the sharing of one's solitude with another. Loving will ask that we assume the burden of our fearful agenda, replace our tentative, timorous tread with a bold step into life, and spare the other the task of taking care of us.

Moreover, what the movies, the novels, the soap operas do not tell us is that the constant companion of Eros is pathos; desire and suffering are twins. If we risk loving, we will always open to larger suffering as well. (Perhaps that is why Cupid, the little guy in a diaper, shoots arrows, arrows that may pierce the heart.) To love another is to learn that we cannot protect them from suffering even as they cannot spare us. We will learn too soon that eventually one of us will lose the other. And we will discover that we, who can only barely begin to know ourselves, will never really know the mysterious other, even when we have learned their habits, their strengths, and their vulnerabilities. We will learn that the chief gifts of relationship are quite different from those offered by the movies and the top forty love songs. We will learn more about ourselves through the engagement with the other, sometimes more than we want to know; we will be asked for greater compassion in the face of the humanness of the other; but we may yet experience, in our aloneness, the community of those who have achieved solitude.

There is an old saying that the cure for loneliness is solitude. Solitude can be defined as learning that we are not alone when we are alone. When we have achieved the stature of solitude, namely achieving a conscious relationship with ourselves, then we are freer to share ourselves with others, freer to receive their gifts in return and not be infantilized by the mutual archaic agenda of childhood, the agenda that covertly uses the other to provide for us.

Mature relationship requires sacrifice, and not just the daily sacrifice of setting aside our narcissistic interests in service to the other—no small achievement in itself. If that remains the only sacrifice, virtuous as it may be, then the relationship will breed bitterness and a corrosive martyrdom over time. The toxins of such compelled sacrifices have poisoned many a

relationship. Rather, the sacrifice asked of each partner is to the dialectic, to the developmental idea of the relationship. It requires a willing suspension of our understandably common regressive agenda in order to remain open to the otherness of the other— also no easy task. As Stephen Dunn reminds us:

No one should ask the other
 “What were you thinking?”

No one, that is,
 who doesn’t want to hear about the past

and its inhabitants,
 or the strange loneliness of the present.

This sacrifice is not codependence, not an excess of superego oughts and shoulds, but is an investment in the development of the souls of both parties. In so many couples I witness one person resist the growth of their partner, for they fear that growth will divert energies from them, or will lead the other in a divergent path; however, growth denied by one party to another will only breed resentment and ensure that both parties live in a sour stew.

The permutations of Eros, the declensions of desire, take us to many places on this earth, and many places within the unfolding mystery that we are. Without Eros, the life force, pulling us into the world, we would all stay home and perish, and there would be no big persons available to take on the world, or even be big enough to rise to the challenge of relationship. But intimate relationship, when it is in service to the summons of the soul, is only one of many engagements with the mystery. Relying on it to replace the many other realms we, as spiritual beings, are meant to travel will not only burden the other with our un-lived life, but will keep us from that appointment which the soul consistently solicits for us.

Companionship, mutuality of goals, sexuality, and supportive endeavors are great possibilities in any relationship, but when we learn that engagement of the soul’s agenda is our real task, that this journey is our real home, then we’ll see that how we use relationship will either serve, or hinder, that prospect. Accepting the journey as our home will free the relationship to serve the agenda of life, the agenda of growth, and the agenda of the soul. When we have accepted this journey, truly accepted it, we will be flooded with a strong, supportive energy that carries us through all the dark places. For this energy we have an appropriate word. It is called love. It is love not only of the other, but love of this life, this journey, and love of this task of soul.