

Symbiosis and Love

by Louis McLeod, Ph.D.

At the beginning of our second meeting Jane told her husband of 25 years that she had felt sad and depressed the previous week, had not shared that with him and wished to do so now using the couples dialogue. Before Harold could get himself ready to contain his reactivity so he could mirror he urgently said, "I can listen to you but I just have to tell you it upsets me when you get sad and don't feel good. When you are sad, I am sad and I want to make you feel better." This opening led to an incredible dialogue about the effect of this symbiosis (although they didn't use the word) on their relationship. Jane replied that her pain causes Harold so much discomfort that she did not usually share it with him. Jane knew that Harold could not tolerate her feeling sad or bad and said, "So I withdraw from you and share that with someone who will accept that in me." Some partners may take a different defensive strategy and attack or argue, but the effect on the relationship is the same: Love is diminished because the partners cannot allow the other to be separate and different.

A very useful formulation of how Real Love differs from romantic love is made by Tom Malone and Pat Malone in their book, *The Art of Intimacy*. They conceptualize Real Love as having two components: Closeness and Intimacy. Closeness resembles romantic love yet is vastly different. In romantic love the symbiosis and fusion are glorified: We think alike, we feel alike, we want the same things. Separateness threatens the symbiosis of romantic love. The Closeness of Real Love includes the warm contact found in romantic love along with the conscious and unconscious awareness that the partner is a separate "other." The epitome of the closeness of Real Love is the experience of partners' lying next to each other after making love, ego boundaries somewhat fused by the orgasmic experience, yet intact and separate. Most of us who are addicted to closeness, "closeness junkies" as I have called myself, are attracted to the symbiosis of romantic love. However, romantic love allows for no separate "other" that is experienced in the closeness of Real Love.

Closeness is seen by the Malones as an affirmation of the connection that allows for the separateness while Intimacy is conceptualized as an affirmation of the Separateness that allows connection. Intimacy is the experience of one's being wholly herself or himself while sharing the same life space with a partner who is being himself or herself also. Thus intimacy may be the experience of one partner, excited and filled with joy and expectation about a new project or idea, being in the presence of the other partner who is experiencing a profound sadness or loss. Harold could experience his excitement about life while he is fully present in the relationship with Jane as she is experiencing her sadness and depression.

My existential learning of this kind of being present occurred with my wife, Linda, a few years ago. Periodically she would return home from her corporate job feeling beat down and blue. I would be eagerly waiting for her return home so we could talk and share. When

I would lie next to her or sit by her with the verbal or nonverbal intent to "cheer her up," things would seem to turn worse. I did not understand her saying in some of our arguments during this period in our relationship that I did not accept who she was. Now I can see how symbiotic I was being. There would be a much different result when I began to break my symbiosis with her. When Linda would come home feeling down or blue, I would sit or lie next to her just to be with her and not to change her. Often no words would be exchanged. Then I might get up and become involved in my own pursuits, feeling connected to Linda. Slowly I learned that being with Linda meant being with her as she is - not as I want her to be.

A couple who is struggling over their core scene as a couple may be very intimate and connected but not feel close. They may also experience an intense closeness during a time of struggle over issues that separate them.

The challenge to a couple who is breaking the symbiosis is to be both separate and connected. Our cultural models lead us to perceive real love as romantic love, even if we know better consciously. When romantic love ends we continue our search for this kind of illusory "real love." Understanding that Real Love includes both Closeness and Intimacy will challenge the partner who is more comfortable with distance as well as the partner who prefers more contact.