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Intimacy: What's Love Got To Do With It?

Fifty bucks on the line. Right here... Right now. You and me. Winner takes all. Ready? Define "intimacy". And, while you are at it, for another fifty, tell me what it means to be "in love." How'd you do? Still thinking??? Chances are, you're reaching into your pocket and getting ready to hand me at least fifty bucks. The concepts of intimacy and especially "in love" are difficult to grasp, yet most of us are either looking for it or being accused of running from it.

To make matters even more complicated, it is more likely that two people in a relationship will have completely different definitions of "in love" and "intimacy"! Although I may be accused of taking the mystery out of love and intimacy, I'm going to simplify the entire matter, making the whole ordeal much more user-friendly.

Most of our love relationships have begun in either one of two ways. The most common brings us to the wonderful world of "infatuation." We've all been there: it's the classic Tony-meets-Maria-For-The-First-Time scene in West Side Story. There they are, minding their own business. Suddenly, from clear across the room, their eyes meet and lock. Reality begins to fade away. All they can see is each other. They approach one another. The room is spinning around them. Each is consumed by the sight of the other. Tony bursts into song, and the rest is history.

While not as picturesque, the second option is a bit more grounded. You're in the same class, work for the same company, do volunteer work together, you get to know each other, sparks fly and the rest takes care of itself. Since method number two is a bit more firmly rooted in reality, it has a better shot at turning into a long term relationship. Still, both can lead to "in love" and both require the same ingredients to ensure that the relationship flourishes.

What are these required ingredients? Well, before we get to that, let's be sure that we're talking about the same thing when we say "in love." There are those who believe that "in love" is either an illusion, a bad scene in a movie or something that fades away after a year. While it is true that "in love" is difficult to maintain, it is most certainly attainable.

The two essential elements for "in love" to develop are fairly simple. The first is "positive regard." This means that you are completely blown away by the other person's values and by what he or she stands for. It's not that this person is absolutely flawless. Rather, this person's values almost completely mirror your own. Moreover, there may be additional aspects of this person's value system that you thoroughly admire. Because of this you have a great deal of respect for this person and hold him or her in very high esteem.

The other element is a bit more abstract. You simply love who you become when you are together with that other person. We've all been there! We become our potential. We become the person we always knew we could be if life and all of its problems hadn't gotten into our way.

So, let's assume that we've met this wonderful person (either a la Tony and Maria or option number two ... you pick). We feel enormous positive regard and we are blown away by the fabulous human being we've become. Then what? What keeps it all together? What's the mystery ingredient? The chocolate chips in the cookies? The silver lining in that elusive cloud?

Here's where intimacy comes in. It's the lubricant that greases the whole machine. Intimacy helps maintain positive regard. If positive regard is lost, "in love" walks

right out the door. Intimacy is multi-faceted in that it has many components. These are: honesty and not keeping secrets; shared bonds through common experiences; love and warmth; the freedom to communicate and to give and receive feedback; commitment -- especially if we are enduring a phase in the relationship that is painful or uncomfortable; and the trustworthiness to follow through with what we say we will do.

Moreover, the aspect of trust also says that we will be kind with power. Let's face it, when somebody exposes the deepest parts of themselves to us, they become extremely vulnerable. This puts us in a position of tremendous power. Using this power as leverage to either get what we want, to get us out of a sticky situation, or to keep us from exposing our own vulnerabilities, squelches any element of intimacy. You simply can't have an intimate relationship ruled by consequences and power.

Power and vulnerability also comes into play in intimacy's area of communication. There is always going to be one person in the relationship who is stronger, has a better memory and is better with words. If unchecked, this person will "win" every argument especially if the goal of communication becomes proving that you are right rather than getting to the truth. Sadly, all that really happens in this case is that the person that "lost" the argument once again feels disinclined to communicate with their partner. Communicating again has led to a loss of self respect as well as a dwindling of positive regard for the other person.

Now that we know all of this, what next? Well, it is rather simple, we put it into practice. We check our levels in each area of intimacy. Let's face it, you wouldn't get into your car and start out on a long trip without first checking the levels of various fluids that make the car run. If your car loses oil, water, antifreeze or gasoline, chances are you are not going to make it to point "B". Each component is as important as the next.

It is the same with the state of your relationship and the components of intimacy. You may be great at communication, but if your trustworthiness is compromised, who cares what you have to say. Your partner may be wonderfully committed to the relationship but if he or she is not giving you feedback and letting you know that he or she is happy and still in love, then how do you really know what's going on? Each component of intimacy is as important to maintaining that "in love" feeling as the next.

Just for fun, take a look at your previous relationships and try to determine where or when it was that things began to turn sour. In this review, go through the areas of intimacy and see which elements were neglected by either you or your partner. Chances are, intimacy began to dwindle and, as a result, positive regard and respect were lost. With that, "in love" packed its bags and headed for the nearest bus stop.

Putting all of this into practice may seem like a lot of work, but salvaging a relationship after positive regard is lost can be a monumental task. With some practice, these new insights can become second nature and will most certainly enhance the quality of all of your relationships. And what if it doesn't? Well, that's simple. I'll give you back your fifty bucks!

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