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LIVING TOGETHER

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Today's phenomenal rate of change brings greater economic freedom. For many of us, especially women, it increases the range of choices that can be lived.

The old ways of holding together human co-habitation, such as marriage, often fall over.

But this doesn't mean there is a complete vacuum of knowhow about living together. Living together is being co-created at this moment in history by those zillions of us who are living with someone. Haphazardly, uncertainly, tentatively, new forms of commitment and mutuality are emerging.

This article puts together in one place a collection of notions that I have developed with, and for, clients over the last 18 years; and living in relationship for 40 years; guidelines that aim to increase the chances of fruitful living together. Just helpful principles. Think of them as nourishment.

Dip in. Feast.

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Appreciation and Celebration

So far as any of us have a cool coupledom, one that swings, or even if it doesn't swing a lot, when it does, be sure to let each other know this is so.

There are lots of possibilities for drift in any long-term relationship and one of the most problematic is a drift toward failing to value the Other. To let your Other know how much they matter.

Is taking the Other on a lavish holiday, or an annual buying spree what I mean by valuing? Not really. Letting other people know they matter means saying so. When you like their smile, you like the joke they made, you like the courage they showed in standing up to the bank manager. You like the way they took time to care for a needy friend. You liked the way they were patient when you were late. You admired their thoroughness and diligence in clearing out the cellar. Say so. Every time.

Is that too much? Why would it be? I'm talking about small, accurate celebrations of liking, admiration and delight.

So far as they come easily and often, then the chances are that a 'taken-for-granted' resentment factory never opens for business. Never even finds a plot to build on.

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Collisions

The two persons in a couple are two universes of experience. Huge areas of overlap and similarity—two legs, two eyes, two hands, two hearts, two feet. And huge areas of difference, of preferences and needs, built around two intrinsically different life stories. Simultaneously a recipe for endless mutual interest and wonder and very likely the occasion for collisions.

Because taken together, the differences between us of history, of sex, of style, plus factors such as fatigue, inattention, or anxiety set us up to be human super-tankers that take 24 hours to change course and often all we have is 24 minutes. So to be in a couple is to have collisions. **Rows.**

We never have rows, I hear you say. Oh no? Who defers then, I ask. Who swallows hurt or resentment? Rows seem likely to be essential because they are one place, but hopefully not the only one, where the emotional life of a couple catches fire.

People with bodies have emotional reactions. Events can trigger bodily reactions of fear, anger, or grief in their infinite variety. So tolerating and even seeing the benefits of rows is an essential ingredient of coupledness.

Rows are distressed negotiations—or, due to lack of attention, sleep, food, fatigue forgetfulness, lack of care, or other pressures—negotiations while distressed.

Rows are very ineffective for reaching agreements but they are often extremely effective, even the only way, that certain hard-boiled knots of opinion or complaint can get out into the fresh air. Rows drill into the furthest reaches of difference. We get to hear things that have been hidden; or only half known; we say things we never thought we could say;

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we say things we never knew we felt; we may hear things that hurt; we may hear things that are a revelation.

And then there is recovery. Rows by themselves are of limited value. Clearing up afterwards and recovery is what potentiates their value. Recovery often seems to take a lot of courage and trust and also it builds trust. A couple who have had, and recovered well from twenty rows, are going to be building on stronger foundations than a couple that do anything to avoid them. In my opinion.

One or two things about recovery. As you've probably found, recovery isn't accessible right away. There has to be a delay, so being row-competent as a couple means knowing that a cooling-off period is vital. Withdrawal, backing off, needs to be tolerated and the need for it understood by both partners. If one of us comes forward too soon then the fire is often fanned into life again.

So a handy kind of agreement to have between you is to know, if you collide and disagreement escalates, this means that for the moment, you have stopped caring for each other, and to go away and take care of yourselves. Whatever that would look like. And then, after a while, talk.

In the background of these ideas about rows are two notions:

1. Because our bodily emotional triggers are autonomous, out of our control, we are not responsible for what we feel. Life events trigger the release into the blood-stream of a hormonal cocktail that we have come to name as anger, fear and grief. This is why we may feel flooded with emotion.

But.

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2. While these feelings may be involuntary, this doesn't absolve us of responsibility, we are responsible for what we do about them.

So to meet each other again after a collision means that sufficient time needs to have passed for the emotional activation in the blood stream to be dissipated. Handling these transitions well is a feature of **Emotional competence**—a more practical notion than emotional intelligence or emotional literacy—which is a big subject and that's all I'm going to say about it here. If you want to know more follow the link above.

I notice I haven't said anything about apologies and reparation. It is a characteristic of interpersonal collisions that language, while maybe a lot richer than usual, is often over the top inaccurate. Especially if we get into telling people what they *are*. Stupid. Cruel. Thick. Careless. Of course you may be someone who's never been out of their pram in a row and never slipped into that kind of abuse.

Chances are though you have. What do we do? Later (it has to be later), we can swallow our pride and apologize for what we regret. Not note, an apology for being a party to the row, but an apology for the inaccuracy or grossness of what we may have said about our partner's mother, or our partner's need to keep bees in the garage, or whatever got up our nose.

And if we did or said something very shameful or regrettable, go one step further and make reparation, clear up the spoiled food, order replacements for the broken crockery.

If both of us can clear up after the mess we've made, then we are on the way to being able to agree, or at least agree to disagree, about the substantive issues that the row brought into the open. And perhaps more important we will be more

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likely to close the episode so that it doesn't cast a shadow forward over coming weeks, months, or years, and also maybe learn something from it.

A footnote. This account of rowing presumes some degree of equivalence, some relative equality of power. Rows which take the form of one person persistently brow-beating the other into submission or compliance are a whole other animal. In other words rows that recurringly take the shape of offence and defence. Such rows will be likely to leave some kind of damaging shadow or imprint, perhaps in the form of illness or depression. Domination of one person by another may be commonplace but despite lots of people who claim so, it's neither 'natural' nor inevitable.

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Contracts

Does this topic sound perhaps a bit too businesslike? Too unromantic? Surprisingly often people who are very competent at devising agreements and checking others' compliance with agreements at work, don't apply this ability in their personal life. So if you needed one, here is a reminder.

Some interpersonal arrangements, like for instance around money and sex, need to be just as well settled as job descriptions, who reports to whom, or who has budgetary control of what.

Are agreements between you:

1. A done deal, out in the open, discussible, settled until you decide to unsettle/re negotiate them?

Or

2. Are they hidden, an unspoken wish, expectation, duty, obligation? Are they out of date? Obsolete?

Both are contracts.

With the outspoken type the hard work comes first, for instance discussing, agreeing, deciding, if you can, or choose to, that this is a sexually exclusive couple.

With the second, unspoken type of contract, the hard work, of breaking up, or down, of sexual jealousy, or betrayal, sometimes comes later.

The second, unspoken contract used to be covered by marriage, partly through the vows of commitment that the couple took and partly by the social sanctions that could be, and are, applied, mostly to women, if there was a breach of contract.

Think of a woman trying to leave a marriage in societies where few women are able to have a valid identity, or work,

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outside of marriage. Think of Iran and Nigeria where infidelity is still punished by public stoning to death (of women). It is now increasingly apparent that the unspoken social/personal contract underlying marriage has too often been a public vehicle for the private domination of women by men.

Because many men would like that to continue, they don't want to talk about the sort of contracting I raise here. And yet, at this time in history, well, Western history, there appears to be more of a choice than there's ever been—to meet as two adults and agree on what the limits and obligations of the couple are—or to bury our heads in the sand and hope no-one adds cement and water.

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Co-dependence

Knowing a bit about co-dependence seems useful in helping coupledness flourish.

An image I often use for co-dependence in couples is the Greek letter Λ —an image of two people leaning on each other. More or less equally taking the weight of being in the couple.

And maybe this is the way it often is in couples. And, some people might ask, why not? I suppose historically, it was the given way: he ‘earned the living’, she ‘cared for the living’. For many people these days this economic dependence is being undermined or even, commonly, reversed.

So why is dependence likely to be problematic?

The basis of many couple connections is that each of us sees in the other what we lack in our selves. Together we are complete. Alone we are incomplete. In many ways this is fine, and living together has played from this script for generations.

Can you see its limitations? In stable, slow-moving times, or in societies locked solid into class or caste, the likely rate of change for each person was slow. So far as I depend on you for what I lack as a person, and you likewise, we may feel very happy together, very settled. We have our place in the order of things.

Now take a time like the present. For many people, an accelerating rate of change is the norm. Any number of life events can shift the deficit balance in a dependent couple. I get promoted and the training that goes with the promotion opens my eyes. Where previously I found it hard to raise objections, to stand my ground, to negotiate, I become increasingly able to take responsibility for what I want and to argue for it.

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Suppose our coupledness was based on your need to have someone who wants always to be led, who seeks to defer to authority and my need to be such a person. If I move out of that deferential mode, our coupledness might suddenly become very shaky. If I am prevented from moving, or obstacles are put in the way of it, then resentment and other colours of disappointment are likely to be laid down.

So to return to the Λ image, if each of us leans equally on each other in a mutually supportive way, in so far as nothing changes, this is likely to be liveable and even great. But it is a style of coupledness that is well past its sell-by date because it is vulnerable to change and development in either partner. If one person grows a bit, becomes more confident, learns new people skills, in other words becomes more of 'a person in their own right', the couple may become very shaky or it may fall over.

If you realize that this is something like where you are as a couple and you both want to stay together, what can you do? One answer is to attend individually to the deficits that brought you together. If I have difficulty around feeling and emotion, I can take steps to become more capable in those areas. If you find it hard to think straight, to know what you want and to be organized, you can take responsibility for developing that side of you.

OK, so the infinite variety of these 'you do well, what I can't handle' ways of being in a couple is one of the wonders of humankind. Co-dependence may have served us well thus far but for the life into which we have been delivered at this time in history it seems a serious liability.

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Difference

When we look at another person, how we respond to the way they move, sit, stand, or speak is shaped, first, by our own personal story and secondly, it is endlessly reinforced by the play of journalism and film and TV drama and consumer culture, especially, advertising.

This means at least two important things for coupledness.

1. It affects who we choose to get together with. Do they fit our idea of who we should be spending our life with?

2. It affects our expectations of, and the demands we make on, the person we are with.

So we very likely get together with someone on the basis of them being a good fit with our currently hot stereotype of attractiveness. OK. Hard to avoid that today.

But. Suppose one of us changes, like gains or maybe loses a lot of weight. What then? Can we tolerate the difference between the actual person in front of us and the original/ideal one we fell for? Do we try to insist that they return to their original state? Or do we, as seems to be a richer more life-enhancing way of being with someone else, take delight in the difference? Marvel at their bizarre (to us) preferences. Be astonished at the difference in style and talent. Keep asking the kind of questions that elicit more of their difference rather than making demands that attempt (despite being doomed to failure) to shut down the dissimilarity.

In other words find ways to honour difference. Eliminate battles for control of the couple agenda. Instead, always ask: how can we both have, or do, what we want, what we like?

How could it be organized? What would it take? Have we been patient enough, sat with the tension long enough, for a creative breakthrough to occur?

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Doubt

Two of the eternal questions that shape human life ask— Am I in love? Does he/she love me?

The short answer to the first of these is, if you have to ask, probably not. And anyway, I'd want to rattle'n shake the notion behind the question of 'falling in love'. Not deny it, you understand, but hold it at arms length and wonder if it doesn't belong in some universe, now slipping away, of Prince Charmings and Sleeping Beauties and Cinderellas.

A useful definition of love sees it as a lot to do with biology and even more to do with a mutual commitment to enhance the Other's 'power within'—i.e. to enhance their inherent worth; to actively support their potential, whatever it is. Then love is something that grows: it doesn't click into place fully formed, though it may have its watersheds, fields of ecstasy, and thresholds of delight.

If it grows then 'Am I in love?' might be usefully rephrased as 'Am I with a person with whom love can/will grow?'

Turning to the first question 'Does he/she love me?' It's a question that makes me want to ask other questions with a less romantic flavour... do you have his/her phone number? Do you know where he/she lives? Does he/she show up? Have you met his/her mother/father? Do they follow through on what they say they'll do/deliver? Again, is there a connection? One where love, or at least something, might grow?

Many people, in my experience more women than men, spend days, weeks, months waiting for the phone call from some Prince Charming to bring them to life. It often seems to take a lot of this waiting before they learn that those on whom they wait are very likely Princes of Zero Commitment, later to be filed under 'errors of judgement'.

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For such persons, who struggle with, or fear, commitment, and those who desperately seek it, both questions, am I in love? Does he/she love me? Are tough ones. Why? Because in a world where the old certainties of male power are receding, what counts as a liveable role, a 'place in the order of things', may often be highly problematic. It is only too obvious, if only from the job market, where, as in the UK, slightly more women than men are in work, that the Princes are these days less securely in charge.

And because of that, 'power over' styles of marriage are less and less feasible, wiping out two of the more secure roles that men and women could step into. But lest you find that overly depressing, there are also the challenges and delights of the new forms of couple liveability, as the other notions here I hope demonstrate.

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Equivalence

OK, so you are a couple and you well understand that holding the couple together means work or, if you'd prefer, effort. This is not Disneyworld, nothing happens by magic.

One of the notions that can help us keep on keeping on in the dance of coupledness is equivalence. Because difference there will certainly be between us, and what amounts to a fair division of tasks, resources and benefits will be constantly under review, unless of course you have settled for, or bought into, an authoritarian, 'power over' form of coupledness.

When disputes arise over who gives or takes what, or who contributes how much, or more mundanely, who takes the garbage out or hangs up the washing, there are going to be questions asked (not necessarily out loud) about fairness and justice.

At these times the notion of equivalence can be handy. Note I don't say 'equality', equivalence presumes differences and points to the possibility that say, walking to the post office and standing in line to collect a package that wasn't delivered because of insufficient postage... is equivalent to your partner taking responsibility for... well what would you think?

Equivalence opens up the possibility of valuing very divergent contributions to the couple. It means taking care to check out, and taking steps to re-balance, how well your contribution to the relationship matches that of your partner.

It's my bet that in your couple, whether or not you talk about it, equivalence is in play. However, so far as it is out of sight, it is very likely to feed resentment as one of us repeatedly steps over our feeling that 'this isn't fair' but doesn't raise it with our partner.

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You might think from this that I am proposing that coupledom could or should be some branch of accountancy. That it merits a constant listing of who did what for whom. Not so. My proposition is that such book-keeping arises when there is no explicit awareness of equivalence (or whatever you would call it).

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Flourishing

If you are a couple that takes itself seriously you might be interested in a notion that I have developed over the last few years.

For reasons of our personal history, more or less traumatic events, damage, abuse, neglect, deprivation, or excessive demands, many of us find ourselves inhabiting a life that is dominated by a need to survive. We will tend to build and maintain comfort zones to protect us from remembering or re-experiencing our painful history—actions, attitudes, addictions and habits that keep us safe and pain-free. In so far as this has been our story, such a need for survival is essential, it deserves to be honoured, yet it tends to mean a life with a particular shape or colour. Not least, it limits our freedom to take the world just as it is.

If this is true for you and/or your partner, you are likely to be in what I think of as 'survival mode'. Relieved that things are OK, unambitiously keeping to the middle of the path of life and being pleased to get through the day, the week, or the month with no hassle. There's lot of us about.

And then you meet someone else and you find that your comfort zones overlap, or coincide. Very likely they too have a survival agenda, but from something, by definition, different, even if it has a family resemblance (let alone a family origin!).

There are infinite varieties of human survival and a similarly huge range of people who necessarily carry their survival needs into coupledness. Nothing much can be done about that, you say. That's right, except that if we take the option of raising the ramparts of our comfort zones so as to make them feel impregnable, (more insurance, more property, more

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investments, bigger and better sofas) such a style of couple is likely to lose perspective over the years.

If we stay in survival mode, if our coupledness goes well then life together is eventually likely to get more and more stale. We can do it. It works. We are consummate skilled survivors. And still the staleness grows.

Why should this be so? Survival mode is about problem-solving but problem-solving is reactive, it requires a problem, so surprise, surprise, people 'in survival' tend to have a life that is filled with problems so that their best skills can be deployed.

So what, you ask. So what is missing? And what is missing is that survival tends to shut out flourishing or hides it from sight.

For a couple or an individual to flourish requires that they are first adequately recovered from early afflictions and have some survival skills, and then that they move from reactive problem-solving into *creating*. Creating the life they want for themselves and those around them.

Now I am not so politically naïve as to suppose that this can be done independently of the social relations around you in the neighbourhood or at work. Flourishing might be your preference but others may impinge, or even impact on you in such a way as to push you unwillingly into a struggle to survive. Flourishing, whether individually or as a couple, requires fertile soil.

And anyway these are not 'either'/'or' options: from time to time any of us will shift from flourishing, supposing we get it installed, back into survival.

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My intention here is inspiration. Because the staleness in middle to late coupledom is very likely a failure of imagination, coupled with loss of nerve or courage, so that the move out of mere survival into flourishing is either never contemplated or never risked (though not infrequently the person most emotionally connected does something reckless to shift the stuckness).

And courage it does take, because flourishing implies letting go of the familiar problem, or people we love to hate, in favour of knowing what we like, choosing, and above all creating, bringing to life, what we want.

Flourishing also implies living in the present, it implies reconnecting or making a connection to the wonder and value of life. Others have talked about it as 'enlivenment'. Think of it as living from liking....doing what you like and liking what you do. Or if you prefer, living from loving.

Here are a few headlines from some recent research into flourishing. See **Survival, recovery and flourishing** for a longer treatment.

Flourishing involves creating something that doesn't exist—order—relationship—connection.

Flourishing requires participation in community.

Flourishing means recovering lost intentions.

Flourishing is undermined by fear.

Flourishing implies ruthless focus.

Flourishing requires courage. It is being yourself in the moment and going for what you want with your whole being all the time using your will to be alive. To regain your joy over and over again, however dire the circumstances.

Flourishing may be expected to be intermittent.

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When we see others flourishing we don't see the rest of the iceberg of life and the preparation, or the courage, or the origins that precede it.

Flourishing may not apply to all or even much of life, but it reminds me of the possibility that I can extend flourishing to more and more of my life.

Flourishing is dancing on the edge of precipices.

Flourishing is daring to be different.

Flourishing is knowing what I want and seeing who congregates around it.

Flourishing requires planning, the minimum needed to take us forward to the next choice point.

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Honesty

Some people would put honesty at the front of the list of these notions about coupledness. I don't want to do that but I acknowledge that to be honest and accurate about what we think, feel and experience in a couple matters like few other things. It takes courage to be honest.

This is not to argue in favour of some in-your-face compulsive authenticity, where every detail of the life has to be declared regardless of the time of day or state of mind. There is perhaps even a place for diplomacy, or at least a sense of timing that takes account of your partner's attention, fatigue, stress, or distress, that helps ensure that certain kinds of news and views are more likely to be heard.

But honesty and accuracy are defining qualities for couples. Not least because of the power of the lie and the secret. Lies are corrosive. Because they undermine the liar's ability to be whole-hearted, they eat away at trust. And because they have to be persistently protected against betrayal, secrets compromise trust too. If liars need a good memory, holders of secrets need to have locks on those closets of mind where the secret hangs.

And I would acknowledge that honesty in a couple takes courage. It takes courage to say, perhaps repeatedly, this is something I can't live with.

But I want to argue that the courage to declare ourselves in this way, however fearful, is to be weighed in the balance with the price of staying silent. Such silence commonly leads to an accumulation of resentment and recrimination that is perhaps more likely to undermine what we have built

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together than saying 'this far and no further', or 'this is no longer liveable', at the point when that is what we feel.

Why? Because it leaves room for a change of behaviour in the other person. They may huff and puff and protest and get overwrought and then... quietly put out the garbage they had forgotten about.

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Liking

In the early days of relationships there is often endless speculation as to whether he/she is the One, or just another one. Faced with a new and presumably appetizing other who might turn out to be a partner, the routers and switchers of the mind often generate a lot of futurology traffic, obsessing around 'what if?' or 'if only...'.

A helpful antidote for this mental gridlock is 'liking'. The straightforward notion of... when we do things together... do I like it? Do you like it? Do we like being with each other?

This may seem very mundane and obvious. If there is effortless flow between us, we don't much need to ask whether we are liking it or not. If the effortless flow is very one-sided, not an unusual occurrence, then 'do I like this?' is a relevant question. One that is likely to tell us a lot about whether I want to continue to meet, or give the person a miss in future.

Following your liking is a synonym for following what you love: it's an acknowledgement that love is founded in, and grows out of liking.

Becoming a couple and staying a couple is arguably a process of continually negotiating and re-negotiating how to do what we like and like what we do.

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Negotiation

Several of these topics are about power, and power is at the root of the need for couples to value negotiation and to be able to do it.

Negotiation means that when a choice or a conflict or a difficulty arises, you sit down and put 'out on the table' the information, wishes, dreams, anxieties that each of you has. Not casually but diligently, thoroughly, until, so far as you can both tell, there is nothing missing. If you want to be sure about that, ask yourselves what you might be avoiding.

When everything is out on the table (and with heavy-duty issues, even written down), then and only then, look first at how all of this can be done, then how much of it can be done, or lived.

Look at how you can reduce the areas of disagreement, or disadvantage, eliminate what is unproblematic. If somebody has to mind the shop while the other goes on business to the Seychelles, agree some equivalent recompense. If there are difficult or stressful options, check with each other that the person who is going to be carrying the discomfort has been heard to their satisfaction.

The more usual approach to negotiation presumes a fixed cake to be divided. A more abundant, flourishing approach tries to ensure that the ingenuity and creative compromise that creates a bigger cake gets a chance to show up.

When negotiating your way through a dispute, or towards a decision, use as a criterion 'Is it liveable?'. This is a question that gets us away from 'right'/'wrong' moral injunctions and the 'shoulds' and 'oughts' of guilt. And lastly, if tough decisions have to be made, a sign that fairness and justice may have been achieved is that both of you feel equally dissatisfied.

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We have been
on this earth
for 3.5m
years and
women have
taken care of
men and chil-
dren for all of
that time. It
won't happen
overnight but
the idea that
women were
put here to
mother men
needs to
change.

MARILYN FRENCH
GUARDIAN 2.7.2003

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Power

We have to talk about power. Like the goldfish that doesn't know anything about the water it swims in, power is just there. And some people (not me) would argue that how power is often deployed in our world—might equals right—is 'natural' and inevitable. Because, as some of the people (mostly women) who have hauled themselves out on to dry land have noticed, 'normal' power-relations tend to be a variation on a single theme. Domination, command and control. What radical therapist Starhawk calls 'power over', the presumption that somebody has to be in charge and that means someone has to be subordinate, if not victim or underdog.

How power is deployed in a relationship tends to determine the quality of life in it. 'Power over' is not the only way that power can be expressed between people, there is also, again I quote Starhawk, 'power with', which means co-operation, affinity, community and negotiation. And 'power from within', the intrinsic capacity we all have to create, to cope, to survive, to imagine, to explore, to choose, to understand and to love.

So contrary to the conventional wisdom, that relationships be conducted on the basis of 'power over' warfare, a series of struggles for dominance and/or to avoid subservience, relationships can also be lived on the basis of 'power with' mutuality, reciprocal caring, and a commitment to actively enhance and cherish the 'power within' of the Other.

In other words 'love'. There, I said it, even though I have often tried not to. For a long time I found the use of the word 'love' problematic and I wondered why. I came to see that so far as we grow up and swim in a 'power over' world, love

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tends to be excluded, or in so far as it flickers into life, is often extinguished. Or that we settle for 'affection' as a tame, low-risk substitute.

And perhaps in every generation, love has to be rescued from oblivion, re-invented for relationships where power is actively and openly shared equally. Where seeking to enhance the flourishing of the Other is mutual, where the social norm that domination and subservience are 'natural' and 'inevitable' is dissolved by the constant application of negotiation.

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Rapport

Why no section on communication here? This is not because communication isn't important in couples—it is; but an emphasis on communication often gives too much attention to the means and not enough to what communication is for. So here I want to introduce the notion of rapport, an intangible thread of bonding between us that needs to be made and remade.

Rapport refers to the quality and quantity of the regard we have for each other. At its most intense, through eye contact when we gaze at each other, rapport also implies touching, talking, holding, listening.

Rapport also engages several modes of being; the practical, doing things for and with each other, caring for each other, looking after each other's interests, looking out for each other. Thinking things through together, planning and arranging or re-arranging. Envisioning, imagining possibilities, what might be created, what could be done. And feeling, sympathy, compassion, empathy. Each of these modes of being contributes to the rapport between us. Is any missing or overheated in your couple? Does one half of the couple do more than half of the rapport-work?

Perhaps the notion of rapport seems very intangible? Yet we know immediately when it is broken. If we have been close to someone and then they say or do something oppressive, or unfairly critical, or wounding, then the sudden cooling, the 'atmosphere', the sulking, the silence, the 'distance' that we notice, denotes a loss of rapport. It is often a sudden collapse and, as I note elsewhere here in connection with rows, it takes time and effort for rapport to be re-established.

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However, there does seem to be a co-relation between the probably inevitable, occasional collapse of rapport between people who live together, and the equally repetitive recovery of rapport, that builds and consolidates trust. Take a look at the visualization of rapport in the **Resolving conflict** screens for more detail on how this often plays out.

Think of rapport as something that belongs to both of you, yet neither of you individually. It is precious, often fragile, a thread of connection between you that needs to be made and re-made, yet can contribute tremendous resilience to the couple. Pay attention to its maintenance and nourishment.

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Reciprocity

Reciprocity overlaps quite a lot with 'equivalence', take a look at that too. You could say that reciprocal is a more or less jargon re-naming of for 'give and take', but just as **equivalence** refers to fairness and justice, so reciprocal points to other kinds of balancing acts that can nourish, enrich or enhance your coupledness.

At its most basic, paying attention to reciprocity in a couple means checking out that you have something like equal 'air-time'. Again, as I've said in the equivalence section, this doesn't imply accountancy, it takes account of the build-up of resentment if it isn't honoured. Such as when one person persistently monopolizes the couple's attention.

So on the ground, this means that if I am wound up about some very tense and long-running saga and need to talk and talk about it, that you also get some attention, some air space. You get listened to because you are there, not because your demands are as pressing as mine.

Maybe you look after all the dish-washing and your partner reciprocally washes all the clothes. I know a couple who shop and cook for each other on alternate weeks. That's what I mean by reciprocal.

However, the drift away from reciprocity is a good way to activate the resentment volcanoes we all probably have.

So, if you are full to brimming over with some stressful life event, keep reciprocity alive by checking that the other person can handle listening this long (or at all). Or do you need to stop and come back to it later? If you feel overwhelmed, keep reciprocity alive by saying, 'I need to stop now, I can't take any more of this at the moment... let's come back to it later'.

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And in the beginnings of coupledness, reciprocity matters a lot. Who phones whom? Do you alternate, more or less? And if not why not?

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Transitions

The more any of us travel widely or live in one town and commute to a weekday job in another town, the more transitions matter.

As a couple who travel a lot, we learned painfully to respect the transitions.

The key learning is easily stated—presume that when you come together—the traveller and stay-at-home will be out of phase in deep and subtle ways.

There may be lots of reasons why this is so, for example the often trance-like conditions of modern travel; but they don't matter as much as the realization that when you meet, the universe of travel will be likely out of kilter with, say, the universe of domesticity.

What to do? Agree between you to honour the mismatch. This means making light, or zero, demands of each other. Until there's been time to get into phase. How long? A hour after a long hot shopping trip? Maybe a day if you have been apart for a couple of weeks.

I know it seems counter-intuitive, the desire to get close real fast and burble on about how wonderful the previous days or weeks have been is tempting, but the likelihood of the returnee being tuned to travel and the home body being tuned to domesticity resembles having two radios on different stations. Re-tuning will happen but it takes time.

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You, Me, Them, and Us

Each of us is a distinct human entity. We come into the world alone and we leave the world alone.

And...

...we are intensely social animals, we herd together, we have a deep need to belong.

These two aspects of the human condition are likely, from time to time, to be in tension: a couple may seem to be faced with a choice between one or the other. However, for a relationship to flourish, it needs to honour both the distinctness and the belonging.

Distinctness means having a sense of myself as having limits. Of knowing where I start and others stop. This is what is meant by 'identity', of being someone who aims to be a 'person in our own right', someone who tries to take responsibility for themselves and their actions.

And this person is embodied, so there are likely to be some not-very-negotiable preferences and aversiveness that derive from this embodied history, like how much sleep do I need? How much exercise do I need? What kinds of food or sex do I like?

And then there's belonging, companionship, friendship, intimacy. From coffee-break chat to the intensity of orgasmic love-making. Of being entertained by the story-telling of friends and relatives. Of contributing to neighbourhood festivities, of bearing witness to the grief of bereaved colleagues, or taking delight in the new born.

In this mode we are people of the world, people who belong not only to those around us but also to the evolutionary and cultural history of the generations that preceded us. Even

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though we may care little, or think not at all about that, it remains so. If you doubt it, wonder at the identical body temperature you share with millions of other people on this planet that you will never see or know.

Thus in coupledom there is a task that recurs and can never be benignly neglected, the active balancing of distinctness and merging. Balancing me and my reality, with us and our reality. It is no solution for either of us to submerge ourselves, to sacrifice Me to the Us. Nor does holding on tightly to my distinctness butter either any parsnips.

What seems to be required is a dance between the extremes of me in my universe and you in yours, and as in a dance, a coming together literally, perhaps, and metaphorically in the Us and then dancing apart again as Me and You. This dance is vital. Vital for longevity of the relationship. Vital for personal and mutual well-being.

But doesn't it require a lot of trust, you say. And I reply, yes but the dance builds trust. As each of us, from our personal affinities and history and talents, plunges whole-heartedly into individual flourishing, so, when we return to the couple, we both have stories to tell, experiences to check out, ideas and opinions to air.

The recurrence of leaving and returning builds trust. OK it is risky: the Other who is whole-heartedly pursuing their distinctness might be tempted into some more appetizing affinity with an-Other. But isn't it easy to see, if we act to limit or restrict the other person's distinctness, how damaging it is likely to be? We might hold them artificially in the couple but would the couple ultimately be liveable?

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I suppose what I am trying to say is that over time an imbalance in either direction between distinctness and merging is likely to be problematic or seriously stressful. Too much distinctness undermines, or inhibits, or rules out commitment. Too much merging builds feelings of being trapped; of being taken over by the other; of loss of perspective; of vicariously living life through the other, or each other.

How much living space you have often feeds difficulties around the distinct/merger dance. For example, if you can't get any acoustic separation between each other, then it's going to be hard to be distinct in the home. Not vital I guess, but it matters because there are thoughts that can't be thought, feelings that can't be felt, ideas that can't arise, if we can't find time and place to be by ourselves.

And then there are children and elderly relatives and pets. All compete for space. And I guess if you realize how important the dance is then you'll be more likely to figure out ways of honouring it.

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My wife (and my previous partners) have been major contributors to these notions, as have the many clients who have brought to our meetings their struggles to find a better way to live. I am appreciative of both their trust and their diligence.

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