

Intimacy and Independence: Making Love Last **Jude LaClaire, Ph.D.**

*You were born together, and together you shall be forevermore.
...but let there be spaces in your togetherness,
And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.
Love one another but make not a bond of love:
Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.*
Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

The mystery of relationships is one that has prompted many people to compose poems, songs, books and other works of art. These expressions of love often focus on intimacy and a sense of togetherness. Gibran speaks about the need for space and a rhythm of coming together and moving apart. It is interesting to me that our ability to be truly intimate is based upon our equal ability to be independent.

The work of Murray Bowen, a psychiatrist who researched intergenerational family systems for over 50 years, addresses our need to differentiate ourselves from others as part of the process of development and maturity. Daniel Papero, in *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, describes differentiation for a family as "...the goal of remaining in viable emotional contact with the family yet retaining the ability to function with responsible autonomy." The ability of an individual to be simultaneously in emotional contact and being autonomous is a paradox that most of us spend much of our lives trying to master.

When we 'fall in love' a cascade of neurochemicals is awakened. The feel good endorphins and oxytocin, a brain chemical that is associated with bonding, attachment, mothering and sexual activity, are activated. This is when we literally 'feel' love with our whole body-mind.

When this fades the relationship may become strained. The person who always wanted to be with us is gone too much of the time. The person who told us loving things has become mute and distant. The person who wanted affection, touching and amazing sex has disappeared. What has happened? Researchers tell us that the sense of satisfaction after 4 years in a relationship goes from very satisfied most of the time to 90% reporting that they are not satisfied.

It is time to call on lessons learned. Re-awakening the ability to self-soothe helps us with healthy independence, not depending on a partner to provide emotional resiliency. We must continue our process of differentiation, developing the Self and our potential, taking responsibility for our emotional needs. This is the time in a relationship when we must learn to find the balance between quality time together and separate activities.

We also need to learn new skills. Gary Chapman in his book, *The Five Languages of Love*, gives a very simple way to find out what kinds of things help our partner feel loved. They are:

- Words of affirmation
- Quality Time
- Receiving Gifts
- Acts of Service
- Physical Touch.

One size does not fit all. People feel loved in different ways. Sometimes the key to a harmonious relationship can be responding to our beloved's needs in a more sensitive, thoughtful way. There is a quick 30 item profile in Chapman's book that will tell you and your partner what your preferred languages are.

We usually give love in the way we would like to receive it. This can be a disaster. Many times I have seen couples shift from fighting, distancing and distrust to a newly found connection when each one reaches out to the other in their 'language' of love. It is usually quite simple and has powerful results.

Understanding your partner's love language is also the beginning of constructing the essential 'love maps' that Dr. John Gottman developed. You can find more about love maps and other helpful relationship books by going to his website: www.gottman.com.

Finding the balance of intimacy and autonomy; growing as an individual and as a part of a relationship or family is a lifetime quest. The moving sea between us that Kahlil Gibran speaks of is the energetic potential for connection. Dive in and find more intimacy and autonomy!

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