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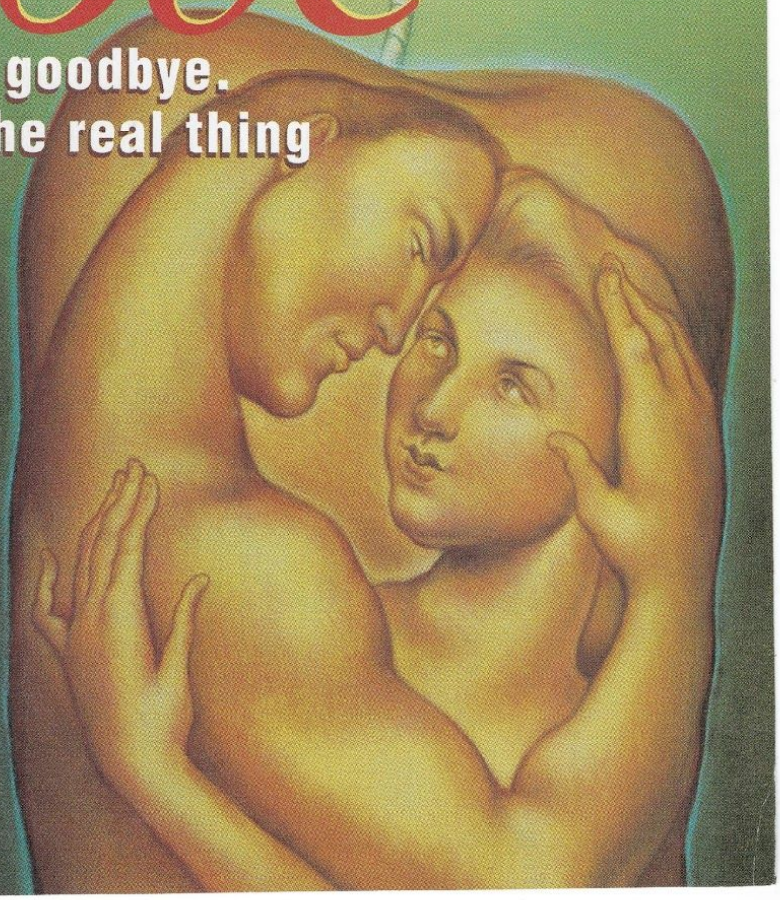

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The Future of Love

In search of a new vision of intimacy

By Barbara Graham

In a snapshot taken at my first "wedding," I look deliriously happy. I am a picture-book bride, dressed all in white—except for my tennis shoes—with one of my mother's silky half slips draped over my head like a veil. My groom is wearing short pants and has one hand on his hip; the other hand rests in mine. We are 6 years old. The setting is a pier on the bay in Miami Beach, with the inky water in the background. We're looking squarely at the camera, but my beloved is angling his body away from me and, in contrast to my blissed-out grin, has a look on his face that suggests he'd rather be swallowing worms. I don't seem to notice. Neither did my mother, who wrote "The Boyfriend!" on the border of the photograph before preserving it in the family album.

We pin our hopes for happiness on romantic love so early. In elementary school, before my faux nuptials in Miami Beach, I desperately wanted to marry Danny Harris, a fellow kindergartner. Later, when I was 12 and *Exodus* had just been released, I believed with all my heart that if Paul Newman laid eyes on me, I would be his forever. So I did what I had to do: I found out where he lived in New York City and spent the better part of my weekends camped out on the sidewalk in front of his apartment building, until the temperature dropped below freezing and I was forced to tether my dreams of true love—and my soul's liberation—to another hero.

Freud and his psychoanalytic descendants are no doubt correct in their assessment that the search for ideal love—for that one perfect soulmate—is the futile wish of not-fully-developed selves. But it also seems true that the longing for a profound, all-

ANITA KUNZ

consuming erotic connection (and the heightened state of awareness that goes with it) is in our very wiring. The yearning for fulfillment through love seems to be to our psychic structure what food and water are to our cells.

Just consider the stories and myths that have shaped our consciousness: Beauty and the Beast, Snow White and her handsome prince, Cinderella and Prince Charming, Fred and Ginger, Barbie and Ken. (Note that, with the exception of the last two couples, all of these lovers are said to have lived happily ever after—even though we never get details of their lives after the weddings, after children and gravity and loss have exacted their price.) Still, it's not just these lucky fairy tale characters who have captured our collective imagination. The tragic twosomes we cut our teeth on—Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Iseult, Launcelot and Guinevere, Heathcliff and Cathy, Rhett and Scarlett—are even more compelling role models. Their love is simply too powerful and anarchic, too shattering and exquisite, to be bound by anything so conventional as marriage or a long-term domestic arrangement.

If recent divorce and remarriage statistics are any indication, we're not as astute as the doomed lovers. Instead of drinking poison and putting an end to our love affairs while the heat is still turned up full blast, we expect our marriages and relationships to be long-running fairy tales. When they're not, instead of examining our expectations, we switch partners and reinvent the fantasy, hoping that this time we'll get it right. It's easy to see why: Despite all the talk of family values, we're constantly bombarded by visions of perfect romance. All you have to do is turn on the radio or TV or open any magazine and check out the perfume and lingerie ads. "Our culture is deeply regressed," says Florence Falk, a New York City psychotherapist. "Everywhere we turn, we're faced with glamorized, idealized versions of love. It's as if the culture wants us to stay trapped in the fantasy and does everything possible to encourage and expand that fantasy." Trying to forge an authentic relationship amidst all the romantic hype, she adds, makes what is already a tough proposition even harder.

The author and her "groom" tie the knot in Miami Beach.

COURTESY BARBARA GRAHAM

What's unique about our culture is our feverish devotion to the belief that romantic love and marriage should be synonymous. Starting with George and Martha, continuing through Ozzie and Harriet right up to the present day, we have tirelessly tried to formalize, rationalize, legalize, legitimize, politicize, and sanitize rapture. This may have something to do with our puritanical roots, as well as our tendency toward oversimplification. In any event, this attempt to satisfy all of our contradictory desires under the marital umbrella must be put in historical context in order to be properly understood.

"Personal intimacy is actually quite a new idea in human history and was never part of the marriage ideal before the 20th century," says John Welwood, a California-based psychologist and author, most recently, of *Love and Awakening*. "Most couples throughout history managed to live together their whole lives without ever having a conversation about what was going on within or between them. As long as family and society prescribed the rules of marriage, individuals never had to develop any consciousness in this area."

In short, marriage was designed to serve the economic and social needs of families, communities, and religious institutions, and had little or nothing to do with love. Nor was it expected to satisfy lust. In *Myths To Live By*, Joseph Campbell explains how the sages of ancient India viewed the relationship between marriage and passion. They concluded that there are five degrees of love, he writes, "through which a worshiper is increased in the service and knowledge of his God." The highest form is passionate, illicit love. "In marriage, it is declared, one is still possessed of reason," Campbell writes. "The seizure of passionate love can be, in such a context, only illicit, breaking in upon the order of one's dutiful life in virtue as a devastating storm."

No wonder we're having problems. The pressures we place on our tender unions are unprecedented. Even our biochemistry seems to militate against long-term sexual relationships. Dr. Helen Fisher, an anthropologist at Rutgers University and author of *Anatomy of Love*, believes

that human pair-bonds originally evolved according to "the ancient blueprint of serial monogamy and clandestine adultery" and were originally meant to last around four years—just long enough to raise a single dependent child through toddlerhood. The so-called seven-year-itch may be the remains of a four-year reproductive cycle, Fisher suggests.

Increasingly, Fisher and other researchers are coming to view what we call love as a series of complex biochemical events governed by hormones and enzymes. "People cling to the idea that romantic love is a mystery, but it's also a chemical experience," Fisher says, explaining that there are three distinct mating emotions and each is supported in the brain by the release of different chemicals. Lust, an emotion triggered by changing levels of testosterone in men and women, is associated with our basic sexual drive. Infatuation depends on the changing levels of dopamine, norepinephrine, and phenylethylamine (PEA) also called the "chemicals of love." They are natural—addictive—amphetaminelike chemicals that stimulate euphoria and make us want to stay up all night sharing our secrets. After infatuation and the dizzying highs associated with it have peaked—usually within a year or two—a new chemical system made up of oxytocin, vasopressin, and the endorphins kicks in and supports a steadier, quieter, more nurturing intimacy. In the end, regardless of whether biochemistry accounts for cause or effect in love, it may help to explain why some people—those most responsive to the release of the attachment chemicals—are able to sustain a long-term partnership, while thrillseekers who feel depressed without regular hits of dopamine and PEA, are likely to jump from one liaison to the next in order to maintain a buzz.

But even if our biochemistry suggests that there should be term limits on love, the heart is a stubborn muscle and, for better or worse, most of us continue to yearn for a relationship that will endure. As a group, Generation Xers—many of whom are children of divorce—are more determined than any other demographic group to have a different kind of marriage than their parents and to avoid divorce, says Howard Markman, author of *Fighting For Your Marriage*. What's more, lesbians and gay men, who once opposed marriage and all of its heterosexual, patriarchal implications, now seek to reframe marriage as a more flexible, less repressive arrangement. And, according to the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, in one out of an estimated seven weddings, either the bride or the groom—or both—are tying the knot for at least the third time—nearly twice as many as in 1970. There are many reasons for this, from the surge in the divorce rate that began in the '70s to our ever-increasing life span. Even so, the fact that we're still trying to get love right—knowing all we know about the ephemeral nature of passion, in a time when the stigmas once associated with being divorced or single have all but disappeared—says something about our powerful need to connect.

And, judging from the army of psychologists, therapists, clergy, and other experts who can be found dispensing guidance on the subject, the effort to save—or reinvent, depending on who's doing the talking—love and marriage has become a multimillion dollar industry. The advice spans the spectrum. There's everything from *Rules*, a popular new book by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider that gives '90s women '50s-style tips on how to catch and keep their man, to Harville Hendrix's *Getting The Love You Want*, and other guides to "conscious love." But regardless of perspective, this much is clear: Never before have our most intimate thoughts and actions been so thoroughly dissected, analyzed, scrutinized, and medicalized. Now, people

TIMELINE ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELISE RUGOLO CROWE

Love Line

Prehistory
The wedding ring as we know it stems from the ancient German practice of offering a ring to a bride on the tip of a sword—a pledge of union.

5th Century BC
Socrates writes, "By all means marry; if you get a good wife, you'll become happy, if you get a bad one, you'll become a philosopher."

323 BC
The Egyptian wife has plenty of power over her husband: He must pay a fine to his first wife, for example, if he wishes to marry a second one.

1st Century AD
With the emergence of Christianity, Roman marriage changes from a procreative duty into a choice. Marriage requires female consent, and the role of "wife" takes on as much dignity as that of "friend." But "love" isn't necessary for marriage. In Greece, Plutarch calls love a "frenzy" and says that "those who are in love must be forgiven as though ill." Meanwhile, virginity is glorified, sexual connection is deemed foul and homosexuality is punishable by death.

c. 270
St. Valentine is martyred on Feb. 14. The association of this chaste, holy man with the ancient pagan fertility festival of the Lupercalia, an ancestor of Valentine's Day, is believed to be pure accident.

2nd–3rd Centuries
Christians stress morality in love. Intercourse is to be passionless and, as Clement of Alexandria stresses, should occur only after supper so that daylight hours could be devoted to studies or prayer. "He who too ardently loves his own wife," he writes, "is an adulterer."

who fall madly in love over and over are called romance addicts. Their disease, modeled on alcoholism and other chemical dependencies, is considered "progressive and fatal."

Not everyone believes the attempt to deconstruct love is a good thing. The late philosopher Christopher Lasch wrote in his final (and newly released) book, *Women And The Common Life:* "The exposure of sexual life to scientific scrutiny contributed to the rationalization, not the liberation, of emotional life." His daughter, Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, a historian at Syracuse University and the editor of the book, agrees. She contends that the progressive demystification of passionate life since Freud has promoted an asexual, dispassionate and utilitarian form of love. Moreover, like her father, she believes that the national malaise about romance can be attributed to insidious therapeutic modes of social control, a series of mechanisms that have reduced the citizen to a consumer of expertise. "We have fragmented life in such a way," she says, "as to take passion out of our experience."

Admittedly, it's a stretch to picture a lovesick 12th century French troubadour in a 12-step program for romance addicts. Still, we can't overlook the fact that our society's past efforts to fuse those historically odd bedfellows—passionate love and marriage—have failed miserably. And though it's impossible to know whether all the attention currently being showered on relationships is the last gasp of a dying social order —marriage—or the first glimmer of a new paradigm for relating to one another, it's obvious that something radically different is needed.

For one thing, many of us raised in the stultifying, claustrophobic nuclear families that were glorified in '50s and '60s sitcoms but were, in fact, less than glorious have tried it all: Bob and Carol; Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice; Bob and Ted, Carol and Alice; and just plain Bob. Or Alice. And still we're searching.

In his latest work, *A Little Book On Love*, philosopher and San Francisco State University professor Jacob Needleman writes, "The social and sexual revolutions of the 20th century have shown us that relaxing marriage laws and customs, in the end, simply replaced one sort of suffering with another. If we love who and when we want and then break the bond whenever the impulse to do so is strong, we see that it brings no happiness to our lives. Nor, of course, did it bring happiness tensely to maintain the old rules, the old customs. So the meaning of living together in love cannot lie in either direction."

> ***"When your priority becomes consciousness, even more than relationship, then conscious relationship is possible." —Stephen Levine***

Although the experimentation of the '60s and '70s unquestionably wreaked havoc, it was a vital and creative havoc, without which we might have remained trapped in old, unsatisfying patterns of relating. "Two important developments in the '60s laid the ground for a more adult stage of couple consciousness, which we seem to be entering now," says Welwood. "The women's movement cast off old stereotypes and made relationships more egalitarian. And the dissemination of psychological ideas into the culture started to give people a new language and a new set of concepts to talk about what actually goes on in a relationship." Moreover, adds Needleman, the '60s were also the beginning of an awakening, the time when people began to realize there is such a thing as transcendence.

The key to the emerging vision of love seems to be intention. Welwood, Needleman and others speak of conscious relationship, conscious marriage. Today, these theorists—in their own ways—are redefining relationship as a vehicle for awakening and self-discovery. In their view genuine, enduring love is possible only when couples let go of adolescent smoke-and-mirrors fantasies of each other and the relationship and dedicate themselves to the search for truth. As Stephen Levine, author—with his wife, Ondrea—of *Embracing The Beloved*, puts it, "When your priority becomes consciousness, even more than relationship, then conscious relationship is possible."

According to Harville Hendrix, founder and president of the Orlando-based Institute for Imago Relationship Therapy, a primary function of marriage is for couples to help one another identify and heal unconscious childhood wounds and unmet needs. "Romantic love is a selection process based on your childhood," he explains, adding that, in spite of any conscious intent to find a partner who does not resemble your parents, most people are attracted to mates who have both their parents' positive and negative traits. And, typically, he says, "the negative traits carry a higher charge." Moreover, if we stay locked in unawareness, once the initial rush of romance wanes, we become either mired in frustration or move on and reenact the drama with someone else. But, if we stretch ourselves to help each other grow, says Hendrix, childhood vulnerabilities eventually diminish—freeing up enor-

mous reserves of creative energy.

The new vision of love, however, is not confined to achieving psychological wholeness. Awakening, transcendence, connection to the divine—call it what you will—are also central to the vision. In this context, intimate relationship becomes a spiritual practice, a sacred, mystical union of two people connected to a larger reality.

Though the idea of relationship as a vehicle for embodying the sacred is hardly new—especially in the tantric practices of India and Tibet, as well as in other Eastern traditions—never before has intimacy been so closely aligned with spirituality. "Now we have the opportunity to bring the sacred fully into our relationships, in a much more personal way," says Welwood—and not just for our own individual pleasure. "This is where we can start to regenerate our world. It has to begin between one person and another. How can we hope to create a better world when we can't even relate to our partner when we come home at night?"

On the one hand, it sounds extraordinary—marvelous—this blending of body, mind, and spirit into relationship. On the other hand, it sounds like madness: We've had enough trouble bringing together body and mind, and now we want to toss spirituality into the fire, too? As Needleman points out, "The whole of human nature is an obstacle to conscious love—our unawareness and our lack of clear, deep understanding that the other person is in the same boat we're in."

Then there's the matter of the body. "My body is playing catch-up with my mind and spirit," admits Mark Matousek, the author of *Sex Death Enlightenment* (see article, p.72) who has always espoused the ideal of being sexually faithful, but until he entered a relationship three years ago with his partner, Louis, never believed it was possible. "Monogamy pushes every major button I have," says Matousek. "It brings out the best and, frequently, the worst in me. But I had to learn how to live as a sexual person on a spiritual path. Celibacy didn't work for me and neither did promiscuity. Monogamy is part of the whole search for soul."

Despite all the obstacles, maybe the sacred is the glue, the binding and holy energy that got lost—first while we tried desperately to merge marriage and passion in airtight nuclear families that valued acquiring over being and, later, as we turned our attention to rediscovering pleasure, as well as redefining our roles, sexual and gender identities, and traditional family structures.

But what about longing? Desire? The very human craving for delirious romance? Even when we know better, even when we've learned the hard way that no other person can possibly make us whole and we've entered into a conscious relationship, where does the longing go?

"Longing is a wonderful, very vital energy," says Florence Falk. "It's not the longing that's the problem, it's what you do with it." As we begin to reclaim our selves and find our core strength, she says, not only is it possible to develop a real, loving relationship, but the longing can be redirected to something greater than ourselves, something transcendent.

And, says Stephen Levine: "If another person is the most important thing in your life, then you're in trouble and they're in trouble because they become responsible for your suffering. But if consciousness is the most important thing in our lives and relationship is a means toward that end . . . Ah! then we are approaching paradise. We are approaching the possibility of actually becoming a human being before we die."

Barbara Graham is a regular contributor to Utne Reader *and the author of* Women Who Run with the Poodles *(Avon, 1994).*

Editorial assistant Rebecca Scheib provided additional reporting for this article.

3rd–4th Centuries
In India, Brahmin priest Vatsyayana, believed to be a lifelong celibate and ascetic, writes the erotic classic, the *Kama Sutra*. In Europe, Jovian, a maverick monk, is excommunicated in 385 A.D. on the grounds of heresy and blasphemy for calling marriage superior to celibacy.

5th Century
Religion governs marriage. Almost all weddings in the Roman Empire now include an ecclesiastical benediction, and marriage is considered a sacrament. In the centuries to come, Emperor Justinian will make adultery a capital offense and divorce nearly impossible.

6th Century
Buddhists and Hindus in India begin to practice Tantrism in an attempt to transform the human body into a mystical one. Through maithuna (ceremonial sex), human union becomes a sacred act.

939
In one of the first known attempts to suppress the ancient Japanese practice of phallic worship, a large phallic image that had been displayed and worshipped in Kyoto is moved to a less prominent place.

11th Century
Chinese philosophers begin to interpret the ancient yin and yang symbols as interdependent—like man and woman. The undivided circle becomes known as t'ai chi t'u: "the supreme ultimate." Around the same time, a few wags in southern France concoct a little game of flattery called "cortezia, courtesie." Soon their little amusement blossoms into the social philosophy of courtly love.

1244
Sufi teacher and poet Rumi meets Shams of Tabriz and abandons himself to divine and earthly love.