

On the Loveseat: *Intimacy and Its Dilemmas*

Rev. Robin L. Zucker

Feb. 9, 2003

When I was a strapping tomboy of a girl, perhaps nine years old, playing catch for real with my neighborhood pals on the corner of Pocasset and Phillips Avenues, I experienced my first bout of puppy love. The object of my ardor was the popular Leslie Rice, a slightly older boy with a broad grin and soulful eyes. (of course, I didn't think of them as "soulful" then. It's a memory!) Turns out that Leslie and another local boy, Gary Valen, had crushes of their own. On yours truly, apparently, and I was faced with a dilemma only TV's *Bachelorette* could envy.

You have to understand that the reason they were smitten with me had nothing to do with my finer feminine qualities. More likely, it derived from my unique ability (gender-wise, pre Title Nine, circa 1966) to catch a pop fly, field a grounder, and bunt. I don't know what possessed me, but I sent these two eager tykes home to clean themselves up and present themselves to me for selection. I stayed on the baseball diamond getting evermore grubby. I actually forgot about the duo in the heat of a late afternoon rematch with the kids from Whitman Street. We creamed them.

At any rate, about an hour later, they re-appeared, scrubbed clean, hair slicked back, in their Sunday best. Can you imagine? I remember them standing before me. I had no idea at that age about the male ego, but these two looked nervous. I sized them up. No words were spoken. Leslie stepped forward. His freckles fairly glistened across the crest of his sunburned nose. Into my hand he slipped something, cool and metallic. A silvery pendant, half a heart with the inscription, "My love I give." My mouth gaped. He grinned and edged the other half of the pendant partially from his pant's pocket. It read: "I give my love." If Leslie got the nod, we'd be "sharing hearts" (as it was known). Gary blushed and looked down at his saddle shoes.

Need I tell you how it turned out? I was a bona fide girl, after all, under the scabby knees and the pixie haircut. Alas, it all ended tragically, a few months later, over a misunderstanding about a faux turquoise key chain that has gotten thrown out accidentally with a paper bag of salt water taffy wrappers. Even so, I still have my half, tarnished but cherished. Maybe Leslie has kept his half, too (a notion that makes the guys out there smirk and the women swoon!) But what a romantic thought, isn't it? What a perfectly splendid fairy tale.

That long-ago moment between Leslie, Gary and I is a memory that's hard to forget. It still ranks up there in the top three romantic moment of my life -- intimate, sweet, oddly intense (given our ages), and notably (but not surprisingly), involving few words. At any age, a dearth of words, spoken with clarity and courage into the silence, may be one of the greatest and most ironic dilemmas we face regarding intimacy. We crave it, but we aren't sure whether and how to talk about it; nor just how to name it and ask for it.

Now, we are grown, and yet, when it comes to relationships, an extraordinary number of sophisticated people (like us, perhaps) may still base our expectations on myths served up in fairy tales, glossy youthful memories, and romance novels. "And they lived happily ever after." So goes the eternal myth of loving each other. The fantasy that being in love and forming relationships based upon love will solve all of life's problems and provide us with endless well-deserved and instant happiness. The myth is delightful. The reality is all too fierce.

Henry David Thoreau, writer, hermit and sage, didn't have much luck in this department. He never settled down, despite several stabs at romance. Nevertheless, he would probably approve of my use of the term "deliberate intimacy." As many of us have likely experienced, deep "deliberate" intimacy ("sharing hearts," as it were) involves an incredibly complicated and volatile mix of chemistry, psychology, self-knowledge, courage, learned skill, maturity, humility, and just plain luck. We can't really expect intimacy to be effortless, and we do ourselves a disservice to feel cheated and incompetent when it is not.

While we deeply desire human connection we'd like it to simply happen, rather than be faced with the difficult work (the blood, sweat, and tears) involved in co-creating it with a partner. I'd submit that many of us aren't even really sure what that work entails. Yet, when all is said and done, and despite all the dilemmas and a potentially steep leaning curve, I believe we each crave this most basic human need. Why shouldn't we? Intimacy repels loneliness, it gives us a sense of belonging, and infuses our lives with connection and validation at the most primal level.

Jennifer and Ned, from our dramatic scene earlier, pursue intimacy, of a sort. Like the classic Venus/Mars odd couple, they stumble through their awkwardly intimate, but ever-so-clichéd encounter. In the silence where all

misunderstandings arise, she's pondering their relationship and he's pondering an oil change. Funny but familiar, isn't it? One can presume that Jen and Ned, like many of us, pine for that one person who gets us, accepts us as is, opens to us. Someone we can lay it on the line with, someone we don't have to hide from, someone to whom we can say "These are my feelings" and they say, "good". All right. This is me. That's ok! Good enough.

So what keeps us off the loveseat of intimacy? Perhaps we've been hurt or disappointed and fear that if we love openly and trustingly, we will be considered naïve. This flippant attitude (along with a myriad of other cultural factors) has contributed to a society of detached, noncommittal persons too sophisticated to admit their confusion and unhappiness, and too caught up in pride and image to risk doing anything about it. It has perpetuated isolation and devalued basic human values. This, in spite of the vast scientific literature which proves that intimacy *is* necessary to sustain a good, productive life, that a loving touch or a hearty laugh or honest words *can* heal, that positive relationships can bring us physical, psychological and mental well being.

I read something this past year that really spoke to my heart and my own pain following the end of a long marriage. It was written by the spiritual teacher Stephen Levine, who led workshops on "The Beloved" with his wife Onda, until her untimely recent death from cancer. Listen to his words: "The distance from your pain, your grief, your unattended wounds, is the distance from your partner. And the distance from your partner is your distance from the living truth, your own great nature. Whatever maintains that distance, that separation from ourselves and our beloveds, must be investigated with mercy and awareness. This distance is not overcome by one "giving up their space" to another, but by both partners entering together the unknown (something sacred) between them. The mind creates the abyss but the heart crosses it."

Levine goes on to tell us that true intimacy arises from what he calls "conscious relationship: and "conscious communication." It is mindful. It does not break the heart.. The harmful effect of an unconscious relationship is that it keeps us so small and needy, and dependent on external circumstances and constant stroking for our happiness. On the other hand, a conscious relationship offers the possibility of relating across the gulf of "I and thou" all the way into the heart of our beloved. It's a whole new ball game.

Last week, I preached about genuine self-knowledge as the foundation for all relationships. I found it interesting to learn that the loneliest people have the most difficulty with self disclosure. All the more reason that after some time in the rocking chair of self-reflection, we can and should spend some time settling in on the loveseat. Our sense of self is continually reinvented and deepened through our interactions with others. Every relationship is a laboratory in which we can practice using our voice in new ways and observe the results of our experiments. Some of us need practice voicing our strength. Some of us need practice voicing vulnerability.

However, that isn't the same thing as blurting out your unvarnished feelings. "Letting it all hang out" and telling the other person exactly what you think may be satisfying, but anger and criticism actually let the other person off the hook, because such reactions allow him or her to stop listening and exit the dialogue altogether. Projecting your fears, writing the words for others to say in your head, aren't good approaches either. They may feel good, in a perverse unhealthy sort of way, but they won't create intimacy.

"Being who we are" requires us to talk openly about things that are important to us, that we take a clear position on where we stand on important emotional issues, and that we clarify the limits of what is acceptable and tolerable to us in a relationship. In other words, to act differently than Ned and Jennifer in the dramatic skit earlier.

Getting a handle on these interwoven dynamics of self and other will require us to be reflective and also to ask some key questions, such as: How do I behave in my most intimate relationships? How open and clear am I in my interactions with my partner or close friends, my minister or doctor, with my family of origin? If you give yourself fairly high points, why are you able to succeed? If not, what are the obstacles and what do you fear? Remember that an intimate relationship is one in which neither party silences, sacrifices or betrays themselves or the other person. Instead, it's a connection that fosters both strength and vulnerability, weakness and competence in a balanced way. This is where self-knowledge becomes so critical. We can't navigate gracefully between being an "I" and creating a "we" without it.

Jen asks Ned: "Oh, Ned do you really feel that way?" Golda asks Tevye: "Do You Love Me?" We feel safer when we have all the answers, but intimate relationships are not safe—they unmask, they expose us. We become vulnerable, which means literally, "able to be wounded." If we are lucky (in my view), true intimacy may even cost us the image of the person we imagine ourselves to be. But this is the pay-off—"it will inevitably bring forth more of

who we really are and make us more fully alive, more available to the world.”

My colleague, Marilyn Sewall suggests that these fuller, deeper dimensions of connection are exactly what God (or the Universe or the Mysterious Presence) wants for us. Really. “Because you see,” she writes, “the Holy Spirit doesn’t really manifest itself in burning bushes or doves most of the time—at least these days. No, the Holy One comes to us most often through the hearts and hands of those who love us. Intimacy, including but not exclusively sexual intimacy, has a mystical quality about it, because it is through this union that we begin to feel a greater oneness with All That Is. Love will drive out fear, and as the fear goes, compassion can enter.”

Male or Female, straight, gay or bi – many of us, perhaps *most* of us, want the same things. Sometimes we get them and then we lose them, whether through clumsiness, neglect, naiveté or decay. Then after a time, we want them again, we try again, take our place on the loveseat and ask, with a bit more confidence this time around: "Human being, will you take my human hand, come sing a song with me, tell me your truth and I will tell you mine?"

In her infernal internal dialogue, Jennifer asks (speaking for many, I’m sure): “Am I ready for that level of commitment?” Am I ready to “share hearts?” If Jen was here, I’d tell her, as I tell you, that anything worth having, requires commitment, including (especially) the gift of true intimacy. That is, a commitment to self-knowledge and honest self reflection, a commitment to a certain level of nakedness and humility, and a commitment to come out of the cave, or at least, to be clear that you need some cave dwelling.

Friday is Valentine’s Day. FTD wants you to “say it with flowers.” I recommend you say it with words. The words may not come in an easy way, but use words. And choose them carefully so they do no harm, even if they might sear a bit with their honesty. The Rev. Elizabeth Tarbox expresses so well the value of words within a commitment to deliberate intimacy, when she writes:

“Let’s keep talking, my love. Words we have to spare: love words and angry words, and beneath them hurting, bleeding, dying words, and beneath them words melted by fire and hardened by ice, words of sadness and truth birthed from the cavern of tears. And when the words are spent, heaped over the pages and spilled to the floor, let us read each other’s eyes and see the chapters and the places where old bookmarks press the pages apart, to the book opens up to the old story before we can move on. For you are all the love words I have ever heard and all the hurt words where the love is deepest.”

“But let’s keep caring, ever slowly building down the words, one beneath the others, getting closer to the truth and still deeper until you touch your words to my wounds, honor them, and feel the pain. Our wounds may not be healed by the touch of the other’s words but are dignified by our recognition of their existence. Then and only then will the words mean anything; when we have used them up until the old meanings have been scrubbed off; when the wrong words have been tried and discarded and the right words have been spoken in a whisper, then let us climb down into each other’s soul and rest there in the silence, and love.”

So may it be.

Amen.