

Rosemary Cowan Relationship as a Spiritual Journey

Introduction

Part of the human condition is to experience a sense of dissatisfaction and incompleteness. Once basic survival needs are met we seek other forms of fulfilment, the highest in the hierarchy being the spiritual quest to discover who we truly are. In previous times people relied on family, community and belief systems to satisfy this yearning but in many Western countries nowadays these traditional bonds are breaking down and, increasingly, we turn instead to our intimate relationships for fulfilment and salvation.

Hence, this article discusses loving relationship in terms of a spiritual journey. Like all spiritual paths, the road is not only beautiful but also rough at times; we often lose our way or abandon the path and it can take a long time to find it again.

“Relationships offer you a profound spiritual path. Your partner is not only your friend, your lover, your companion but also your teacher. S/he reflects back to you all the beauty that lies within you but also all the fear, doubt and ambivalence which lies buried deeply within your soul. As you come to accept your partner’s apparent imperfections, you begin to integrate your own unacknowledged fears.”¹

The journey divides into three distinct stages: Eden, Purgatory and Paradise - falling in love; falling out of love and attaining a mature, loving attachment. Most of us will be familiar with the first two stages – the final stage is the prize, which is worth working towards, even though it may only be obtained occasionally and fleetingly.

Eden

In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve lived together blissfully, in a state of innocence, unaware of their condition, until they fell from grace and were evicted. Whether you believe the biblical story of the creation to be the literal truth or see it as a metaphor for the original state of oneness with the mother prior to birth, it nevertheless captures the sense that we all have, of having lost a state of original bliss and unity. One of the most compelling myths humanity subscribes to is that through union with a special someone, we can return to the happiness of Eden.

“The fantasy of the Magical Other, the notion that there is one person out there who is right for us, will make our lives work, a soul-mate who will repair the ravages of our personal history; one who will be there for us, who will read our minds, know what we want and meet those deepest needs... Virtually all popular culture is fuelled by this idea ... Nothing has greater power over our lives than the hint, the promise, the intimation of the recovery of Eden through that Magical Other.”²

The ancient Greeks believed falling in love was the work of the god Eros, a mischievous, irresponsible boy who, blindfolded, fired arrows that caused people to fall in love helplessly, randomly and often unsuitably. His name meant desire, a word which comes from *de sidus*, meaning 'of the star' and, hence, his activities were associated with yearning for the Magical Other as for something beautiful, distant and unknown.

Dorothy Tennov, an experimental psychologist working in the 1970s, coined the term 'limerence' to distinguish 'in love' from other forms of love, such as affection, loving attachment or the protective instinct we feel for a child. The phenomenon of limerence is recognised all over the world and experienced with the same degree of intensity by both men and women. Since eye contact was so frequently mentioned by her research subjects, Tennov believed the eyes to be the main organ of limerence, not the heart.

Common features of limerence include:

- Intrusive thinking about one particular person, who is not only the object of passionate desire, but also a possible sexual partner
- Dependency of mood on the love object's actions or, more accurately, interpretation of those actions in terms of likely reciprocation
- Some fleeting and transient relief from unrequited passion through vivid imagination of the love object reciprocating
- Buoyancy - a feeling of walking on air – if there is a chance of reciprocation
- A general intensity of feeling that leaves other concerns in the background
- A remarkable ability to emphasize what is truly admirable in the love object and to avoid dwelling on the negative, even to respond with compassion for the negative and render it, emotionally if not perceptually, into another positive attribute

Limerence is both a wonderful, exciting experience and an unbalanced, almost crazy time. Indeed, when we fall for someone, a powerful combination of neurotransmitters is being secreted with side-effects such as sleeplessness; loss of appetite; obsessive thoughts about the love-object, leading to loss of concentration; going weak at the knees; dry mouth; increased heart rate; butterflies in the stomach and light headedness - no wonder this phase of a relationship is often called 'lovesickness'! The compensation is: elevation of mood; one's senses being on high alert and the excitement of being taken over and lifted out of one's usual state, all of which serves to create a bond with one other, special person: the Magical Other.

And there is something special about this Other because when we fall in love we are unconsciously recognising a combination of qualities in someone that feels familiar. As the failure of so many speed-dating sessions, television match-making

programmes and relationship internet sites can testify, of all the hundreds of potential partners only a certain small percentage will have the ability to activate our unconscious love template, created from the positive and negative traits of our early caregivers – what Jung called the ‘hook’. The psyche recognises the pattern that it experienced in the past and seeks to recreate it because, this time, things could turn out differently and the Magical Other will heal the wounds our caregivers inflicted - either necessarily in order to socialise us, or unnecessarily because of their own flawed natures.

“It is truly frightening to realise how little one is conscious in the formation of intimate relationship, how powerful is our programmed desire for what we have known. What is known is what is sought, even if what is known is wounding.”³

Popular culture mythologizes limerence as the high point of romantic fulfilment. The ultimate goal of one’s love life – of one’s life even - is presented, in film and song and popular literature, as the moment when we meet the eyes of a total stranger, experience a sense of connection that can only be described as ‘magical’, fall into bed almost immediately and have passionate sex.

This kind of relationship is, of necessity, based on our fantasies of what the other person is like, but popular culture has created an unrealistic expectation that limerence will go on forever. It is not sustainable, however, and usually lasts for between 18 months and 3 years. It is a prelude stage which evolved to bring a couple together, to create special feelings for each other so as to bond and start the mating process.

The huge emphasis placed on limerence – and probably also the addictive nature of the cocktail of neurotransmitters – causes many people to believe that when it passes, as it inevitably must, the relationship, too, is at an end. Andrew G. Marshall, a couples’ counsellor and author of a book entitled ‘I love you but I’m not in love with you’⁴ has observed that this issue is increasingly what brings younger couples into therapy – and his book provides seven steps to saving the relationship.

In psychological terms, during the Eden phase, not only are we and our lover on our best behaviour and wishing to make a good first impression, but also, in the absence of any other information about this new person and bathed in chemicals that lift our mood, we rely on projection, the psychological defence mechanism whereby we ascribe our own inner experiences and attributes to another person, so that we are convinced that our inner experience is truly ‘out there’. When we fall in love the projections are positive; we are really falling in love with our own best qualities. Tennov noted this ‘remarkable’ ability to emphasize the love object’s admirable qualities and to avoid dwelling on the negative and, moreover, to even turn a negative attribute into another positive one. Marshall cites the following examples:

“It doesn’t matter that he is shy because I can enjoy bringing him out of his shell.”

“She might have a temper, but that just shows how deeply she feels everything.”

All relationships begin with projection and we only gradually learn what others are really like as we take back our projections. Though limerence fades, its longer-lasting legacy is joyful: it has given us a glimpse of our own potential, reflected back to us from our beloved. Sad though it is to lose the excitement of limerence, this phase must wane in order that a true, authentic relationship can begin to blossom.

“Loving is mutuality; loving is synchronous attunement and modulation. As such, adult love depends critically upon knowing the other. ‘In love’ demands only the brief acquaintance necessary to establish an emotional genre but does not demand that the book of the beloved’s soul be perused from preface to epilogue. Loving derives from intimacy, the prolonged and detailed surveillance of a foreign soul.”⁵

Purgatory (or Hell)

At some point, a few months or years into the relationship, normality begins to reassert itself; the surging chemicals recede and, gradually, we begin to notice that there is a discrepancy between how the Other is ‘supposed’ to be and our actual experience of them. We begin to wonder why he or she disregards our wishes or doesn’t seem as devoted as they were; why did we not notice before their flaws and irritating habits? With some consternation, we start to question who this person really is.

Projection is, by definition, an unconscious process (as soon as we realise we are doing it, we have begun to take the projections back). Now, as all unconsciously, the positive projections are withdrawn and, increasingly, replaced by negative ones, we enter a less happy, but more real stage. It is characterised by power struggles as each person tries to dominate; the more they refuse to conform, the more each seeks to control and change the other. Our defences, the strategies we developed to cope with negative feelings and to try to get our needs met, become strengthened, building a protective wall that isolates us from our partner. Now the relationship feels like Purgatory, or even Hell, for the more we projected, the more we were relying on the Other to complete us and take us back to Eden and the deeper is the pain and disappointment when we realise this is not going to happen.

Our negative projections onto our beloved begin to remind us of our early wounding:

“...we are once again brought face-to-face with what is unresolved in us. We

meet again our father's absence or our brother's envy, our mother's cruelty or our sisters' competition. We see our own childhoods mirrored in every direction."⁶

This is especially hard because our conscious minds have straightforward expectations of love relationships, imagining a scenario where we meet the beloved, fall in love, and live happily ever after, but this does not match what our unconscious seeks. Instead, the unconscious, primed from our earliest days to know what love feels like, expects a repetition of the past to unfold, which is a deeper, often darker story. Perhaps one that goes:

*"...boy meets girl [and any other combination], who (reminiscent of his mother) is needy and stifles his independence; they struggle bitterly over the years and resent each other a little more every day."*⁷

This is often the stage when break-ups occur. Some relationships, it is true, are not healthy and need to end, but more and more it seems that popular culture is helping to convince us that being 'crazy in love' is how love relationships should always be, so that people believe they want another phase of (short-term) limerence, rather than a long-term partnership. If we can ride out the storm and stay to 'peruse the book of the beloved's soul', the reward is rich for, in asking us to face what is unresolved in us, this stage offers the promise of the completion we so desire. Through the (no longer Magical) Other, we will indeed experience the sense of completion we knew in Eden, but it is we who must do the work; there is no short-cut.

Our relationships test us every day, insisting we wake up to our inner story, check our expectations against reality and ask ourselves what qualities we could develop as a result of this situation. We may not know until after the event but, courageously, we can check if what we were asking of our partner is something we ought to be doing for ourselves. If I want my partner to take care of me, then I need to grow up; if I want them to bolster my self-esteem, then I need to value myself more.

A man I know had a strong internal drive to be punctual. He felt intensely frustrated whenever his wife, having agreed the time they would leave for an event, would suddenly remember a last-minute task or a forgotten item. They had been married many years and he had tried all he could to change his wife, but without success. Pondering on this, he realised that from this infuriating situation he could develop the quality of patience – and reduce his blood-pressure! He recalled his tendency to frustration, irritation, annoyance and all the other names he gave his anger and knew that his wife was less attached to the punctuality rule. This gave him a basis from which to enquire what was going on for his wife – perhaps she was not deliberately setting out to annoy him but had a different motivation, such as not being bound by rules. As Rumi put it:

*“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I will meet you there.”⁸*

Sometimes this ‘field’ can open up compassion and even humour in the midst of an argument, which is important because, much as we need the occasional complaint or discussion about our hurt feelings to keep our relationship on track, we also need to ensure we experience a higher number positive interactions or the relationship will wither and die. Professor John Gottman⁹ has been researching couples for over 35 years and reckons that relationships need twenty positive interactions to each negative one in the normal course of events and, even when arguing, the number must not drop to less than five to one.

Not that this is easy, for we are programmed to defend our own reality and as a result, unless we consciously choose otherwise, tend to believe that if we see it someone else’s way, then we have to surrender our own view; that agreeing with you means I invalidate my own experience.

“...If what I say is true, then what you say must be false. There can be only one centre of the universe and that centre has got to be me. But if I muster the courage to suspend my own view of the universe for a moment and manage to see a fraction of your reality, something miraculous happens. First of all, a feeling of safety comes over you. Because the way you see the world is no longer being challenged, you begin to lower your defences. At the same time, you become more willing to acknowledge a portion of my reality. Because I have been willing to abandon my centrist position, you are more willing to let go of yours. To our mutual surprise, a drawbridge begins to descend on its rusty hinges, and you and I have our first experience with connection.”¹⁰

Paradise

Like all spiritual paths, suspending one’s own view and seeing more of our partner’s is not easy and requires daily effort. As our beloved also changes and develops we might even selfishly wish for a different result. Someone very wise once referred to his partner’s spiritual quest and asked, “Why do I have to be the victim of her personal growth?!” But, like the grit in the oyster that creates a pearl, dealing with struggles, learning how to care for each other, re-entering our childhoods and redeeming them generates the Paradise of loving attachment.

“Such a relationship is not 50-50 – it’s 100-100. Each takes perpetual care of the other, and, within concurrent reciprocity, both thrive. For those who attain it, the benefits of deep attachment are powerful – regulated people feel whole, centred, alive. With their physiology stabilized from the proper source, they are resilient to the stresses of daily life, or even to those of extraordinary circumstance...A couple shares in one process, one dance, one story.

*Whatever improves that one benefits both; whatever detracts hurts and weakens both lives.*¹¹

Now, in place of the either-or of dependence or independence, there is interdependence, differentiation, acceptance of our own positive and negative qualities as well as our partner's, commitment and mutual healing. The spiritual journey of relationship can open the door to Paradise.

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