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## **Sacred Relationship**

*by Lisa Nave, MFT*

*The first step to using relationship conflict as a path is to shift our focus away from the heat of the struggle and explore its source inside ourselves. Any serious relationship can always point us to wounded places inside ourselves that we have turned away from, and that need attention and healing.*

*John Welwood*

Everyone desires to have sacred relationships in their lives. We all want relationships that bring us happiness and fulfillment, that give us a deep sense of connection and of belonging to something larger than ourselves. We desire relationships that spark a feeling of aliveness and love and passion within us.

Sacred is defined as deserving reverence and respect. A sacred relationship draws a circle around itself as an alchemical container, deserving reverence and respect, in which each partner assists the other in becoming his or her highest self. Each partner is devoted to the other and to the relationship itself as a third entity. The relationship in essence becomes a vehicle for service. This form of service includes serving the other partner, serving the development of each partner and the union as a whole, serving the social network surrounding the relationship, and serving spirit.

Breaking the circle through triangulating with someone else in an intimate fashion dilutes the relationship. When the boundary of the circle is not revered and respected, sacredness is lost. The intimacy and depth within the circle only grows and becomes richer and more conscious over time when it is revered, protected, and tended to.

In the 1960's and 70's we were culturally in a phase of individuation, we were trying to strike out on our own and break with traditional roles and structures. But individuation can only go so far before it becomes destructive and begins to split off parts of itself and the world, creating shadows and dysfunction. We are now entering a cultural phase of integration. We are challenged to integrate again with family and community, bringing with us all that we've gained and learned from feminism, civil rights, and psychological insights. It is no longer enough anymore to just individuate, to cut-off marriages and family freely and without conscience, to dispose of all social structures in search of individual freedom. We now have the ability to think and behave in more complex and sometimes seemingly paradoxical ways. We can now preserve the sacred circle, our marriages and families and extended relationships. We can challenge ourselves to work through conflicts and differences and wounds in order to become more conscious and aware, and in order to act from a place of service, love and devotion. This is striving toward social sustainability.

Some may question the concept of social sustainability, of respecting the sacred circle and relationships over time and through generations. But this is a new structure that includes the individualism we incorporated during the social rights movements of the 1960's onward. This form of relating and living is not like that of China, for instance, where self is denied. We can now live in a way that integrates the respect for self with the respect for community. It is not one or the other. We can hold an awareness of both self and other, and when we encounter a conflict, we can look for the best solution while holding these opposites in tandem.

Devoting ourselves to another within a sacred relationship becomes a practice for dissolving our egos, and for expanding our love and care for others. This practice assists our personal development toward wholeness and maturity, and then ripples out, touching the lives of those around us. This may seem like a difficult undertaking, but it is a way of relating and living that will bring us the happiness, fulfillment, aliveness, passion, connection, health and sustainability we so desire.

Numerous people today believe in a romanticized version of love and marriage, and perhaps have no role models showing them a more authentic version. We are a society addicted to celebrity culture and entertainment. We see celebrity couples on TV and magazine covers announcing their recent divorce, only to see them the following month with new partners, purportedly in a torrid romance – and we begin to believe this is reality. What is disturbing, is that the more our society fragments and people become less securely attached to their families and communities, the more they will take celebrity displays of love as real, because they will have no other reference.

Popular psychology has often encouraged people to be individualists and to find personal happiness at any cost, without regard for the web of relationships in their life. Psychologists who dispense this advice are only seeing a part of the picture. People do need to individuate, to become themselves, and to have identities separate from their family members. But individuating doesn't always mean leaving a relationship for a supposed better one. One can individuate and still remain connected to their partner and family. These two paths are not mutually exclusive. We need to remember that part of health, development and sustainability is being in communion with others over time, and in working through obstacles that bring us closer together and help us to develop more fully.

For those of us who choose to get married and to hold marriage as sacred, not as another disposable item to be discarded when it no longer meets our personal and sometimes fleeting needs, we are given the greatest challenge of all. Rainer Maria Rilke describes it beautifully:

*For one human being to love another: that is  
perhaps the most difficult task of all..., the work  
for which all other work is but preparation. It is a  
high inducement to the individual to ripen... a  
great exacting claim upon us, something that  
chooses us out and calls us to vast things.*

We achieve the deeper intimacies and riches of love by walking through the fire of surrender, chaos and selflessness when called to do so. We have to commit to the sacredness of marriage and

draw a circle around us, creating a space in which we practice loving another. We cannot avoid walking through the fire if we want to experience great love. We can stay outside the fire for a lifetime, just beyond it, afraid to move closer for fear of the heat. We can play with different partners, play house, play out various fantasies, but we will never reach the true depths of what love can be. We will instead experience a kind of superficial love, and find ourselves on a continuous search to fill the emptiness inside. A more sacred form of relationship will provide the deeper fulfillment we seek, as well as more social sustainability for our families and culture.

John Welwood, a psychologist who writes eloquently about marriage and relationships says:

*The marriage vow establishes the boundaries of a container. We all have parts of ourselves that do not want to bother with things that are difficult. Especially in our affluent society, we want to feel free to walk away from anything at anytime. Yet because marriage is about the realization of love, not just its inspiration, it calls on us to deal with our fears of the earth – of being tied down, losing our freedom, having to deal with limitation and necessity. In taking a vow, we begin to subdue these fears and bring them under the yoke of our higher intelligence. We pledge that when things get hard, we will bring our combined energy to bear on the difficulties and see them through.*

The realization of love that John Welwood writes about is possible. It requires that we begin to look beyond our own personal needs, and out to the needs of the whole. Though the road to sacred relationship may be arduous, its gifts – love, health and social sustainability to name a few, are plenty.

A lovely poem by Rumi encourages us to take this road:

*Drumsound rises on the air,  
It's throb, my heart.  
A voice inside the beat  
Says, "I know you're tired,  
But come. This is the way."*

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