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More Intimacy, Less Sex

Love Seeks Closeness, but Desire Needs Distance

Love and lust are inseparable parts of a larger whole for some, while for others they are irretrievably disconnected. Most of us, however, express our eroticism somewhere in the gray areas where love and lust both relate and conflict.

—Jack Morin, from The Erotic Mind

In any first conversation with a couple, I always ask how they met and what attracted them to each other. Since we associate therapy with problems, people usually don’t come to me when they are still in the initial thrall of love. Sometimes they need a gentle reminder of what once was. It can be difficult for estranged or distressed couples to focus on what drew them together, but within every couple’s “creation myth” lies the key to understanding the unfolding story of their relationship.

“She was beautiful.” “He was so smart and funny.” “He had pizzazz, and he exuded such self-confidence and style.” “For me it was her warmth.” “For me it was his gentleness.” “I knew she wouldn’t leave me.” “I loved his hands.” “His dick.” “Her eyes.” “His voice.” “He made great omelets.” The attributes that describe an idealized lover are always luxurious and bountiful. Love is an exercise in selective perception, even a delicious deception as well, though who cares about that in the beginning?

We magnify the good qualities of those we love, and confer on them almost mythical powers. We transform them, and we in turn are transformed in their presence. “He made me laugh.” “She made me feel special, smart.” “We could talk for hours.” “I knew I could trust her.” “I felt so accepted.” “He made me feel beautiful.” Such comments highlight the magnificence of the beloved or illuminate his capacity to enlarge us, to lift us from ourselves. As the psychoanalyst Ethel Spector Person writes, “Love arises from within ourselves as an imaginative act, a creative synthesis that aims to fulfill our deepest longings, our
oldest dreams, that allows us both to renew and transform ourselves." Love is at once an affirmation and a transcendence of who we are.

Beginnings are always ripe with possibilities, for they hold the promise of completion. Through love we imagine a new way of being. You see me as I’ve never seen myself. You airbrush my imperfections, and I like what you see. With you, and through you, I will become that which I long to be. I will become whole. Being chosen by the one you chose is one of the glories of falling in love. It generates a feeling of intense personal importance. I matter. You confirm my significance.

As I listen to couples describe the merging that accompanies the nascence of love, I get a glimpse of the dreams that propelled them toward each other. The first stage of any encounter is filled with fantasies. It’s a stream of projections, anticipations, and stirrings that may or may not evolve into a relationship. Here you are in front of someone you barely know, and you imagine climbing Kilimanjaro together, building an Architectural Digest home, making babies, or umpteen irresistible fantasies as arbitrary as the weather. As my patients recount the exaltation they felt, I am able to take a peek beneath the rubble to see what they once had.

A Hopeful State of Bliss

John and Beatrice spent their first six months virtually locked up in a room in a blissful state of effervescence. John is a stockbroker who has known the glories and defeats of the dot-com revolution. When I first met him in therapy he had just witnessed his fortune wither before his eyes. He would spend days staring at his computer screen, helplessly tracking the demise of his portfolio while he drank the last of his single-malt Scotch. He had also just experienced an erotic collapse in the midst of an otherwise loving and caring relationship with a girlfriend of five years. He was in the grip of a triple crisis—emotional, professional, and financial. When he met Beatrice, it was like waking up from a coma. His sense of relief and renewal was profound. Beatrice, a Pre-Raphaelite beauty, was a graduate student in English in her mid-twenties, ten years younger than John. In the cocoon under the sheets they would talk for hours, make love, talk again, make love, and sleep (but very little). Transported as they were in this early rapture, they felt free and open. They relished the meeting of their two worlds, were endlessly curious, and luxuriated in their feelings of mutuality and warmth, free from the torments of the outside world.
As the relationship between them evolved, John and Beatrice experienced a growing sense of serenity. The initial excitement matured, the real world reemerged, and hope was transformed into substance. Enter intimacy. If love is an act of imagination, then intimacy is an act of fruition. It waits for the high to subside so it can patiently insert itself into the relationship. The seeds of intimacy are time and repetition. We choose each other again and again, and so create a community of two.

When they move in together, John and Beatrice are introduced to each other’s tastes and preferences, and become more acquainted with each other’s quirks. John likes his coffee black. No sugar. And he needs his first cup as soon as he gets out of bed. Beatrice likes hers with cream, no sugar, but she likes to have a glass of water first. Some of these wants are met with ease and tenderness; some they must learn to accept; and some are annoying, offensive, or downright disgusting. They wonder how they’ll ever live with...(name the three most revolting habits of your own partner). They enter into each other’s world of habit, and this familiarity reassures them. It creates routine, which in turn fosters a sense of security. Growing familiarity also signals freedom from ceremony and constraint. Yet this unconventionality, which is a welcome feature of intimacy, is a proven antiaphrodisiac as well.

Of course, familiarity is but one manifestation of intimacy. Our continued discovery of another person extends far beyond surface habits into an interior world of thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. We penetrate our partner mentally. We talk, we listen, we share, and we compare. We disclose certain parts of ourselves, while we adorn, fiddle with, and conceal others. Sometimes I learn something about you because you tell me: your history, your family, your life before we met. But just as often my understanding comes from watching you, intuiting, and making associations. You present the facts, I connect the dots, and an image is formed. Your singularities are gradually revealed to me, openly or covertly, intentionally or not. Some places inside of you are easy to reach; others are encrypted and laborious to decode. Over time, I come to know your values, and your fault lines. By witnessing how you move in the world, I come to know how you connect: what excites you, what presses your buttons, and what you’re afraid of. I come to know your dreams and your nightmares. You grow on me. And all this, of course, happens in two directions.

As John settles into this new relationship, he stops talking about it in therapy, and I assume that no talk means no problems. So when, after a year, he brings it up again, I pay close attention.
“Things are going well. We’ve moved in together. We get along great. She’s beautiful, she’s funny, she’s smart. I really love her. We don’t have sex.”

Intimacy Begets Sexuality...or Does It?

The prevailing belief of couples therapy in America today is that sex is a metaphor for the relationship—find out what’s going on emotionally and you can infer what’s going on in the bedroom. If couples are caring and nurturing—if they have good communication, mutual respect, fairness, trust, empathy, and honesty—you can reliably assume an ongoing, pulsing erotic bond. In her book *Hot Monogamy*, Dr. Patricia Love gives voice to these ideas:

> Good verbal communication is one of the keys to a good sex life. When couples share their thoughts and emotions freely throughout the day, they create between them a high degree of trust and emotional connection, which gives them the freedom to explore their sexuality more fully. Intimacy begets sexuality.

For many people, a loving, committed relationship is indeed a great enhancer of sexual desire, a fillip. They feel accepted and swaddled, and that safety allows them to feel free. The trust that comes with emotional closeness enables them to unleash their erotic appetites. But what about John and Beatrice? They don’t fill the bill. They have a beautiful, intimate, loving relationship (they communicate); and, according to this view, that should form the basis for sustained desire. But it doesn’t. And if it’s any consolation to them, it doesn’t work this way for a lot of people.

Ironically, what makes for good intimacy does not always make for good sex. It may be counterintuitive, but it’s been my experience as a therapist that increased emotional intimacy is often accompanied by decreased sexual desire. This is indeed a puzzling inverse correlation: the breakdown of desire appears to be an unintentional consequence of the creation of intimacy. I can think of many couples whose opening lines in my office go something like this: “We really love each other. We have a good relationship. But we don’t have sex.” Joe relishes Rafael’s intense interest in him but doesn’t like being engulfed physically—Joe will only be a “top.” Susan and Jenny feel closer than ever after they adopt their first child together, but that closeness does not translate into sensuality. Adele and Alan refer to their nights away at a hotel as intimate, but not particularly
passionate. Despite their erotic frustrations, these couples seem to share a fine intimacy, not a lack thereof.

Andrew and Serena are clear that sex has been an issue from the beginning, and that regardless of how much their relationship has flourished, it is never enough to charge them erotically. Before she met Andrew, Serena had experienced a luscious sexual life in a number of long-term relationships. In her experience, mounting intimacy had consistently led to better sex, so she was surprised when it didn't work that way with Andrew. When I asked her why she stayed with him when from the first date she didn't feel desired by him, she answered, “I thought we'd work on it. That with love it would get better.” “Sometimes it is the love that stands in the way,” I explained, “so just the opposite happens.”

Listening to these men and women has led me to rethink what I had long assumed about the correlation between intimacy and sexuality. Rather than looking at sex as an exclusive outgrowth of the emotional relationship, I've come to see it as a separate entity. Sexuality is more than a metaphor for the relationship—it stands on its own as a parallel narrative.

The intimate story of a couple can indeed tell us a lot about their erotic life, but it can't tell us everything. There is a complex relationship between love and desire, and it is not a cause-and-effect, linear arrangement. A couple’s emotional life together and their physical life together each have their ebbs and flows, their ups and downs, but these don’t always correspond. They intersect, they influence each other, but they’re also distinct. That’s one reason why, to the chagrin of many, you can often “fix” a relationship without doing anything for the sex. Maybe intimacy only sometimes begets sexuality.

**Separateness Is a Precondition for Connection**

It is too easily assumed that problems with sex are the result of a lack of closeness. But my point is that perhaps the way we construct closeness reduces the sense of freedom and autonomy needed for sexual pleasure. When intimacy collapses into fusion, it is not a lack of closeness but too much closeness that impedes desire.

Love rests on two pillars: surrender and autonomy. Our need for togetherness exists alongside our need for separateness. One does not exist without the other. With too much distance, there can be no connection. But too much merging eradicates the separateness of two distinct individuals. Then there is nothing more to transcend, no bridge to walk on, no one to visit on the
other side, no other internal world to enter. When people become fused—when two become one—connection can no longer happen. There is no one to connect with. Thus separateness is a precondition for connection: this is the essential paradox of intimacy and sex.

The dual (and often conflicting) needs for connection and independence are a central theme in our developmental histories. Throughout childhood we struggle to find a delicate balance between our profound dependence on our primary caregivers and our need to carve out a sense of independence. The psychologist Michael Vincent Miller reminds us that this struggle is vividly represented in children’s nightmares: “the abandonment dreams of falling or being lost, and the engulfment dreams of being attacked or devoured by monsters.” We come to our adult relationships with an emotional memory box ready to be activated. The extent to which our childhood relationships nurture or obstruct both sets of needs will determine the vulnerabilities that we bring into our adult relationships—what we most want and what we most fear. We all straddle both needs. Their intensity and priority fluctuate throughout our lives; and, as it happens, we tend to choose partners whose proclivities match our vulnerabilities.

Some of us enter intimate bonds with an acute awareness of our need to connect, to be close, not to be alone, not to be abandoned. Others approach relationships with a heightened need for personal space—our sense of self-preservation inspires vigilance against being devoured. Erotic, emotional connection generates closeness that can become overwhelming, evoking claustrophobia. It can feel intrusive. What was initially a secure enclosure becomes confining. While our need for closeness is almost as basic as our need for food, it carries with it anxieties and threats that can inhibit desire. We want closeness, but not so much that we feel trapped by it.

All these meanderings on intimacy are still far from the awareness of John and Beatrice. The authenticity and the spontaneity of the beginning did not lead them to anticipate the ambivalence of love that would follow. From where they were, intimacy was simple. Open up, reveal, share, become transparent, open up more...

John and Beatrice exemplify a typical beginning. In fact, the intense physical and emotional fusion they experience is possible only with someone we don’t yet know. At this early stage merging and surrendering are relatively safe, because the boundaries between the two people are still externally defined. John and Beatrice are new to each other. And while they are migrating into each other’s respective worlds, they have not yet
taken full residence; they are still two distinct entities. It is all the space between them that allows them to imagine no space at all. They are still enthralled by the encounter, and they have not yet consolidated their relationship.

In the beginning you can focus on the connection because the psychological distance is already there; it’s a part of the structure. Otherness is a fact. You don’t need to cultivate separateness in the early stages of falling in love; you still are separate. You aim to overcome that separateness. As new lovers, John and Beatrice enjoyed a built-in distance that allowed them to experience the confluence of love and desire freely, exempt from the conflicts they would bring to therapy later.

**Entrapment Deadens Desire**

For John, intimacy harbors a threat of entrapment. He grew up in a home with an alcoholic, abusive father. He can’t remember a time when he wasn’t acutely attuned to both his father’s moods and his mother’s sadness. As a young boy he was recruited to be his mother’s emotional caretaker, and to alleviate her loneliness. He was her hope, her solace, a vicarious affirmation that her miserable life would be vindicated through her marvelous son.

Children of such conflicted marriages are often enlisted to protect the vulnerable parent. John has never doubted his mother’s deep love for him; nor has the love ever been without a sense of burden. From early on, love implied responsibility and obligation. And even while he craves the closeness of intimacy—he has always had a woman in his life—he doesn’t know how to experience love in a way that does not feel confining. The emerging love he feels for Beatrice carries with it the same heaviness that love has always had for him.

There are many circumstances that can lead people to experience love and intimacy as constricting—an unhappy childhood is not a prerequisite. Popular love talk has made a real case for thinking of this as a “fear of intimacy,” which is seen as afflicting men in particular. But what I observe is not so much a reluctance to engage in intimate bonding—no one can doubt John’s deep involvement with Beatrice. Rather it is the weightiness of that involvement that these people find overbearing. Foreclosing the necessary freedom and spontaneity that eros demands, they feel trapped by intimacy.

John’s sexual inhibitions are exacerbated as his emotional involvement with his girlfriend deepens. As a matter of fact, the more he cares about her, the less he can freely lust after her. For him, as for many other men in this predicament, erotic
shutdown is not subtle. He is at the mercy of a stubborn penis that simply will not respond. But why? What is the erotic block that stops him from pursuing pleasure with Beatrice, the same woman with whom he lay in a languorous paradise not so long ago?

Ironically, even the closeness generated by good sex can have a boomerang effect. Like John and Beatrice, many couples experience their relationship as a dance in which great sex brings them close, but then this very closeness can make sex difficult again. The initial rapture facilitates a swift bonding and establishes an immediate connection. But while many of us relish the idea of losing ourselves in sex, the very oneness that we experience through the merging of our bodies can evoke a sense of obliteration. The intensity of sexual passion triggers a fear of engulfment. Of course, few of us are aware of these undercurrents as they're happening. What we feel instead is the urge to pull out right after orgasm, or the sudden desire to make a sandwich, to light a cigarette. We welcome the intrusion of any random thought: I meant to send an e-mail to... These windows need cleaning... I wonder how my friend Jack is doing? We appreciate being left alone to meander leisurely in our own mind because this reestablishes a psychological distance, a delineation of the boundaries between me and you. From "inter-" we go back to "intra-." Having been all over each other, we retreat back into our own skin. Nowhere is the passage from connection to separateness represented more clearly than at the end of a sexual act.

In his book Arousal, the psychoanalyst Michael Bader offers another explanation for John and Beatrice's erotic impasse. In his view, intimacy comes with a growing concern for the well-being of the other person, which includes a fear of hurting her. But sexual excitement requires the capacity not to worry, and the pursuit of pleasure demands a degree of selfishness. Some people can't allow themselves this selfishness, because they're too absorbed with the well-being of the beloved. This emotional configuration is reminiscent of how John felt toward his mother—his awareness of her unhappiness overwhelmed him with worry and a sense of burden. The very caring he experiences makes it harder for him to focus on his own needs, to feel spontaneous, sexually alive, and carefree.

John has faced this vexing problem of loss of desire in every intimate relationship he's been in. In the past, every time the block set in he interpreted it as meaning that he no longer loved the woman. In fact, the contrary is true. It is because he loves her so much that he carries this sense of responsibility for her and can't enjoy the blithe quest for erotic rapture.
Patterns Are Equal Employment Opportunities

Dynamics in relationships are always complementary—both partners contribute to creating patterns. We can’t talk about John’s fear of entrapment and his diminishing desire without also taking a look at what Beatrice brings to the relationship. So I invite her to come in with John for a few sessions. In the course of our conversation her contribution to the puzzle becomes clear. In her couple’s fervor, she has matched her interests to his, given up most activities that don’t include him, and stopped seeing her friends. Unfortunately, all her attempts to increase the closeness between them have had the opposite effect erotically. Her eagerness to please and her constant readiness to give up anything that might come between them increases the emotional burden and further exacerbates his sexual withdrawal. It’s as if his penis is creating a boundary that he cannot establish otherwise. It’s hard to feel attracted to someone who has abandoned her sense of autonomy. Maybe he can love her, but it’s clearly much harder for him to desire her. There’s no tension.

I suggested that Beatrice move out of their joint living situation for a while, and reestablish some independence. Doing this encouraged her to reconnect with her friends and to stop organizing her life around John. As I said to her, “You’re so afraid to lose him that you’ve alienated yourself and you’ve lost your freedom. There isn’t a separate person here for him to love.” To John I said, “You are such a caregiver that you can no longer be a lover. We need to reestablish a degree of differentiation and re-create some of the distance you had in the beginning. It’s hard to experience desire when you’re weighted down by concern.”

In the next few months Beatrice did move out. In a remarkable turnaround she found her own apartment, sent in her application for a PhD program, took a trip with her friends, and started earning her own money. Gradually, as John became convinced that she had two feet to stand on, and as it became clear to Beatrice that she did not need to abdicate her own person to merit love, they created a space between them into which desire could flow more freely.

Many of the men and women I see in my practice find it particularly difficult to introduce this kind of emotional space into their loving relationships. You would think that the safety of an established base would make it easier to take these kinds of risks, but no. A secure relationship does indeed give us the courage to act on our professional ambitions, to confront family secrets, and to take the skydiving course we never dared
consider before. Yet we balk at the idea of establishing distance within the relationship itself—the very place that grants us the delicious togetherness in the first place. We can tolerate space anywhere but there.

Sexual desire does not obey the laws that maintain peace and contentment between partners. Reason, understanding, compassion, and camaraderie are the handmaidens of a close, harmonious relationship. But sex often evokes unreasoning obsession rather than thoughtful judgment, and selfish desire rather than altruistic consideration. Aggression, objectification, and power all exist in the shadow of desire, components of passion that do not necessarily nurture intimacy. Desire operates along its own trajectory.

The Flannel Nightgown

My first meeting with Jimmy and Candace was a powerful illustration of this all too common story. Jimmy and Candace are young musicians in their early thirties who've been married for seven years. They are a biracial couple: she is African-American; he is of Irish descent. She exudes confidence in her boy jeans and aquamarine nails; he has the Quicksilver signature all over him. They're attractive, spunky, and on the go—and they are in despair over what's happening to them. "We're not having sex, and this has been going on for years," Candace explains. "We are terrified about it and so upset. And I think we each have a deep-rooted fear that we're going to find out it's unfixable."

Like John, Candace has experienced what feels like an inescapable loss of desire in every relationship she has been in; and what emerges from our conversation is that she understands her pattern. "My problem, my side of it, doesn't have to do with Jimmy," she explains. "When I'm intimate with someone, when I'm in love and he loves me, I suddenly lose interest sexually. I feel like there's something missing and I can't get close to my partner on a sexual level. I had a number of long-term relationships before I met Jimmy, and it happened each time."

Candace knows who Jimmy is for her. He's reliable, thoughtful, and intelligent. They share a rich partnership. And while she wants these characteristics in a man, their collateral consequences are counter-erotic for her. Faced with Jimmy's kindness, she isn't able to experience her own sexual energy. "What I can tell you," she says, "is that his kindness makes me feel safe, but when I think about who I want to sleep with, safe is not what I look for."
“Because it’s not what?” I ask her. “It’s not transgressive enough? It’s not aggressive enough?”

“It’s not aggressive enough.”

“And he is in some way too much of a conscientious lover?”

“Yeah.”

“And he’s constantly paying attention to you?”

“Which is very thoughtful.”

“Very thoughtful indeed, but not exciting.” I add. “It’s all very affectionate, very cozy; it’s just not sexual. You’ve replaced sensual love with something else. It’s what the sex therapist Dagmar O’Connor calls comfort love.”

Candace nods, “Like a flannel nightgown.”

The caring, protective elements that nurture home life can go against the rebellious spirit of carnal love. We often choose a partner who makes us feel cherished; but after the initial romance we find, like Candace, that we can’t sexualize him or her. We long to create closeness in our relationships, to bridge the space between our partner and ourselves, but, ironically, it is this very space between self and other that is the erotic synapse.

In order to bring lust home, we need to re-create the distance that we worked so hard to bridge. Erotic intelligence is about creating distance, then bringing that space to life.

In one of our sessions Candace describes how nothing turns her on more than to see Jimmy perform onstage. But when I ask her if she ever goes backstage afterward, she tells me no. “Why don’t you go into the dressing room?” I ask her. “You look at him up there onstage and you’re all excited by him. He’s totally in possession of himself and his talent. But then you wait until he comes home and he instantly becomes de-erotized.” She nods in agreement; he looks disappointed.

“Why don’t you divorce him?” I suggest. “Stay with him but divorce him. If you’re not married to him, he won’t look like such a homebody.”

“You know what I said to him?” she admits, “I said, ‘If you left me today I would be sexually interested in you.’”

Candace recognizes that the feeling of emotional closeness she longs for with Jimmy stands in the way of what excites her sexually. In order to circumvent this pitfall, she needs to create psychological distance. Long before meeting me, Candace had attempted to do just that. She had come up with her own solution to the predicament: Jimmy was to ignore her when he came home, rather than instantly approach her. As she said, “If I feel that you don’t need me at all, you become desirable.” Intuitively, without knowing why she needed this particular plot, she was trying to generate desire.

Unfortunately, Jimmy wasn’t up for the game. He saw her
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need for being at arms-length as a rejection of him. He poignantly articulated his longing when he explained, “I’ve had so much anger. I remember a time when all I had to do was rub my knee up her thigh and she’d get all turned on. But for so long I haven’t truly felt that she wanted me like that. I want her to want me. I want her to be hungry for one thing and one thing only. And that thing is me.”

“Yet you see her request for a breather as rejection,” I respond. “You know, desire acts in weird ways. Here she is asking you to ignore her, not to want her, as a way for her to want you. I can see why this makes no sense. Why such detours? And I understand your reaction. But you see, she needs to separate the intimate from the erotic, and for that she needs space. She invited you into a scheme that would allow her to do just that. It wasn’t a rebuff; it was an invitation. You have to imagine it not literally, but as a form of sexual play. Play at not needing me. Play at ignoring me.”

But Jimmy could not play, because he was caught in a struggle with Candace. He didn’t want to engage in such contortions to elicit her desire. He wanted her to want him his way. Jimmy had felt deprived and rejected for so many years that the main feeling that escorted him was anger. His bile only highlighted the extent of his longing and need. The way they neutralized the threat of rage was through massive affection. Their almost constant physicality acted like a sexual appetite suppressor. This kind of contact can sustain itself for years without turning into desire. Unconditional love does not drive unconditional want. That’s what we have with friends, and Jimmy and Candace were friends who wanted to be lovers.

Knowing that Candace had already expressed a need for distance, I saw an opening to intervene. I sought to introduce a disruption into the cozy, affectionate touch that had come to replace sex. “Do you touch each other?” I asked, though I already knew the answer.

“All the time,” she replied.

“Do you cuddle?”

“Yes,” Jimmy said.

“A lot?”

“Yes,” they said in unison.

“Well, it’s got to stop.”

They looked at me wide-eyed. Here they had been emphasizing one aspect of their relationship that they both cherished, and I was taking it away from them. But by the way Candace responded, I knew I was on to something.

“You don’t know what you’re doing to me,” she said. “I’m so touch-sensitive. For me, it’s all about touch. I’ll take it from
anyone, even a relative stranger. I’m a touch whore.” Jimmy added, “When we visited my family last week, my mother’s best friend was rubbing her shoulders. You know, now that I think about it, I remember wondering if it even mattered whether it was me or Mrs. Monahan.”

“So, this is going to be the goal of therapy,” I interjected. “We’re going to differentiate between Jimmy and Mrs. Monahan.”

By telling them not to touch I was mapping a space that would give her room to go after him. That, in turn, would give him the feeling of being desired. “I’ll make this clear for you. No contact. No pecks, no kissing, no massage, no strokes. Nothing. Sorry, you guys. You can write, you can send notes, you can make eyes—whatever else you want to do. Because at this point you have smothered sizzle with affection, leaving it with no way to ignite.”

Candace was ready to comply with my suggestion. “OK,” she agreed. “It’s hateful, but it’s a good idea.”

I wondered who would have the harder time following my prescription. While Candace presented herself as the “touch whore,” I suspected that Jimmy would be the first to break the agreement, for he had more at stake. He had been furious for years, and he had never known how to be angry with a person he also loves—how to be mad and connected at the same time. Behind his restraint, behind the sweet caresses, lay the unarticulated fear that irretrievably leads to separation. During the first several weeks, Jimmy repeatedly slipped. So I instructed Candace to become more forceful in maintaining the hands-off rule. I was looking to up the ante. Eventually, Jimmy got worked up enough to comply. “About a month into it, I wanted nothing to do with her.”

Removing the protective layer of affection turned out to be more effective than I had anticipated. “Safe might not be attractive to me,” Candace admitted. “But I’ve come to rely on it. These last few weeks he’s been more removed, and it’s been really uncomfortable. We’re not used to being this way. I got what I asked for, but I’m not sure it’s what I wanted.”

Candace and Jimmy had constructed an intimacy that precluded conflict of any sort. All the tension was crystallized in their sexual impasse. It was the one place where they maintained their distinction. By upsetting the balance of their harmonious but sexually flat relationship, I hoped to introduce an increased sense of otherness; for without that, there was no way desire would emerge.

A few months into our work together, Candace and Jimmy reported that they had noticed a difference, but they still had a
long trek ahead. "In a lot of ways we have so much in terms of our relationship. We have a lot to be thankful for, and I know that," Candace told me. "But we've also come to realize that being close doesn't mean never fighting. It's funny, because the one thing that we were so proud of was actually kind of a problem."

In listening to Candace, it occurred to me that the word "safe" had more than one face. The psychologist Virginia Goldner makes an accurate distinction between the "facial safety of permanent coziness" and the "dynamic safety" of couples who fight and make up and whose relationship is a succession of breaches and repairs. It's not by co-opting aggression but rather by owning it that sexual tension can freely romp—and can itself bring safety.

Everyone Needs a Secret Garden

In her landmark book The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir writes, "Eroticism is a movement toward the Other, this is its essential character." Yet in our efforts to establish intimacy we often seek to eliminate otherness, thereby precluding the space necessary for desire to flourish. We seek intimacy to protect ourselves from feeling alone; and yet creating the distance essential to eroticism means stepping back from the comfort of our partner and feeling more alone.

I suggest that our ability to tolerate our separateness—and the fundamental insecurity it engenders—is a precondition for maintaining interest and desire in a relationship. Instead of always striving for closeness, I argue that couples may be better off cultivating their separate selves. If cultivating separateness sounds harsh, let's think of it instead as nurturing a sense of selfhood. The French psychologist Jacques Salomé talks about the need to develop a personal intimacy with one's own self as a counterbalance to the couple. There is beauty in an image that highlights a connection to oneself, rather than a distance from one's partner. In our mutual intimacy we make love, we have children, and we share physical space and interests. Indeed, we blend the essential parts of our lives. But "essential" does not mean "all." Personal intimacy demarcates a private zone, one that requires tolerance and respect. It is a space—physical, emotional, and intellectual—that belongs only to me. Not everything needs to be revealed. Everyone should cultivate a secret garden.

Love enjoys knowing everything about you; desire needs
mystery. Love likes to shrink the distance that exists between me and you, while desire is energized by it. If intimacy grows through repetition and familiarity, eroticism is numbed by repetition. It thrives on the mysterious, the novel, and the unexpected. Love is about having; desire is about wanting. An expression of longing, desire requires ongoing elusiveness. It is less concerned with where it has already been than passionate about where it can still go. But too often, as couples settle into the comforts of love, they cease to fan the flame of desire. They forget that fire needs air.

3

The Pitfalls of Modern Intimacy

Talk Is Not the Only Avenue to Closeness

We have no secrets, we tell each other everything.
—Carly Simon, “We Have No Secrets"

When my mother talked about relationships, she didn’t have much to say about intimacy. “You need two things in a marriage,” she told me. “You need the will to make it work and you need to be able to make compromises. It’s not hard to be right, but then you are right and alone.” My father, who was always less pragmatic than my mother, more than filled the