

Relationships: Carriers of Life, Growth, and Trouble

by Jerry M. Ruhl, Ph.D.

Pychological development, even among Jungians, is often viewed as an inner, individual task. Yet relationships are the container for all growth and advancement. In fact, mature relationships are the ideal training ground for love, compassion, forgiveness, surrender, generosity, selflessness, gratitude—qualities that wisdom traditions describe as the fruit of spiritual progress. In addition, we must note that the path to individuation is seldom smooth and happy.

With any developmental path you must expect trouble, constant interference with your conscious plans. Listening with integrity and intention to the urgings of the “other,” whether in the form of a partner or the unconscious, one can no longer do just as one pleases. The Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung deified the **inner** push to individuate, referring to it as the work of the higher Self. “To this day God is the name by which I designate all things which cross my willful path violently and recklessly, all things which upset my subjective views, plans and intentions and change the course of my life for better or worse.”

Oh my. Sharing your psychic house with someone who irritates you, at times blocks your plans, frequently highlights your shortcomings and blind spots? That sounds like the experience of marriage or a primary relationship! What better environment to have your willful intentions thwarted and your shadow elements pointed out to you—for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, so long as you live. While we may frequently invoke the Lord’s name in our relationships, unlike Jung, most of us do not associate it with a spirit of divine intervention.

Let’s face it, relationships are difficult and require constant attention and hard work. They frustrate us, leave us mystified, at times drive us to the edge of madness. As Woody Allen narrates in the film *Annie Hall*: “A relationship is like a shark, you know? It has to constantly move forward or it dies. And I think what we got on our hands is a dead shark.”

While many would testify that marriage is at times a predator of peace or society’s instrument of torture, the myth of happy relationship still dominates our culture, even in the face of a divorce rate surpassing 50 percent in the industrialized nations. Everyone knows couples who have dissolved their family after ten or twenty years of commitment. While self-help books and marriage counselors promote the idea that only happy marriages are successful, the truth is that every path to consciousness leads through dark and difficult places. Zeus and Hera, the archetypal married couple for the ancient Greeks were constantly in turmoil

and quarrel. Zeus had countless sexual affairs and Hera avenged herself in a most cruel fashion against lovers of her husband. Friga, the Norse goddess of marriage, was also a patron divinity of war. The image of a strife-filled marriage is reflected not only among the gods, but also in popular stories. Why do we expect otherwise?

Perhaps it is time for change in the mythic images of committed relationship. A colleague of mine recently recounted the dream of a twice-divorced client in her late 50’s: *She is in her garage when a man in blue overalls pulls up in a truck. He tells her, “I am the Holy Spirit...” As he turns to leave he says, “By the way, you know you **can** have a relationship if you want one.” She replies, “But I am too difficult to live with,” to which the Holy Spirit responds, “You know, **everyone** is difficult to live with!”*

The mythologist Joseph Campbell once told Bill Moyers, “When people get married because they think it’s a long-time love affair, they’ll be divorced very soon, because all love affairs end in disappointment. But marriage is recognition of a spiritual identity... You’re no longer this one alone; your identity is in a relationship. Marriage is not a simple love affair, it’s an ordeal, and the ordeal is the sacrifice of ego to a relationship in which two have become one...the sacrifice of the visible entity for a transcendent good. This is something that becomes beautifully realized in the second stage of marriage, which I call the alchemical stage, of the two experiencing that they are one. Marriage is not just a social arrangement, it’s a spiritual exercise.” (*The Power of Myth*, p. 6).

If relationships are so troublesome, why do we keep returning expecting better outcomes?

To return to the philosophic Woody Allen for guidance: “After that it got pretty late, and we both had to go, but it was great seeing Annie again. I realized what a terrific person she was and how much fun it was just knowing her, and I thought of that old joke. You know, this guy goes to his psychiatrist and says, “Doc, my brother’s crazy. He thinks he’s a chicken.” And the doctor says, “Well why don’t you turn him in?” The guy says, “I would, but I need the eggs.” Well, I guess that’s pretty much how I feel about relationships—you know, they’re totally irrational and crazy and absurd, but, I guess we keep going through it because most of us need the eggs.”

We do need the eggs. Committed relationships can be understood as archetypal containers for individuation. Jung recognized the importance of relationship, writing, “Individuation has two principal aspects: in the first place it is an internal and subjective process of integration, and in the second it is an equally indispensable process of objective relationship.”

What would relationship look like considered as a spiritual exercise, a journey of pilgrimage, a container for self-realization and mutual individuation? Here are some preliminary ideas.

First, unlike a vacation, a pilgrimage is a journey in which we are in service to something greater than our own egos. We expect challenges and suffering along the way. The participants aim for compassion, affection, and consideration as they go, yet they are prepared to deal with setbacks and suffering.

To return to Jung’s stormy quote about how the divine is constantly interfering in his life, conflict moves psyche. In relationships we are working out our flaws, our gifts, what we have

Jerry M. Ruhl, PhD, will be our November speaker. Please see his bio on this page.

inherited, and what is unique to us. It would follow then that a real “soul mate” is not the perfect partner in the sense of someone being there to give us what we want or to make us happy. Happiness seems to come and go of its own accord. The more we chase it, the more it eludes our grasp. God help the person who thinks they are in charge of the happiness of another person. We often have to fight hard with our soul mate because that person may appear to be the very obstacle to our becoming who we are. Precisely because they are the obstacle, they may help us to grow. Of course, a relationship also must contain care, consideration, love, and resonance, an energy that is vibrant between people.

Jung’s choice of the term “individuation” is perhaps unfortunate; he constantly had to explain he did not mean individualism—a sort of Pilgrim’s Progress without a creed aiming not at heaven but at self-centered development. Individuation is Jung’s term for a whole-making instinct. This requires that we listen and respond to “the other” with presence. In doing so, our conscious plans and desires are modified by forces hidden beneath awareness.

When people say they want deep intimacy they often envision a bottomless pool of unconditional love, trust, security, and acceptance. This is other-validated intimacy, an emotional fusion of selfhood borrowed from another and an extension of childhood.

Being intimate with another doesn’t mean you get the response you want. When a partner cannot or will not validate you, you need to be able to soothe and validate yourself. Dating couples thrive on other-validated intimacy. They give each other lots of positive feedback, are on best behavior, and tend to ignore the shadow. Committed relationships require self-validating intimacy and skills for negotiating and working through trouble. Individuating relationships must stretch you, often painfully. Intimacy involves being accurately known and knowing your partner. People don’t desire partners who they constantly have to validate. Reciprocal validation is a big part of dating but not workable in a long-term, individuating relationship. The demand to constantly be there for the other starts to eventually feel suffocating. Desire fades as the urge to escape grows.

To summarize, there is no avoiding doing our own inner work, but it always takes place in relationship to an “other.” We would benefit from a deeper understanding of how individuating relationships might work. We can say that such relationships are about co-creation, and there is no growth without effort, conflicts, and struggle. As Alexis Zorba exclaimed to a young man who insists he doesn’t want any trouble, “Life is trouble. Only death is not. To be alive is to undo your belt and look for trouble!”