

A Dance We Do  
UUF

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Intimacy is a dance we do...and it doesn't require music. Music and low lights may set the atmosphere, create a mood, but folks, there ain't no guarantee intimacy is gonna follow.

But don't give up on low lights and soft music, intimacy does require a bit of stage setting. It doesn't just happen. Sometimes you have to sneak up on it. Sometimes it sneaks up on you. But however it happens, it requires your participation...intentionally or not.

When you Google intimacy, the majority of hits have to do with sexual intimacy...often couched in terms of husband and wife. No doubt, because that's the only way it's supposed to happen, according to the rule book! Husband and wife, intimacy, sexual intercourse.

While sexual intercourse can be a wonderfully intimate thing, intercourse isn't always intimate and doesn't require intimacy, unless we're only measuring by physical proximity. Confining intimacy to the act of sex is much too limiting, much too constraining for this powerfully potent thing called intimacy.

Intimacy is the life blood of human relationships. I remember early on in a psychology course reading about Harlow's experiments with infant monkeys. It focused on the need for contact. Within hours of birth, he took the babies from their mothers and replaced them with surrogates made either of heavy wire or wood covered with foam and cloth. Both were warmed by an internal light source.

Even when the wire mother was the source of nourishment, the infants spent most of their time clinging to the cloth covered "mother". He concluded the need for closeness and affection went deeper than the need for warmth.

Harlow's research informed the importance of mother/child bonding. It pointed to the infant's need for more than food, safety, and warmth, but also the need to feel love, acceptance, and affection from the caregiver. As adults, these monkeys were not well socialized, indicating the long-term psychological effects of inadequate attentiveness to children's needs. Much of modern psychology is based on his experiments.

Not getting enough love, acceptance, and affection is not good for any of us, at whatever age. But it's clear to anyone who's given it any thought: love, acceptance and affection is not a given in our relationships. It doesn't come easily. It requires attention and effort. And can't be had by only one person in the relationship. It's something that must be shared.

No doubt, some folks are better at creating and nourishing intimacy than others. Maybe it's cultural. Intimacy is about feelings and emotions and some cultures don't encourage such things. Maybe it's about gender. We're told women are better at doing that touchy/feely stuff than men. Like in the Harlow experiments, it's something mothers are supposed to do...assumedly while men are out slaying the bacon.

Maybe it's about our personal histories, whether male, female or queer. Lori Gordon told us in the reading this morning: "Because the past continually asserts itself in present experience, both partners in a relationship are obligated to explore [for] themselves, their beliefs, needs, and hopes, and even uniqueness of personality through their family's emotional history. "

Whatever the reason, and there must be multiple factors, intimacy requires willingness. It requires a willingness to be seen and known, and to see and know another. To see and know the real person, not just the public face one puts on while the world is a stage.

On her blog, Shana Schutte, suggests we think of intimacy as being spelled differently...with hyphens, between four words. IN-TO-ME-SEE. Intimacy involves being able to share the whole range of feelings and experiences we have as human beings - pain and sadness, as well as happiness and love. Our strengths and frailties. Doing so comes with vulnerability.

Letting another see-in-to-me, places me in a vulnerable position. It exposes my deeper self, my true self. Another person may not be happy with what they see, hear and know of me. At the same time, seeing in to another makes me vulnerable to having my hopes, dreams and fantasies shattered, of who I want the other person to be.

To quote a dear friend of mine, “if you don’t want to get hurt, don’t ever love anyone”.

Schutte says relationships “without conflict is flowers, fireworks and fantasy”. She writes that “conflict can be a vehicle to intimacy, but only if both parties are willing to work through problems”. It takes a willingness to understand and to be understood.

If we worry about making the other person angry, we run the risk of being inauthentic. And if we place our own ego needs for comfort above the other’s need to be seen and known, the window into the other grows small and dim.

Yes, intimacy is risky business. But we won’t have a life of vitality without it. It’s a dance we do. A dance, me with me, me with you, you with you and you with me. Intimacy is built on being real, a willingness to look, to see, to discover; an openness to explore and learn.

Some say, intimacy starts within, with self. Others say intimacy can be induced; we can be invited into intimacy. I suspect both are true. Either way, intimacy requires the soft touch of empathy. Empathy for self and empathy for the other.

I become more and more intimate with myself when I’m willing to see myself as I am, rather than as I am supposed to be or would prefer to be. I’ve heard it expressed as being able to set yourself apart and see yourself out there in the middle of the table. And say, hummm, this is what I believe, this is what I want, this is how I feel. This is what makes me happy and that is what makes me sad or frightened. It’s a dance of me with me.

The dance of me with you, requires that I see you dispassionately; really see, listen and hear... and maybe even feel your feelings. It means I do not filter what you say and do through my list of shoulds and oughts. When I am able to let you be you without judging you for not being different, I dance with you, intimately. When I listen for information, I gain an understanding of what makes you you.

And when we are able to do those things for and with each other, something wonderful begins to emerge. With continued effort and experience, trust builds and comfort unfolds. Like all good fruits and vegetables, it takes time for intimate relationships to ripen.

Now it must be said, not all intimate relationships are the same. Since people are different, it stands to reason that relationships will be different. But more than that, it's important to honor the different ways we can be intimate.

An intimacy grows within a choir or between musicians as they listen, adjust and attune to one another. It can be magical to hear jazz musicians take a melody into the land of creativity, then bring it back to the band. A dentist and assistant working in tandem can perform an intimate dance.

Colleagues exchanging ideas, exploring territory can create a particular kind of intimacy. It's intellectual for sure, but can be intimate none-the-less, if both or all are comfortable sharing and expressing themselves without constraint.

There is a certain intimacy that grows up between dear friends. One feels comfortable saying what's on your mind, expressing fears, laments, hopes and desires. They tell stories and confide confidences they might not share with anyone else. Good friends can sense when another is adrift or out of sorts. One offers to help or more importantly, simply sits quietly, holding a hand, providing emotional support. It's a slow dance of intimacy.

Sexual intimacy is what tends to get a lot of attention. It's the stereotypical definition of intimacy. So much so, the two terms, sex, meaning intercourse, and intimacy, are often used interchangeably. But using the terms to mean the same thing is misleading. Not all intercourse is an intimate exchange.

Sexual intimacy is seldom if ever solely physical. I suspect women understand this much better than men who tend to be culturally trained to dampen, or avoid emotions and feelings.

Sexual intimacy is composed of any number of subparts. It can be many forms of sensual touch. But before touch can be experienced as sensual, there must be a certain amount of comfort with self and comfort with another or others. That comfort and ease may arise out of intellectual intimacy and/or emotional intimacy. We do ourselves and others a disservice when we fail to make such distinctions.

Intimacy comes in many forms and operates on many different levels. But regardless of the type of intimacy in question, intimacy takes time and effort. There is no magic pill or short cut to intimacy. Intimacy requires a willingness to be vulnerable to hold oneself out in such a fashion as to be seen and understood.

In-To-Me-See.

In-to-me-see, that I have wants and needs, hopes and fears. Strengths and weaknesses. All of which make me particularly and uniquely human. While our particularities will differ, we are each uniquely human. We are each unique individuals. None before and none ever will be the same.

There is no guarantee of intimacy between any two individuals. But each is worthy of recognition and appreciation. And for each of us, intimacy is the life blood of a vital existence. Lets travel along the path of non-judgment, be willing to be self-reflective. Be open to our fellow travelers for they may have something important to share, even teach.

That something may enliven and enrich our lives. They may become a valued dance partner, dancing, with or without the music.

Amen