

Intimately Yours

You don't really need a Ph.D. in order to discuss the subject of intimacy. You *do* need a degree of interest! The experience of intimacy is crucial to a human being. It is a lab course that requires you to learn from experience. Intimacy is richly rewarding—some say our only way to truly know who we are. However, it is not without risk!

Our first brush with intimacy, and our initial imprinting, comes to us as an infant. The warmth of being encircled in loving arms, the familiarity of body scent, the resonating of a well-known voice and the eye contact that mothers make with babies are vital components for human growth and development. From this we could almost postulate that intimacy is as vital as food. It is essential to our continued well-being throughout our lives.

Some of us approach intimacy better than others. Perhaps we were held closer or loved more adequately. Our personality is open and communicative. We have learned how to listen attentively. We have an air of self-assurance, and face life unafraid. We have an adequate measure of self-esteem. We are learning more of who we are, every day of our lives. These attributes invite intimacy and, like a self-perpetuating circle of growth, we gain self-knowledge and invite deeper levels of intimacy.

Intimacy is not without pain. It is from those who know us best, who impact our lives most strongly, that we can receive the deepest wounds. In the beginning stages of friendship, for instance, the risks are very slight. There is a certain headiness about the newness of relationship where all is revelation. Experience is limited to who or what we say we are, and then time makes itself felt and knowing begins to occur. So long as what

one professes closely matches what one actually accomplishes, all is well. But when an intimate does not meet our expectations, we are very disappointed. We become sad, angry, disillusioned, and sometimes afraid to take the risk toward intimacy. We'd rather hide a little, not divulge so much, so that we may feel safe. These hiding mechanisms we call defenses.

Self-defenses are healthy in the proper circumstance. When real danger threatens us and we hide, either physically or emotionally, then we have activated an appropriate defense. However, when we use our defense mechanisms to "hide away" habitually, without discriminating or knowing what we are doing, these defenses keep us from experiencing intimacy. As we shut people out, we close ourselves in by overusing mechanisms of denial, avoidance, projection, and even humor. We must be brave enough to lower our defenses in situations that we know are safe, so that we can allow another person to communicate with us.

A safe environment is essential. To attempt to be intimate with another person when you do not know whether it is safe is extremely foolish. To be safe we need to know, first of all, that we have the right to choose what we share and how much. It is essential for most of us to know that this potential intimate will not reject or belittle us, that he or she has the ability to give us some degree of unconditional love and that he or she will not abandon us. Wisdom is called for as we choose the persons with which we share our personal information. Jesus talked about not throwing pearls before swine. In our own need for intimacy we often forget His advice, handing out ideas, feelings, and hopes for the future to people who do not know what to do with them. And

so we watch for the appropriate people with whom we can experience true intimacy. There is fakery aplenty.

True intimacy progresses through stages. It begins with the willingness to communicate. David Ignatow, in "With the Door Open," says:

Something I want to communicate to you,

I keep my door open between us.

I am unable to say it.

I am happy only with the door open between us.

The style of intimacy suggested by these poetic lines is merely announcing willingness. It can be silent: a willing silence to experience another person, even without verbal communication.

As we speak, communicators tell us, there is a progression toward intimacy in our conversation. It begins with reporting what we've heard, and moves on to include our perspective (what we see) and then to what we think. We hit "pay dirt" as we express our values, those things we believe in, and then edge deeper into intimacy as we are free to share our feelings. The flow of intimacy encompasses all of these elements in ever deepening cycles.

One of the greatest gifts that we give another is to approach them with a curious spirit. Questions, treasured and heard, are an invitation to intimacy. Martin Buber, an intimate writer, in his book *I and Thou*, describes the excursion of friendship:

When I confront a human being as my Thou and speak the basic word I-Thou to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things. He is no longer he and she, a dot on the world grid of space and time, nor a condition to be experienced and

described, a loose bundle of named qualities. Neighborless and seamless, he is Thou and fills the firmament. Not as if there were nothing but he; but everything else lives in his light.

I thrill at the wonder of having a friend like this who would know me so well and truly allow everything else, for at least five minutes, to live in my light. This is true intimacy!

Am I tempting you toward deeper knowledge? Take the plunge! Did you know that scientific studies show that people who have a capacity for closeness have better defenses against disease? McClelland and McKay conducted an experiment based on the theorem that people who have trusting relationships had better health. They found it to be true because their attitudes were more positive and this boosted their immune system. While intimacy has its risks, living without it can be hazardous to your health.

Sternberg has developed a progressive list of intimacy's aspects: (1) deep understanding of another; (2) sharing ideas and information; (3) sharing of deeply personal ideas and feelings; (4) receipt and provision of emotional

support to the other; (5) personal growth through the relationship and reciprocity; (6) giving help to the other; (7) making the other feel needed and needing the other; (8) the giving and receiving of affection in the relationship.

These expressions are mutually beneficial, since intimacy has an enabling, strengthening quality in our life. Sternberg's list stopped short of what we traditionally call romantic love. With the groundwork provided in (1) through (8), I could almost guarantee a delightful romance and a healthy marriage relationship.

Our challenge is to tap potential friendships in a variety of settings. Lillian Rubin, in her book *Just Friends*, argues that we need rituals that recognize and honor intimate relationships other than romance or family. Pat Ordovensky probed the phenomena of intimacy in mentoring relationships recently in the *USA Today* newspaper under the headline, "Both Sides Win With Mentoring." We do know that each intimate configuration, whether inter-generational, cross-cultural, same-sex, or opposite-sex, is unique in what it has to offer.

Gender differences do appear. Men most often define intimacy as

a physical connection; while the emotional component, familiar ground for females has highest value for them. In search of a "quick fix" we are tempted to opt for physical interaction without this vital emotional undergirding.

Carol Gilligan, author of *A Different Voice*, describes the different gender approaches to intimacy in societal terms of "hierarchy" and "web." She suggests that men are the tower builders while women concentrate on affiliation and networking. But balance occurs in combination. During the emerging friendship the scale tips, ideally, toward the feminine stance. Once the emotional foundation of trust, compatibility, reciprocity, and honor are in place, then it is safe to erect the tower—a safe place to add the layers of physical intimacy that are so synergistic.

In his book, *Bonding Relationships in the Image of God*, Donald Joy describes the differences in male and female brain development. The male brain, with its simpler connections between right and left hemisphere, has more difficulty in accessing feelings than the female brain. Our challenge is to exercise all portions of this creative mind-computer of ours in order to become whole-brained individuals, to become whole human beings. In the security and glow of intimacy we reach out toward life in ways that we dared not risk alone.

And so I plumb the depths with you, my significant other, I-Thou, inviting you to join me in the dance of life, to know and be known, intimately.

This article was written by Pat Wick in collaboration with her husband, Ted. His the task of compiling authors, hers to give heart, theirs the journey toward intimacy.

Scriptural Models of Intimacy

- "It is not good for the man to live alone" (Genesis 2:18, TEV). God spoke these words when Eve had not yet been created. His statement refers to the human need to be with people. Human interaction provides vital intellectual and social stimulation. We are made that way. It is the essential nature of God's human creation, both male and female.
- "Jonathan loved David as much as he loved himself" (1 Samuel 20:17, TEV). These designates for the throne of ancient Israel demonstrated true friendship in a most unlikely situation. Jonathan's friendship with David tested his loyalty in explosive royal family intrigues. These men were both heroes in warfare. Their lives of violence did not cripple their capacity for intimacy.
- Ruth and Naomi were women of disparate age who became intimately attached because of family tragedy. Through their shared suffering, Ruth's heart was knit to her mother-in-law, Naomi, an expatriate. So she said to Naomi, "Don't ask me to leave you! Let me go with you. Wherever you go, I will go, wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and that is where I will be buried. May the Lord's worst punishment come upon me if I let anything but death separate me from you" (Ruth 1:16, TEV).