

Chapter Four - Erotic Soul Relationships

Coagulation

Venus



Our problem in relationships is how to have an on-going, intimate life with another person at the same time as we invite this completely unpredictable depth to have a significant place in our lives...

– *Thomas Moore*

Here at this stage in coagulation we need to explore more of what we mean by freedom. The core issue, the single reason why relationships have repeatedly broken down, links to what is most fearful and perhaps least loving in us, but what defines a traditional relationship. The issue is exclusivity.

This means you can't be with her if you are with me. At least that is our assumption. In fact it is our hope and indeed expectation every time we enter a relationship. This time it will work. This time I will be favoured. This time I (and it) will be the one. It is not wrong to wish for this. But is it love?

By exclusivity, what we also mean is exclusive body rights. Your body is reserved for me. If you share with someone else what you share with me, I will assume you do not love me and respond accordingly.

We are confronted here with a paradox, one that is in the word 'exclusive' itself. It excludes in order to define. But then what it defines means that feelings which cannot in reality be excluded are excluded. The emphasis, rather than being on privacy and keeping in, becomes one of keeping out. This is our relationship: keep out.

We want safety. We want assurance. We want certainty and commitment, of course. And we also want challenge, risk, adventure – we want freedom. And if we love the one we're with, we want them to have those things as well. But who are we to say what that might mean for the other person? It can be a startling thing to realize that freedom is not ours to give.

And love, if it is love, if it is centred in the heart, means what it says: 'I can love you, but I can never possess you. You do not belong to me, you belong to yourself' – or we might say, 'You belong to Love.' And it recognizes that without the freedom of the other there can be no love – a lesson it seems we are all having to learn at this time (the present author being no exception).

So, insecurity is a part of life. Anything can happen at any time. Must this include betrayal? It may. The uncertainty principle is part of life, because if we knew how everything was going to be we could not create and we would not feel. This is the gap, the void which creativity demands, that is also the space that brought the loved one to us in the first place – and could also take them away.

As James Hillman explains:

We can be truly betrayed only where we truly trust – by brothers, lovers, wives, husbands, not by enemies, not by strangers. The greater the love and loyalty, the involvement and commitment, the greater the betrayal.

And as he adds, on a deeper note:

And betrayal, as a continual possibility to be lived with, belongs to trust just as doubt belongs to a living faith.

The only way we can avoid being devastated here is to accept, without resignation, that what our loved one needs to do might not be what we want them to do. We may not know, at least for a time, what they might choose to do. We would like to have the reassurance of guidelines. But love seems to require uncertainty and unknowing.

What are our usual responses when confronted with this? If we look closely, or even from several feet away, we will see they are often based not on love at all but on territorial posturing, fear and conditionality – or 'emotional terrorism':

- ‘I don’t like it – it makes me feel insecure.’
- ‘If you do that I will divorce/leave you.’
- ‘I will only love you if...’ (not simply because you exist)
- ‘I can only open to you if...’ (a more subtle version of the same)
- ‘When I think of her, I want to kill her!’ (Naturally!)

In a word, we regress. And yet these are the responses we still expect. They are even vaunted as signs of true love (‘I wouldn’t love you if I didn’t feel this strongly – this proves it, doesn’t it?’)

I am not saying we have no right to feel these things. What I am saying is that it is time to recognize what these responses are and to ask ourselves whether we want to go on responding and acting in these self-limiting ways.

These are the responses of the primitive brain. Fight or flight. Or, in a slightly more advanced sense, barter. Cajole, plead, manipulate. And if it’s not working, bully. Unconditional love simply doesn’t make sense to the old brain. There are also the more subtle aspects of shaming here, taking the moral high ground and seeding guilt in our partner’s mind. And we have to get beyond this to expand into a bigger picture, a greater loving. We have to keep coming through into the heart. Where does this begin? It may start with the simple recognition that however exclusive we may be, there are never just two of us in a relationship, there is always a third ‘body’ which connects everything we have experienced in our lives and everyone who has been a part of that. So there are not just two, or even a few of us, there are (as subscribers to ‘polyamory’ also believe) many of us, and we all have business with each other, ‘soul business’ that involves different degrees of connection and feeling, different issues, difficulties, opportunities, thresholds. We can find this with so-called strangers too.

Love is broader than we tend to bargain for. And love, it seems, is a process rather than a cut-and-dried event. It is a story that we are not so much writing as are written in, a film, if you like, with an extremely mercurial director. Love is work, too, living unpaid work, or rather, paid only in kind. The idea that love is for pleasure and comfort alone really is a myth for the faint-hearted. The reality of our close relationships, then, becomes an expanded area where we are much more involved with each other than we may know.

A Different Kind of Love

We know we can be attracted to more than one person and that attraction takes different forms and means different things in different contexts. Sometimes we don’t know what the attraction means or what this particular relationship intends. Without words to express the subtle variations, everything, potentially or otherwise, is reduced to being a flirtation or an affair. Everything is brought down to sex because sex is the basis – the cave floor – of our animal insecurity.

This reduction blocks an expanded view of loving, keeping us all in emotional contraction, more compromised, less free, less loving. It is a vicious circle that bites back on itself, sometimes literally, as in domestic violence. We try to dam the flow and all we end up with is drought.

Sanskrit has 96 words for love: we merely have one ! We need a language for these different kinds of relationships – not just the ones we recognize as brotherly love or filial piety, but the relationships that seemingly endanger us, that make us uncomfortable.

I call these erotic soul relationships. They are not couple relationships, though they may sometimes become so. They are based on friendship, but a friendship that has a charged erotic quality. This quality does not have to be acted out sexually. The attraction takes place in the space between the two people. These relationships can tell us a lot about what is being left out of our lives. What has been suppressed or denied is suddenly illuminated here.

We all know these kinds of relationships, in different degrees. The Celtic tradition has a term for them: anam cara.

As John O’Donohue says:

Anam cara was originally someone to whom you confessed, revealing the hidden intimacies of your life. With the anam cara, you could share your innermost self, your mind and your heart. This friendship was an act of recognition and belonging. When you had an anam cara, your friendship cut across all convention, morality and category.

It is the last sentence that is important here. Our connection may be spiritual, but it is embodied and mysterious too. So we may have immediate eye contact, the pulse of recognition and an attraction that is visual and energetic, though not literally sexual.

This is how it begins, but not at all how it necessarily remains. If we look at these relationships over time, we can see that some of them do become sexual, but equally some we think might be, or will be, turn out not to be at all. Attraction is part of what brings us together, but the purpose would, in these instances, be deflected by actual love-making. What happens instead is that the erotic element rises from the sacral into the heart as the attraction changes. Then again, sometimes the attraction remains sexual but is never acted on. It is sexual and virginal at the same time. This may be as a result of a conscious choice made by both people involved because of their situation, but it can also be there unconsciously, as their bodies can tell them. This can also be true for same-sex attractions between two men or women who are not actually gay or lesbian. Part of the 'soul' of the attraction is about masculinity and femininity respectively and a kind of transmission of that from man to man, or woman to woman. Support and encouragement of each other is part of what is taking place, but it isn't literally about love-making; that isn't necessary. As Joan Evans, co-founder of the London Institute of Psychosynthesis, once remarked wisely in an overall sense 'We don't have choice around love, but we do around intimacy. Love is.'

In this sense too we can see that - sexually or not - we can also love someone without it being right to be partners with them.

This expanded view of love may cause discomfort or relief – or something of both. As Diana Durham put it, in her poem 'Many Mansions':

If it were not so
I would have told you.

Apparently it is natural
to feel these things.

We have not understood
how large love is.

As we get beyond obvious levels of emotional reaction, what we begin to understand is that both relationship and sexuality are more mercurial areas than we may have thought. 'We have not understood/how large love is' because we have insisted on looking at it in a fixed way, at a concrete level of mind which brings everything back to fear, to sex and abandonment, and so to power and punishment. As one woman expressed it poignantly in *Couples*, a recent survey: He won't do it again. Or anything like it. That isn't one of my worries. But I shall always wonder if it is fear of the consequences constraining him rather than my sexual attractiveness.

In a relationship where power takes over from love the price is that – in terms of its alchemy – Mercurius is exiled. Mercurius is the ambivalent factor. He/she resists definition in the name of a greater openness, a greater exploration, a greater loving. As another man put it, in a private letter

I am sorry you felt misled. I just want to be able to explore and see how things develop in freedom without it being nailed down to expectation.

Too much to ask ?

It may be useful to remember a phrase we don't have in English that is relevant here: *amitié amoureuse*, literally 'loving friendship', a friendship that can be or become sexual outside conventional partnership. Just as friendship itself is expanded by bringing in this soulful, charged aspect, so sexuality is also extended here. With Mercury, we start to understand the essence and purpose of sex.

The Secret in Energy

Sex is energy, just as matter is. We know that in the simplest of ways. Take away the energy and the desire is gone. At a soul level, the essence of sex is a blending, an alignment of two energies to bring them into deeper sympathy, allowing a deeper level of communication. In that sense we can also make love to each other without literally making love. We can touch each other's energy fields and remain there while an emotional process takes place between us, whether we are together or apart.

Our energetic fields can also be deeply affected by the constrained relatedness that is left once freedom has been denied. Our feelings remain as blockages and potentially neuroses, even obsessions. And what is true for the psyche is also true for the body. And the body can always tell us what is real if we listen to it as opposed to overriding it in a merely wilful or instinctual way. In Stanley Kellerman's phrase, 'The body never lies.' True – and how often in reality do we attend to it?

Love says that we must be able to respond freely. But we may still have questions that we can't easily answer. What do we do if one of us needs more sexual contact than the other? And what if one of us is – or becomes – bisexual?

In any relationship one person's freedom affects the other and without sensitivity and honesty we can and do cause each other great pain. Merely acting from our freedom is not love's way. Agreeing to what we both want and need is a different matter, and that can be different for each couple. We need not generalize. It is not a question of legislation. We have to come into relationship with each situation as it is, which is part of what it means to be in the unknown. This doesn't mean we abandon discrimination any more than we abandon feelings, but it does mean we can be liberated from a shallow and mechanical view that turns everything into a set formula.

We need to agree our boundaries, based on what is possible for each of us, while recognizing that this will also change at different stages of our lives. In this way in our own primary couple relationship, we can also be soul friends – true companions to each other on our journeys rather than each other's judge or 'keeper'.

Honesty

Remembering the stages of Venus, downwards from fermentation to nourishment and grounding, what is the basis of this? What is the ground here?

It has to be honesty, with ourselves and the other. It has to be scrupulous honesty, too, the truth as we know it. If we are dishonest with our partner, not letting her know where she stands, we deprive her of her freedom, which is one of the devious and unloving ways in which we can use our freedom against someone.

Dishonesty can inflict the deepest wounding. As one man, a well-known writer, confided, 'The real betrayal wasn't that we had had sex. It was that I didn't tell her for three months.'

Communication is, obviously, vital, since it is part of the ground. Many 'open marriages' lose their grounding and the couple drifts apart through a lack of awareness and unconscious neglect. The other aspect of grounding, one that we are constantly brought back to, is that however and wherever we are, we are always also alone.

We are gifts to each other, we are lent. And we, and the forms of all our relationships, are transient. To root ourselves in the reality of our aloneness is the deepest and perhaps the most courageous thing we can achieve here. There are many things we would rather do, and we all run away from this to a greater or lesser extent. But in it, we may find the greatest freedom, the freedom to love, and be able to find and follow the thread of love's way ... which is golden.

Crucible Of Love—the alchemy of passionate relationships

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You may also find my first book, *Alchemy* (Thorsons, 1997) of interest for the history of the subject. Second hand copies are quite rare now, and a reprint is also pending from Inner Traditions (contact jong@innertraditions.com)