Transformation through INTIMACY

REVISED EDITION

The Journey toward Awakened Monogamy

Relational intimacy as a sanctuary and crucible for a deeper, more authentic life

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Psychotherapy and Practices for Couples

We do not reach awakened monogamy without working for it, and an essential part of such a labor of love is high-quality psychotherapy, whether done on an individual basis, or as a couple, or both. In addition, there are personal practices that address and help us to make good use of various elements in our relationship; I discuss these later in the chapter.

I see psychotherapy as being essential at some point for just about *everyone* (and for the purposes of this chapter, I don't mean psychotherapy that is limited to talking and analysis, but that also incorporates emotional opening and release, bodywork, and awareness/spiritual practices, especially in integrative contexts). Yes, there are other avenues of self-exploration and personal growth besides psychotherapy, but some in-depth time spent with a suitably skilled psychotherapist examining and directly working with one's conditioning, reactivity, psychoemotional logjams, and possible trauma is invaluable. Doing so can both illuminate and deeply address tendencies—*and the roots* of such tendencies—that other modes of self-exploration (such as lifestyle coaching, personal growth seminars, and mindfulness training) tend to bypass or only superficially address.

Unfortunately, there remains in our culture a shaming, inadvertent or not, that often accompanies one's going to psychotherapy, especially for men. I often say to men who are beginning some psychotherapy that it takes balls to do so; later on, we will sometimes talk about how the percentage of men doing psychotherapy tends to decrease as corporate and political status increases, so that those who are "at the top" are usually those who have done the least in-depth work on themselves. After all, how many sitting or would-be Presidents would admit to having undertaken psychotherapy? Probably none (Bill Clinton's belated "pastoral counseling" being an anticlimactic exception, following his public shaming), as doing so would very likely seriously damage their credibility in the eyes of many.

(I recall working with some top-level corporate men and having them refer to me—as they apparently "had to" among their colleagues—as their "executive coach" rather than as their psychotherapist, as if admitting to doing some psychotherapy was a sure sign of having failed. Whatever their status or power, they were in shame's chains.)

Having participated in some individual psychotherapy before one's current relationship began may be sufficient preparation for healthy relational intimacy, or more may be required as the relationship progresses. If we have each done enough prior to our relationship—and the measure of this is both in the depth of our psychological/emotional self-knowledge and in our capacity to behave sanely in the midst of difficulties—we may not need any couples counseling. At the same time, though, if difficulties arise in our relationship that we are not satisfactorily resolving, then we would be wise to do some couples counseling as soon as possible. Be fussy in selecting a psychotherapist who works with couples, but not so fussy that you talk yourselves out of doing any couples counseling!

In the best of couples work, both partners not only face each other (we have partners literally face each other most of the time, maintaining eye contact) with increasing openness and transparency, including during reactive bouts, but also face with equal depth whatever in them

is obstructing intimacy. This does not have to be a preset process, and in fact is optimally effective when its structuring emerges in fitting accord with the here-and-now needs and energies of the couple.

It may also be useful to do not just individual and couples psychotherapy, but also some skillfully led group work that includes psychotherapy, both with and without one's partner. The most effective group work combines the best of individual session work (albeit in shortened form) with abundant opportunities for the kind of healing and breakthrough (involving not just our present but also our past) made possible in the dynamics of a safe-to-go-really-deep *interactive* environment. One participant's work can often catalyze others' work to a depth very difficult to otherwise access. The sharing of such work, level upon level, in an environment of intimate safety and trust is as liberating as it is practical, as heart-opening as it is empowering, as integration-promoting as it is clarifying.

Now, what about relationship-enhancing practices? If we're doing these (as perhaps garnered from self-help books or seminars) without having participated in any psychotherapy, then whatever good we are getting from such practices is likely going to be strongly limited by the lack of in-depth exploration and integrative breakthrough that is provided by skilled psychotherapy. For example, we may be doing a practice that is supposed to increase our male-female polarity (that is, generate more charge, sexual and otherwise, between us and our partner), but we might through such a practice only unwittingly reinforce our aggression (more often in the man) or passivity/seductiveness (more often in the woman), while thinking that we are somehow enhancing our masculinity or femininity. If we had, however, done some quality psychotherapy prior to this, we would be far less likely to let this practice reinforce our neuroses (and might then not even need to do it).

Competent psychotherapy provides fitting practices (or "homework")—tailored both for individual and couples work—that *directly* stem from the deep work done in sessions. As couples engage in a particular practice (such as mindfully, compassionately, and firmly interrupting their own and each other's reactive tendencies), their psychotherapist can, after seeing how they are doing with their practice, modify and fine-tune it, or perhaps come up with a better one for them.

If both partners have done enough psychotherapy—as perhaps best demonstrated by their consistently mature approach to each other and to their own conditioning—they will benefit even more from doing various couples practices, so long as they do not engage in them mechanically. For example, if they have some difficulty expressing anger to each other, they can implement practices that address this (such as getting relatively heated in expressing anger while remaining responsible and compassionately attuned to the other in the process), knowing that there is sufficient safety in the relationship to handle—and benefit from—such intensity.

And what about practices that do not come from psychotherapy? If we have done some psychotherapy, it's fine to experiment with these, whether they originate in self-help seminars or psychology books or spiritual undertakings. (And even if we haven't done any psychotherapy, such practices may get us going in that direction by bringing to attention some of our less-flattering qualities or by catalyzing unexpected openings in us.) Going for long walks together, intentionally giving what we want to receive, meditating while gazing softly but directly into each other's eyes, not permitting sexual mechanicalness—these and other practices can be immensely helpful in deepening and strengthening a relationship. What matters is that we do them *fully*. If they don't work, or don't work all that well, and we've stayed with them for a while, then it's fine to drop them. Staying too long with a practice is just as much of a mistake as leaving a practice too soon.

As a couple matures, the need to do couple-oriented practices diminishes, until there are no such practices that *need* to be done, sim-

ply because what needs to be done gets done without any reliance on them. But beware of trying to reach this point too quickly! The goal is *not* to not need to do any couples practices, but to do whatever work is necessary to reach such a point.

And such work usually includes a deep dip into psychotherapy and couples practices, along with employing the only real shortcut in healing work: realizing that there are no shortcuts (though there are plenty of detours!). Most of us would love to have the benefits of a profound transformation of being without having to do the required work—such a fast-food mentality regarding work on ourselves needs to be supplanted by a healthier outlook, one that allows for proper digestion and integration.

I could list a number of highly effective practices, but plenty of these have been described in earlier chapters, embedded in relevant detail and fitting context, so I will only recommend one practice here: Read each chapter of this book out loud with your partner, then discuss it thoroughly. Take on for an agreed-upon period its practices or, if no practices are suggested, co-create some of your own based upon your mutual reading and discussion, then stick with them for an agreed-upon period. And only take on practices that are clearly doable!

After the psychotherapy and after the formal practices, you will come to realize that your *entire* relationship is a practice in the most sacred sense: Together you are creating a sanctuary for a kind of intimacy that has perhaps never been so needed, an intimacy in which "I"-centered reality and its "us versus them" mentality is held in noninjurious perspective by a we-centered reality that eventually goes far beyond a "we" of just two, leaving us in the being-centered reality of awakened monogamy.

Awakened monogamy is not itself a practice, but what prepares the way for it requires commitment to various practices, especially those that arise from the kind of opening and insight possible through a truly integral psychotherapy.