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Radical Decency Reflection #38  
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## **Three Dimensions of Love**

As a psychotherapist in private practice, coaching couples is one of my abiding passions. Indeed, it was the transformative couples work that my wife, Dale, and I did in the 1990s that was the catalyst for each of us becoming therapists.

In this Reflection I return to the subject for the 4<sup>th</sup> time. Earlier Reflections explain its enormous potential for healing and growth (#33), and strategies for more effectively being with your romantic partner – at times of conflict (#3) and, in calmer times, when things are going more smoothly (#10). My goal this week is to pull the lens back and to describe the multiple levels at which committed intimate relationship operates.

There has been so much really good thinking about committed romantic partnership in the last 20 years or so, and practicing therapists have been at the forefront. It is easy to see why. Couples therapists are on the firing line every day of their professional lives; dealing with real issues, in real time. They need to search for better ways – now. And the feedback is immediate. We can see, all too vividly, what works and what doesn't. In this context, the old cliché definitely applies: Necessity is the mother of invention.

But the context in which relationship therapists work – helpful as it is – also brings a distorting perspective. Because our sample is skewed toward couples in active crisis, our expertise tends to be in dealing with breakdowns in relationship. And since the urgent first priority is, so often, on re-establishing a workable level of communication, our attention tends to be skewed toward those issues. The result: Much of what we teach couples focuses active listening and other techniques to improve communication.

This, I believe, is unfortunate. Once the crisis is over, couples still long for guidance in building from this more stable base toward a relationship marked by a growing sense of safety, aliveness, and joyful possibility. Getting from here to there – as Dale and I have discovered in the years since our counseling ended – requires far more than the communication skills that are the bread and butter of so much couples work.

In seeking to offer a fuller roadmap for couples to follow, Dale and I have grown into a view of relationship that operates on three levels:

1. Listening and Sharing (Communication);
2. Loving and Being Loved;
3. Claiming and Being Claimed.

Note that, while I discuss these factors in the context of intimate romantic partnership, their value goes far beyond that context. While the levels of intimacy and boundaries we set will differ, depending on the person involved, these same principles will also enrich

our relationships with other family members, with friends, and with our communities of choice.

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To say that communication is only one aspect of the equation does not, of course, detract from its foundational importance. And emphasizing listening skills is a vital corrective, since the culture – with its emphasis on shrill assertiveness – leaves so many of us with engrained deficits in this area.

Good listening requires more than just hearing the words. It also requires a patient assimilation to the mood or “music” of the communication. In addition, hearing your partner is not enough. You also need to ensure, as best you can, that your partner “knows that you know.” Still another important aspect of listening is not to change the subject prematurely. As well intentioned as an “I’m sorry” is, for example, it needs come *after* your partner feels that his or her grievance has been fully heard.

With all of our well-deserved emphasis on listening, we also need to remember that communication is two-way street; that being open and vivid with our thoughts and feelings is equally important. A generous and patient listener who fails disclose his or her difficult or unpleasant feelings may feel virtuous – and is often seen as the “good guy” in the relationship. But if intimacy is the goal, that person’s approach is flawed.

A final point on communication: Like every of the level relationship I discuss in this Reflection, there is a rhythm to the back and forth of offering and receiving that is, truly, art and not science. Taking turns may work – but it may not. It all depends on context and the “dance” that the particular couple evolves. Indeed, in some of the most constructive, intimacy building conversations that Dale and I have had, one or the other of us has been a marathon “sender.” On this point, the most that can be said is this: Be alive to the issue, open to possibilities, and patient and trusting of the process.

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The second level of intimate relationship – loving and being loved – is not as obvious as it may seem. One very common problem is the confusion – heavily promoted by the messages of the mainstream culture – between what I call love the noun and love the verb.

We are all familiar with the first – that feeling of being powerfully drawn to another person. But all too often in our culture, the declaration – “I love you” – is offered as though it answers all questions. It doesn’t. In the movie *Chasing Amy*, the Ben Affleck character, gripped by that “in love” feeling impulsively turns to Amy and declares his feelings. Amy, with remarkable clear headedness, is furious calling him out on the thoughtlessness: “I am a lesbian. I have a life. You are messing with it.” Her point: A feeling (love, the noun) does not negate an insensitive act (love, the verb).

Seeking to love your partner, in this action-oriented sense, is a skill that needs to be cultivated. Growing up, we are habituated to a particular style of loving and offering love on those ways – the ones you know best – is important. Since your partner’s

“channels of love” are typically different from yours, you are, in this way, acting as his or her teacher. But to be a fully effective, you also need to offer love on your partner’s channels as well.

The second aspect of “love, the verb” – accepting acts of love from your partner – is all too easily overlooked. Indeed, many instinctually see it as an act of self-absorption; something to be soft-pedaled, even avoided. But, you need to remember the wonderful feeling you have when you successfully love your partner. Given that, the importance of being an active agent in creating that same feeling in return becomes obvious.

To do so, you first need to consistently ask for what you want. Why? Because, in this way, you offer a vivid roadmap for how you want to be loved and set your partner up for success. The key, however, is to avoid any sense that your “asks” are veiled (or not so veiled) “demands,” since the joy of loving only comes when it is offered as a gift.

To complete the process, you then need to generously and warmly accept what your partner offers in return. A significant challenge, here, grows out of a key difference between loving and being loved. The first is an active sport. You do something. You initiate an action. Being loved, on the other hand, is more passive. You need to be open and receptive to what your partner offers. Implicit, then, in being loved is the challenge of trusting and letting go – no small thing for many of us.

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The final level of intimate relationship, “claiming,” typically shows up as a visceral, passionate, take-no-prisoners declaration – expressed verbally, energetically, and through bold acts: You are mine, fully mine, no matter what. Our longing to be claimed is inextricably bound up with our need to cope with the grim realities that frame our existence as self-conscious beings, aware of our fate. Simply put, we are here through no choice of our own; we, and everyone we love, will leave, again through no choice of our own; and there is no roadmap for what to do, while we are here. Given these unalterable facts, we long for a feeling of belonging that – in its sheer passion, power, completeness and unconditionality – can offer psychic surcease from these existential realities.

Needless to say, claiming is an aspect of relationship that lends itself to abuse through domination and control. But if we are right in assuming that it is a deeply engrained, human longing, the appropriate response – faced with these risks – is not to avoid claiming but to manage it with maturity and wisdom.

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Because every relationship is unique, the extent to which these levels of relationship show up will vary significantly from couple to couple. But, being more fully aware of these different dimensions expands our view of what is possible. It also allows us to better name our varying skills – his at claiming, hers at sharing; his at listening, hers at being loved. Doing so, it facilitates our ability to see our self and our partner, not as adversaries, but as each others’ teachers; as partners in creating a relationship that nourishes and soothes our deepest needs and longings.