

Intimacy and Beyond

SUDHIR KAKAR

A keynote address gives the speaker a license to take a wide-angle view of his subject: in my case, the present state of the Indian couple and the issue of intimacy. It also tempts the speaker to break free of the scholarly constraint of qualifying almost each statement. He can generalize without compunction and even speculate if he wishes to. What follows in my short talk, then, are my impressions, informed impressions if you will, rather than rigorous conclusion based on empirical scientific study.

When I say the 'couple', I am perforce talking of the married couple. Unmarried couples and live-in arrangements in our society are still far too rare to merit sustained scholarly attention.

Now, the couple, I believe, is the site of three fundamental needs of human adulthood: of sexuality, intimacy and what my mentor, Erik Erikson, used to call generativity, of which perhaps the most obvious form is the commitment to the care of one's offspring and, wider, the next generation. The fulfillment of these needs is not a straightforward affair but an achievement since each involves the overcoming of many inner, psychic obstacles. For example, take adult sexuality, which is much more than a simple conjunction of genitals. The problem with sexuality lies with its two contradictory currents. On the one hand, there is possessive desire, with its excitement and exultation of possession, its insatiability and waves of consuming hunger. Then there is the second current of tender longing, of becoming porous to the other person. The firm contours of the self-presupposed by desire stand in opposition to the dissolution of individual boundaries and willingness to yield demanded by longing. Desire seems to be fulfilled by the overpowering of its object while longing would have him/her indestructible and ascendant. Desire seeks to master, longing to be a slave. Without a balance between desire and longing and with a preponderance of either the one or the other over a longer period of time, sexuality becomes an arid and alien soil that cannot provide vital nutrients for the psyche. Where desire alone holds sway, the boundaries of the self are not expanded to include another, but rather the self and

its impulses are propelled outwards, effacing what lies in their path while an excess of longing can easily degenerate into masochistic suffering. Moreover, each of the two currents has its own dangers. Naked in our desire, we are vulnerable to narcissistic injury of rejection and the shame of disapprobation. And for men, at least, desire also holds the possible danger of mortification if, to put it delicately, a man prematurely (in Nabakov's words) "dissolves in a puddle of pleasure." Longing, on the other hand, can evoke terror at one's vulnerability, the feeling of complete helplessness as the control over one's life is ceded to another and sexual love becomes a matter of anguish and tears, while its songs resound with lovers' cries that curse it as a plague and affliction. However, my talk today is not on the promise and perils of sexuality but on intimacy, to which I now turn.

My impression is that a thwarting of the need for intimacy, especially that of the woman, is the major source of discontent in the life of the married couple today and lurks behind many of a woman's presenting symptoms as she enters the therapeutic situation. We are much more aware of the role of sexuality as a source of disquiet between the couple and tend to underplay the unease generated by the thwarting of other needs. Let me note that sexuality, intimacy and generativity are not discrete, separate entities but are intimately related: there is a feeling of intense intimacy experienced in a mutually satisfactory sexual consummation, and intimacy without a modicum of potential generativity may be nothing more than joint selfishness. However, for the purpose of easier elucidation, I will focus on intimacy without bringing in the complications introduced by the demands of sexuality and generativity.

The dictionary definition of intimacy as closeness or familiarity, I am afraid, does not help us further in the understanding of this primary need of adulthood. At first, we may try to grasp its essence emotionally by turning to the poets. When Bhavabhuti, in his *Uttara Rama Charita*, lets Rama, with Sita asleep across his arm, reflect on

This state where there is no twoness in responses of joy or sorrow,
 where the heart finds rest; where feeling does not dry with age,
 where concealments fall away in time
 and essential love is ripened.

Then, I believe, Bhavabhuti is capturing an essential aspect of intimacy. In yet another poem, "The Indian to His Love", Yeats evokes the sensual feel of intimacy:

The island dreams under the dawn
 And great boughs drop tranquility:
 The peahens dance on a smooth lawn,
 A parrot sways upon a tree,
 Raging at his own image in the enameled sea.

Here we will moor lonely ship,
 And wander ever with woven hands
 Murmuring softly lip to lip,
 Along the grass, along the sands,
 Murmuring how far away are the unquiet lands.

How we alone of the mortals are,
 Hid under quiet boughs apart
 While our love grows an Indian star.

According to Plato's myth in his Symposium, with Aristophanes as his spokesperson, humans began life as spherical creatures with 8 limbs, two faces and two genital organs facing in the opposite direction. These beings were so mighty and strong that they posed a threat to the gods. Zeus retaliated against this hubris when they attacked the gods, not by destroying them but by cutting them in two. From then on, the two parts of human beings, each desiring his or her other half came together, and throwing their arms about one another, entwined in mutual embraces, longing to grow into one, they were on the point of dying from hunger and self-neglect because they did not like to do anything apart. They were in the process of destroying themselves when Zeus at last took pity on them and turned their genitals around to the front so that they could at least embrace in intercourse. I quote: "Thus they might be satisfied, and rest, and go their ways to the business of life: so ancient is the desire of one another which is implanted in us, reuniting our original nature, making one of two, and healing the state of man."

In the myth of creation from the Upanishads, Purusha was alone at the beginning of the universe. Looking around he saw nothing other than himself, "He found no pleasure at all. So [even now] a man who is all alone finds no pleasure. He longed for a second. Now he was the size of a man and woman in close embrace. He split this Self in two; and from this arose husband and wife..." In these myths, as well as in the terse Koranic statement, "It is He that created you one soul, and fashioned thereof

its spouse, that he might find repose in her", there is a striking lack of emphasis on sensual exuberance.

Correspondingly, they underplay the role of sexual desire in the coming together of man and woman. Commenting on his own myth, Plato remarks, "For the intense yearning which each of them has towards the other does not appear to be desires of lovers' intercourse, but of something else which the soul of either desires and cannot tell and of which it has only a dark and doubtful presentiment." The myths make it clear that the longing for 'this something else', a congress of souls rather than of bodies which I have called intimacy, the longing to constitute a two-person universe, is more fundamental than sexual desire. I would go so far as to say that the desire for intimacy also has a spiritual dimension since ultimately it may be the desire to see myself, my partner and us both together in a 'divine' mirror, to be seen (to adapt Dostoevsky's phrase) as God might have done so, a wish that will always remain fated for fulfillment.

Intimacy, then, has connotations of being made whole, of completion through the love of another human being (thus also extending to same sex couples). The narcissistic self-sufficiency of an undifferentiated being who does not require another is implicitly condemned by all the myths. Plato's globular monsters are, after all, not only unattractive but in danger of annihilation; Purusha alone, 'does not enjoy happiness.' Whereas in all other situations in life, we guard the frontiers of our individuality against trespassers, in intimacy we make ourselves metaphysically porous to another human being, hunger for that which otherwise threatens our individual survival. In making the boundary of the self permeable, intimacy does not altogether erase the self in a new merged state but heightens the sense of both the self and the other.

The feeling-tone of intimacy is an utter serenity, a repose. Anyone who has experienced deep intimacy in love, much, much rarer than passion, can vouch for the fact how intimacy can make you experience the world with a fresh vision. Intimacy illuminates what have been hitherto perceived as shadows, background figures. It animates a person's relationship with nature and art, and deepens his or her sensate and metaphysical responsiveness.

Since conferences are normally not conducted in the connotative mode of poetry but in the discursive mode of scientific and scholarly discourse, we must also try to approach the meaning of intimacy intellectually. Elsewhere I have defined intimacy as a couple's mutual enhancement of experience, beyond procreative obligations and social duties. This, I realize, is too abstract, or 'experience-distant'. Perhaps Otto Kernberg's definition of sexual love applies equally to intimacy,

namely, that it is the experiencing and maintaining of an exclusive love relation with a person of the other sex that integrates tenderness and eroticism, human depth and common values. (You will have noticed that homosexual couples are being excluded here; I would exclude the words "of the other sex" from this definition.). If sexual satisfaction is the open promise of marriage, then intimacy is its hidden promise, a promise that more Indian women than men are demanding that it be kept. It is more women than men who demand an intimacy unimpeded by the shackles of family obligations and duties toward the old and all the other keepers of society's traditions. It is the woman who is the more active, driving partner in this enterprise.

Even a few decades ago, the nature of Indian social reality and family life was not conducive to the fulfillment of this promise, at least in the first years of a couple's married life. The dangers posed to the larger family by the development of intimacy in a couple are suggested by such questions as: Will the couple's growing closeness cause the husband to neglect his duties as a son? As a brother? Will the increasing intimacy of the couple turn the woman primarily into a wife rather than a daughter-in-law and inspire the husband to transfer his loyalty and affection to her rather than remaining truly a son of the house?

These were, of course, not either/or choices. However, custom, tradition and interests of other family members demanded that in the redefinition of roles and relationships initiated by marriage, the roles of husband and wife, at least in the beginning, be relegated to relative inconsequence. Thus, the elderly family members discouraged signs of a developing attachment and tenderness within the couple by either belittling or forbidding the open expression of these feelings. Efforts were made to hinder the development of any intimacy, which might exclude other members of the family, especially the man's parents. Oblique hints about 'youthful infatuation', or outright shaming virtually guaranteed that the couple did not express any interest (let alone affection) for each other in public and that they were effectively alone together for only brief periods during the evening and night. If women's songs are any indication, even these brief meetings were furtive affairs; the songs complain of the ever-watchful mother-in-law or sister-in-law preventing the woman from going to her husband at night.

I do not mean to imply that intimacy was completely absent in Indian marriages. It generally developed late in married life as both partners slowly matured into adult householders. The postponement of intimacy was encouraged by the family, for in the years of middle age

the bond between the couple no longer threatened to exclude other family members but incorporated or rather evolved out of the responsibility to take care of the next generation. Now intimacy between the couple was not antithetical to the solidarity of the larger family but, in its proper time, even a guarantor of it. The conclusion is inescapable that middle-class marriages in an earlier era had to deal with a considerable tension generated by two, and at times conflicting, principles of family organization: the importance of the parent-son and fraternal relationships on the one hand and that of the husband-wife on the other. Today, the tension between the two has not disappeared but the husband-wife relation as the fulcrum of family life is well on the way to establishing its primacy. We should, however, be aware of the strains that the triumph of this ideology will impose upon the couple. For as the middle class disenchantment with other social institutions in our society becomes more and more rampant, the strains placed on the couple as a space that fulfills the quest for authentic experience may prove too much for this still fragile institution.

The first source of this strain is the setting free of the universal wishes of man and woman in relation to each other, wishes that were kept in check by the older ideology that attached signal importance to the larger family vis-a-vis the couple. The perennial question of what does a man or a woman want can be answered that a man wants his wife not only as an adult sexual woman but also as a mother, a little daughter and a twin sister. Similarly, a woman not only wants her husband as an adult sexual man but also as a father, a little baby boy and a twin brother. The demands on the partner, mostly unconscious, to fulfill these multiple roles--rather than their being spread over the larger family--can certainly be a source of disquiet in the psychological life of the couple. And, of course, the acme of intimacy, its final goal, is a complete fusion with the other, a wish that can never be fulfilled so long as we have separate bodies and selves.

The second source of strain on the couples arises from its relationship to the larger social group, specifically the family. The paradox of the couple is that its intimacy is necessarily in opposition to the larger family and yet it needs the larger group for its survival (Kernberg, 1980). It is only in opposition to the conventional morality of the family, its ideological ritualization of marriage, commitment and family tradition, that a couple establishes its identity and begins its journey as a couple. A couple's intimacy is implicitly rebellious and defiant, not only attracting sanctions from those who see themselves as representatives of the family order but also arouses guilt in the couple's constituents--husband and/or wife. The option of erasing the boundary with the family,

re-embrace its ideological underpinnings and dissolve into the larger group to end the disquiet caused by the sanctions and the guilt thus always remains tempting in the life of the couple. This is especially so with a couple which has already allowed a breaching of this boundary by its children, where a couple has begun to proceed from the unconscious assumption that parental functions should replace sexual ones.

A solution to the maintenance of the couple would seem to be its isolation from the larger group, i.e. by cutting off from the family. Here, the danger is that the inevitable upsurges of aggression in the couple's relationship will have no other outlet and can cause seriously damage to the partners and their intimacy. The larger family mitigates the effects of aggression by either some of its members serving as the objects of its discharge or by providing the stage where the husband and wife can be aggressive towards each other in the relative safety of an intimate audience.

Moreover, living in close quarters with other couples of a larger group, with at least a pre-conscious awareness of their sexual lives (and observing its signs on the faces and bodies), is a constant source of excitement that can help in maintaining the couple's erotic life. Extended Indian families are not only a system of duties and obligations but also highly charged fields of eroticism. The danger, of course, is that one or the other family member--a sister-in-law, a brother-in-law, a cousin, a niece, a nephew--may come to constitute a sexual temptation that is not resisted by the man or woman, destroying the couple's intimacy. This danger, however, is even greater in the social network of friends that has begun to replace the family in the life of some middle class couples, where the tolerance for such lapses is generally less than if they had taken place within the family.

Is the present emphasis on intimacy between the couple as a *sine qua non* of married life overblown? Is intimacy being given almost the same importance as was given to sexuality in the West in the latter half of the twentieth century when Foucault could write: "sexuality has become more important than our soul, more important almost than our life, and so it is that all the world's enigmas appear frivolous to us compared to this secret, miniscule in each of us, but of a density that makes it more serious than any other?" I will answer this by saying that the movement towards the couple and the valorization of intimacy are inevitable, a needed corrective to the excessive "familism", as I would like to call the earlier ideology governing intimate relationships. We only need to be careful that this movement does not cross over into the other extreme. Whereas we can welcome the modern Indian couple's wish to constitute a

two-person universe, we may not encourage the tendency for the couple to become a fortress that shuts out all other relationships. The couple needs to remain vigilant that intimacy does not degenerate into a mutual ego boosting, that it does not become a joint self-centredness, a *folie a deux* of a special kind. That a two-person universe does not become a two-person neurosis.

I began my talk by saying that the couple is the site for the fulfillment of three needs of human adulthood: sexuality, intimacy and generativity. In the short time available to me, I have only dwelt on intimacy. There is yet another deep human need, a further development and maturation of intimacy. This need is rarely if ever talked about by psychologists and almost never alluded to in western theories and systems of couples therapy. What I am referring to is the couple as a site of the individual's spiritual evolution. Indeed, I would even suggest that in today's world, the marital relationship is as important for the spiritual seeker as the relationship with a guru. Let me elaborate.

Spirituality, like culture, has many definitions and yet manages to give a sense of familiarity to most of us. For me, the spiritual is a continuum of loving connectedness--to nature, art, visions of philosophy or science and, above all, to another human being. We normally fail to acknowledge the presence of the spiritual in everyday life, moments of self-transcending feelings of connectedness, since we are accustomed to think of the spiritual in terms of its highest manifestation: the mystical union where there is no distinction between "I" and "You". Spirituality, though, is not a mystical moment but a continuum. One can compare it to a mountain climb with many base camps marking its progress on the way. The first camp from which one cannot see the summit, covered as it is by clouds, though we know it is there, is tolerance, defined minimally as giving the benefit of the doubt to the other. The second camp, a little higher, can be said to be compassion, while the third and the last camp where one climbs to the summit is empathy, the 'feeling into' another person, although of course, empathy can also encompass a 'feeling into' nature, as in this passage from a letter by Rabindranath Tagore: "My feelings seem to be those of our ancient earth in the daily ecstasy of its sun-kissed life; my own unconscious seems to stream through each blade of grass, each sucking root, to rise with the sap through the trees, to break out with joyous thrills in the waving fields of corn, in the rustling palm leaves. I feel impelled to give expression to my blood tie with the earth, my kinsman's love for her, but I am afraid I shall not be understood." The point is that the spiritual climb fosters deeper and deeper feelings of loving connectedness although only a few, rare saints can

reach the summit, expressed in the Upanishadic ideal of 'he who sees all beings in his own self and his self in all beings.' Most of us can consider ourselves fortunate if we can catch a glimpse of the peak from the base camps of tolerance, compassion and empathy.

Now, if spiritual evolution is the development of an even-greater loving connectedness, then it is evident that there is no better site for the practice of tolerance, compassion and the development of empathy than the couple where these attributes of spirituality are often tested. Tolerance, compassion and empathy, can thus be forged in the trails and tribulations of daily life of the couple, with all its annoyances and irritations, and not remain pious platitudes or high sounding ideals. For like no other human institution, the heterosexual couple is built on the premise of a loving connection between man and woman and promises enough time, a long term stability (even if the promise is no longer kept in many marriages), in which the loving connectedness, withstanding many searching tests on the way, can realize a good measure of its spiritual potential.

You all know the story of Goswami Tulsidasa, the author of the Ramcharitramanas, the very popular Hindi version of the Ramayana. Tulsidasa was passionately attached to his wife, Ratnavali. He could not bear even a day's separation from her. One day his wife went to her father's house without informing her husband. Tulsidasa

stealthily went to see her at night at his father-in-law's house, through wind and rain, just to be with her. So determined was he that he mistook a dead body for a boat to cross a torrential river. Finally, after midnight, he reached his destination only to discover that all the doors were locked. Since his wife's room was on the upper floor, he had to climb in order to reach her room. Taking a python to be a thick rope, he scaled it and slipped into his wife's room. After all his difficulties, he expected his wife to be happy to see him. But instead, she said to him, "Had you been as attached to God as you are to me, you would have realized God long ago." Tulsidasa, we are told, was so ashamed that he became an ascetic devoted only to Rama. My contention is that without that deep and passionate relationship with his wife, Tulsidasa would have never progressed towards his vision of union with Rama. I would also like to take issue with T.S. Eliot when he observes, 'A man does not join himself with the universe so long as he has anything else to join himself with.' I would amend this and say, 'A person can only join himself with the universe if he has joined himself with someone else before.' For most human beings, it is the couple that makes such a 'joining' possible.

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