

2 | *Why Is Breaking Up So Hard to Do?*

NEXT TO THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE, the ending of a relationship is the single most emotionally painful experience that any of us ever goes through. In spite of divorce statistics, and although everyone of us has been touched by someone's experience of divorce or separation, when we find ourselves contemplating the end of our own relationships, we are totally unprepared. The terrible thing that happens to others is, like terminal illness or death, a thing that is never supposed to happen to us. Because love is our security blanket, we want it to last forever and to be our everything. That's why breaking up is so hard to do.

Existential Fears

When I say that love is our security blanket, what I mean is that we use our intimate relationships more than any other experience in our lives to solve some of the most basic questions of our existence. "Why don't I live forever?" "What is the meaning of life?" "What should I do while I'm here?" We very often want to see our relationships as providing the answers to these questions. To the question "Why don't I live forever?" the answer becomes, "If you love

to do with the chemistry and process of relationships themselves.

In our individual lives, relationships are one of the most important vehicles by which we create our identities and through which we define ourselves. Since this is the case, it may be that we will create a number of relationships to achieve that self-definition, and, consequently, we may end one or several relationships in a single lifetime.

A relationship is a process and not a destination. It is not necessarily the final emotional resting place of the persons who enter into it, but a vital and growing entity that has a life—and a lifetime—of its own.

While we don't give it much thought, our most strongly internalized myth about love is that "love is forever." Our popular music and literature continually assert this, and even aside from this encouragement, we tend to see relationships as permanent, to assume that once they have begun, they will go on, immutably, forever.

And yet, with increasing frequency, relationships do end. One out of every two marriages ends, and uncounted numbers of short- and long-term unions not legalized by marriage also end. These stunning statistics certainly prove that love is not forever, yet when our relationships end, we judge ourselves harshly, according to the values implied by the myth of forever.

The truth is that since we first embroidered this myth on our hearts, our relationships have gone through innumerable transformations, while our thinking about them has not. As a result, an incredible number of people are suffering through the trauma of ending their relationships with guilt, rage, self-flagellation, and a profound loss of self-esteem as the only emotional hallmarks of parting.

We all seem to be experts at falling in love. We even have a number of commonly agreed upon rituals for courting. But we don't know much about what goes on inside of a relationship, and we know even less about how to end one. Survivors of ended relationships haven't left us much of a trail as to how they made it through

this painful rite of passage. We know that there are some survivors, that hardly anyone dies or ends up in an insane asylum because of having ended a relationship. Indeed, among the "survivors," we know many examples of transformed men and women, people who are happier after their break-ups and divorces. But we don't know *how* they made it through the terrible experience.

That's one of the reasons endings are so difficult. We don't know *how* to do them. We don't know *how* to get through the endings of relationships. We've all seen people around us going through their endings (or we've even done it once or twice ourselves), and what we see are people in pain, bouncing off the walls emotionally and having to go through radical upheavals in their lives and circumstances. In general, our observations teach us that the endings of relationships are frightening indeed, and this makes us very afraid of going through an ending of our own. Sometimes we are even afraid to acknowledge that the dissolution of the relationship might actually be an improvement because we are so afraid of going through whatever we'll have to go through in order to accomplish it.

One of our greatest fears about ending a relationship is that in the process of parting we will have to experience feelings that will overwhelm us and from which we will never be able to recover. We all suspect that the ending of our relationship is going to take us into some deep emotional waters. We are already feeling vaguely out of control as we contemplate the possibility of the ending, and we sense that the ending itself will take us in over our heads emotionally and leave us feeling totally out of control. This fear is so immense—and so pervasive—that even if a soothsayer could tell us unequivocally that in twenty-five years we would still be as unhappy in our present relationship as we are now, we would probably still be afraid of ending it. Many of us would rather do anything—including continuing to live in a miserable, lifeless, spirit-defeating relationship—than go through all the feelings of ending a relationship.

Another great fear is that, once having ended our present relationship, we will never love or be loved again. While this feeling is very frightening, it has been my experience that, for the most part,

this is not the case; in fact, an overwhelming majority of my clients who ended relationships went on to establish new and much more satisfying unions. These happier relationships resulted when people were willing to learn the lessons their previous relationships had to teach.

I have helped hundreds of people through the process of ending their relationships: people who precipitated the ending, people who resented the ending, and couples who mutually agreed upon the ending. My experience is that whether you leave or were left, if you are willing to go through the process of ending in a directed and thoughtful way, without avoiding any part of the emotional process, you can go on to establish a new and more satisfying relationship.

The purpose of this book is to hold out a hand to anyone who is already going through the ending of a relationship and who, as a result, is feeling all the difficult, scary, and unfamiliar feelings that accompany a parting. (If you are not sure your relationship is ending or should end, begin by reading the coda, which starts on page 149.) By showing you that relationships do have legitimate reasons for ending, by guiding you through the normal emotional stages that occur, and by providing you with a first-aid kit for getting through the ending, this book will enable you to live through the end of your relationship with your self and your self-esteem intact.

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me, it doesn't matter." To the question, "What is the meaning of life?" we answer, "Love." And to the question, "What shall I do while I'm here?" we often answer, "Love my husband, love my wife, enjoy one another till death do us part."

Among the many things that we're continually trying to work out in our lives is the problem that none of us lives forever, that our human existence is finite. Because we are all afraid of death, of the ultimate extinction of our personalities, we do whatever we can to give ourselves stability. We try to provide ourselves with the illusion that some things can always be counted upon, that some things will always continue. We try to defend ourselves against the gaping hole of death by taking love into our lives, by staying close to the persons about whom and to whom we can say, "I know you'll always be with me. I know you won't leave me here alone." Because the thought of death is so intimidating, whatever gives us the illusion of stability and permanence is extremely important to us, and it is to our relationships that we have assigned the primary task of providing us with this sense of permanence.

It is both natural and easy to expect this feeling of permanence from our relationships, because as children most of us experience ourselves as being constantly in relationship to our parents. From the very beginning of our conscious experience, we could feel that they were there, and, so far as we knew, they had always been there. They were there when we opened our eyes, when we first opened our mouths for nourishment, and when, gradually, we generated our first thoughts. Because of this continuous experience of them, our sense is that they are forever, that they always have been, and that they always will be. It is this sense of relationships as continuous and, in a sense, eternal that grants us the necessary stability in our early lives.

For most of us, there was also something immensely luxurious and peaceful about this early experience. Even though as adults we know that our childhood experience of safety was an illusion, we want to create a counterpart experience in adulthood by creating loving relationships, which we hope will serve the same stabilizing

function. With our sweethearts, husbands, and wives as our constant protectors, we feel that we are safe. This is also true, in a different way, for people whose parents *didn't* create a feeling of security in childhood. For them there is a desperate need to establish the sense of security that was always painfully lacking.

One of the reasons we try so hard to duplicate our early experience through our adult love relationships is that in our society there are only two kinds of relationships we believe we can legitimately have. One is as a child in a family; the other is as a grown-up with a spouse. Despite the variety of options that are available to us—living alone, living in a singles' community, living with roommates or friends—at the deepest level of our psyches, we still believe that these are poor substitutes for the real thing: a couple relationship that in its intensity of focus replicates the early childhood experience.

As children, our relationships were fixed; we were inextricably part of a family unit. But, in adulthood, we move into that segment of life where we choose our relationships. We hope to recreate in the format of an adult romantic relationship the feelings of security and connectedness that we experienced as children. When these adult relationships end, we are tossed out onto the open sea of nonconnectedness; it suddenly feels as if we are totally alone. We can't go home and be little children again, so when we end our adult relationships, we feel as if we have separated ourselves from the only context and format we believe we're allowed to have as a safe harbor in our adult lives. We feel emotionally devastated.

Obsolete Mythologies of Love

Another thing that makes breaking up so painful is that we have a number of myths about love and relationships, about how love and marriage "should be," that are no longer a reflection of reality. Our beliefs about love no longer match up with what's going on in the world, and they are contradicted when our relationships end. I call these out-of-date notions the obsolete mythologies of love.

Love Is Forever

Our primary and probably most potent myth about love is that love is forever, that when we make a relationship, it will last for our whole lives. Our marriage vows—"Till death do us part"—are the public ceremonial expression of that myth. We don't say, "I'll love you as long as it feels good," or, "I'll love you until I find somebody else." We say, "I'll love you forever; I'll live with you until one of us dies." We expect the person we choose to be our partner for our whole lives.

It is this assumption in particular that makes breaking up so hard to do. In ending a relationship, we negate the myth of forever; we violate the assumption that our relationship will last us for our whole lives. What we see is that instead of being forever, our relationship was just an episode.

Because almost all of us have subscribed to the myth of forever, when our relationships end, the only thing we can say is, "I must not be any good; there must be something the matter with me. I created this relationship with the intention it would last forever, but now it's ending. It certainly can't be ending because the idea that love is forever is wrong, so it's got to be me who is wrong." We spend an unbelievable amount of time in self-flagellation because we can't imagine that the notion of forever could possibly be inappropriate. But it is. There isn't a person in the United States who hasn't witnessed a divorce or the heartbreaking end of a romance. The truth is that relationships end. It is high time we explode the myth that love is forever, so that when we end relationships, we can do so without such devastating crises in self-esteem.

Love Is All-Inclusive

Another one of these obsolete myths is that relationships are all-inclusive. When we make a relationship with someone, we assume he or she will be sufficient to meet all our needs. In other words, we believe that the person we love will be the one person with whom we always go to movies, with whom we always go out to dinner,

with whom we go to church, with whom we have all our conversations about our bad day at the office or our ailing back, who knows all our troubles and to whom we unburden ourselves.

We don't enter into relationships saying to ourselves, "Well, in my relationship I'm going to handle my needs for sex and a Friday night date, but I'm going to have an intellectual life with my friend Sally and a cultural life with my friend Stan." When we enter into a long-term relationship, we generally assume that the person we love will be sufficient—or almost sufficient—to meet all our needs. We expect that 95 percent of our needs will be met in our primary relationships and the other 5 percent—well, we'll just forget about them.

We presume the person we love will provide us with companionship and entertainment, with intellectual and emotional stimulation, with physical solace and sexual satisfaction, that he or she will be our . . . everything. We think of a relationship as an exclusive and all-encompassing resource, and we conduct our lives according to this expectation. We begin by turning to our partners and restricting our outreach to others. More and more, we ask our partners to meet all our needs, until they become the focus of our existence.

It is because we have such all-encompassing and exclusive expectations for our relationships that we are devastated when they end. At the simplest level, who will be our Friday night date? How will we meet all our needs—for sex, for conversation, for succor, for daily companionship, and for consistency? What or who will provide the ground of familiarity in our lives? How can we replace the handy-dandy, live-in jack- or jill-of-all-trades that the person to whom we were related had inevitably become?

The great cafeteria of needs that were being met with affection and efficiency by the single person we chose to hold close in our lives is now no longer being met. We are paralyzed not only by thoughts of loneliness—"What will I do for companionship now?"—but also by the aggravation of needing to learn, on what feels like a moment's notice, how to meet all our needs in a variety of other ways.

What's ironic about the *forever* and the *all-inclusive* myths is that they sprang up in times when the life span was half of what it is today. In those days, when a person said, "I'll love you forever," forever could be two years or ten years, but it very seldom approached the forty, fifty, or sixty years of marriage that could conceivably be possible today. But even in the past, people often had multiple relationships. They could get married and easily say, "until death do us part," because death often did part them, and the surviving partner would go on to marry again. Relationships ended not because of what occurred within them, but because of external circumstances. It wasn't necessary to ask, "Was I a bad person?" "Did I fail?" "Did this relationship end because I wasn't okay?" None of these questions had to be asked because the usual cause of the ending—death—was out of everyone's hands.

When we apply these myths to ourselves now, however, they can only have one psychological result: we find ourselves in a crisis of self-esteem because we are unable to build relationships that are in accordance with these myths.

The circumstances in which we find ourselves today are very different from those that spawned our cultural attitudes toward relationships, and these mythologies didn't always have such personally negative effects. In the past, the continent needed tanning and its subjugation was best accomplished in community, by teams. The teams began with a pair of people who fell in love or married for convenience and then had children, developing a society and work-force that could get the tasks done.

People were too poor and too busy to worry about anything except economic survival. The point of a relationship was, above all, to establish a stable economic unit, which, with the efforts of all its members, could create a somewhat comfortable life. Once you chose a partner, you just made it work. There was no worrying about the emotional well-being of your relationship or whether you felt good about yourself.

But now our relationship tasks are different. Since as a society we are no longer concerned with conquering the environment, but

rather with keeping peace and preserving the environment we have already subdued, we are now turning our attention inward, to deal with the questions of who we are as human beings and what are the meanings of our lives.

In the past, individuals subjugated themselves to the needs of the relationship in order to accomplish work, some task that was a mutually agreed-upon goal. Now we live in a time when relationships exist to serve the deepest needs of the individuals in them.

In a sense, we are asking the relationship to subjugate itself to the evolution of the individual. Because we have solved the issues of basic survival, we have the luxury of moving on to deeper levels of development: emotional, spiritual, aesthetic. And it is in relationships, the intimate and challenging encounter with another, that we do this. This is not a state of affairs toward which we are moving; it is the place at which we have already arrived.

This is a difficult concept for us to admit to ourselves, despite the impact of the "me generation." All evidence to the contrary, we have not yet consciously acknowledged the degree to which we value the development of the self. But it is true that we enter into relationships primarily to discover, foster, enhance, and sustain our individual selves. We haven't really openly acknowledged this because we don't like to think of ourselves as selfish or self-oriented. There is a certain part of us that wants to believe we hold human communion and, therefore, relationships as a higher value than self. We don't like to conceive of ourselves as being in relationships to get something—that's too crass. It also violates our soft romantic sensibilities. We don't want to believe that we fall in love in order to get something out of it.

We want to hold love out as the one part of life where there is still magic and mystery, where there is still romance. Although love does serve to meet our needs for magic, mystery, and romance, the deeper truth is that we all enter into relationships for very specific reasons, whether we choose to see them or not.

In spite of the progress of civilization, relationships are still task-oriented. When we fall in love, we fall in love with the person who

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will help us accomplish something—whether that's something we know we're trying to accomplish, like getting a college degree or having a family, or whether that's something about which we are entirely unaware, like trying to achieve emotional security.

I am certainly not saying that we should take the mystery, the magic, or romance out of falling in love, but we certainly do need to take the mystery out of falling *out* of love. When a relationship ends, it is vital to look at it through reality-colored glasses and ask, "What was it really about?" "What were we doing together, anyway?" We need to see what happened so that we don't feel guilty, so that we learn for the future, so that we can love again.

My experience in helping hundreds of people go through the painful process of parting is that it is only when we truly understand the meaning of our relationships—the tasks we undertook in them, the gifts we received from them—that we can survive their endings with our selves and our self-esteem intact.