

The Phenomenology of the Relational Void: Probabilities and Possibilities

Joan Lavender

In 1986 The New York Times reported the results of a study (Bennett, Bloom and Craig, 1986) indicating that women over 35 had only a 5% chance of finding an appropriate mate. This news created an outcry in women of this demographic. The achievement of a marriage – the relational gold standard of the times - could no longer be assumed. Fifteen years later a Newsweek article (McGinn, 2006) revisited the issue with both revised data from the original study as well as retrospective data. Both refuted the original dire predictions. By 2006, the study observed, 90% of baby-boomer women (and men) either had married or would marry.

Between 1986 and 2006, the predicament of the woman in a state of unremitting unchosen singlehood underwent an apparent transformation. The popular press emphasized women's ability to live well without a partner and implied that it was passé to need a man. A familiar saying from this time period, "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle" epitomizes this sentiment. The upper middle class imperative encouraged women to feel they could be whole without being in a relationship with a man. Women created new options for themselves including professional advancement, single motherhood, homosexual partnerships and the newly socially sanctioned preference to defer or reject marriage. The zeitgeist now proclaimed a woman's ability and choice to adapt effortlessly to life without a partner. The gold standard - a heterosexual marriage partner- was out.

Even as the media exploits one or the end side of the marriage/relationship dilemma, and as we psychoanalysts study with increasing refinement, the nature of

attachment and relationality, a large number of our patients are women experiencing relational voids (Rucker, 1993).

A touchy topic

My initial interest in this topic developed as I overcame the pain and shame I felt personally as I grew older while still yearning for a partner. I was not alone in this. I wished to document our lives to counteract the invisibility we felt and to give dignity to our circumstances. I wanted these women - friends, colleagues, and patients - to know that someone was thinking specifically about them. Yet, how many of these women wish to be recognized as a member of this club? The status of a failed search for a significant partner is the unenviable psychic “hot potato” (Harris, 1997). No one wants to be the last one caught holding it.

During the eleven years I was alone I saw many women in psychoanalysis who were dealing with the same circumstance. My personal discomfort with the issue affected the way that I sat with them. I squirmed at moments when patients leaned forward to confirm that I was, indeed, married. The intensity of my need to disidentify stifled our developing spontaneity. I even considered purchasing a wedding band for relief.

With the benefit of hindsight, I will identify dilemmas, raise questions and make suggestions about how to proceed when either one or both participants in the therapeutic partnership is living with a relational void.

The first dilemma deals with the private awareness that we as therapists must maintain yet hold lightly as we listen to our patients. What do we do when we sense the discrepancy between our patient’s stated wish for a partner and her levels of avoidance of

same? How do we hover in this gap suspended amidst validation, hope, uncertainty and sober wisdom? What happens to the therapeutic partnership when the woman's stated need for a relationship transforms as she allows herself to notice that things are not what they seemed at first glance? As one wise woman now in her eighties told me recently, "We can think we know what we want, but....we don't!"

The second issue raises questions about our method. My psychoanalytic heritage, even revised, still makes me listen more for the tragic than the resilient side of things. Yet I know that our capacity to make meaning, often in small steps, is inherently optimistic. How do I create an experiential environment that manifests this process?

Finally, I will make observations regarding the vagaries of life in an attempt to contextualize our deeply held notions of attachment and intimacy.

I used the word touchy in describing the shame that women can feel if they have found themselves in this situation, regardless of the reason. But the risk of my hitting a psychic nerve goes beyond that. It's one thing if the woman classifies herself as suffering from a relational void; it is quite another thing if someone else classifies her. For the purpose of succinctness, let me say who I am writing about.

I no longer use marriage as the variable distinguishing whether or not a woman is experiencing a relational void. A woman can be in a long-term intimate relationship without the formality of marriage. She is not in a relational void. And she does not have to be in partnership with a man; homosexual women in relationships with primary intimacy are not in relational voids.

Men have relational voids. They may have not found a suitable partner for all the range of reasons that women haven't, although demographics suggest that their chances

for success are better. We see some of these lonely men in our practices. I do not have sufficient experience working with such men to include them in this paper and I look forward to hearing from analysts who do.

I am not including widows, recently divorced women or those with partners whose work demands long distance relationships. With some hesitation, I exclude women with children, including single mothers, although this will raise objections. I arrive at this decision based upon the all-encompassing bond that most mothers have with their children regardless of the quality of that bond. The unique nature of this kind of bonding makes for a different inner life than the woman who has no one 'coming up behind'.

Also very touchy is the making of generalizations. A large segment of our populations lives alone. [Alternatives to marriage project]. We are each unique and the ways we have arrived at our aloneness has much private and personal meaning. I do not wish to engage in bashing of any kind; this paper is not meant to externalize blame (e.g., all guys are screwed up, all women are high maintenance): doing so serves ultimately to increase despair on both sides.

I am writing about women roughly in midlife who have spent a significant number of years in the weary search for a partner. They do not have children but do have biological clocks and are feeling pangs of mortality. Their hope is waning. In Rucker's view their situation is currently irresolvable.

Primary intimacy and the relational void

Rucker's original paper (1993) spoke out against the fish without a bicycle ideology:

I posit the continuing importance of a primary intimate bond throughout one's lifespan for maximally integrated identity and for maximally stable sense of

psychological well-being. This attachment is characterized by exclusivity, loving mutuality and continuity over time. ...Although individuals in difficult marriages may experience ruptures in primary attachment or some degree of relational deprivation, they seldom present the same psychological residue of length deprivation of a primary bond that is felt by single women living alone.

It is virtually impossible for the qualities of primary relatedness to be experienced in isolation from a mutually desired, continuous, physically intimate relationship with another.

The need for primary intimacy is either met by the presence of a suitable other or left unfulfilled; it cannot be resolved, and its gratification cannot be self-generated. The absence of primary intimacy forms a primary relational void.... it is my position that the relational void has not been and cannot be transformed; it can only be obscured. (Rucker, 1993, p.)

Rucker's deepest sentiments about primary intimacy strike me as having a timeless quality in most ways. Yet the value of such a form of relatedness is something we may take for granted without articulating just what an intimate relationship provides. It is often a ticket to participate in the social milestones of life; many solitary women describe a loss of status and identity. The presence of a viable partner amplifies the resources brought to bear in any given life situation. From a psychological perspective, a working intimate bond captures aspects of childhood while challenging mature capacities. It provides opportunities for humor and for passion- alternate psychic domains that may be essential for providing us with relief from life's harshness. Perhaps such relatedness, which affords novelty and familiarity, can be thought of as rejuvenating our capacities

for communication and communion. On the other hand, like the Vietnam Memorial, unremitting singlehood makes an eloquent statement through the painful presence of an absence. The fact remains that, while there are women who have chosen to remain single, women in unhappy marriages, etc., we all know women who enter treatment because they are on a search for a partner. They may even make up the majority of our patients.

While their dream of an enduring partner is the first thing they tell us, their life histories or temperament may have made them less than poised for one. We might be their initiation into the experience of an intimate relationship.

Other women, capable of primary intimacy, may have had limited choices and may simply never find that one special relationship.

The phenomenology of the relational void

What if something happens to me?

The initial stage of the relational void may be ushered in by a single dramatic circumstance. Alone at night and suddenly very dizzy, Renee, a single woman, faces, in a new way, that she is really alone. Family and friends love her, but the realization of her aloneness persists and elaborates. The thought is now fixed in her mind: no one is thinking of her first.

Ann described her entry into the relational void with the following metaphor: "I was walking down the streets with my friends, and all of a sudden I fell into a crack in the sidewalk. I started to scream, but no one heard me. They just kept walking." She had many coupled friends, and was invited to their gatherings but was shocked by the intensity of her envy.

A nagging internal dissonance plagued one woman who watched herself pursue an ill-fated relationship with an unavailable man, despite her knowledge that it would have an unpleasant ending. She was caught between her “normal middle-class values” and a compelling need to survive her loneliness. She asked, “How could this have happened to me?”

Who should I leave my album to?

Rucker compared a deeper immersion into the relational void to the phenomenon of a phantom limb - “nothing is there, but it always hurts” (1993). When a woman begins to face that this is, indeed, happening to her, there is shock and outrage. No longer desperately seeking any partner, she avoids them to preserve precious energy for inner sustenance. One woman used the image of a camel in the desert storing up her memories of special relationships. Another woman wondered about the meaning of a gap in her photo album between the ending of one significant relationship and, many years later, the start of a new one. She had been professionally productive during the years between the two relationships. But she had felt too uncomfortable traveling alone to ask anyone to take her picture. She was also less interested in retaining her memory of events during this time. She wondered to whom she would leave her photo album after her death.

My fantasy has run out!

As the women enter their forties and fifties still alone, it is clear that “this is indeed happening to me”. Menopause, aging, aging parents, etc. co-exist with advances in professional life and the inclusion, as a valued friend, in the friends’ and family milestones. Life goes on, with the relational void asserting itself with greater or lesser salience.

Socially, the missing of the first milestones of adult life, marriage, children, divorce even, is well in the past. Only rarely do friends or family inquire about the prospects of potential partners. This may be due to tact, awkwardness with the situation or even relief that the problem is not expressing itself with outward urgency. By now, most have had firsthand contact with one or more forms of misfortune, and unremitting singlehood cannot lay claim to special sympathy.

While many women are invested in meaningful pursuits, they still describe “dead” time in which the voice of the void is deafening. Winnicott’s “think not of trauma, but of nothing happening when something profitable might have happened” applies here (Winnicott, 1974). Such prolonged deprivation might make a woman prone to attacks from internal bad objects, precipitating bitterness, envy and despair. Perhaps years of such loneliness could even affect the stability of the representational world itself, creating a kind of involuntary defacto meditation process. Women who have experienced such moments of void report a terror, which resembles that of the advanced student of meditation (Engler, 1994). This may bring them to the brink of a dimension claimed both by psychology and spirituality i.e. an encounter with emptiness itself. But this emptiness does not feel like a spiritual phenomenon achievement; it is a psychic specter.

One woman’s story

A good friend was willing although not eager to recount with me her encounter with the relational void. She was in her own treatment during most of this period (two different analysts, due to her temporary move to another state for her education).

Ellen grew up in the sixties in a family that friends described as friendly and “colorful”. Her father and sister had substantial untreated psychiatric problems that were

camouflaged by the freewheeling atmosphere of the sixties. Her mother seemed unaware of the impact that the family's extreme and disturbing behaviors had on Ellen. Ellen took on the role of observer, warding off the mad hatter's tea party quality with a deadened demeanor. They loved her, yet no one seemed able to hold her in mind for very long. This was the context of her earliest loneliness.

Being a child of the 60s (and of this particular family), Ellen had plenty of romantic adventures. In her twenties and early thirties she had long monogamous relationships with nontraditional creative men who were drawn to her intensity and tolerant of her unrealistic expectations for excitement. During this period, there was no relational void but a different kind of loneliness, which resulted from the gap between realistic expectations of a relationship and Ellen's overblown fantasy - her psychological inheritance. She was in relationships, but not in relation.

Ellen was 34 when depression, loneliness and confused longings brought her into psychoanalysis with a gentle yet formal (single) male analyst. She recalls the first meeting - how his deep voice and gentle handshake responded to the lonely child in need of security. The sultrier aspect of her personality masked the underlying depression that she attempted to medicate through sex. As their psychotherapeutic bond took hold she had her first experiences of steady boundaries and containment. Over time she began to feel the inevitable loneliness of the individuation process from her family of origin and she entered into her relational void.

There was another side to this treatment experience. Ellen, sensitive to shame, had the distinct feeling that her analyst was uncomfortable with her. She had been told (by a busybody) that he was single; in fact she had coincidentally seen him at times with

different women. She wondered why a man of his professional stature and kindness was still alone, but could not bring herself to ask him.

Feeling both protective and critical she asked herself ‘were they both losers? Something crucial to the issue of acceptability and self-esteem was being implicitly exiled from their relationship. Where was the discomfort coming from? Was it her projection? Was he warding her off? Did he find her capable of hurting him? As her relational void continued in her “outside” life, her shame and loneliness increased. Was she too much for him? Was she too much for any man?

Most of what we do operates in the realm of the implicit. If Ellen could have felt safe enough to ask him about himself and to sense that he felt okay enough with himself to respond to the questions or welcome her need to know, she might have begun the process of accepting herself. Maybe” the two of them against the world”, could have developed. With that bond, it would have been easier to do the hard work of articulating the story of why she was having a hard time settling down.

Ellen was entering the third year of her void. She distinctly remembers the feeling of a “different playing field” (the men were few and far between) as well as “an internal sea change”. Now she was drawn to steadier men: none was available.

This was the era of the ‘fish without a bicycle’. But for Ellen, the cultivation of her capacity for a realistic relationship was an achievement. And now she was supposed to not need it! Too late! Envy, with its intrinsic relational nihilism, became her companion. She had the financial means to support herself, fine friends, mentors and even a great place to live. No stranger to loneliness, she was terrified at the thought of spending the rest of her life alone.

Further inner clarity was needed: Terror of infinite loneliness is not the same thing as genuine motivation to find and sustain an enduring intimate relationship. Neither is the urgent need to fit in, nor the need for status and social identity. Ellen struggled with these dilemmas and arrived at the conviction that ‘fish without a bicycle’ was a load of bull.

Now in her mid-forties, Ellen tried to keep her inner life alive. She found masturbation to be a source (albeit a sad one) of autonomy and psychic sustenance, but worried about the potential for compulsion. She had been tormented by vivid memories of intimate moments with one special man from her past. But as she continued on alone, she could barely connect with this source, as “my fantasy life has run out”. This prospect was more terrifying than the thought of being alone in the social sense; it meant a loss of self! This kind of detachment must be the end of the line. The treatment process itself had narrowed. Was this an emotional hunger strike, a depression, or simply a winding down of her inner life? Was this a determined attempt at renunciation? And, if so, could renunciation be considered adaptive in such a situation?

Ellen, now living in a different city due to her graduate education, found a new therapist. She was older and pithier. Ellen noticed how her therapist “leaned in” as she challenged her with polemics on hopelessness. She wanted to tear down the walls of her therapist’s polished middle-class office and (she assumed) marriage. This therapist seemed passionately invested in Ellen and proud of her courage to keep searching. She was impressed with Ellen’s homemade desensitization method of recovering from a failed encounter with a man. (She tape recorded the final phone messages, and listened to it until it became absurd. She played them in sessions.) This analyst vigorously

supported Ellen's overdue decision to try antidepressants, resulting in the alleviation of her lifelong depression. She studied her envy and it morphed over time into sadness, longing, admiration and a commitment to stay close to those whose happy relationships included a place for her. She was readying herself for an immersion into wherever her life would take her, and making the distinction between submission and surrender.

Silent confessions

When a lonely patient cries out "I am alone!" it is monolithic and unnerving. Am I going to be The One who can make an intimate partner appear, like pulling a rabbit out of a hat? I can't guarantee her a life partner. I recall hearing from a colleague that Otto Kernberg gave a disclaimer to his female patients in yearning, stating that he could not guarantee that after treatment they would find a suitable partners.

Shame is stopping her from showing me the depth of her despair. I can't help feeling that my presence makes it worse. She doesn't feel our implicit solidarity. She is rushing through sessions with no allowance for emotional breathing or even a moment to receive a supportive nuance from me. Her best friend is getting married; she should be over all this by now. Is it awful of me to indicate that a struggle with envy is something I can understand? Do I wear a ring? Am I afraid of her envy? Self-conscious, I hear cultural biases I didn't think I had leaking through my comments.

Can we together open a therapeutic space where intimacy emerges on its own? I may be praying for this, but my patient dismisses my bait and switch with a wave of her hand! Her mission, cast in concrete terms, is unwavering. This work is beautiful, perilous, expensive, and, yes, of great practical value. It is worth the time, money and

effort. But build a relationship with yourself, first, because regardless of the future, you're going to need it! When does her biological clock become our time bomb?

Finely attuned listening and validation are the essentials of a therapeutic relationship. But don't go out there expecting to find this! You will be searching for a unicorn in the garden.

The vicissitudes of our engagement take us into her unique history and how loneliness perhaps became the better of two sad choices. Loners who have chosen loneliness over their intensely conflicted feelings about relatedness can also be lonely. As I respond to her history, I listen more for "what was needed that was missing and what was welcome but endured", than for the resilience that is equally a part of our human heritage. This type of listening, still in my psychoanalytic bloodstream, can, paradoxically, increase her despair. More bad news.

I appear cloaked in the words and worlds of the psychoanalytically tragic but I am a actually a closet optimist. The strongest influence in my work, based on the intrinsic hopefulness inherent in our capacity to make meaning, is the philosophy and method of Eugene Gendlin (1962). I know that psychotherapy, in its most meaningful moments, is not talking about your self; it is speaking from your insides, your vivid highly specific experiential sense of things as they are forming inside you. It is speaking poised at the point where the complex bodily-sensed meets the poetic possibilities of language (Lavender 2007). My patients need to sense this aliveness in me, palpably, and then within themselves, or else we are done for. A specific image - of my own analyst - comes to mind. Her quiet involvement in her own experiential process as she sat with me had the natural effect of bringing me down into my own. And coming down into

myself enriched the evolution of our relationship. She trusted herself and me enough to have a “process intimacy” (Lavender, 2009) with me. She was listening to herself, deeply, while she was listening to me. My insides knew this immediately, as if we were breathing, emotionally, together. This made us close. No longer hovering above myself, I could ease into my own experiential realm.

I can help people by offering an experiential environment where things are released from the way they have been held and fresh constellations can emerge. As life is openly acknowledged to be uncertain, it may also become more interesting. We are unleashed from the grip of the structure-bound nature of language and cultural convention to listen to ourselves, freshly. Can I help her lay down her over-determined structure-bound burden? Can we find ourselves floating amidst the paradoxical, poetic, chaotic, etc? This experiential “sinking into” is the realm from which new meaning emerges. This is the most sacred part of my work.

New Possibilities

Rose has come of age in the current era of confusion regarding our theme. She has come to me to help her find an enduring meaningful relationship. She feels uneasy about the fact that she hasn't had one by now.

As she describes her attempts to find a mate, she can see that I can feel how tough it really is out there. Although I never say it, she gathers that I've been there. I have the impression that Rose wasn't expecting this. She doesn't have to hold back here: we will work on it together. She is a lively and intelligent woman, an only child who learned at a young age how to entertain herself. Her father was irritable and abrasive and had difficulty relating to his little girl. Her mother was proper and smiling, on the surface,

but Rose sensed her unhappiness in the marriage. Her mother worked hard to protect her from her father's criticism.

Rose continues in her relationship quest, like her mother, smiling, but inwardly anxious and stressed. I am struggling myself, concerned that she is trying so hard to present a smiling face while she is suffering a great deal in the process. Before long the atmosphere of the sessions changes, as Rose shares her disappointment in her friends, bosses and men who don't convey a real caring for her. I can't help but feel that I am someone else pushing her out into the world unprepared to face repeated rejection. Rose wants to press on.

I see how painful this search is for Rose. I am doing everything I can to help her to form a more compassionate relationship with herself and to take hold of a sustaining relationship with me. Often I want to say forget the guys for a while, come more into our relationship, rest, and find yourself, please! We push on as each encounter with a new man becomes a gauntlet.

A few months into therapy another pattern emerges. Rose is self-supporting and the therapy sessions that her insurance provider underwrites are dwindling. Her job makes travel demands and she cannot come to our sessions as steadily. I appreciate all this and wonder if I am making unreasonable demands – not only time, money etc. Rose has moments when she becomes, in her own words, snarky.

When I ask her more about this, Rose courageously replies, yes, she is like her father in this way. I tell her that I see what she means, as I am feeling kind of brushed off, even though I do appreciate the money, work and schedule pressures. We have our first explicit relational encounter. I must try to understand that she is busy, not wealthy,

etc. and that therapy is no guarantee. Yes, yet, as a person, entering into a relationship with you, I notice myself feeling, well, a bit brushed aside, sitting on the edge of my seat in each session, getting ready for you to leave. Just as we were getting into it.

My comment, its vulnerability and directness, touches Rose and she sees the implication. Yes, she is lonely yet unsure that our time together will be worth the effort.

Now I reflect privately, does Rose keep coming now because she is afraid to upset me, hence complying, or is she moved to find her sea legs in the vicissitudes of our relationship? She still wants me to help her assert herself with the cryptic man who calls at all hours to see if he can spend the night. He is friendly but remote. Maybe he will come around.

We talk about loneliness. I find myself sharing some existential stories with her, and we create a language for weathering our own relational breakdowns. She sees how, when and sometimes why she backs off... with me. She finally confronts that strange guy and it's all over. I am about to take a one-week vacation.

When we meet next, it is clear that Rose has had a very hard time. The attempt at a relationship with the quirky man has ended. She has difficulty talking and takes the risk to tell me that she has had some passing suicidal thoughts.

It is my fault. How could I let her pretend she could really work toward a relationship when all along we both knew it was mission impossible? I feel like the mother who pretended everything was okay when it wasn't. This is the subtext of her suicidal cry. Rose and I stick together through this painful scary time. As she starts to feel steadier, I notice that she becomes is freer to express her real feelings. No more Ms. Nice Guy. She is taking a break from her search.

Released from her original agenda, our work can slow down and find its own level, moving from real time to the timeless quality that characterizes experiential processing. How does Rose really want to spend her time alone now? She has always talked about wanting a pet, and I have always taken this seriously. Her new mission is clear: investigate breeds, temperaments, training, etc.

As Rose pursues this goal she questions: am I too self-involved to be a good parent to a dog, how will I handle my anger if my dog chews my new couch, what about that commitment of walking, etc. This is an arranged marriage, with all the effort, time, hopes and fears. One problem. She cannot afford to come to therapy weekly now. By now we have enough relational heft for me to respond, in a garbled comical way, when she takes the risk to tell me how much she paid for her beautiful puppy. My shock worn off, Rose continues to come with a temporarily lowered fee.

When Brando arrives, his lively and faithful personality surpasses her dreams. I love hearing the details of their growing relationship and she likes telling them. Rose's contentment is pervasive. For the first time, Rose's father starts to call regularly, checking in on both of them. Her sense of motherhood gives her a better sense of boundaries at work; she has to get home to Brando. She has a home. I listen for signs of relational void and hear none: Rose is content.

Something is clearly shifting in R. With Brando stretched out alongside her on my old couch, Rose stays with her own process; she is not outside of herself. I can see by the rhythm of her speech and the tone of voice, that she is forming a different relationship with herself as we sit together enjoying a moment of reflection. Her puppy has given her a new role and she has responded with a steadiness she wasn't sure she had

to offer. Rose has a presence in the room as she reflects on how she has been living her whole life, with such a distance between how she really feels, when she is safely alone, and the smiling face she has cultivated to be acceptable to others. Now she has a grave expression, and now, tears. She is sad but “sad” doesn’t capture her mood, because there is relief in finally being able to see this and to tell it to me. And her tears are a sign that she is starting to find herself. She sees more clearly how her need to please overshadowed her anxiety and depression, how her fear of men may have turned her off to men, and how relieved she is to have finally shared this with me.

In the following session Rose has a hard time settling in, uncomfortable, like a puppy circling to find the right spot. What is this, we can wonder together? Is she conveying what she talked about last time, that she needs a lot of time to herself, and is missing that this morning? I can really see it, she is trying to want to be here, but she is aching to be alone, or with her puppy. I say, gently, is this what might be happening right now? This session, no, I, am taking up your alone time? She nods and stops fretting. It’s okay to be like this, you don’t have to perform for me, it’s really okay.

She observed that dogs lash out when they are fearful and reviews her own history in this light. She leans forward and asks “Are you expecting me to look for a relationship?” And now, hesitating, she wonders if she had gotten help sooner, where would she be in her life by now? As Rose takes the time to listen to herself, she raises raises new questions. The wish to choose an occupation that inspires her emerges along with a clearer appreciation of why it didn’t happen that way in the first place. Giving herself permission to revisit the issue that brought her to therapy in the first place, Rose can now ask, freshly, “Would I have necessarily chosen to get married?”

So we continue, the three of us, creating the conditions for new possibilities.

The vagaries of life

Our hope, as analysts, is that we can intervene with what life has given or not given our patients and co-create a deepening relationship that inspires new opportunities. This is the heart of my work. This is the closet optimism I described earlier.

Yet there is no bill of rights regarding intimacy. Our opportunities for early attachment and adult primary intimacy are not created equal.

A colleague whose expertise is in trauma articulated this to me. She suffered years of premeditated physical torture at the hands of her father. Her desperation led her to making phone calls to random numbers hoping to find human contact. Thrown into such a life, she created abiding attachments to nature, in particular, blades of grass or the beauty and inspiration of a field of wheat blowing in the wind. I imagine that this helped her to have some sense of continuity, alleviation of alienation and loneliness; this was her own psychic version of a Camelot. She said “Let’s be serious now, how many on this planet can even come close to the images these attachment guys are selling us. Sure, it’s beautiful, but let’s get real.”

I wonder how can we endorse the value of relationship while being careful to not privilege certain types of relationalities. Our profession has had its share of mythology and I do not want to eliminate any kind of attachment phenomenon that helps anyone sustain a meaningful life.

Back to Ellen: Who defines intimacy?

In the eleventh year of relational void, Ellen met a guy whose phenotype was opposite to hers but held promise. She didn't bolt. He seemed like a unique person with many impressive qualities and some mystifying ones. This would be no natural match, but there might be something here. He was loyal, reliable, and handsome enough, with a stimulating mind. But his manner didn't offer her the standard brand of intimacy she had come to assume was universal. No looking into each other's eyes, no private in-jokes, no deepening dialogues, no intimate transparency. No apparent falling in love. No marathon psychological encounters. How could this be happening? Doesn't one size intimacy fit all? She accepted his marriage proposal, took up the offer to learn about another kind of enduring intimacy and never regretted it.

In closing

I know a fine man, now approaching 70, who recalls his deceased mother with great love and respect. She had been a farm girl from a poor family in the Midwest.

What was she like as a mother?

She took me to the library, we were both voracious readers. She'd show up in school and talk to my teachers when I got into trouble. She made great pastry. She gave me the box to make the stage for my puppet shows.

In the summertime and on the weekends, I'd leave the house early in the morning, run through the fields all day, and have a great time. I had a great sense of freedom, I could do whatever I felt like. I made bows out of wood, discovered Osage oranges and discovered things no one else ever knew about. Being on my own all day in those fields was wonderful. I'd show up just in time for dinner.

Did you ever share your feelings with her?

I just don't know what you mean by that. Please explain.

Did she touch you, did she hold you? No, of course not, parents were taught back then not to do that.

Did you do things together? Yeah. We sat in the living room and each read a book from the local library. It was great.

Did you feel close to her? That's another one of those questions.....I knew she was there for me.

How did you know that she loved you?? What a ridiculous question!

References

- Alternatives to Marriage Project. Retrieved from <http://www.unmarried.org/statistics/html>. Home page.
- Bennett, M. & Bloom, D. (1986). Why fewer American women marry. *The New York Times*. 12/13/86.
- Engler, J. (1994) Paper presented at The Suffering Self Conference. New York, 4/9-4/10.
- Harris, A. (1997) Women's envy: disowned excitements. Paper read at MPAP March 9, 2001.
- Gendlin, E. T. (1962) *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning: A Philosophical and Psychological Approach to the Subjective*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Lavender, J. (2009) One therapist's travelogue. Unpublished manuscript.
- Lavender, J. (2007) Psychotherapy Lite: Spinning Gold from Straw. Unpublished manuscript.
- McGinn, D. (2006) Rethinking marriage after 40. *Newsweek*. Retrieved from <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/13007828/site/newsweek>
- Rucker, N. (1993) Cupid's misses: relational vicissitudes in the analyses of single women. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 10 (3), pp. 377-391
- Winnicott, D. (1974) Fear of breakdown. *International Review of Psycho-Analysis*, 1, pp. 103-7.