

The Inti-Mate Marriage P. Daniel McGee, Ph.D.

September 26, 2000, Submitted for Publishing to *Review & Expositor**

Two psychologists enroute to the APA convention are passing through the lush New England countryside discussing their upcoming presentation on “The Psychology of Intimacy.” As they top a hill and round a curve they spy a young couple on a picnic, obviously euphoric. Seizing a rare opportunity to observe spontaneous subjects, they clandestinely park the car and crawl across the grass for a closer look. Soon the couple is dancing, picking flowers, throwing them into the air and falling into each other’s arms. The lovers are full of joy as they share revealing stories about themselves, laughing and playing together. There is an innocence and timelessness in their play, and they are quite unaware that researchers are observing, assessing and cataloging their every move.

The observers seem lost in the moment as they envy the magic transpiring between the two “Inti-Mates.” As the psychologists return to the car in silence they are stunned by the emotional impact of such an intimate moment. They ride quietly on through the countryside but cannot shake the sounds and images of the young couple: their openness, honesty, trust and sheer celebrative joy. It is obvious to both observers that they cannot avoid sharing what they are feeling. And, for the first time in their lives, they see the futility of defining intimacy. There is a spirituality about it, a mutual celebration of life, that defies description. It is about a human-to-human communication at the deepest and most profound level. It is a microcosm of God’s love projected in a human relationship.

No, it didn’t really happen. But, I could think of no better way to illustrate the difficulty of the task before me here. Or, the challenge facing churches committed to the emotional and sexual health of its married couples. Intimacy defies definition. Recently, my research assistant uncovered well over twenty attempts to define intimacy in texts and professional journals. Some surveys have revealed common themes which couples describe.¹ Others have uncovered reasons why we avoid intimacy.² One team came up with four distinct approaches to understanding intimacy,³ and another, four types of people in intimate relationships.⁴ If the volume of material related to intimacy is any indication, we may be experiencing a monumental search for answers to a cultural crisis of significant proportions.

What is Intimacy?

Intimacy is not an either/or proposition. Neither black nor white, it more often resembles gray or plaid. In reality it is a continuum. It begins in infancy with a sense of connectedness with the one who gave us birth. In order for it to mature it must graduate from symbiosis to individuation. As awareness and appreciation of self continues we are laying the groundwork for intimacy with others. Intimacy culminates in a reciprocal awareness and mutual appreciation with another. It may exist at different levels—with a sibling, friend or a romantic relationship. It cannot exist without self-awareness and self-love. It exists in an infantile way in the early stages of a romantic relationship, usually in isolated moments. At its highest human level it exists among two individuals, each of whom is wholly aware of his/her strengths and limitations and are willing to risk self-disclosure, not needy of approval, but able to enjoy their common values and celebrate their differences as couple strengths. As we will discuss later, a mature Christian experiencing this process begins to gain insight into this entire metamorphosis as a journey towards God, a means of experiencing life and God more fully.

Intimacy vs. Sex

Fortunately, we no longer are compelled to explain the difference between sexual activity and intimacy. For many years my wife and I would show up at conferences to speak on the topic of intimacy. The assumption, evidenced in the introductory comments themselves (as well as the nervous laughter of the participants), was that we were about to embark on Sexuality 101. For clarity regarding the

differences I would remind the reader that sexual activity may occur with or without a partner and, if we follow the predominant theme of our current culture, may be no more than a bodily function in the presence of another.

Parenthetically, there are at least two miracles occurring among partners in a sexually intimate experience. One is the miracle and wonder of the body as it functions sexually. The other is the miracle and wonder experienced in the vulnerability of sexual togetherness. In the former it is possible to experience a kind of self-intimacy; in the latter, a celebration of mutual intimacy.

Obviously, sex occurs in all species or they would cease to exist. Whether or not intimacy takes place in the presence of sex among other species I will leave for another to explore. Since I suspect all of God's creatures to be more alike than different, it would not surprise me to discover that humans have no corner on the intimacy market. Nevertheless, a casual observer of sexual behavior among humans on this planet will have no difficulty distinguishing between sexual behavior and couple intimacy. Notice that in our opening vignette no mention was made of sexual behavior on the part of the euphoric couple. Sex may have preceded or followed the picnic, but what they were celebrating was the relationship. Later I will address the significance of sexual knowledge and skill in an intimate relationship of marriage, but we must first grapple with the illusive nature of intimacy.

Intimate Experience vs. Intimate Relationship

One complication of this task is the necessity of separating our description of an intimate experience from an intimate relationship. Two people may at a time in history experience what they might glowingly describe as "intimate," a moment when they were emotionally and spiritually connected. But, it would not qualify as an intimate relationship. Herein lies the tragedy of an extramarital affair, whether it be sexual or "merely" emotional in nature. I have maintained throughout my career as a marriage and family therapist that the so-called "emotional" affair is far more damaging to a marriage than a sexual one. Sex, as important as it is, is merely a physical experience that is time limited. An intense emotional and romantic relationship with another outside of the marriage can be devastating to the marriage. There is a grief recovery period common in the giving up of such a relationship that greatly complicates marital reconciliation. And, far too often, the intoxicating effect of an intimate experience leads one to believe (a) that it is or can be an intimate relationship, or (b) that such is impossible within his/her own marriage.

Hope vs. Despair

Having survived the crises and tragedies as well as the romance and ecstasies of a 40-year marriage, and after investing 25 years in the profession of marriage-repair, I am convinced that most of the time an intimate relationship within marriage is possible, even when the couple is exhausted from their own attempts to find it. There is somehow inherent in the American psyche the notion that somewhere there is a perfect model of everything. Tragically, as we seek the perfect marriage, we see superficial indicators in other marriages that convince us that "they" have found it, but that we never will. There is a predisposition to attribute "their" success to the "right" choice of a partner, ours to the "wrong" choice. I am proposing the insane notion that our marriages are what we make them, what we create them to be. We remain under the "spell" of an expendable-oriented culture that trashes that which can be recycled. I am moved by the words in Carly Simon's recording, *The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of*, which encourages the disillusioned partner to stop comparing her spouse to some unrealistic model and "take another look" in her own backyard.

What if the prince on the horse in your fairytale
Is right here in disguise
And what if the stars you've been reaching so high for
Are shining in his eyes
Don't look at yourself in the same old way
Take another picture
Shoot the stars off in your own backyard
Don't look any further
And you will see
It's the stuff that dreams are made of . . .

Carly Simon "The Stuff that Dreams Are Made Of," in Carly Simon Coming
Around Again (Artista Records, Inc., 1987) used by permission

My own marriage partner and I express the need for intimacy in this way:

*Isn't it intriguing that what we seem to need most we fear the most? The greatest conflict in human relationships has to do with the need for and the fear of intimacy. In this approach-avoidance conflict, marriage offers our best chance for finding balance. Marriage provides the framework, the laboratory, in which we can safely seek closeness while owning our real fears of intimacy.*⁵

Self-Intimacy vs. Other-Intimacy

A second complexity to any inquiry about intimacy has to do with dependency vs. intimacy. Is it really intimacy when one is *dependent* on another's validation? When a partner's sense of wholeness is dependent on a spouse's saying so? Or, when a partner's feelings of completeness await other-affirmation? If you believe in the "continuum" view (described above) it may be the early development of intimacy, when here and there, in rare moments, partners feel close. However, it is but a shadow of the real thing. Unless one experiences self-intimacy there is no chance of knowing intimacy with another.

It is my strong belief that this higher level of intimacy comes as a couple forges its way through the crises, tragedies and losses of life together. In truly "being with" your partner, allowing her to know your fears, your dreams (especially the ones you will likely never realize), you are growing with each self-revelation (developing "emotional muscles") whether or not she affirms you, your fears, or your dreams. It is in the risk of self-disclosure that self-intimacy grows, not in her affirmation. Yet, when the experience is reciprocal, and at the same level of disclosure, couple-intimacy flourishes. I believe that in the commitment of marriage we have the best opportunity to experience self-intimacy and other-intimacy. As intimacy grows on the continuum it is more likely that a marriage partner will, in time, either risk conflict or affirmation of his/her partner. Either one is productive when the recipient already has a healthy respect for himself/herself. And, as we all know, true friendships have painfully honest moments, from which a deeper friendship emerges.

In the words of T.P. and P.T. Malone, "When I am close, I know you; when I am intimate, I know myself. When I am close, I know you in your presence; when I am intimate I know myself in your presence. Intimacy is a remarkable experience."⁶ An old Jewish proverb has remained embedded in my memory, although I do not know its source: "If I am I because you are you, and you are you because I am I, then I am not and you are not. If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am and you are."

Psychologically speaking, one's sense of self has best been evaluated in terms of connecting, mastering and valuing: how connected one is to self and others, how much in control one is of his/her life

and destiny, and what value is placed on self and others.⁷ It is easy to see how interwoven is our self-concept with our others-concept. As a matter of fact, some researchers identify three systems levels in marital intimacy: dyadic, individual and social. The dyadic level deals with the affective, cognitive, and behavioral interdependence between the marriage partners as revealed in their emotional closeness, validation of each others' ideas and values, and the consensus they share on the rules governing their interactions.

At the individual level intimacy is dependent on the *capacity* of each partner to be authentic, open, and ready to share ideas and emotions. On the social level marital intimacy is reflected in the use of the term "us" as defining the couple's exclusivity, with some notion of commitment in the relationship.⁸

Intimacy is so much more than mutual validation. In emotionally dependent relationships I believe we are describing a developmental stage of intimacy, an immature one at best that will fail unless growth results. Admittedly, that growth is unlikely when a partner is continuously meeting these needs for affirmation. Some level of pain and conflict must occur to move the relationship to a more mature level of intimacy. As referenced earlier, intimate moments may be experienced, but a truly intimate relationship does not yet exist.

The vast majority of couples getting married for the first time have no idea how many unconscious factors are at work in mate selection. For most couples it is after the honeymoon stage, after romantic feelings fade and the business of making the relationship work in the presence of conflict begins—when grief over loss of an ideal surfaces—that intimacy has its best chance.

Somewhere on the journey towards success marriage partners discover that the pain of emotional dependence for one's self worth is too high a price to pay for merely feeling whole. Here the journey inward begins and a sense of self-validation grows. At this juncture one is becoming whole with or without other-validation. The next level of growth is couple wholeness, when two individuals, not dependent on each other for self worth, begin to reciprocally affirm each other's wholeness. We recognize mature intimacy in the couple that *celebrates* diversity.

It is in this passage that one can risk sexual openness and honesty, acting out mutual self- and other-respect in sexual activity together. I'm not certain that there is only one pathway to this level of emotional and sexual intimacy. Much depends on each partner's individual developmental stage and specifically on each partner's differentiation from his/her family of origin. The biblical notion of a man leaving his father and mother and "cleaving" to his wife is not only gender neutral but foundational to an intimate marriage (Genesis 2:24, RSV). Otherwise, there will always be present in the relationship a "third" party or parties, formidable barriers to an intimate relationship.

It is more than idealistic to imagine marriages beginning with two mature adults, regardless of age. If nothing else, the romantic euphoria identified with "falling in love" prevents a rational assessment of the potential success of the marriage. Professional pre-marital assessment and counseling has proven to greatly improve the chances, however.⁹

My point is that reality prevails. We meet, fall in love, marry, and find out that somebody sold us a myth: but if we truly love each other, love will overcome all obstacles. In reality, emotions (accompanied by biochemistry) inhibit our judgment. We marry based on these feelings and must find our way without a map to the Camelot of marital bliss.

Intimacy vs. Isolation

Many researchers have concluded, based on studies of mental illness, that intimacy plays an important role in a person's physical, emotional, and psychological health. A number of studies have found a link between the absence of an intimate relationship and problems such as loneliness, physical illness, depression, psychosomatic illness, sexual abuse, and unsurprisingly, marital dissatisfaction.¹⁰ at the simplest level of observation it is no surprise that the cruelest form of punishment in any society is solitary confinement. Human beings not only need feedback to remain sane; we need emotional connectedness to remain human.

In 1987 Harvard researchers found that “trusting and loving relationships produce higher levels of immunoglobulins in the body’s secretions and ultimately better health.” Using the 1977 Vallant study of Harvard students, McAdams found that high intimacy motivation at age thirty was positively and significantly related to overall psychosocial adjustment at midlife. The opposite was true if the students had the need for power along with a high intimacy motivation. This resulted in depression, anxiety, and lower self-esteem. McAdams, in another study of 1,200 men and women in America, coast to coast, found a link between health/happiness and intimacy motivation.¹¹

Intimacy researchers Lauer and Lauer report, “Healthy, fulfilled people operate from a base of intimacy.”¹² They see intimacy as a fundamental need of human beings. They report on studies revealing that second-, fifth-, and eighth-graders, in rating the importance of companionship and experiences of intimate disclosure, indicate a desire for both companionship and intimacy.¹³ Lauer and Lauer also raise the question and answer, “But do intimate relationships have the expected payoff? Do they bring a satisfaction, a sense of fulfillment to our lives that nothing else can? The answer is yes.”¹⁴ They provide a plethora of studies documenting the importance of intimacy in childhood, adolescence and adulthood.¹⁵ In addition, they report that just as loneliness tends to generate a downward self-sustaining cycle, intimacy creates the opposite effect.¹⁶ These researchers believe that intimate relationships create special behaviors, attitudes and feelings that maintain and increase the sense of intimacy. They add a warning, however, that feelings of intimacy are not the same as an intimate relationship—that a relationship may be intimate without always feeling so.¹⁷

The Myth vs. the Crucible

It is an understatement to say that popular magazines and self-help books, including our own, have oversimplified intimacy and its connection with sexual fulfillment. We are encouraged if not required in such publications to condense, simplify, and target grade school level readers who reportedly purchase these products. A slow walk past the magazine racks at the supermarket will provide an education in marketing research. Sexual fulfillment, sexual behavior, and sexual appeal dominate the featured articles on the covers. The human sexuality sections of our bookstores have enjoyed an explosion of growth in recent years. A variety of “sexperts” daily serve up a wide offering of topics on radio and television. Some are almost as laughable as their credentials. Yet, there is an issue that must not be lost in this barrage of explicit exposure and confusing counsel: What is behind the hunger? What drives American consumers to spend millions annually on the search for so-called sexual happiness?

I believe there is a yearning for closeness common to human experience, and that it is feverishly fed by the “mythinformation” that sexual pleasure will fill this existential void and relationship fear within. The late Henri Nouwen expresses the core issue as loneliness:

*We become increasingly aware that we are living in a world where even the most intimate relationships have become part of competition and rivalry. Pornography seems one of the logical results. It is intimacy for sale. . . Loneliness is one of the most universal sources of human suffering today.*¹⁸

As we approach each passage of life we experience appropriate anxiety, which is mediated (hopefully, not medicated) by the development of survival skills. These coping skills then become the emotional muscles we use to overcome the obstacles we experience as we travel to and through the next passage. By anesthetizing the anxiety with pleasure sensations (sex, alcohol, prescription or non-prescription drugs, food, etc.), we rob ourselves of the necessary mediating skills for life. Anxiety ought to be our friend, since it offers both the energy and opportunity to grow. But there remains in our culture a myth that sex is the cure. And, as such, sex is asked to carry too great a load. Consequently, it fails again and again, often resulting in sexual addiction, sexual dysfunction, or both.

In his landmark work, *Constructing the Sexual Crucible*, David Schnarch describes two meanings of the word “crucible.” The first is derived from an industrial term applied to chemistry and metallurgy, which refers to a nonreactive vessel in which a reaction occurs. The crucible contains the chemical

reaction and thereby contributes to its reformation. He defines the sexual crucible as “an approach to sexual-marital therapy in which the therapist and the therapeutic alliance function as the nonreactive container for patients’ transformation.”¹⁹

The second meaning, and the one relevant to this discussion, is described as “a severe test or hard trial.” He compares it to the crucifixion of Christ, portraying Christ’s own “fear of abandonment” and his “unbearable pain.” Schnarch continues, “People often feel their partner is out to crucify them, that the marriage is a trial designed to test their breaking point, and that the decisions they face are absolutely untenable, overwhelmingly anxiety-producing, and excruciating.”²⁰ While he believes it accurately represents a transition from one level of intimacy to another in his theoretical construct, I find it entirely fitting here in describing what I believe is required to attain mature marital intimacy.

It is a cultural hoax of sinful proportions to lead young adults to believe sex is a key, much less *the* key to marital intimacy. I would snicker were it not so tragic when I hear a couple describing their plan to cohabit prior to marriage so that they will *know* if they are compatible. According to *The National Marriage Project* at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, “Cohabiting couples report lower levels of happiness, lower levels of sexual exclusivity and sexual satisfaction, and poorer relationships with their parents.”²¹ The report concludes:

*Despite its widespread acceptance by the young, the remarkable growth of unmarried cohabitation in recent years does not appear to be in the children’s or the society’s best interest. The evidence suggests that it has weakened marriage and the intact, two-parent family and thereby damaged our social wellbeing, especially that of women and children.*²²

The crucible metaphor well describes the reality of pain common to all intimate relationships. From my experience with couples in marriage and sex therapy over many years, I indeed ascribe to the athlete’s motto, “No pain, no gain.” It is in the pain that we discover our true impact on our partner. It is in the pain that we learn to express ourselves honestly to each other. It is in the pain that we learn to see the value of our differences. It is in the pain that we discover our capacity for breadth and depth. The crucible of marital intimacy includes a capacity for stretching oneself beyond pain to gain.

Robert Sternberg believes that love itself has three distinct components: (1) passion, (2) intimacy, and (3) commitment. He reports that passion generally is highest early in the relationship while emotional intimacy is not high. For the relationship to develop, intimacy must grow with trust, openness, and acceptance of each other’s shortcomings. With the growth of intimacy commitment develops. Sternberg believes that when we add commitment to the passion and intimacy the result is consummate love.²³

The “Inti-Mate” Marriage

Several years ago my partner in marriage *and* marriage enrichment and I began using the term “Inti-Mates” to refer to those married couples who seem to embody the ingredients of an emotionally and sexually intimate relationship. We uncovered eight ingredients we believe are necessary for emotional and sexual intimacy and find that our discoveries have much in common with those of leading researchers in the field.

1. Healthy Self-esteem

Why is self-esteem so critical to intimacy in marriage? Unfortunately, we tend to unconsciously select a partner for how he or she makes us feel. We choose someone to fill the esteem gap left over from childhood. In time, this unconscious demand leaves both partners angry, empty and fearful that we have made the wrong choice. Self-esteem allows one to live with confidence, with energy. With a healthy sense of appreciation of who we are, we have something to *give*.

The Journey of Self-esteem

1. Self-esteem begins with accepting God's valuing of you.
2. Self-esteem grows with acceptance of a significant other's valuing of you.
3. Self-esteem matures with acceptance of your own uniqueness.
4. Self-esteem deepens when you act on your belief in yourself.
5. Self-esteem enriches others as you live it out daily.²⁴

2. *Commitment to Marriage*

Because we are likely to be attracted to someone with opposite personality characteristics, we can be certain that, once the surface feelings have subsided and the hard work of building a marriage begins, conflict will occur. Any growing marriage will require a level of investment in not only the idea of marriage, but also, the marriage itself. In whatever ways partners learn to cope with these challenges, one thing is certain: both must value marriage. Both must be willing to sacrifice personally a great deal in order for the marriage to reach the Inti-Mate level of intimacy. Waring describes commitment in terms of "cohesion," the high valuing of marriage and the feeling of a strong sense of commitment to the marriage.²⁵ Referencing other researchers, Sternberg reports:

*Commitment grows through a series of day-to-day decisions to spend time together, care for each other, share possessions, and overcome problems even when that involves some personal sacrifice. Devotion and mutual dependence are among the dominant traits of commitment.*²⁶

3. *Trust*

Some people trust too easily, too quickly, and make themselves too vulnerable. Some people are disabled by abuse from their childhood or from someone in their recent past, and understandably exclaim, "I'll never trust again!" The consequences of either extreme are costly. The greatest risk of all is not to risk. An intimate relationship is the ultimate risk. Unless it frightens you it is not a risk. Trust is both *earned* and *learned*. It is *earned* as each partner exhibits trustworthiness. It is *learned* as each continues to risk disclosure and their trust is validated. Again, Sternberg places importance on a high level of trust, and the willingness to risk misunderstanding, rejection, and pain.²⁷

4. *Time Together*

How we spend our time is too often determined by decisions we never realize we make. These unconscious choices, frequently resulting from our need to succeed, or our need to please the wrong people, must become conscious. We must recapture our capacity to play together, to laugh at ourselves, to do "nothing" well together. Marriage is the only endeavor we seem to believe will succeed without a serious investment of time.

While it would seem obvious that the other ingredients require that a couple spend time together, time alone does not lead automatically to intimacy. However, the other components can never be realized without one on one protected time. Referring to the work of Wallerstein and Blakeslee in 1995, Sternberg and Barnes report that the journey of intimacy may take months, even years, to reach, no matter how intense the passion or how frequent the sexual activity early in the marriage.²⁸

5. *Listening and Talking Well*

Much of the pain in a troubled marriage results from messages sent, but never received, or messages received that were never sent. Some miscommunication is the result of the differences in maleness and femaleness. Add to this personality differences and those significant differences resulting from our families of origin, and you have to wonder how, occasionally, we get home from the store with the right brand of bread. Healthy communication between marriage partners is a learned skill which anyone can learn when they are committed to the idea of an Inti-Mate Marriage.

Among the eight components of intimacy identified by Waring and Patton, at least three relate strongly to healthy communication: (a) Conflict resolution—the ease with which differences of opinion are resolved; (b) Affection—the degree to which feelings of emotional closeness are expressed by the couple; (c) Expressiveness—the degree to which thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings are shared within the marriage.²⁹

6. The 3 A's of Emotional Intimacy

“If you agree on everything you could do without one of you!” a wise marriage counselor once said. Our differences assure conflict, which I believe is normal and necessary in an Inti-Mate Marriage. But, how can intimacy survive such stress? In *Celebrating Sex in Your Marriage*, Sandra, my partner in marriage, and I discuss what we have found to be the answer to this question.

- **Acceptance** has to do with learning to see the frequently frustrating and irritating characteristics of your spouse for what, in a positive sense, they bring to your marriage and family.
- **Appreciation** assigns *value* to these features, recognizing that *every* characteristic of a personality is, in some setting, an asset.
- **Affirmation** is an active behavior, like a verbal compliment, which praises or reinforces the positive aspects of your partner's formerly agitating characteristic.

Sternberg and Barnes, referencing Hatfield's 1988 study, lend support to both acceptance and good communication skills:

*... a good, lasting partnership depends on a high level of trust, openness, and acceptance of the other's limitations that enables "honest, graceful, complete, and patient communication" without anger or guilt.*³⁰

7. *Sexual Knowledge and Skill*

“Mythinformation” is what Sandra and I call sexual knowledge which “everyone” knows is true, but isn't. Americans, for all of our openness regarding sex, tend to fail most sex education tests. Each semester I administer a test on basic sexual facts to my psychology students. Even among our brightest undergraduates, exposed to more sexual information than any previous generation, the results are not reassuring.

Any survey of the amount of dollars invested in weddings, versus the pre-wedding dollars invested in *marriages* will reveal a grossly distorted perspective of the need for serious premarital counseling. My clinical experience reveals that even among couples sexually active prior to marriage there remains an alarming ignorance of opposite gender sexual interest and responsivity.

Under the component of “sexuality” Waring and Patton indicate that the degree to which sexual needs are communicated and fulfilled within the marriage plays an important role in determining intimacy.³¹ Olson and DeFrain, in their 1999 study found that “a major strength for a happy married couple is the quality and quantity of their sexual relationship.”³² Among happy couples in their study of 80% reported being satisfied with the amount of affection they received from their partner, and 68% agreed that their sexual relationship is satisfying and fulfilling.³³ Reviewing the 1994 University of Chicago survey, considered by sexologists as the most extensive ever conducted, Olson and DeFrain report that, when compared to single people, married couples have more sex and are more orgasmic when they do. Furthermore, the survey revealed that nearly 40% of the married couples reported having had sex twice a week, as compared to 25% of the singles.³⁴

8. Spiritual Intimacy

For many years psychologists and psychiatrists avoided discussing religious beliefs in therapy, believing it to be a minefield of psychological issues. Today it is common for mental health professionals to work with couples to integrate their faith with other issues in therapy. The *Timberlawn Update* recently reported that scientists have found a positive correlation between strong faith and increased life expectancy, lower rates of cardiac disease (and other life threatening diseases), increased self-esteem, social support and lower suicide rates.³⁵

The 1995 “Summit on Spirituality” described our spiritual tendency as moving us “towards knowledge, love, meaning, hope, transcendence, connectedness, and compassion. Spirituality includes one’s capacity for creativity, growth, and the development of a values system. Spirituality encompasses the religious, spiritual, and transpersonal.”³⁶ While our concept of spirituality may be more narrowly defined in terms of an intimate relationship with God, we cannot deny that such a redemptive and growing relationship will transcend every dimension of our lives, and thereby profoundly affect the level of intimacy we experience in our marriages.

In the Sinnetts’ and the DeFrains’ research on healthy families we find support for religious and spiritual values important to family strength.³⁷ We believe that spiritual growth is as important to a person’s psychological health as diet and exercise is to one’s physical health. In fact, we do not believe you can separate physical, psychological and spiritual health.

Conclusion

Always pay attention to those things in life that truly defy definition. What does it say about a concept that it requires volumes to approximate a definition? When we describe a brain cell as having over a million pages of programmed instruction; when we learn that the possible number of connections between these cells, in one single brain, if represented by the thickness of one sheet of paper, would create a stack of paper reaching the outer limits of our solar system; do we then comprehend what a thought is? What does it tell us that the concept of an intimate relationship cannot be limited to spoken or written words? We can know it only by the presence or absence of it, but we fall far short of defining or even describing it adequately. It smacks of something far greater than our capacity to describe it. It bears the handiwork of Creator.

It comes as no surprise that whenever intimacy exists in a marriage sex is more of a celebration of the relationship. When it does not, sex will remain sex. I find that the most important ingredient in the treatment of sexual dysfunction lies in the search for intimacy. Intimacy with one’s self, intimacy with one’s Creator, intimacy with one’s spouse. It is important to see intimacy as a journey, not a destination. The search is the important thing. It will always remain just out of our grasp, for the stretching of one’s self is indeed the point of it all.

And then, God created intimacy;
So deep no one could fathom it
So broad no soul could span it
So high no wings could ascend it
So heavy no heart could bear it.
And then, God created intimacy.
That we might know the joy and pain of loving
In the journey toward another.

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Finally, intimacy is not dependent on the absence of tragedy.

*We discovered that the crises of life do not have the capacity to destroy our friendship unless we give them that power. In every tragedy lies the potential, not merely for growth, but life-giving strength to survive the next crisis around the bend. If you live long enough, if you are married long enough, you will face tragedy. Loss is a part of living, not an alien to life. If you know that bad things happen, then the issue is not “if” but “whenever” they happen how will you respond? You cannot have mountains without valleys, rivers without banks, beginnings without ends, successes without failures. We choose our responses to the events of life, and our choices determine the outcome, not the events.*³⁸

In each of our marriage enrichment events we close with a candlelight ceremony and the renewal of our marriage vows. Each partner faces his/her spouse, repeating words that incorporate the eight ingredients of an Inti-Mate marriage. The “Celebrating Marriage Vows” are included here with the hope that the reader may one day find herself/himself experiencing the euphoric dance of intimacy on a countryside picnic, undaunted by those of us cataloguing your every move. Some of us will never cease trying to understand intimacy.

I celebrate this special moment with you in the presence of God in whose image we are made. I recommit myself to you and our marriage. I value your trust and will work to strengthen it. I commit myself to time with you, to listen, to share, to trust you with my deepest thoughts. I will work at accepting, appreciating and affirming those things that you bring to our marriage. I commit myself to hearing your needs, and growing with you spiritually, emotionally and sexually. I choose you again and ask for your prayers that God will enable me to be the best partner I can be.

Dan and Sandra McGee, “Celebrating Marriage” in *Inti-Mates: A Resource for Intimate Marriages*, pp. 1, 4

I would like to express appreciation to my graduate assistant, Shannon Caldwell, M.A. This project would not have been possible without her.

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This article was published in *Review & Expositor*, *SAGE Journals*, Vol. 98, No. 2, May 2001, pages 191-206.
<http://rae.sagepub.com/content/98/2.toc>

About the Author*

At the time of this writing Dr. McGee held the position of Associate Professor of Psychology, Director of the Graduate Program in Family Psychology, Hardin-Simmons University. He was the issue editor of this issue, "Sexuality and the Church," when he submitted the above article for publication. At the time of publication in *Review & Expositor* he held the position of Director of Counseling & Psychological Services with the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT) where he supervised psychological services for over a decade, first as director and later as an independent contractor. His work there included psychological assessment of ministry students in nine universities and two seminaries. Dr. McGee assisted in the creation of the Center for Christian Leadership at BGCT and served as its coordinator of leader research and product development.

McGee is a licensed marriage and family therapist, has been certified as a sex therapist by two national accrediting associations, is board certified in clinical sexology and was named Founding Clinical Fellow of the American Academy of Clinical Sexologists. A graduate of Baylor University, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Texas Woman's University (Ph.D.) with additional graduate work at the University of Texas at Arlington he has served as an adjunct professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University.

In his retirement he works as an independent contractor at the Center for Counseling & Enrichment, a ministry of the First Baptist Church, Arlington, Texas. As CEO of Dan McGee Associates, Inc. he provides consulting and leadership assessment services to churches and non-profit organizations and provides certification for stress management consultants. He and his wife, Sandra, a Certified Family Life Educator, co-authored the book *Celebrating Sex in Your Marriage*.

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www.drданmcgee.com info@drданmcgee.com

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