

Long-Term Love

By Julie Hanus

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'Divorce,' I remember repeating dully, after my mother told me my uncle was separating from the woman I always had known as aunt. Silence separated us as I stumbled toward a meaning. 'You mean they're not going to live together anymore?'

I should have known better. I am, after all, the child of a second marriage. My older half brother should have been proof that not all relationships last forever. But my uncle and aunt were a ritual presence in my childhood. My birthday meant a trip with them to the city; holidays, a picturesque meal piled on their dining room table. Each summer brought a picnic on their rural Wisconsin farm. (Even a visit to their bathroom was a ceremonial occasion, when I inspected the circle of shaving soap, a curiosity to a kid accustomed to the hum of electric razors.) These undisturbed and familiar patterns left little space to imagine anything would ever change.

The easy explanation for my surprise is to say I was a kid. I could have elaborated naively on 'love,' or 'getting married,' but was oblivious to the guts of a long-term relationship. (Mattel makes neither a Golden Anniversary Ken, nor a Trial Separation Barbie.) My uncle's divorce was the first I had ever known, and I had years to live before I would begin to understand the complex, everyday arrangements of friends and family (to say nothing of my own) as they got together, stayed together, and sometimes split apart.

But even as we age, and complexities become commonplace, the language of happy-ever-after seems to linger. Last time I checked a popular website, where users

declare their goals, more than 4,000 Net-savvy souls have signed up 'to fall in love.' More than 3,000 want 'to get married.' Only 32 aim 'to have a long-term relationship.' And only a few exacting users have vowed 'to fall in love with someone who will always love me back.'

The distinction is surely semantic; the terms love and marriage imply, even assume, a long-term relationship. Yet 'true love always' clearly beats 'long term' in the cachet department, and these trends in diction also reflect our broader cultural conversations.

To prove the point, spend a couple weeks in Utne's library of more than 1,200 magazine titles. Try to find a how-to, or a why-at-all, story on what makes a long-term relationship work -- an honest description of the struggles, the joys, the petty betrayals, the everyday triumphs of making a relationship last. I tried, and I came up nearly empty-handed.

Instead, there are commentaries on the government's involvement in legal recognition of relationships, treatises suggesting monogamy is pass?, endless stories about falling in and out of love. These all are important conversations, and they serve as a sounding board for the political and cultural obsessions of the day. And yet . . . the implied long-term relationship underlies it all, in every hope-for and loss-of.

The long-term relationship requires the marathon treatment -- training, commitment, and strategy -- but fascination hovers with the beginning and the end. (Imagine if we clamored to ask 'Who ran well in the middle, up that mild grade, and around the city hall?' and not 'Who won, and who sprang quickly from the gate?')

Maybe some couples share a fated, seamless union and coast with grace from one stage of partnership to the next. But most of us struggle, triumph, and struggle again. We make mistakes and corrections, require constant revision. And it seems, as a whole, we are silent participants; our hard work remains unspoken. What would it mean to speak honestly about the difficulties of the long haul? It might drain the romance from our stories, but it could also expand our abilities to imagine, negotiate, and tend our relationships as they truly are.

Shared wisdom could make us happier in our relationships, too. One recent study of long-term relationships, reported in *Science and Theology News* (Dec. 2005), suggests that knowledge is bliss: Couples who reported taking time to negotiate, plan, and execute actions to better their relationships also reported the highest levels of satisfaction.

Who are these highly developed people, I wonder, and why am I so often flying by the seat of my pants? After his divorce, my uncle gave me one scrap of insight, which I have repeated as I blundered through my own somewhat-sacred unions and messy-if-happy arrangements. What he said was this: We are capable of loving more than one person in a lifetime.

Several years ago, I sat alone in a bathtub, all pruned up in long-gone-lukewarm water, and found that I had forgiven a lover for cheating. If it had been a decision, I might have chosen differently. Instead, it was the cold, boring truth, the only thing left when my grudge circled the drain. I don't regret my actions: choosing to stay, to keep trying. I do regret feeling so terrifically alone, and oddly guilty. I was convinced no one would understand, no one would respect the way I felt.

Perhaps I was unreasonable in my embarrassment, conceited to imagine no one would understand. The fact is that all of us who are involved in long-term relationships, whether we're at the beginning, midway, or end, have something in common. Keeping quiet about our failures and successes ensures that we'll repeat each other's mistakes. And celebrate our victories alone.

What prevents us from making these conversations an everyday part of our lives? Cultural taboo? Linguistic difficulties? Ancient Sanskrit and Persian languages, writes Daniel Pinchbeck in *Arthur* magazine (Sept. 2005), have more than 80 words that we translate in English only as 'love.' We may be strangled by verbal paucity. We might lack an easy way to explain a person who is our sometime-partner, sometime-friend, sometime-lover, but there must be ways to talk about such an improbable yet unflinchingly attractive venture.

A little over a year ago, I sat once again at my uncle's dining room table. Every inch of it was crowded with traditional Thanksgiving fare, and around it were gathered people who were more or less family. Stepchildren passed plates to grandchildren; ex-wives sat alongside new partners. Not everyone was there, but no one would have been unwelcome. It was a scene I could not have imagined as a child nor predicted as an adult. But the memory buoy me.

I don't know much more now about what it takes to make a long-term relationship hum and purr -- or if a smoothly functioning machine should even be a goal. But I am committed to trying to find out. I figure talking about it is a decent first step.



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