

The Art of Intimacy:
An Inquiry into Sustaining Vibrant, Intimate, Romantic Relationship
As a Pathway to
Contributing to the Cultural Evolution of Integral Consciousness

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ABSTRACT

The impetus for improving personal romantic relationships has been gaining momentum in modern times concurrent with the breakdown of the sustainability of long-term marriage. In this paper I look at the connection between the advancement of relationship skills and the evolution of cultural values. I provide an overview of how the movement toward gender equality has a significant influence on the development of sustainable vibrant marriage, and how the evolution of human consciousness has contributed to this movement. I explore conversations around intimacy, emotional intelligence, feminine and masculine aspects of being, and the changes in attitudes necessary for a new worldview to emerge wherein the prospect of sustaining vibrant romantic relationship becomes more prevalent. This paper describes the emerging values of a new social order, one that moves beyond a domination style of relationship and toward a respectful partnership approach to relationship. I summarize how this could be a most desirable and beneficial cultural model.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my children Coral, Autumn, and Jody, in the hope that it will reveal more to them about the meaningful possibility of a happy romantic relationship.

I wish to acknowledge my deep love, gratitude and respect for my husband Tom and all the support he has given me to pursue my passions.

Thank you to my mentors at the Graduate Institute for Transformative Learning for all their wise instruction and guidance during my Master's journey. It has been a deeply enriching and engaging experience.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

This inquiry is about exploring the ways in which couples create successful long-term marriages and how this is related to the unfolding and development of social values and norms. My question is: In what ways do couples sustain a Vibrant Intimate Romantic Relationship, and how does this accomplishment contribute to the betterment of the world, and in particular, how does it advance the cultural evolution of human consciousness towards Integral Consciousness?

In researching my thesis question I will address the basic tenets of a successful marriage, including maintaining one's own autonomy while making a long-term commitment, learning to communicate intimately, dealing effectively with conflict, sharing affection and pleasure, and building meaningful connection. My journey also looks beyond these opportunities and challenges to the deeper and more expansive pursuits of experiencing regular vibrant passionate sexuality, integrating a sense of oneness within the relationship, and developing a sustained Heart-centered Connection with each other.

I am particularly interested in how the accomplishment of a successful romantic relationship is supported by societal values and how it in turn influences the development of new cultural attitudes. I look at how the creation of a strong marriage may well hinge on the balance between feminine and masculine influences, both individually and in a partnership, and how this contributes to the evolution of Integral Consciousness in the world. Finally, I am curious about whether the more feminine partner in a marriage might be more of the driver of the marriage in terms of guiding and supporting and inspiring it to become more emotionally intimate and connected. This honouring of the feminine contribution may translate into living in a more enduring holistic relationship, and contributing to the betterment of the world. These questions are profoundly meaningful to me.

In Company

*Without the confidence of knowing that anything I say
Could ever be relevant to another's life,
Could ever hold sway over the forces
Of a more persistent story
Still I speak, still I write, still I converse
For I know that as my voice interacts with yours
There are tiny imperceptible changes
Becoming whispers
Heard as uplifting song
Begetting dancing footsteps (Do you feel them?)
Moving us toward the heart of what is truly important
Transformation happens in company*

In this written record of my work, I am choosing to present my poetry and prose-poetry within the main body of the text. This is my way of encouraging an emotionally centered reading of the paper as a whole, since the subject matter is so closely linked with heart matters. The poetry is a rendering of my inner self through arts based inquiry. I've learned through experience that the art of writing and the process of creativity allow me to bring Logos, (sensing, thinking, rational mind) and Mythos, (intuition, experience, feeling) into my process of knowing.

At the outset I would like to clarify that my use of the words 'feminine' and 'masculine' throughout this thesis are not meant to signify 'female' and 'male'. My use of the word 'feminine' is in reference to what I see as the 'authentic' or 'true' feminine qualities of: nurturance, creativity, process-orientation, and cyclical nature. It may show up as a tendency towards interest in relationships, caregiving, intuitive perspective, willingness to be vulnerable, diffuse-focus, self-introspection, and home centeredness. It is unlike the stereotypical version of society, which would include such qualities as weak, unfocused, incapable of logical and higher thinking, unworthy. When I use the word 'masculine' I am referring to my sense of 'authentic' or

‘true’ masculine qualities such as: supportive, active, goal-orientated, and linear in nature. It may present as a leaning towards taking responsibility, logical perspective, willingness to provide and be protective, one-pointedness, outward-focused and productivity centered. It is not limited to the traditional view of masculinity as being violent, unwholesomely competitive, domineering, aggressive, warlike and incapable of heart-centeredness.

I recognize that there are many other qualities that could describe true authentic masculinity and femininity, and also that there are no fixed definitions. For the purposes of this paper it is most important to make the distinction that I’m not referring to a woman or a man, as these qualities may exist in all beings. The feminine and the masculine are aspects of natural phenomenon, and they are used to describe a duality of forces that are perceived to be at play in all of nature, including in human beings. Cultures throughout history, all over the world, have recognized these aspects of reality and used different words to express them, for now it’s important that we not limit their meaning to a gender binary.

We don’t have many accessible historical roadmaps to assist us on our relationship venture because the world is changing quickly and the old social orders are not necessarily applicable anymore. It is a relatively new phenomenon that men and women have equality, and are experiencing autonomy within the context of a marriage. This is changing the relational dynamics that reverberate in multifaceted ways throughout society. Women are increasingly finding the support and freedom to honour and step more deeply into their true femininity, while also engaging with their innate true masculinity. They are more often expressing confidence and empowerment in expanding their social, artistic, professional, and relationship roles within their various cultures. Likewise, a shift is occurring for men. More men are approaching an expression of an authentic masculinity, which values and embraces a more feminine influence as well. They

are taking on more parenting, family-centered, and caregiving roles in society. Balance is being sought and respected on an individual and cultural level. Meanwhile, many societies are now recognizing and validating the existence of a broader gender spectrum and this is encouraging people to demonstrate increasingly authentic ways of giving voice to their unique gender biology, identity and expression. With these changes, we are learning modern ways to relate to this diversity, carving out new territory within the complex world of today.

Having lived primarily in a patriarchal culture for thousands of years, most of humanity sorely needs an injection of authentic feminine values, while concurrently re-thinking the experience of masculine values. It is my hunch that an embrace of true feminine values will encourage the emergence of true masculine values and create a more emotionally intelligent and evolved consciousness and culture; one that lives within the new worldview of Integral Consciousness wherein sustaining vibrant relationships will be a more present possibility. Mirra Alfassa, founder of the international community of Auroville, India, gave this message at the World Conference of the Sri Aurobindo Society in 1964;

“The only hope for the future is in a change of ... consciousness... But it is left to (humans) to decide if they will collaborate for this change or if it will have to be enforced upon them by the power of crashing circumstances.” (Hindochoa, 2002)

We all have a separation inside. We have a subconscious memory of a time in the womb when we knew unity, oneness with another being, perhaps even an experience of belonging and connection with all beingness. We have only found that union fleetingly, if at all, since then. A primary human need is to belong. We ache, almost unknowingly, for that experience. Love and life bring us into proximity with it, yet it is transient, temporary, or ever unreachable. Some seek it by striving for an expanded consciousness, one that includes an experience of oneness and

interconnection, through spiritual practices, music, dance, creative and performing arts, sports, adventure, or the use of consciousness altering substances. Others search for it in giving to community, or within family, friendships and romantic relationships.

Wombness

*Where I came from
I knew not certainty
For there was no concept
Of what was or could be*

*Nor did I engage in seeking
Yet my life was full of exploration
What others may call curiosity
For me, was simply developing capacity*

*From where I came from
Belonging was my existence
And unity was the water
Within which I was held*

For those of us who become parents, and are forward thinking, we try to bestow this sense of unity, of belonging, upon our children. From there, we believe they'll have the support they need to be successful in life. There is a general sense that we want the next generation to achieve a higher level of knowledge and intelligence than our own, including an increase in Emotional Intelligence. We wish to see them experience more intimacy and Heart-centered Connection in their relationships. We endeavour to share our best practices with them and encourage them to develop their own. It is our dream that they reach their potentials and gain meaning and purpose in their lives.

On a personal note, in the 1990s, I served for 10 years as a lay midwife and attended many home births in my small island community. I experienced that the natural birth movement

created a new frame of reference, which included the empowerment of women and the equality of feminine values. We wanted our babies to have their first experiences after birth to be part of a peaceful, secure and loving vision. Within this very feminine context, it was obvious to me that babies are born with a unique balance of femininity and masculinity, and I realized it is primarily the family and the culture that influences how children continue to develop and express this balance as they mature. It became obvious to me that the potential of all beings and cultures is well beyond the limited perspectives that have prevailed and that it is imperative to the health and welfare of society that we learn new ways to interact with young children. We are in the midst of a time when the concepts we've developed over thousands of years are being challenged and new ones are forming. The quality of the parents' relationship and their parenting practices will have a powerful impact in determining the direction we'll take.

During the course of my master's studies over the last three years I have experienced great change and development in my learning, and also in the application of the learning to my own life. Many profound revelations have come from being introduced to the concept of the evolution of consciousness. I've deepened my lived experience of Interbeing, and expanded my understanding and application of how femininity and masculinity are manifest in romantic partnership relationships. I feel more equipped to make meaning of my life and to live it with purpose in an increasingly meaningful way.

This study brings to light the possibility of the lived experience of balance individually and as a couple. To be successful in my own intimate relationship is the greatest achievement I am in the process of realizing in my life. It is a display of the inherent interconnection each of our lives has with other lives, and the expression of a sustained positive, heart-centered living within a primary partnership. It takes commitment, cooperation and compromise and it grows

compassion, courage and freedom, all elements that can contribute to the betterment of the world. It is the step I can take, within my own small life that will prove the current potential of our human social order.

A Choice From Within

*Can I embrace the present fully
As if each happening in my life
Is one that I've chosen?
Or will I succumb to some past habit or tendency
Bred of the story of separation
Nurtured on fear and doubt?*

*My tiny and frequent footsteps
Through the forest of all knowing
Manifest the grandness of the fir trees
The pathways through the territory of longing
The remembrance of a green and comforting reality.*

*I use this time to fuel wisdom
Penning the poem of my relationship
Diving deeply into the true utterance of my being
Expanding with another's touch
Co-creating our shared intimacy
Dropping the pretence of me.*

DEFINITION OF TERMS: To clarify terms specific to this thesis, I offer the following definitions:

Consciousness - “The state of being aware of and responsive to one's surroundings.” “The fact of awareness by the mind of itself and the world.” (Oxford Dictionary, 2018)

Emotional Intelligence - ‘The capacity to be aware of, control, and express one's emotions, and to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically’. (Oxford Dictionary, 2018)

Heart-centered Connection– I define this as a feeling or state of shared attraction, tenderness, and love.

Integral Consciousness - An evolved state of enlarged perspective that integrates other previously evolved states of consciousness, through a process called Spiral Dynamics, as written about by Integral Philosophy proponent Steve McIntosh (2007).

Integral Philosophy - Links together the work of Bergson, de Chardin, Habermas, Hegel, Gebser, Wilber and others in the field of cultural evolution (McIntosh, 2007).

Interbeing - Thich Nhat Hanh coined this word and used it in the title of his 1987 book “to describe our deep interconnection with everything else” (2017). Other scholars adopted it, including Charles Eisenstein, who uses it in reference to the interdependence and interconnection of all beings (2013).

Vibrant Intimate Romantic Relationship: - I define this as a committed relationship that is supportive of each partner’s autonomy and success in individual and shared interests. It includes regular affectionate heart-centred connection and passionate shared sexuality, as well as emotional intimacy, attentiveness to feelings and needs, and effective interpersonal communication. The partners exhibit acceptance, compassion, and support for each other and

there is a to growing respect for the unique balance of feminine and masculine expression and influence within the self and other.

This concludes my introduction. Next, I will review the literature sources that are most significant to my research inquiry into how couples sustain a vibrant relationship, and how this accomplishment contributes to the cultural evolution of human consciousness.

CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

Romantic relationships, and how they can be successful, has been widely explored and written about in psychology, sociology, and spiritual fields. The concept of the evolution of human consciousness has been pondered and written about using various terminology by scholars and philosophers, including authors who have developed a system naming Integral Consciousness as the current most advanced stage of human cultural evolution. I have drawn on a variety of resources from the fields of philosophy, developmental psychology, and systems science for my inquiry into these subjects. This literature review highlights some of the material that has been particularly inspiring to me as it relates to my thesis work.

Modern Relationships - Feminine and Masculine Influences

In the modern and developing world, the women's movement has fought for equality between men and women. This endeavour has caused positive advancements, but also created problems. John Gray, PhD, author of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, (1992) and *Beyond Mars and Venus* (2017) speaks to this. The struggle for equality has initiated somewhat of a lack of recognition and acceptance of the actual differences between females and males. He makes it very clear that if we want to improve our marriage relationships, it's important to understand what these differences are. Gray explains that in general, a woman values relationships, communication, beauty, spirituality, personal growth and expression. She defines herself through her feelings and the quality of her relationships. A man typically values competency, efficiency, power, success and accomplishment. He defines himself through his ability to achieve results (2017).

“What we need in our relationships to experience lasting fulfillment has dramatically changed. Both men and women require a new kind of emotional support that embraces

greater authenticity, intimacy, and personal expression. ... This change has created incredible new opportunities, both for relationships and individuals. People have the opportunity to be themselves in ways they never could before, and to embrace characteristics beyond those of their traditional gender roles, allowing for relationships of more profound intimacy than ever before.” (2017, p. xiv)

Alison Armstrong, in her books *Keys to the Kingdom* (2013a) and *The Queen’s Code*, (2013b) stresses a point similar to Gray’s, that men and women are not the same, that we have some inherent differences. It’s important for us to understand these if we want to bring out the best in each other in a relationship, and Armstrong leans towards a sentiment that women can lead the way to this greater understanding. She writes;

“There is a notion among people that we exercise free will all day long, with little acknowledgement that we are members of the animal kingdom. Just like every other species, we have ways of behaving that are not by individual choice at all, but rather, are characteristic of our species and done by instinct. I call this aspect of people ‘the human animal.’ There are also significant gender differences among most species. Besides human animal characteristics, we have specific male and female characteristics. In addition to understanding ourselves as humans, by understanding ourselves as male and female we can be more effective with each other.” (2013a, loc. 516) “If women changed how they understood men, and then by that understanding, how they interacted with men, they would be much more effective.” (2013a, loc. 543)

It is clear that it is usually women who stimulate a deeper intimacy within the romantic relationship by bringing forth many of the compassionate social and communication skills. This

is in line with John Gottman, PhD, author of *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide*, (2015), who maintains that the next most important evolution of social culture will be the increase in the emotional intelligence of men (2015, p. 123).

Gottman has researched thousands of couples in his 'Love Lab' for over three decades, to find out what makes marriages endure. He and his research associate can predict with over 90% accuracy which couples will stay together happily, or those who will divorce, after analysing their interactions (2015, p. 2). He speaks about the seven most important factors in maintaining a happy coupling, which include seeing your partner in a positive light, accepting influence from your partner, resolving conflict effectively, and creating shared meaning. Spurred on by his research, Gottman's wife Julie Schwartz-Gottman, PhD, developed the Gottman Institute in Seattle, Washington, to help train couples in how to maintain a happy marriage. Together they released a book, *Eight Dates*, (2019) which coaches partners on how to work with each other to improve their relationship. One of the main pieces of advice is that couples need to make time to have regular 'dates' with each other in order for their marriage to flourish (2019).

Esther Perel, PhD, a Belgian psychotherapist and expert on relationships, has a very similar perspective. Perel sees that even though there are different needs and varying ways to address issues, to be successful each couple must have the intention to do what is necessary to keep the marriage alive, and particularly regarding flourishing sexuality. In her book *Bonding in Captivity*, 2006, she makes mention of many different approaches to this end, but the message is the same, we must put attention and time into creating a rewarding coupling;

“Modern relationships are cauldrons of contradictory longings: safety and excitement, grounding and transcendence, the comfort of love and the heat of passion. We want it all, and we want it with one person. Reconciling the domestic and the erotic is a delicate

balancing act that we achieve intermittently at best. ...eroticism in the home requires active engagement and wilful intent. ...Nurturing eroticism in the home is an act of open defiance.” (2006, p. 242)

Emotional passion is something that Doug and Naomi Moseley, therapists and authors of *Feelings First*, believe is key to stoking the fires of sexual passion. They train couples to get in touch with their feelings and to express these emotions cleanly and passionately. They also stress the importance of learning how to listen to strong expressions of feeling so that each partner feels heard. They speak to the importance of making a commitment to monogamy within the relationship. Their work delves deeply into the familial and cultural factors that created the particular psychological make-up of each partner, and how the individuals can learn to access their feelings and passions to bring aliveness to the relationship. They write;

“When individuals and couples want to have more juice and passion in their lives, they have to learn more about their feelings. It's as simple as that and as complicated as that. Learning to locate, express and receive feelings is the foundation of our work and it's a very challenging skill to learn. It requires a determined effort at self-discovery. It requires a willingness to learn the language of feelings. It requires a readiness to risk personal vulnerability. It requires a desire to experience a more whole and balanced existence. The good news for those who persevere is that the rewards in relationship and family life are beyond measurement.” ([intimacytraining](#), 2013)

One of the largest surveys on couples and their relationship habits was recently published in book form. *The Normal Bar: The Surprising Secrets of Happy Couples and What They Reveal About Creating a New Normal in Your Relationship*, 2015, by Chrisanna Northrup, Pepper

Schwartz, PhD, and James Witte, PhD, gives us insight into marriages from all over the world. Amazon describes it this way: “ Based on data obtained from nearly 100,000 respondents, here is the ultimate resource for anyone who wants to learn the relationship-tested ways couples can achieve satisfaction and contentment in areas such as communication, sex, affection, and financial cooperation.”

The resources above have shed much light and learning on the area of sustaining vibrant and romantic relationship. I've continued to want more perspective on the feminine/masculine balance aspect of relationships, and how a new worldview, including gender equity, might contribute to more successful relationships. Therefore I've put the question into an historical context, seeking out further resources to this end.

Ancient Perspectives on the Feminine and Masculine

As far as romantic relationships are concerned in our modern culture, clearly a balance is being sought between masculine and feminine natures being understood and appreciated. This need for equality between men and women (gender) is rooted in our underlying values.

Since ancient times, humans have been fascinated by the concepts of masculine and feminine. Different civilizations have developed rich mythologies around these concepts as a way of organizing and making sense of their manifestation as expressed by both women and men. Vicki Noble discusses many of these cultural beliefs and influences in her book *Motherpeace, A Way to the Goddess through Myth, Art and Tarot*, 1983. She makes reference to the honouring of feminine and masculine principles among many wisdom traditions. She includes commentary on: the Indian Hindu archetypes Shiva and Shakti; the Chinese Taoist notion of Yin and Yang; the Sun, Moon and Earth worship traditions of the Pagans; the South American Pachamama prophecy of the Condor and Eagle people, and the pantheon of Goddesses

and Gods seen in Greek and Roman mythology. She clearly illustrates the broad exploration and expression of these dualistic concepts. She also describes Shaman traditions, some of which have been recognized in Asia, Africa, Australasia and the Americas. Interestingly, she states:

“Shamans are expected to become androgynous - balancing male and female elements within themselves.” (1983, p. 218)

The gender issue is currently undergoing an awakening involving discussions related to gender identity and gender expression, and how they are not necessarily linked to gender biology. It has become apparent that gender is not binary, but that there exists a wide gender spectrum and humans may abide anywhere along it, or even be gender fluid. This brings up a range of issues related to feminine and masculine balance, that are being explored and questioned on websites such as genderspectrum.org and by authors/speakers such as Dr. Michael Kimmel, Sam Killermann, and Dr. Margaret Nichols. It behooves us to acquaint ourselves with these emerging understandings if we are to broaden our minds to the possibilities of living up to our human potential in terms of our gender identity and roles in society.

Since the model of most human societies the world over has been a patriarchal system for thousands of years, the masculine, and masculine roles, have been the most powerful and have been recognized as dominant, and the feminine nature has been invalidated and disempowered. This has had an immense impact on how men and women relate to each other and what roles they assume within a marriage.

Modern scholar Riane Eisler, PhD, author of the ground-breaking book *The Chalice and The Blade, Our History, Our Future*, 1987, outlines this situation and maintains that it hasn't always been so. She asserts that all ancient societies, from which there is evidence of female deity worship, were peaceful societies (1987). She postulates that humans are not inherently

aggressive and warlike, but that those qualities have developed through cultural shifts over time. This is quite a revelatory statement as applied to men in particular, and a very significant one in terms of how we envision the future potential of humanity. Furthermore, she writes;

“This book is different in that it focuses on the implications of how we organize the relations between the two halves of humanity for the totality of a social system. ... how these relations are structured has decisive implications for the personal lives of both men and women, for our day-to-day roles and life options. ... the way we structure the most fundamental of all human relations (without which our species could not go on) has a profound effect on every one of our institutions, on our values, and ... on the direction of our cultural evolution, particularly whether it will be peaceful or warlike.” (1987, p. xix)

Eisler developed the Cultural Transformation Theory, in which she recognizes, and encourages the global possibility of a ‘gender holistic’ perspective (p. xii intro). In subsequent books, *The Power of Partnership: Seven Relationships That Will Change Your Life*, 1995, she proposes that to be a progressive and egalitarian society we must evolve from our traditional ‘dominator’ model of social order into what she calls the ‘partnership’ model. She shows us how we can transform all the relationships in our lives to ‘partnership’ relationships. Furthermore, she is confident that this is already happening on a large scale in the developed world.

Eisler introduced me to the work of archaeologist and anthropologist Marija Gimbutas, PhD, author of *The Civilization of the Goddess*, 1991, and many other books, in which she reveals that there existed egalitarian societies in pre-history, and she cites archaeological and linguistic evidence of these societies having been peaceful, culturally advanced, and that they worshipped a female deity.

“The primordial deity for our Palaeolithic and Neolithic ancestors was female, reflecting the sovereignty of motherhood. In fact, there are no images that have been found of a Father God throughout the prehistoric record.” (1991, p. x) “In spite of the revered status of women in religious life, the cemetery evidence throughout the 5th and 6th millennia B.C. does not suggest any imbalance between the sexes or a subservience of one sex to the other. It suggests, instead, a condition of mutual respect.” (1991, p. xi)

As a former Professor Emeritus of Archaeology at UCLA, Gimbutas’ contributions, based on her study of Neolithic culture and religion, were considered of utmost significance in the academic world of women’s studies. I concur with this. I find this information incredibly significant to my interest in how men and women relate to each other. It increases my faith in the possibility of a re-emergence of an egalitarian society, and perhaps within that, a greater potential for successful marriages.

Gimbutas gives us insight into pre-history and Eisler affirms that since that time period there has been a continuum of women maintaining, exerting, and fighting for their rights through the Women’s Movement. They have held onto at least a thread of their inherent potential and honour throughout history by continuing to gather and share their truth and by creating underground affiliations and subsequent uprisings. During the last few centuries, with the occurrence of the first and second waves of feminism in the West, writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (Shelley), Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, have further explored and expressed women’s creative, economic, and societal equality. Within a few short generations, women in some modern countries have won many of their rights and are able to continue to openly speak up and advocate for feminine values to be honoured.

All of this has had a profound impact on the evolution of romantic relationships between women and men, and how the balance of power in society is reflected in those relationships. With the historical background fuelling my curiosity, and the modern information and support for sustaining successful vibrant relationships being so accessible, it's fascinating to see how this has been part of the cultural evolution of humanity.

Evolutionary Philosophy and Human Cultural Development

I delved into the field of cultural evolution and became fascinated by how, through the ages, humans have changed in our thinking, and developed capacities for higher education and new sets of values. Carter Phipps, in his book *Evolutionaries, Unlocking the Spiritual and Cultural Potential of Science's Greatest Idea*, (2012), has organized much of his text around introducing the foremost thinkers, scholars, scientists, and philosophers in the field of evolutionary philosophy. The work and contributions of stellar thinkers such as Andrew Cohen, Teilhard de Chardin, Riane Eisler, J. Gebser, Jean Houston, T.H. Huxley, Lynn Margulis, Barbara Marx-Hubbard, Ramana Maharshi, Steve McIntosh, Mirra (Alfassa) Richard (The Mother), Rupert Sheldrake, Sri Aurobindo, Brian Swimme, and Ken Wilber is highlighted. Phipps explores:

“the evolution of technology, the evolution of cooperation, the evolution of consciousness, the evolution of worldviews, the evolution of information, the evolution of values, and the evolution of spirituality and religion. I believe these are legitimate and important ways to speak about evolution, and indeed critical if we are to adequately understand our life and our world.” (2012, p. 14)

Phipp's book gave me an overview of the ideology of many cutting-edge intellectuals and I became intrigued with how their concepts fit in with changes in relationships. One of the

foremost proponents of evolutionary theory and philosophy is Steve McIntosh, PhD, author of *Integral Consciousness and the Future of Evolution- How the Integral Worldview is Transforming Politics, Culture and Spirituality*, (2007). He describes Bergson, de Chardin, Habermas, Hegel, Gebser, Wilber and others as the founders of an Integral Philosophy, one that links together much of the work done in the field of cultural evolution. We are urged to think beyond validating only physical evolution, and to move towards entertaining the notion that our consciousness, our thinking and awareness, has also undergone a concurrent evolution, and is still evolving.

McIntosh's work explains a widely accepted theory among scholars in these fields that there are specific stages of consciousness, and humanity has evolved through each of them, or in some places in the world, is still in the process of doing so. McIntosh clarifies that the progression of cultural evolution is not linear, and he refers to it as Spiral Dynamics because it is more of a spiralling around and forward through and into each stage, whereby a person or culture incorporates new ways of thinking, often rebelling against attitudes of previous stages. The term Integral Consciousness is used by McIntosh and is accepted by many other evolutionary scholars, having roots in scientific, anthropological, psychological, sociological, and historical studies. It describes the stage of consciousness that we are currently entering, called Integral Consciousness, wherein humanity broadens its intellectual capacity and gains a perspective that includes insights from each previous stage of evolution, and at the same time transcends all of the stages to encompass a new worldview. New and appropriate values are integrated, while irrelevant ones fall away. McIntosh proposes:

“The evolutionary leap constituted by the appearance of humans was internal - it came about through the advent of a dramatic new type of self-consciousness. This self-

awareness, this consciousness of consciousness itself, appears only in humans. It is the emergence of this new self-reflecting ability in humans that marks the real beginning of the developmental domain of cultural evolution.” ... “Why does this self-consciousness in humans make such an evolutionary difference? It’s because with self-awareness comes the ability to see themselves in perspective within the scale of evolution, and this creates both the desire and the ability to improve their condition relative to the state of their animal cousins.” (2007, p. ii)

The work of these evolutionaries brings us to a profound understanding of the responsibilities we have as humans to continue the forward movement of evolution, which has brought us to the place where humans are able to reflect on and be aware of our actions and their consequences. We are reminded that our purpose, even in our seemingly insignificant lives, is paramount, and that we are now shaping the course of evolution through our ways of being. This is profound and has implications for all our relationships, perhaps especially intimate ones.

Charles Eisenstein, another author who speaks to this notion, presents lectures worldwide and has written many books such as *Sacred Economics* and *The Ascent of Humanity*. In his book *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Knows is Possible*, 2013, he looks at the dilemmas we face in modern society, and calls upon us to address them by opening ourselves to a new ‘Story of the People,’ a view in which the ‘Story of Separation’ is no longer the dominant perspective from where we make our choices. He uses the word ‘Interbeing’ to illustrate the realization of what Science and Spirituality have shown us, that we are all interconnected and interdependent with each other (2013, p. 6, 20). He invites us to summon the courage and wisdom to experience how our daily choices, even within the smallish realms of our homes and communities, are

where we can start to make the changes necessary to transform the world for the better. The attitudes we hold, and the decisions we take, are ultimately what create the reality of our lives.

Pille Bunnell, PhD, a Systems Ecologist, speaks about the existence of our biological interconnections in her online course *Epistemological Foundations of Learning*. She explains that we are all beings living in a niche, and that we are not only being supported by and influenced by the niche, we are in turn also changing the niche, and thereby causing changes in our larger environment. She states; "... it takes a chance alignment of all kinds of intermediate steps for a small local change to percolate through a system in such a way that a major change happens." (2017, p. 38)

Together, each of these academics and philosophers helps create a vision of the future where we will experience our interconnectedness and thereby be impelled to take more responsibility for our actions, seeing clearly how they ripple out and have significant effects and consequences, shaping the direction of our lives, our relationships, and the Earth's evolution.

So how can an individual begin to explore integral thinking and consciousness, and how can this advance the quality of our relationships? Many of us are already engaging in practices, activities and creative endeavours that serve to bring us a deeper sense of connectedness with the present, our loved ones, our surroundings, and ourselves. Certainly some esoteric teachings are available for study, and the modern world abounds with secular information, support, and resources that are accessible to more and more people. Recently I became familiar with the work of Aloka Martin and Joan Sala. In their book *Awareness Through the Body*, 2006, they have developed a system that describes principles and practices that bring us into a more full experience of what it is to be human, and these practices often involve interaction with a group:

“Awareness through the Body (ATB) aims to provide tools for individuals to expand their consciousness, explore the different planes of their being, discover their inner selves and eventually, ... their soul in its evolution.” (2006, p. 20)

ATB is just one example of a practice that encourages a new way of being; one in which we open more fully to our whole selves in order to expand our consciousness for the purposes of living in integrity with reality. In this study I will delve into the processes of the self and how they inform the processes of the intimate relationship, with a partner, and with life.

During my thesis research I noted that there was not much literature available on how the feminist perspective and the emergence of gender equality are significantly contributing to successful romantic relationships, and how this is transforming human culture and promoting the evolution of Integral Consciousness in the world. This is the subject of my inquiry and this Literature Review has brought together many resources related to these areas. I will be revisiting these resources as part of my Lived Experience in Chapter 4. From here, I will outline the methods and processes I've used to research my inquiry and to produce this thesis work.

CHAPTER 3 - METHOD

In this section I will reiterate my inquiry question and outline how I have gone about researching it. I will share the methods and processes I've used to demonstrate my data generation, analysis, and conclusions. In this inquiry, I ask the question: In what ways do couples sustain a vibrant intimate romantic relationship, and how does this accomplishment contribute to the betterment of the world, and in particular, how does it advance the cultural evolution of human consciousness towards Integral Consciousness?

Autoethnography Method

My intention has been to research this question in a variety of ways; to write, read, journal, compose poetry, participate in related classes, converse with others, travel, and continue to live in vibrant romantic relationship with my husband Tom. I have used Autoethnography as the primary method from which I've produced this document as a synthesis of what I've been learning and integrating into my life while studying with the Graduate Institute for Transformative Learning (GIFT-L) over the past three years. My understanding of autoethnography, as a combination of autobiography and ethnography, "is an approach to research that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience." (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2010) Autobiography tells a story about significant insights gained from an individual's epiphany experiences, while ethnography illustrates the study of cultural values and experiences in order to bring understanding to the culture. Often interviews are part of the latter. Combining the two is done for the purpose of illustrating how the personal epiphany moments come from being part of a culture, and that they convey something new that is reflected back into the cultural identity.

What attracted me to this method is that it validates the ‘process’ of doing the research as much as the product (thesis conclusion) that is produced by the research. The process itself engages the witness perspective and is recognized as being therapeutic. My thesis presentation is part of the sphere of subjective research that is qualitative, and looks at more creative, more organic, and subjective ways of knowing. To me, articulating this participatory way of knowing is just as relevant as drawing from academic lineages to bring credibility to this study.

Firstly, my study involved researching the work of experts in the related fields; I will be sharing the most important themes from this research within the telling of my tale. I describe my continuing path of growth in respect to sustaining a vibrant romantic relationship and how this relates to the concept of the evolution of human consciousness.

As part of my inquiry process, I included a focused time of working with my husband Tom on our own relationship. For three months in 2018 and one month in 2019, we committed to weekly sessions where we spent time discussing ideas about romantic relationship and partaking, as a couple, in related exercises and activities inspired from my research sources. This was part of gaining deeper wisdom through application and integration of the material. I documented a baseline state of our relationship with updates, and a description of our participation in activities, as well as the subsequent effects on our relationship.

Near the end of my master’s study I travelled to India to live in the international intentional community of Auroville and take a series of classes in an integral bodywork practice called *Awareness Through the Body (ATB)*. The ATB work is a practice of expanding one’s consciousness, and it also fits into my ‘Relationship’ theme as part of an aspect I consider very essential to relationship, that of bringing one’s ‘whole’ self to the coupling. This trip to India was also an example of how I am continually developing and maintaining my autonomy.

I have endeavoured to connect my living self (body/mind/heart/spirit) with the body of knowledge I'm exploring, through ongoing expressive journaling and poetry writing, and I've included some of that material within the autoethnography. Journaling has been important to me since it is part of how I learn through the process of re-thinking as I'm writing. While composing poetry I go into a more expanded, open state of consciousness that seems to allow me to access my heart intelligence and expression in a more authentic way. Previously, my main expressions of art were through dance and music. During my postgraduate studies, my main expression of art has undergone a transformation to poetry writing. I welcome the opportunity to share my poetry as an artifact, displaying my newfound creative expression as a valid way of deepening my knowing. Rereading my journals and poetry is also part of my learning and integration process.

In allowing the experience of this thesis-creation to be an integral part of the unfolding of the inquiry into my lived experience of it, the process along the way has been of utmost significance. This practice of re-telling my odyssey has helped me to feel more connected to myself, to Tom, and to others on a similar path. It has legitimized my story as the story of my life-long learning and I celebrate this methodology.

Since I have sourced the bulk of my research from my own experience and application of the findings and discourse written by experts, I also wanted to include some consideration of other lay-people's experiences. I became interested and stimulated by conversations with other couples about their experience in sustaining a successful relationship and decided to include a few of these conversational interviews in my methodology. I wanted to capture and learn from their stories as a way of gaining a broader comprehension of my inquiry findings.

To conduct the conversations, I met with one or both partners of six committed relationships, and undertook a process with them wherein I asked questions and recorded their

answers regarding ten different areas of romantic relationship. I then partook in the process of ‘member checking’ by sending my written notes to the participants, and subsequently receiving their consensus that my rendition matched what they had intended to convey in the conversation. They also approved that the documents be included in this thesis if necessary, based on my assurance of maintaining full confidentiality. I’ve included the questions and areas of discussion in the Appendix of this paper. The conversation notes are available on request.

I’ve shared the entirety of my Autoethnography, my ‘lived experience’ of this inquiry, including my poetry and also my interpretations and analysis of the themes contained in the couples conversations, within Chapter 4.

There is a gap in the literature about how gender balance and the feminist perspective play a major role in contributing to successful romantic relationship, and how this relates to the human evolution of Integral Consciousness in the world as a phenomenon of human evolution. This thesis brings forth discussion on these concepts and encourages further exploration and acknowledgement of emergent themes. My intention is that the narratives I am creating and sharing on this thesis journey will serve as part of the new story of relationships, a chapter in the evolving book of what it can look like to be in a successful intimate romantic coupling and how it contributes to a new story of culture.

Of note here is a comment about the entirety of my thesis writing process. It has not been a linear process separate from my life. I have endeavoured to keep my healthy lifestyle active during my master’s degree courses, and especially so during the last semester of writing this paper. I think this is a very significant objective. I consider it part of how I am embracing my femininity, to stay connected with my body, my relationships and my community in a wholesome way while undertaking this creative, academic project. Though the norm in society

may be to put everything aside and go literally headlong into a very mind-oriented process, possibly putting off regular life for a number of months to accomplish the goal, I don't find this approach congruous with Integral Consciousness and evolved ways of being. As I sit here at the computer typing I often have my granddaughter toddling around me, my nieces and nephews playing nearby, and the lunch I prepared baking in the oven. I know we'll go out and explore the beach soon and then visit with neighbours on the way home. Perhaps I'll share some of my ideas with friends and hear about their relationship processes. Maybe I'll write a poem when I get a quiet moment. It is a mother's way and a grandmother's way of integrating higher education into our lives, a community way. It is not the only way, but I am glad that GIFT-L has the kind of master's program that encourages and allows for the type of learning and assessment that is inclusive of integral living.

CHAPTER 4 - LIVED EXPERIENCE

In this chapter I tell the story of my personal learning process and experience during my romantic relationship journey, as autoethnographic data. I share details highlighting my individual self-reflection and how I've brought the material into my relationship with my husband. It begins with my marriage and continues through the years of exploration and then concludes with formal studies on the subject. I elaborate on how I've made meaning of the emergent themes from my inquiry, and I reveal what has supported my aspiration to deepen into a more heart-centered approach to my romantic relationship and to life. I uncover new understandings about how the tools and skills acquired during the process of sustaining a successful relationship are part of the acquisition of a new worldview, or global cultural perspective. This view continues to shape and reveal itself, and it is part of humanity's approach to living in a better way, in more congruence with unity, peace and partnership. It is a new way of thinking, an evolved intelligence, called by some scholars, Integral Consciousness.

During my lived experience I journaled extensively and have included excerpts here, which are dated and in italics. My story culminates between 2016-19, during my master's degree program with GIFT-L where I had the opportunity to focus my attention and learning on an area of inquiry I have long been passionate about. I ask: In what ways do couples sustain a vibrant intimate romantic relationship, and how does this accomplishment contribute to the betterment of the world, and in particular, how does it advance the cultural evolution of human consciousness towards Integral Consciousness?

I've divided my story chronologically into four parts: Background; Integral Studies; Poetry Mode as a form of Knowing; and Sustaining Vibrant Intimate Romantic Relationship.

Part 1 - Background of my Marriage

Tom and I met and fell in love on our first date and became engaged the same weekend. We had a very passionate, loving attraction and connection with each other and recognized we were good partners right from the start. Having said that, Tom and I would not be together today if we had not made a strong commitment to each other in the form of getting married. Our commitment to learning and growing in our relationship has been key.

Allow Me

Allow me to stand at your side
To know the journey of your days
To read from the book of your life's story
Drawing my character into the plotlines
Allow me to sit at your table
Painting blue skies with my smile
Bringing flowers to your lips

The romantic stage of our marriage lasted a few years and then we purchased property on a small island and began living our 'homesteading' lifestyle. Pretty early in this endeavour we lost touch with our need for intimacy in the marriage and soon I became attracted to other men. Because our only marriage vow had been not to blame the other person for being solely responsible for the challenges and conflicts that arose, we needed to take 50-50% accountability for creating the state of our relationship.

Tom and I decided to keep our marriage together while we explored the possibility of including others in our romantic lives. Subsequently, we had periods of being in an open relationship over the next five years. It was a time when many couples in our community were splitting up over having affairs, and we were determined not to do that. We still loved each other

and were pretty sure that the same issues would resurface in subsequent relationships. We decided to stay together and figure out how to be satisfied romantically in the ways both of us wanted, as well as be fulfilled in our shared practical life. Thus began our lifelong learning quest for sustaining happiness within our committed relationship.

The biggest transformation occurred for us after seeing marriage counsellors Doug and Naomi Moseley. The Moseley's were very clear that a commitment to monogamy is essential for couples to really face into the challenges that emerge in a long-term marriage. They coached us in the importance of accessing our emotions and expressing them to each other. They taught us that unless passionate feelings are expressed and fully listened to, there can be no passionate sexuality in a lasting relationship. Sharing emotions, feelings and needs, and being heard through true listening, opened the door to passion and increased sensuality for us. It facilitated a deeper knowing of both the light and dark sides of ourselves, so that we felt known and loved for our real and whole selves. Perhaps it satisfied the natural yearning for belonging that humans search for and which gives such meaning and purpose to our lives. With the Moseley's guidance we were able to rediscover romantic intimacy and by our tenth anniversary we had reaffirmed our marriage with a commitment to monogamy.

Since then, we have faced the challenges and opportunities of married life with a solid foundation. Amidst our career, family, creative, recreational and community life we have continued to seek out and find ways to enrich and strengthen our relationship bond. This has included reading and discussing relationship books and videos, learning from friends, and incorporating various practices into our way of being together. Other than being very compatible, enjoying each other's company, and sharing many similar hobbies, our main approach to keeping

our marriage alive and vibrant has been our regular practice of taking a period of time each week to focus on our relationship, and to be intimate, emotionally and physically, with each other.

Intimacy

I throw my blues up to the sky
One verse at a time
To be captured in the dusky pink clouds
Hung up like laundry among the envy and jealousy, the petty misgivings
Each utterance unsustainable abreast the glowing of the clear white moon
The moon that understands each translation
Of sadness, gladness, and madness
Of beauty and ugliness
Casts its soft shadow of listening
That we may have a haven in which to find shelter

Making intimacy happen brought mystery. We were able to reach the deep connection we were looking for on a fairly regular basis, yet in between our ‘dates’ we would slide into a place of relative disconnect. I found this state lacking in romance and tenderness, intimate aspects I viewed as being more heart-centered and desirable. I wanted to live from them more often. This became the seed of my thesis inquiry.

July 2016 - The single most important, enriching and life-enhancing act I partake in is my 35-year marriage. It is vibrant, passionate, inspiring, challenging, nurturing and ever deepening. I am certain that when I’m ‘in love’ with Tom, everything in my life is better; problems become resolvable, and experiences become richer and more satisfying. I have more to give to the world. I know that there are other ways to achieve this, but I’m a relationship person, this is my path.

Which brings me to these past few years studying with GIFT-L. Tom and I are empty nesters, semi-retired and new grandparents. We have all the time we need to spend on our priorities, and we have different ones. Since for many years I’ve recognized that I am more in touch with a desire and need for affection and closeness in our relationship, I know it is up to me

to prioritize it. Tom joins in to create it through my influence, and then acknowledges and appreciates the benefits and rewards of our more fulfilling connection.

Road-Trip

I've known for a long time that I'm the primary driver
In this romantic relationship
I take ownership of my set of keys
I take us on curves, scenic routes, tunnels and surf-sides
Picnics in tall green meadows and orchard bowers
That otherwise might have slipped past
Along the high-speed freeway of life

Part 2 - Integral Studies

When I started the master's program, before I could delve into relationship work, my first studies were compulsory courses. I didn't know it at the time, but each course I've taken has contributed greatly to this thesis inquiry in its own very significant way. The studies I undertook were all part of the vibrancy I brought to my life, and thus to my relationship.

The first course I took was with Darrell Letourneau, on SelfDesign, designing your own learning journey by following your interests. I had been working for SelfDesign Learning Foundation for ten years as an educator and was well versed in the philosophy of SelfDesign's 'learner-at-centre' model. Now I was in the role of 'learner' myself and the course guided me to look within and find out more about how I learned.

July 2016 - My personal belief around learning is that I need to be interested in the subject to really learn from it. I need to apply concepts to real life situations for them to make sense. I need repetition of skills and sharing with others to master learning. It's a creative process.

I opened up to expressing my learning and knowing in more creative ways, which was a radical change from other courses I'd taken. This was the course in which the poetry of David

Whyte was introduced to me, and I became very interested in his work and also read more of Mary Oliver's work. Both of these poets influenced me to write poetry and I learned that in the writing, I was reflecting on and integrating my learning on a very deep level. My poems became part of how I shared my learning for the rest of my courses.

Later courses, presented by David Marshak, educated me in Integral Philosophy, heart-centered inquiry, and the power of story. Reflecting on these areas, particularly the work of Steve McIntosh, Carter Phipps, and Charles Eisenstein, has had great relevance to this thesis inquiry. Phipps book, *Evolutionaries, Unlocking the Spiritual and Cultural Potential of Science's Greatest Idea* (2012) caused me to broaden my concept of evolution;

“The idea of evolution, the basic notion of process, change, and development over time, is affecting much more than biology. It is affecting everything, from our perceptions of politics, economics, psychology, and ecology to our understanding of the most basic constituents of reality.” (Kindle Edition, p. 1)

Many of us see our current state of humanity as being the final stage of our evolution. We have trouble thinking beyond the present, and often lock ourselves into a mindset that the traits we see manifested in human behaviour today are innate and unchangeable. Many cultural evolutionary philosophers see it differently. They see the unlimited potential in humans, and know that within our awareness of possibilities lies the pathway forward.

Evolution

As imperceptible as change may seem
It is occurring underneath the layers of foliage
Beneath the leaves of the pages of my mind
What magic developed eyesight?
Where did a word appear as a tool?
When did a feeling begin to express a truth?
How does a wave of ideas change an ocean of knowing?

McIntosh's book, *Integral Consciousness and the Future of Evolution- How the Integral Worldview is Transforming Politics, Culture and Spirituality* (2007) provided me with a new system from which to make sense of the workings of the world. He summarizes an integral philosophy wherein the study of human development and cultural evolution sheds light on the patterns that are observable in human behaviour. The patterns are contextualized into stages that have occurred throughout the ages. In each stage, a new way of thinking and set of values emerges, at first gradually in a few creative minds, and then when enough people are experiencing the new level of consciousness there occurs a more widespread shift into the next stage. He explains that this shift is usually preceded by an intense period of unrest where the values of each previous stage reach a point where they've exerted their influence and need to expand. Humans are compelled to break free of the previous stage's limitations and broaden their consciousness into new areas of creativity, technology, philosophy, science, and social order. Advancement through each of these stages of human consciousness reveals an increasingly complex ability of thought, self-reflection and communication, and some cultures are now at the level of shifting into Integral Consciousness (McIntosh, 2007). Furthermore he writes:

“Integral Consciousness is a new perspective on the world that expands our perception of reality and provides fresh motivations to make a positive difference. This new way of

seeing and living arises from an enlarged set of values framed by an expanded understanding of cultural evolution ... we become endowed with the power to make significant progress in the improvement of both ourselves and conditions in our world.” (2007, p. ii)

My understanding of integral philosophy gave me an incredible sense of faith in how history is unfolding in a way that is progressive. I started applying these concepts to my understanding of world cultures to see how they played out in current events and realized that this new worldview seems necessary to solve some of the massive environmental, economic, and social problems we are facing. I also understood the metaphor of their application to an individual's growth through the stages of a lifetime: foetal, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adult and elderhood (Phipps, 2012). I began to see parts of myself that are expressing the consciousness of a particular stage. I recognized how shifts occurred back and forth through the stages, depending on the circumstances of my life. Even throughout a day I saw the influence of particular stages of my consciousness. This awareness helped me make more conscious and beneficial choices, and to expand my thinking and form new opinions about reality. I began to recognize some of what it means to be in Integral Consciousness.

December 2016 - It is a big responsibility to engage in Integral Consciousness, and its proactive. It brings me to a more positive, hopeful worldview. I realize Integral Consciousness when I'm more holistically present with my mental, spiritual, emotional and physical aspects, when I respond to life in a more balanced way. It becomes an embracing, rather than a fighting stance. I can see the positive and negative values in actions, while having a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons and purposes, thereby gaining acceptance. This gives distance and allows me to focus on an appropriate response, not an all-knowing standard response.

I began making connections between Integral Consciousness and what author Charles Eisenstein speaks of as Interbeing in his book *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is*

Possible (2013). He refers to the ‘Story of Separation’ (p. 1) as the context within which we have been living for thousands of years. It plays out in the creation of hierarchies, class structures, and other inequalities of humanity, and according to Eisenstein, these are no longer relevant, as in reality everything in life is interconnected. He describes existence in terms of non-separation, a co-creation of life, and that even within the discouragement we sometimes feel in the face of what seem like insurmountable global problems, there is hope. He writes:

“The question ‘Will we make it?’ itself encodes a profound disempowerment. The question implies that there is a fact of the matter independent of one’s own agency. The fear behind the question is ‘Whatever I do, it won’t matter, because the world is doomed anyway,’ and the assumption behind the fear is that I am separate from the universe. That is part of our story. The assumption, the fear, and the question go away as we transition to the Story of Interbeing. In it, we know that any change in ourselves will coincide with a change in other people in the world, because our consciousness is not separate from theirs.” (2013, p. 256)

I find it encouraging that a new worldview is forming, and that it is a group undertaking. I recognize that the collective motivation to change is very stimulating and has compelling momentum. Clearly we are now living in an era where for the first time human beings are not only responsible for changing the course of evolution on Earth, but are consciously taking part in choosing its direction. It’s going to take a lot of intention, reflection, and risk-taking, to move past our cultural conditioning of what we think we know. This kind of introspection and openness has already been present in me since I was young, and I can see that I need to keep challenging myself to let go of rigid ideas and embrace the unfolding truths as I understand them anew. This is especially so in my marriage, as it is my primary relationship.

February 2017 - I see Integral Consciousness as seeing more of the whole picture. Whether we 'know' it rationally or not, whether it is approved by science or not, it could be that the mystery that connects us all; this force that gives us life, and intelligence and beauty and love, could be called Interbeing. And the state of consciousness we are accessing when we allow ourselves to experience Interbeing could be called Integral Consciousness. I'm experiencing and living it through being present and more intimate with life.

My further studies looked at more themes that are relevant to my inquiry into sustaining vibrant marriage. Two authors inspired me greatly, Riane Eisler and Marija Gimbutas. They write about the possibility of the existence of ancient cultures that worshipped a female deity and lived in peaceful societies. Eisler's book *The Chalice and The Blade, Our History, Our Future*, 1987, deepened my understanding of how cultures have transformed, and though large parts of history were dominated by patriarchies, there have also been other cultural manifestations.

Gimbutas, in her book, *The Civilization of the Goddess, The World of Old Europe*, 1991, provides convincing evidence, from the archaeological findings of grave sites, city structures, linguistics and artwork, of the existence of pre-patriarchal cultures in Ancient Europe, and that these cultures were matrifocal (worshipped a female deity) and possibly matrilineal (family names follow the maternal lineage) and matrilocal (family lives in the maternal home and community). Here, the distinction between matriarchal as compared with matrifocal is an important one. Matriarchal societies refer to ones where women are dominant over men. Rather, in matrifocal societies, the genders seem to be equally respected and valued. Interestingly, the archaeological evidence from these societies shows no indication of fortification, weaponry, dominant leadership, or artifacts common to warlike cultures; whereas in societies showing evidence of male deity worship there is evidence of warfare and widespread dominance of men over women and other subordinates (1991).

These findings are very significant and encouraging as they show that humans, and men in particular, are not inherently aggressive and warlike. It allows for the envisioning of a future society where true feminine values are elevated along with true masculine values, and balance and equality exist. Eventually we may get to the place where these values are honoured as 'human' values. These are the values that are emerging in the new Integral Consciousness that is part of our current cultural evolution. This is particularly useful information to know about in light of the present quest for global peace and harmony. It is also invaluable knowledge as applied to the quest for sustaining vibrant romantic relationships.

Eisler, in her book, *The Power of Partnership: Seven Relationships That Will Change Your Life*, 1995, outlines her Cultural Transformation theory, which includes the delineation of the two prevalent models that guide social order. She calls them the Dominator and Partnership systems, and whereas the established model for the past several thousand years has been the Dominator system, the earlier ancient peaceful societies appear to have used a Partnership system. Unlike Dominator systems, whose authority figures often use their power for selfish or destructive purposes, and to gain dominance over others, leaders in Partnership systems hold the power of responsibility for making beneficial contributions to society and the environment, as for example in a family where parents have authority over their young children, and this authority holds the power of caring and responsibility for the children's well being, not the power of dominance for the sake of control (1992). In essence, Partnership is a more feminine approach.

Most of Eisler's suggestions have to do with balancing the feminine and masculine in our family life, our workplaces, and in international relations. They point to finding creative ways to value caring in our society equally with economic growth. They create the context in which it is easier and more supportive to live in a considerate way with others, to the benefit of the whole

community (1992). This builds from the groundwork of evolving attitudes that recognize the interconnection of all beings and the environment, and how when we care for these, we bring out the best for the whole.

November 2018 - I've gained insights and skills that I'm using directly in understanding myself and in how I interact in my marriage. I am taking more ownership of my feminist values and shifting my conceptual images away from having a resentful, fighting response to society's male domination system. Instead, I can see more clearly how both men and women, and everyone on the gender spectrum in between have been compromised within this system, and there are models that exist that we can use to create a new partnership system.

Eisler's work defines four 'cornerstones' that we must lay down to accelerate the change to a Partnership model: ensure childhood relations are grounded in empathy; establish equitable gender relations; create economic relations that value caregiving; and develop new narratives and language that show the importance of stories to morality and spirituality (1995, p. 113). To me, this work holds critical significance, and I appreciate Eisler's clarity in laying out the structure of how we can contribute to positive change. We are adopting these concepts into our worldview right now, and our success at this could prove to be a defining factor in what contributes to better relationships, and to a better world.

Part 3 – Poetry Mode as a form of Intimacy, Inquiry and Knowing

I decided to design a Directed Study on poetry with Anna Soter in which I focused on increasing my understanding of how reading and writing poetry would affect my sense of presence, heart-centeredness, Integral Consciousness and Interbeing-ness. I challenged myself to read and write poetry every day for three months, and in a way, instead of trying to 'learn' poetry, I began to have the actual experience of 'being' poetry.

February 2017 - My most worthwhile poetic moments are when I'm immersed in what I call 'poetry mode', a way of seeing the world through the eyes of being more present. The act of reading or writing poetry or prose poetry is what I've begun to call 'poetic practice'. I notice a subtle difference in whether I am 'in' the creative process, or more 'separate' from it, looking at the poem from a distance. The latter doesn't work in terms of being engaged in poetry mode.

I discovered how powerful poetry can be to facilitate a more connected state of consciousness and it has enthused me greatly. I went to a poetry reading by Jeannette Armstrong, an aboriginal writer from central BC, and author of *Whispering in Shadows*, 2013, and I found her work very compelling. Armstrong says that poetry changes us; she likens it to creating a connection to the land, our home. I take this in a literal way and also in the sense that home is where the truth lies, as revealed each new moment through a state of expanded consciousness into the present. One sees without judgement, directly through experience and feeling. Perhaps the words of poetry help us understand and have a deeper connection to feeling into who we are, and to sharing that with others. Poems seem to communicate with more parts of the self than does prose. Poetry enters in through all of our senses, gets under our skin and into our hearts. I think this is a powerful way to evolve changes in consciousness and culture.

March 2017 - Expressing myself through poetry connects me to expanded states of mind. I unravel, develop, and ripen ideas into new ways of being in the world. I see poetry as a living thing. It is a piece of Nature, changing, growing, alive in its influence on it's medium. The important thing is that poetry mode sustains throughout my day, and informs the way I relate to my life and to the way I interact with others. I am becoming a softer person, a better listener, responding from a more vulnerable and authentic position. It has allowed me to connect on a more intimate level with life and the people in my life.

Adam Vincent, a PhD Candidate at UBC in the department of Language and Literacy Education, explores poetry as a way of gaining knowledge; "Poetic Inquiry (PI) has proven itself as an emergent arts-based research methodology. It has gained greater acceptance in the larger community of qualitative research" (Vincent, 2018, p. 1). This speaks to the increasing

validation of different ways of gaining knowledge, and of expressing it not only interpersonally, but also in the realm of academia. It's exciting to be part of this trend.

Concurrent with the Poetry Directed Study, I took a course with Pille Bunnell that included a portion on living systems. Something I became very interested in is the notion that our thoughts and words cause changes to our physiology, the actual biology of our cells. Our brain changes and our behaviour and emotions respond and in turn affect changes in the medium, or surroundings in which we interact. Our niche is in constant interaction with us through our bodily functions, senses and a multitude of other co-minglings (Bunnell, 2017). Constant transformation of cells is taking place. Our beings respond and change. This is evolution, and it's fascinating! It means that reading poetry for example, might influence changes in consciousness and that this could affect how we interact with life around us.

Arc of Life

Virtually all living systems exist within a constant interchange of energy with each other. Our very biology is in perpetual flux with the medium around us. Even our thoughts and emotions cause measurable changes to the neurons of our brains. And hearts have neurons too! How can we imagine that what we feel, think, say and do is separate from the world around us? I influence what my beingness touches. I have agency over my expressions. Each dialogue begets a recognition of validity, or not. The patterns in my language create the acceptance of legitimacy of self, of others, of experiences, or not. Nothing is ordinary within this poetic view of life as piece-by-piece reality is formed and influences the arc of life around it.

I thought about the idea of intimacy and how I connect with that which is around me, and how we change each other through our connections, continually transforming our world. Two centuries ago the poet John Keats wrote about how love can change our perceptions of the beauty around us. Here I present an excerpt from his poem, *Endymion* (Keats, 1967).

“Just so may love, although ‘tis understood
The mere comingling of passionate breath,
Produce more than our searching witnesseth:
What I know not: but who, of men, can tell
That flowers would bloom, or that green fruit would swell
To melting pulp, that fish would have bright mail,
The earth its dower of river, wood, and vale,
The meadows runnels, runnels pebble-stones,
The seed its harvest, or the lute its tones,
Tones ravishment, or ravishment its sweet,
If human souls did never kiss and greet?”

This provided the context within which I recognized a deeper intimacy with life.

March 2017 - I have been better at noticing moments of intimacy, with my garden as I do yoga in it, with the toddlers as we play, with caring colleagues at work, with my husband as we talk honestly and truly listen and feel heard. Intimacy seems to change us.

Intimacy has always been important to me, and I started to see it as a conversation with whatever ‘other’ I am relating to, whether that be human, animal, plant, object, circumstance, poem, or even ideas. David Whyte’s poem ‘Everything is Waiting for You’, celebrates this idea, and is deeply moving to me, as is his commentary in his TEDx talk ‘Life at the Frontier: The Conversational Nature of Reality’, (TEDx, 2011). I wrote some prose-poetry, in part influenced by his work, that I hope conveys my level of heightened intimacy in daily life.

In Conversation

This morning as I stood making a pot of tea I had an epiphany moment. I was re-organizing the tea tins, tinctures, and tiny tea balls. I smelled the herbs and spices and arranged them to be orderly and beautiful. All of a sudden the beauty and organization of my life came together. The simplicity of being present for the most menial task became the realization that all is right with the world. When I attend fully to what needs to be done, I am living in an integral way; I have an awareness of listening and responding in conversation with the pattern language of life.

Being engaged in poetry mode for the better part of a three month period, I arrived often at a place where everything matters, and creativity became a more valued contribution to my day. I went about ordinary tasks and wasn't trying to quieten my thoughts; I was embracing them as transcripts of simple, beautiful and revelatory moments. This was very meaningful to me.

A Fragment of This Land

Stepping out into the snowy day I feel a white wonder of unity, a coverlet of soft silence on every branch. Nothing is mundane any more; every little thing matters. Each tiny sprouting crocus bulb poking up amidst icy mounds; the flutter of the bird in the bush seeking refuge and sustenance; the sound of crunching snow beneath my leather boots; the grunting and straining as

I carry in a heavy load of firewood. These moments contain all of what it is to be alive.

Having kindled the fire in the woodstove, I sit and give my entire attention to each flame of warmth licking at the fir logs. Pieces taken from those piled in the shed, brought from the forest one wheelbarrow at a time. Gloved hand touching each rough-barked round, bucked and chopped, laid over summer to dry in the sun, now reflecting its radiance back, providing comfort, a place in the world, a fragment of this changing land to converse with.

With each new moment, I had a choice – to be present and accept what is, to be in poetry mode, or not. 'Poetic practice', reading and writing poetry and prose-poetry, became a way, a means, an artistic expression that I used to transport me there. I believe poetic practice led me to be more conscious of Interbeing, heart-centered connection, and Integral Consciousness. It is consistent with the intimacy I've wanted to sustain in my relationship with Tom.

Part 4 - Sustaining Vibrant Intimate Romantic Relationship and Creating Betterment

Eventually my master's directed studies focused on the subject of sustaining vibrant, intimate, romantic relationships. Initially I worked with Annie Smith and Laurel Tien and researched the main necessary components of a successful marriage; this was followed by exploration with Darrell Letourneau on gender studies. I looked at resources and discussed and integrated many of the insights and new approaches with Tom. When I began this thesis, my

inquiry centered in on the art of intimacy and how sustaining a vibrant marriage contributes to evolving consciousness and culture.

January 2018 - I used to think that my need to do self-inquiry and improvement, my need to explore spirituality and seek deeper purpose and meaning, was something I was driven to do to expand into my own potential. Now I see this as one of my chosen pathways toward sustaining humanity's potential. I see my seeking as part of my responsibility to become better at the art of living, to contribute to the flourishing of all my relationships, and to global society.

When I began my coursework on relationships, I was encouraged to write a *Relationship Baseline* to document the state of my relationship with Tom at the outset of the study. I summarized the quality of our intimacy (both emotional and physical), our communication and conflict resolution style, the support we gave each other for our autonomy, and also how we shared interests together. One of the most important things I recorded was the nature of our heart-centered connection, how tender and affectionate we were with each other. I noted that this was the area in which I really wanted to see growth. At the end of a semester of focused relationship work with Tom, and also a year later, I wrote updates to the document. It was evident that the most significant areas of improvement were in our heart-centered connection and our ability to communicate intimately. These improvements led to more effective conflict resolution and richer emotional and physical intimacy.

Excerpts from Relationship Baseline and Updates document (full document available on request)

Baseline, January 2018

Emotional Intimacy - Last summer we had a series of 4 very big fights. We couldn't seem to get past a very polarized state, with lots of anger on both sides. This intense time was a big impetus for me to learn more effective communication skills with Tom.

Physical Intimacy – We have an active, fulfilling sex life and typically make love during our 'dates' and occasionally at other times. In terms of quality, we usually have what I call 'Great sex' (fun, pleasurable, intimate). We also experience what I call 'Goddess sex' (fabulous, passionate, deeply emotionally intimate) every few months, and we have 'Meat and Potatoes' sex (Moseley's term for basic sex without much passion or intimacy) only occasionally when we have not had much recent connection and we want to build it, but don't have time for a full date.

Heart Centered Connection - We are able to maintain a sense of heart connection, or tenderness, for only a few days after an intimate 'date' connection, and very rarely longer. More commonly we just tend towards getting a bit distant, with some bickering or complaining being a surface symptom of what feels to me like a lack of caring. This is a source of sadness for me. I want and need more of a loving Heart-centered connection to be sustained.

Update April 2018

Emotional Intimacy - We've learned many new techniques for sharing our feelings and needs, and we're feeling very connected. The way we address conflict has changed a lot, and we now have much more awareness and experience of using new tools to solve our challenges. Trust in our communication skills has increased and this is helpful in restoring connection after conflict.

Physical Intimacy - We are still thoroughly enjoying our lovemaking. Perhaps it is slightly more relaxed before and after, (as in less tension) as a result of more trust having been built up in the relationship. We have seen an increase in our affectionate touching throughout the day.

Heart-centered connection- Heart-centeredness is sustaining more for us in between the date times and it has been the greatest area of improvement and the one I most wanted to develop. We are finally starting to live my dream of being really caring and attentive to each other most of the time we are together. We experience more softness, listening, and appreciating of each other. It's brilliant. When we're tired, hungry or stressed we may be somewhat disconnected, but we're more often letting it be and then coming back to a heart place when we're ready. I trust that he is here for me, and we both trust that our connection will re-emerge and maintain.

Update, April 2019

Emotional Intimacy - This is sustaining and improving all the time. We've established weekly relationship check-ins, and they are really working well. I'm overjoyed that it is now habitual for us to devote regular time to talking about what's working or not in our relationship. We address conflicts using a variety of tools, e.g. we take turns sharing feelings and endeavouring to truly listen (without defence or interruption). We express our appreciation for each other's efforts and gifts. We ask each other what we can do to make each other feel more loved each week. Wow! How emotionally intelligent is that?

Physical Intimacy - Fun things have been happening by bringing in more exploration and conversation about our sexuality. Having included in our repertoire many helpful tools for emotional intimacy, and developing new attitudes towards the deepening and enlivening of physical intimacy, we are reaping the rewards. The very cool thing is that we are using resources to give us ideas, and inspiration, and we're having a good time with this.

Heart-centered connection - We have increased our caring for each other! We are sustaining our connection between dates! It is so rewarding to see how much we've changed - I am much more trusting of Tom's masculinity, and also that he is here for me and willing to take time to nurture heart-centeredness, which I see as expressing more femininity. We share tenderness and affection every day now. This is incredibly fulfilling for both Tom and I.

Lie Down

I just want to lie down in the tall grass with you
Romancing the sky
Nothing else
I just want to lie down in the tall grass with you
Fabricating fondness

So how did we accomplish this and in what ways do we sustain it? I will illustrate this through a re-telling of how I began exploring the work of many marriage counsellors, lecturers, authors, and experts in the field of relationships and how Tom and I began applying some of the suggested activities to our own marriage.

The emergent themes are listed in five sections that encapsulate the gist of the study:

- i. Authentic Femininity and Masculinity, Recognizing and Validating Male/Female Differences, Gender Spectrum
- ii. Emotional Intelligence, Intimacy, and Communication
- iii. Sustaining Sexual Passion in a Committed Relationship
- iv. Autonomy and Connectedness
- v. Willingness to Learn, Change, and be Influential

i. Authentic Femininity and Masculinity; Recognizing and Validating Male/Female Differences

I began studying the work of John Gray, relationship counsellor, lecturer, and author of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992), and *Beyond Mars and Venus* (2017). Tom and I discussed many of the chapters in these books and applied the material to ourselves. Gray outlines the importance of couples understanding that men and women are very different, and when we can accept our differences, the marriage can thrive. He explains how women typically value relationships, communication, beauty, spirituality and personal growth and expression. A woman often defines herself through her feelings and the quality of her relationships. Men typically value competency, efficiency, power, success and accomplishment. A man often defines himself through his ability to achieve results (1992). Tom and I agreed that we fit in with this.

January 2018 - I've been in the modern age of seeking equality between men and women, but have I been linking equality with sameness? When I was a young woman I wanted to do everything a man could do. I resisted recognizing some of the actual differences between Tom and I because I was busy proving myself. I'm now aware of that resistance fading. And not because I'm aging and tired of being a staunch feminist, it's because I've been looking at Tom's masculine qualities with more acceptance, and enjoying them. I've been backing down on wishing he'd change them. Tom commented that in our culture, masculine qualities have been valued and therefore have more obvious power, whereas women's power is not as easily understood or apparent. If we're going to create a balanced society, we need to bring more recognition to the feminine values that aren't so product driven, but are more caring.

A successful romantic relationship today is defined very differently than in the past and in my experience it supports the full expression of one's masculine and feminine self. Within it, we wish to have mutual respect and honest communication. This means having more meaningful conversations, cultivating curiosity, and truly caring about the other person and their wellbeing. It also means more honouring of the other's viewpoint as legitimate, no matter how different it is from our own. When I'm upset, and Tom listens to me, it feels like he's legitimizing my experience, and that has really helped me to calm down.

February 2018 - Good to be reminded of better ways to communicate while still being ourselves and honouring our own needs and propensities. We practice honouring each other's inherent natures, instead of invalidating them. Tom realizes he is typical as a man in not dealing with feelings. Often it is on my impetus that issues get talked about. He is supportive and interested in it, but can sometimes feel like it's too much processing; other times, my sharing stimulates his defensiveness, and then he brings up an issue of his own. I'm learning that although that seems negative at first, it is his route for getting in touch with his feelings and if I back off a little and give him the listening I crave, then it helps me understand him more. Then he can have a listen to me. We are finding more of a balanced approach.

One of my goals with this study was to learn how to communicate with Tom more effectively in emotional situations. This meant being more aware of our differing needs. Understanding his needs better, helped me be more compassionate of his feelings. Gray (2017) outlines that a man's primary emotional need is to be trusted. He wants his partner to see him as capable, and to encourage, appreciate and admire him for this. A woman's primary emotional need is to be cared for. She needs to share her feelings and feel heard and understood by him. It follows that men would do better to listen to women more and women would do better by learning to trust that men are there for them. I saw this happening for Tom and me.

Finding Myself

I am finding myself in the universe of our home
Having seen my reflection in the tea you poured me
Set out on the summer table under the blossom tree
I revel in the birdsong you draw my attention to
You listen at dawn and dusk for your favourite calls
I know my voice is one of them

Discussing this material and setting some goals made it easier for Tom and me to focus on improving our communication skills. We learned an easy new technique called the Love Letter from Gray's work. It allowed me to work through emotional issues on my own first, and then present a letter to Tom in a way he could receive it. It's often hard to bring up emotionally charged issues. Our experiences with the letter gave me the faith that it's not so hard, and it could more easily happen again, without my needing to over-organize, over-talk, or have undue control over situations. The more caring we showed each other, the more we trusted ourselves to be caring, which prevented resentment from building up, and supported a deeper connection.

February 2018 - Tom and I agree that I need to ask for what I want, and not just expect him to 'get it'. And he needs to learn to listen well so I feel heard. He could try telling me when it's a good time to talk. I need to trust that he will listen when he's ready, and that it's OK to ask him to listen. I can't believe how long it's taken me to speak my needs often and well enough that he really 'gets me'. And on the other side, I see how my verbal appreciations of him, and small acts of trusting him more, are really working for him. He needs my recognition that he is doing a good job, especially in providing for the family, and in being here for me.

Through Gray's work I became less controlling of Tom in little ways, like not giving him advice with certain areas he is good at. I saw where I could let go of being involved in some of the decisions. I became less dominant in my opinions and more aware of when I was talking overly much. I didn't try convincing him of things so often. I realized all this was part of accepting his masculinity. At the same time I began enjoying my femininity more often, for example by gaining more happiness from just understanding him more, feeling fulfilled by being

softer and more caring, participating in self-nurturing activities. Being more aware of my changing tendencies, I could feel bits of my old resistance coming up; e.g. a woman is weak when she expresses her femininity, yet my awareness was dispelling those false assumptions. I wanted validation for my womanly responses from the culture as a whole, and in particular from Tom, yet I've always known that I need to give it to myself first.

Permission

*I am now giving myself permission
To occupy the space given to me to do what I find meaningful
To be who my heart informs me I am
I am now embracing the validity of my urges
I am finding my place in the world over and over again
Thereby altering the whole of creation*

Gray discusses recent developments in gender equality and their effects on marriage: “Equality does not mean sameness. It means equally respecting our differences and holding them in a positive light. All people are different; each of us has a unique blend of male and female characteristics. To expect everyone to conform to one standard is the opposite of respect.” (2017, p. 88)

Gray sees that instead of being ‘role mates’ stuck in rigid gender roles, couples are becoming ‘soul mates’, sharing deep love and intimacy, and respecting each other’s right to choose our own directions in life (2017). Navigating through this freedom of choice poses its own set of challenges. Gray encourages us to learn to identify what it is that fulfills us. According to him, generally men are most fulfilled by making a difference, by living a life of meaning and purpose, and many women are most fulfilled by living a life filled with love and happiness (2017, p. 288). This may seem very traditional, yet there are inherent reasons for this.

He makes a case for the weighty influence of hormones on our attitudes and behaviours, and emphasizes that hormonal imbalance can happen due to stress, but that hormones can also help us de-stress. Obviously more women are working in traditionally male jobs, and vice versa. Gray points out that if we swing too far from our natural feminine/masculine balance by pursuing activities that are the opposite of our propensity, (e.g. women working in traditionally masculine-oriented careers such as carpentry, that require more masculine qualities such as upper body strength, goal and product orientation), then it can upset our hormonal balance unless we also choose activities in our free time that bring the other aspect out more (e.g. the woman taking a more caring and creative role at home after work). The situation is similar for men (2017, p. 289). Awareness of these hormonal effects might assist individuals in coming back into balance.

Gray points out that in Norway, where there is freedom to choose their preferred work, more women choose traditional female work, and more men choose traditional male jobs. In India, where there is little freedom of choice in roles, women are increasingly choosing male oriented work, and men choose more female oriented work. He has an interesting theory for this:

“The answer is balance. Women in Norway have no permission to express their female side at home, just as men are not supported in expressing their male sides. Because they do not embrace their differences at home, women choose traditionally female jobs and men choose traditionally male jobs to find some balance in their lives. In India, the reverse is true. Women don’t have permission to express their male side at home and so aggressively embrace male jobs. Similarly, many men are embracing female jobs.”

(2017, p. 87)

Men and women have very different responses to stressful situations in the marriage as well, and their needs are quite different. He outlines that the primary needs of women are that

their partner show caring, understanding and respect, and fulfilling these needs causes a change in their hormones that balances their femininity in a positive way. Likewise for men, except that their needs are appreciation, acceptance and trust. When needs are met, hormones are released and stress levels diminish, and thus a caring partnership can be maintained (2017, p. 286).

Discussing these ideas with Tom brought new awareness of possible hormonal changes during challenges and conflicts. It brought in a witness perspective, and that seemed to assist in de-escalating stressful situations. Tom and I have done pretty well all along in getting our needs met, within our relationship, chosen work, and lifestyle, by doing what we love and what makes us fulfilled. Perhaps we'll grow even more into balance with ourselves and with each other by increasing our understanding of the hormonal mechanisms of our behaviours. This unfathomable mystery of how feminine and masculine traits are carried through our lineage and culture has started to become unravelled with the modern discoveries of hormones, DNA, genes and chromosomes. There is much yet to be understood; I'd like to see more research on it.

I continued my relationship work by studying Alison Armstrong's books, *Keys to the Kingdom*, 2013a, and *The Queen's Code*, 2013b. She has been studying men for decades and has come up with some intriguing ideas about relationships (and some are controversial amongst feminists). When I explored her work, it continued to unravel my rigid beliefs about men being in the wrong, and released me from many long-held patterns of fighting against them as perpetrators of the patriarchy. I started by understanding men from a more inclusive and accepting place, by seeing their developmental stages from boyhood (page), to young man (prince), to mature men (Kings), (2013a). Again, I found myself appreciating Tom for his manhood, and also discovered more of my own true value as a woman in the relationship. I dropped further into releasing the need to prove myself worthy as a woman in a patriarchal

world. My habitual underlying stance, adopted from my mother's very valuable 'women's liberation' days, of fighting for my rights and value, became more of an embodiment of them.

May 2018 - Armstrong is asking me to assume that Tom (or any man) has a good reason for doing what he does. This is a big ask, and brings up how I sometimes mistrust Tom's motives. Instead, if I can't see a good reason for a specific behaviour, I ask him what it is; out of really wanting to understand him better. I see how important it is for a woman to have a positive attitude and behaviour towards men, especially if she has children, and will mentor them in her ways. I've definitely wanted to pass along a successful model to my children.

Our modern culture has been moving through a stage where women are almost rebelling against their own womanliness, and against men's manliness, in the name of acquiring equality. Women often shift out of trusting that men are coming from a loving place, that they have a good reason for their actions. Then they want to take some of men's power away and emasculate them.

July 2018 - Many more revelations have occurred about the masculine and the feminine, and how they manifest in our behaviours and needs. I made a vow never to justify my 'emasculated' of men anymore. (Emasculation means to weaken, or deprive of power, or masculinity). Even if I emasculated a man through habit, I won't justify it anymore. I know I will have resistance coming up, because I've been in power struggles with Tom before. This vow spurs me to look at how I also disempower my own femininity. So I need to give that up as well.

Armstrong (2013a) teaches that both men and women need positive, affirming attention, but men are especially responsive to our positive attentions. Therein lies some feminine power, as it only takes one person to turn the relationship around. Men will provide what we want when they feel our trust, just as they withdraw when they feel our distrust. I've felt this within my relationship with Tom. Men need physical connection to get to the emotional depth, and women need emotional intimacy to get to the physical depth of sexual pleasure. Through the lovemaking connection the man's heart becomes more open and receptive to all that is good and valuable in this world, including fulfilling the woman's need for intimate communication and caring.

In some situations, being a woman means being vulnerable: as a physically smaller person, sometimes while having sex, during pregnancy and breastfeeding, and especially giving birth. Vulnerability is an aspect equated with femininity and it has been underrated. Magic emerges when we are vulnerable, when we temporarily lose the self-constructed identity that is shielding our ego-self. Our innate interconnectedness is experienced. Our Interbeing. This is a powerful gift that women are given when they go through natural childbirth. I felt and honoured my femininity the most in my lifetime during my pregnancy and breast-feeding years. I also feel it strongly when lovemaking and when nurturing myself through self-care practices.

This work of more deeply accepting our differences was a celebration of the beauty of them. In essence, Tom became more of a King, and I a Queen. The more power one of us had, the more power we both had. Treating an opinion with respect didn't mean we had to agree with it. To grow in partnership, we found ways to share power.

Sovereigns

*From whence rode the queen on her white horse
In search of the true king*

*Because she'd spent enough time walking the authentic path of her soul
She could see him, and hear him
And instead of holding a shield to deflect his sword
She became invisible
And shone from the fire of her heart
The flame of her legitimacy
Which ignited his legitimacy
And the sword became a pillar of light
Dispelling the shadow between them*

*They reigned
Under crowns both heavy and light
Accepting their battle
As part of their glory*

The study of Gray and Armstrong's work was the most important area of relationship growth for me personally. Clearly, my focus became looking at the influence of feminine and masculine balance individually, in relationship, and culturally. The validation and honouring of the balance of our feminine and masculine aspects individually and in each other has been profound. As far as evolution goes, it is evident that this aspect is being addressed through an expansion in our ways of thinking. As women are gaining equality in the world, it is reflected in the capacity to create more successful relationships. Men and women, and gender-variant people, have all been affected by the predominant patriarchal system of social order, and have been expected to adhere to strict gender binary roles in society. It will take time to transform this situation so that we can become liberated and find our authentic selves. Some countries are ahead of others in this regard, and it is evident that their progression depends on where the culture exists within the stages of human development and evolution of thinking and consciousness.

The Beauty of the World

*I know the beauty of the world
I know it in the quiet eyes of a kiss
I know it in a few scrawled words
Penned from the wanderings of pilgrim
Voiced from the music of a lullaby
Soft hands stroking a tired back
Tears embraced by the hearing
Petals opening in the morning dew*

*I've flown to the edge of the earth
Born up by these transient visions
Floating like a kite tied to the end of a ribbon in the wind
Knowing I'll return
Shining like the sun*

Looking further into gender issues and their influence on relationships, I became acquainted with the many ways humans manifest gender, as defined not only by their gender biology, but also their gender identity and expression. I listened to stories from people who lived their lives in different places along the gender spectrum (the range along which gender is described without conforming to a gender binary of strictly male or female). A wide scope of gender variant people exists: gender neutral, gender fluid, transgender, etc. This knowledge and understanding informed my ideas about masculine and feminine expressions in self, culture and relationship, and how it is imperative that society cultivates recognition and respect for all gender realities.

November 2018 - Life on earth is not going to get better until we have gender equality across the board. Celebration of diversity and human equality is needed, and the same attitudes that bring us to this place can be applied to romantic relationships - acceptance of differences, compassionate communication, honouring unique needs, and finding connections. I'm being challenged to step beyond my traditional views and beliefs about gender. I realize that though there are norms that exist, there is actually no normal way of being in terms of gender identity and expression. There is a balance of femininity and masculinity in each of us, and it's important to be aware of how we are expressing this as it changes in different situations. The awareness allows for more acceptance and equal valuing of the various expressions.

With changes come questions. Is choosing to identify as non-binary denying femininity and masculinity? Will the celebration of women or men morph into a celebration of all gender expressions? Are there more gender variant and gender fluid folks being born whose gender biology is not matching their gender identity and/or expression? Or do they seem more prevalent recently due to the social/political climate, with people becoming more aware and accepting of it? Are we evolving into a less binary species? Will there come a time when transgender hormonal augmentation and surgery become unnecessary because individuals feel fully accepted

for who they are? There are a lot of unknowns, and even though they may feel uncomfortable to us, they will likely persist. This is all part of our physical and cultural evolution.

September 2018 - I am thrilled to see the topic of gender come up in my Women's Circle group and my Women's Mountain Biking Group. It's tough deciding how to evolve our group names and intentions to be more inclusive, or not. The discussions bring up interesting points and provoke us to ask ourselves about whether the participants will feel safe enough to express themselves if we are inclusive. Why have a 'women's' group in the first place? What does it give us? Allow us? How is that changing? Would the presence of men who identify as women cause it to be less 'feminine' oriented for us? Can we still celebrate our womanliness and femininity, while having genderfluid or transgender people in the group? It's impressive that even on this remote island, these issues are coming into everyday life and discussion.

As we evolve, the entire issue opens up new areas for romantic relationship study, including of homosexual and heterosexual relationships. I think the work done on accepting new definitions of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality will be key to positive progress in other areas of relationships. Whatever feminine/masculine balance an individual expresses at a given time, will in part continue to determine how that person responds in their relationships, and this is a fascinating on-going study.

January 2019 - Make room for the positive role of the feminine in a relationship, whether from the man, woman, genderfluid, agender or other non-binary identified person. It can look like being the one in the relationship who will stimulate more valuing of connection, affection, emotional intimacy and quality communication. And often it is the more feminine oriented partner at the time, that takes the responsibility of inspiring that these values be honoured equally with the other values we live by.

ii. Emotional Intelligence, Intimacy and Communication

John Gottman's books, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide*, 2015, and also his new book written with his wife Julie Schwartz-Gottman, *Eight Dates*, 2019, have been invaluable sources of inspiration and helpful activities. John Gottman observed and worked with thousands of couples during his research on what couples do to stay happy

together, and Julie started the Gottman Institute to teach couples how to have successful marriages. Together they share effective methods that promote a meaningful, loving connection.

The Gottmans recognize that there will definitely be conflicts in a marriage, and that it helps for us to recognize the difference between those that can be resolved, and those that cannot. Learning to accept and live with the latter is a key component for success, as is deepening our skills for how we resolve the former. Most of us already have really good communication skills, and we use them with our friends, we just need to apply them more in our marriages. For example, if a couple uses ‘repair techniques’, the practice of finding simple ways to recover caring after a fight, such as saving face, apologizing, being humorous, etc., then the trauma of the conflict fades. Partners need to come ‘towards’ each other by being more attentive, by sharing each other’s hopes and dreams, and by appreciating the best in each other (2015). John Gottman speaks of building emotional intelligence, which is particularly necessary for men: “...the emotionally intelligent husband is the next step in social evolution.” (2015, p. 123)

Gottman explains that most women are already culturally socialized to be emotionally intelligent from the types of childhood play with which they engaged. It is more natural for them to be cooperative, compassionate, and intimate - willing to delve into the emotional aspects of life and resolve conflicts in positive ways (2015, p. 122). I find it highly significant that he stresses the difference in how women and men ‘accept influence’ from each other, and he refers to a study done by Eleanor Maccoby of Stanford University to shed further light on this:

“... my data indicate that the vast majority of wives ... let their husbands influence their decision making by taking their opinions and feelings into account. But too often, men do not return the favour.” (Gottman, 2015, p. 116) “Whatever the reason for the gender disparity, the data indicate that husbands are far more likely than their wives to use the

four horsemen (silence, defensiveness, criticism and expressing contempt) to escalate a marital disagreement. And when they do, they are also more likely to put their marriage at risk. ...the bottom line is that husbands need to be particularly vigilant about accepting their wives' influence." (2015, p. 118) "Maccoby offers an intriguing theory that dovetails with my findings on accepting influence. She has found that even at very young ages (one and a half years), boys will accept influence only from other boys when they play, whereas girls accept influence equally from girls or boys." (2015, p. 122)

It seems to me that this has been obvious to many a wife for a long time, and has certainly contributed to many a divorce. This points to how essential it is in a successful marriage that both partners take a feminine, inclusive, compassionate approach, one that builds the social and relational skills necessary for mutual fulfillment.

Change

Though we value deeply what we know
Each day has a threshold to cross
Whether with one foot dragging
Or our whole being leaping

October 2018 - Better communication is sinking in. I find myself pausing and thinking about how I word my requests, and of course noticing if I'm making them 'demands', which just won't give results. I'm doing more listening and I'm having more patience with how Tom has difficulty putting things into words. I'm honouring that it's not his forte; his strengths in the relationship lie in being conscientious, in providing, being generous and helpful to me, and most importantly, exhibiting willingness. We are both willing to be emotionally intelligent and intimate. I'm letting go of blame and rigidity, and being more flexible and openhearted. He is more aware of his defensiveness and moving past it. We see how typical we are.

The study and discussion of the Gottman's work was an important piece that Tom and I, as a couple, engaged in to stay more warmly connected and intimate. Some simple practices

became habits, such as ensuring short moments of physical affection and emotionally intimate contact every day, along with deeper verbal intimacy during our dates. We began a weekly check-in about the state of our relationship, what worked well or didn't, with focus on shared appreciations, and asking what we can do to make each other feel more loved. We incorporated a sweet little trick that has worked well for us - the six second kiss at the end of the day as a greeting (2015, p. 278). These simple practices worked wonders in connecting us. It felt to us that through these successes in our relationship we began moving more steadily towards our fullest potential as partners and as human beings.

iii. Sustaining Sexual Passion in a Committed Relationship

Tom and my previous work with our marriage counsellors, the Moseleys, had served us well for decades. We had experienced that it was hard to be honest with each other when we had intense feelings about a relationship issue. We knew that when we were honest about having a problem, it meant that time had to be spent dealing with it. Sometimes we just wanted to cruise and hope the challenge would resolve itself, yet we found that didn't work, it only made our connection less passionate and trusting. We'd lose out on intimacy. So for the most part we were willing to take the time necessary to share our feelings and try to listen so that the other felt heard. We almost always found that this enhanced our sense of freedom in the relationship and increased our sexual attraction for each other.

Novelty

I am willing to sit down upon the summer-day grass
Watching the stars emerge
Singing a harmony to the song of their unfolding
An acceptance speech for the gift of newness
A warm embrace for all that passes and emerges

A burial procession for the fear of the unknown
Lying, standing, walking, dancing, flying into the eye of the hurricane

I studied Esther Perel's book *Mating in Captivity, Unlocking Erotic Intelligence, 2006*. Perel, a relationship expert, counsellor and worldwide speaker, advocates bringing novelty into the long-term relationship in order to fuel sexual attraction. She writes about finding ways to make the marriage new and alive by balancing domesticity with passion.

Within her modern view of marriage, her main thrust is that though there are typical responses to typical marital problems, the unique personalities within each relationship must be taken into consideration when working towards a vibrant marriage. She challenges us to continuously find a balance between satisfying our need for security and exploring our need for freedom in relationship. She speaks out radically against too much 'intimacy'. She agrees that it can bring a deep connection, but warns that it may lessen the sexual passion. Knowing everything about your partner is not necessarily a good thing; a certain amount of mystery can keep the intrigue and attraction alive (2006).

Perel suggests some radical ideas such as that some couples thrive on having flirtations, or even short affairs. Other couples use bondage or fantasy to play out roles in the bedroom that help them work through issues and express themselves freely. She says we need to do what works for us, as long as we make agreements that allow for both partner's needs to be met. If both prefer a sexless relationship where they can focus their attention on other areas like career or children, then it's not a problem. But if one partner craves sexual intimacy, then it's something that needs to be addressed in the relationship. Her overriding message is that each marriage needs its own unique approach, but all relationships need intentional effort and attention to keep them dynamic. It will not happen on its own. This has definitely been my experience throughout

my marriage. I am enthusiastic about the subject of thriving partnership and have brought exploration, ideas and communications tools to our relationship to support it in flourishing.

Perel says it takes ‘erotic intelligence’ to keep a relationship alive and romantic so that it can provide both security and adventure. Sensuality relies on an element of mystery and a dose of playfulness (2006, p. 241).

December 2018 - If we just change things up and allow more spontaneity into our date nights, our eroticism builds. We've had more stimulating conversation relating to sexuality as part of this study, and that has fuelled our attraction for each other. Honesty in sharing feelings and true listening go a long way in building intimacy. Humour brings in lightness and fun so we're not taking things too seriously. I am more open to using aphrodisiacs, like alcohol, poetry, film, art, and music. I don't think there'll ever be fixed ingredients that work every time. Eroticism thrives on a fresh approach and in that way it's a very creative endeavour.

Hearing the stories of couples in Perel's counselling practice gave me insight into the wide variety of approaches to intimacy. I had to admit that everything I'd experienced as working well in my relationship didn't necessarily apply to other relationships. I also realized that there is no end of new ways to experience the erotic. I had a similar experience while perusing the newly published and extensive survey written by Chrisanna Northrup, Pepper Schwartz, and James Witte, titled *The Normal Bar: The Surprising Secrets of Happy Couples and What They Reveal About Creating a New Normal in Your Relationship*, 2015. These authors surveyed thousands of individuals from around the world about the quality of many aspects of their relationships. Their survey methodology sorted for age, gender, sexual preference, and racial and geographic differences. They presented the norms that exist for happy couples, and gave tips on how we can achieve those in areas where we strive for a new normal. Much of it supported what I'd already learned, and the main area that brought new information was regarding sexuality. I'd always wanted to see what the statistics reveal about the quality and frequency of lovemaking in couple's lives. The authors exposed this and many interesting trends

about such topics as what happens to sexual passion as we age, and which gender wants what when it comes to sex.

According to the *Normal Bar* Survey, and this is also reflected in the research of John Gottman, there is a percentage of married couples who experience and sustain a heart connection that includes regular affectionate, passionate attraction and sexuality into old age. These couples describe their relationships as happy or extremely happy, and sustain vibrant intimacy by going beyond good communication, spending quality time together and sharing a meaningful life - they explore the challenging territory of sexuality. *Normal Bar* statistics show that 60% of extremely happy couples have sex three to four times a week, even after twenty-one years together (p. 178). However, this high frequency reflects only a small percentage of actual couples in the survey, as most were not 'extremely happy'. Even so, it's intriguing. The self-described extremely happy couples also gave attention to other areas such as giving each other massages, showing affection, kissing passionately and arranging surprise dates. This book was fun to read and discuss as it gives many ideas for stimulating conversation and bettering relationships.

December 2018 - I see that I have made changes in my behaviour that have contributed to sustaining the building of positivity in our relationship. Tom is less aware of the details of the progression, yet knows the relationship is flourishing more. There are times when I definitely need more connection and intimacy than Tom does, and it builds up some tension until we connect. It reminds me of how with the evolution of the stages of consciousness things get worse before they get better. On the other hand, our focus on relationship growth has meant that it's easier to get to connection in the first place.

Integral philosophy aligns well with what I learned from the evolution of my own relationship, and what I see happening culturally with the desire for more fulfillment in marriage. Though this desire is the cause of many split-ups, the advancement in this area is still unfolding. My understanding of this natural process helps me be more accepting personally and culturally.

Yes to Life

*No end in sight
Only this journey immersed in caring for each other
And about each and every trice
As if the fey creatures were alive and prompting us to wing alee
To be at ease during flight
To be a-tingle with not turning back, with not urging forth
Just staying the currents and riding the tides
To wash up on the shore again and again
With each wave of breath speaking
Yes to life*

iv. - Autonomy and Connectedness

At the start of my last semester, I travelled on my own to India to study Awareness Through the Body (ATB) at Auroville, an intentional international community of peace and unity, based on the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the vision and teachings of Mirra Alfassa, known as The Mother. I also partook in daily yoga, dance, and holistic bodywork classes, made new friends, explored the community, travelled, and experienced the ancient culture of Mother India. It was a time to go deeper into my spirituality and to celebrate my autonomy for a month.

January 2019 - Travel provides autonomy and inspiration for me. As I prepare for my trip I'm enjoying how I am in the stage of wondering what will happen. It's part of the beauty of being truly aware and present in savouring every moment. Of course going to India on my own brings fear as well. Safety on the roads? Snakes in my tree house? I am drawing on an awareness of faith and serendipity regarding these fears, as well as seeing them as opportunities. I want big things in my life - living my greatest potential, thriving in relationships, making meaning. It's good practice for my mind and heart to focus on the present and move past these fears. It gets me places and I experience autonomy in the process.

January 2019 - I am sitting beside a woman from Mexico on the flight. We've both left our husbands for a voyage to the other side of the world. She speaks of being proud to be able to travel with her friends and that she has a husband who supports her need to get away. She says it's important for her to talk to her husband about her thoughts, ideas and needs. She sees that it's necessary to educate him on how a woman must live in order to be happy. This is refreshing to hear, as it's becoming mainstream to be an autonomous woman owning feminine wisdom.

With plenty of alone time to be reflective, new enthusiasms arose and choices became more conscious. In India there are so many folks seeking spirituality. It is the motherland of spiritual teachers, but I am not inclined to ‘worship’ anyone or any particular belief system. I am constantly re-discovering my own spiritual path as a journey of learning, and allowing myself to pursue my interests. Dance and ATB are personal ways for me to allow for the unique experience of engaging in spirituality without the dogma of any particular religion. Beyond individual training, these approaches are inclusive of interconnection with others while providing embodiment in a culture that tends to be overly mind-centered.

February 2019 - I woke up to childlike happiness and composure. After returning from ATB and Dance studies I feel exhilarated. Noticing the planes of my being again. Seeing more clearly how I am not any of them separately, but all of them together, and that I just express myself from their perspectives at different times. One student says ATB is related to his sexuality. Its true that it opens my senses and puts me in my body. It connects me with other bodies and the living group body. I feel the sensuality of existence. Is this really separate from my sexuality? I get out of my mind and emotions and into my psychic and physical being more. The reality of connection allows my seeing to include the wholeness and unity that is already present.

Travelling to India and living in Auroville for a month was a fascinating chance to meet people and talk about relationships. I had extensive conversational interviews with ten people, all of who considered they were being successful at sustaining vibrant intimacy in their relationships, which ranged in length from three to forty-three years. (See Appendix for more details and ‘interview’ questions.) I found the conversations valuable to this inquiry as they introduced new perspectives from regular couples, rather than experts in the field. These folks were from nine different countries and cultural backgrounds, and included one traditional Indian woman who’d lived her entire adult life in an arranged marriage. How had they sustained their vibrant relationships? Which themes overlapped?

Usually there is a spectrum of how each of us perceives a story, and makes sense of it as it translates into our own individual reality, so naturally I viewed through my own lens. All of the couples were in committed relationships, and experienced regular emotional intimacy wherein they felt comfortable having conversations about their relationship. Each had worked out acceptable ways to resolve conflict through communication. It was striking that all couples were highly autonomous in their own lives, making their own choices about their careers, travel opportunities, and other decisions, including the Indian woman who felt strongly that even within her very traditional role as a wife, she made important family decisions and as the head of the household, felt highly valued.

All couples shared pleasurable sexuality for most of their time together except for one, who, surprisingly, had never had a physical attraction or sexual connection in their ten-year relationship. They focused on their stimulating, creative careers and described romantic times within their very caring and supportive relationship. It was interesting to see how much they loved and depended on each other for support, but were not unsatisfied that they didn't share sexuality. One couple had experimented with an open relationship and had found it overly complex and dissatisfactory, so were currently monogamous, as were all the other couples.

I found that the couples were creative in the ways they'd arranged their lives to support the fulfillment of their individual and paired dreams. Their respect for each other was strong, and they'd managed to achieve a balance of feminine and masculine equality through varying life experiences, some more easily than others. Every one of the couples showed willingness to learn and grow from their challenges and opportunities and felt they contributed to their families and communities by having learned to live positively in their relationships and therefore providing models of success for their children and society. Each couple had a unique and compelling story

to tell, and their styles were wide-ranging. My impressions of what comprised a dynamic relationship were expanded to include a broader scope of possibilities, both reaffirming and challenging the validity of some of the themes I'd isolated as important to good relationships.

I had noticed I felt a twinge of arrogance within me as I gained more knowledge during my studies, and thought I could apply it to others. As it turned out, the process of learning was completely non-linear, and speaking in person with others about such an intimate subject served to dispel some of my assumptions and disperse many of my generalizations.

March 2019 - It's been interesting to investigate my own and others' stories and beliefs. I'm looking at the processes, experiences, and methods I've used to form my worldview and becoming more aware of how I can challenge and change my ideas and assumptions. In the end, I am less sure of what I know than I had thought I was. Yet still, I know my own experience, and it is valid in its own right as a living example of a vibrant marriage.

I consider that meeting and connecting with the couples was a valuable part of my autonomous venture outside of my own world and into the richly diverse world of others.

Heartspeed

*The passing on of knowledge and understanding
Takes many revolutions round the body-mind
Through seasons of surprise, disorientation and epiphany
To enter into the realm of knowing, to sit at the table of wisdom
The transmission of beauty and love is faster than light
It happens at heart speed*

v. Willingness to Learn, Change and be Influential

Back home in Canada, I re-entered my relationship with Tom. It felt good that we had been able to stay connected through two months of not having much intimate time together. We'd maintained a closeness and tenderness.

February 2019 - We've had a weekend of re-connecting intimately and deepening our affection. He feels loved by my supporting his work, particularly with good dinners made. Pretty

simple. I'm a bit more complex I suppose. I am fully aware that I am a woman who desires 'everything'. I want to have it all in my relationship with Tom: dynamic interchange, physical attraction, intimate communication, passionate and stimulating love-making, gentle caring touch, supportive and heartfelt partnership, interesting and stimulating conversation, creative exploration together, shared outdoor adventures, meaningful shared work, close relationships with mutual friends, excellent communication with our family...everything!!!! And I want to retain sovereignty over making my own choices.

To finish off my eighteen months of study, Tom and I spent a month in intentional relationship work again. We focused on re-establishing our weekly verbal check-ins about the state of our relationship, and also tried to maintain the specific practices that had been working well. A real treat occurred when a friend gave me a book on tantric yoga and sexuality called *Soul Sex, Tantra for Two*, by Pala Copeland and Al Link, 2003. At first we were pretty humorous about it, and then we took the leap and began delving into this rich and inviting practice. It enhanced our lovemaking in a light and playful way, and deepened our emotional connection. One of the most heart-warming aspects was it showed me that we still have a willingness to include discovery and adventure in our romantic life.

March 2019 - There are many significant steps along the journey we've chosen to take together, to continually enrich and sustain the vibrancy in our relationship. The process itself holds excitement and no matter how many answers might be revealed, there will always remain more mysteries to be heartily explored. How could it be any different in the realms of love?

It's a complex thing to create a union with another being. It is a legitimate endeavour to strive for beauty and validation in a marriage so that the pairing is a real partnership. Awareness and intention create a vibrant, integral marriage. It doesn't just happen. One of the most important components of my successful marriage has been the seeking out of education and inspiration. I expect that awareness and seeking also contribute to Integral Consciousness, by fuelling the intention and willingness to learn and change, for the betterment of self, other, and

the world. Integral Consciousness isn't just a new-age concept; it's what is now beginning to happen on the planet. It manifests itself in how we are inclusive and value all beings equally. It has become clear to me that the skills and values that create success in a marriage are the same actions and attitudes that create more understanding in the world. The capacity for humans to choose caring, peace and unity over power, destruction and division, realized within one person, is what helps create positive manifestations in the bigger world. We need positive practices that serve us in moving forward constructively into the unknown unfolding of evolution.

February 2019 - Why be so obsessed with vibrant marriage? I could put more energy into other important areas yet I remind myself that everything is better when Tom and I are deeply in love, with soft and heartfelt communication, adoration and appreciation. The good energy created through our connection is directed toward our other projects and they benefit more with the increased inspiration and relaxation we bring to them. We affect a bigger sphere than we know, as we are all interconnected. Relationship is definitely 'my' path. It may not be everyone's, but it is mine.

I continue to explore the notion that the beauty of creation that we see, our ability to perceive beauty, exists to the extent with which we have the capacity to love. I wrote a poem about this, inspired by John Keats' poem Endymion, previously cited.

If We Did Not Kiss

*Who can tell that the rocks would shift
The sea wave surge, the white mist lift
The pond reflect a pink-gold sky
The pearl drop shine, the wild geese fly
That lavender would have sweet scent
The fireweed bloom, the wind lament
The stream its rush, the rush its song
The rain its falls over polished stone
If we did not kiss, if we did not share our breath
If a deeper gaze of generous love
Was not a word upon our lips?*

Being conscious of a visceral sense of interconnection with beauty is what we experience in a vibrant romantic relationship and maybe it originates in the intimacy of expanded consciousness.

December 2018 - How I interact with people, things, nature, and circumstance, in an intimate way IS living in a partnership way. I tune into what's around me, not just what's within me. Being in intimacy IS being in an integral state of consciousness. It IS me being aware of my Interbeing with all of creation. It has a bearing on all of my relationships.

I desire to live fully and dynamically and I keep saying 'I do' to Tom, choosing him as my mate every day. This feels like choosing life. To me this is the art of living. The natural world is constantly rejuvenating and evolving, the atoms and molecules transforming to produce breathtaking landscapes, living forms of beauty. Isn't the evolving natural world the ultimate art form? What is the ultimate human art form? Perhaps it is the art of love, the art of romantic relationship, the ongoing creation of sustaining intimacy with just one other human being on the whole planet. And this art of intimacy informs the ultimate art of living.

My Plan

I plan to continue this journey of loving relationship, of being my authentic self, vibrant and alive, of walking with the beauty and bliss reflected from another. I revel in my capacity to inspire, to enhance and sustain intimacy, maintaining sovereignty over my own life, devoting to the enterprise of partnership, and bettering the world.

CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

I started this inquiry journey with the question, In what ways do couples sustain a vibrant intimate romantic relationship, and how does this accomplishment contribute to the betterment of the world, and in particular, how does it advance the cultural evolution of human consciousness towards Integral Consciousness? The way I approached answering this question has been through learning about my own learning style and way of thinking, as well as about the concepts and ideas of Integral Philosophy. I explored the bigger patterns of cultural evolution and the stages of human consciousness development, and how the Dominator and Partnership systems of social order fit in with these patterns. I started to recognize Integral Consciousness in myself and from this study I experienced an opening into writing poetry as a way to expand my consciousness and deepen into expressing my intimacy with the world. This led into my focused immersion for over a year in studying Romantic Intimate Relationships and what experts had to say on the subject. I also conducted conversational interviews, and reviewed a large 2015 survey, about the habits of couples in happy relationships. Applying some of the ideas and advice to my own marriage, I documented the exploration of processes, practices and improvements in a number of relationship areas. I realized what the main themes of learning and growth were for Tom and me personally, and how these fit in with the patterns of cultural evolution.

Although as a culture it may seem as if we are declining in our ability to sustain a marriage, I propose that we are actually in the process of learning how to be successful in sustaining vibrancy within a marriage. An expanded way of thinking is emerging, with a broader perspective, an Integral Consciousness, wherein a new worldview is developing. There is greater access to the information and support necessary to create the personal and cultural shift to sustaining successful relationships.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF A CULTURAL SHIFT

Human Equality and Partnership. In many places across the globe, as a result of education, democracy, and other forward thinking trends, cultures are moving away from a patriarchal and dominant model of organizing society. Human rights are on the rise. Women, non-binary and other oppressed people are increasingly being seen and valued as equal members of the human race in their ability to contribute to society. They have the right to education, career choices, and financial independence. Many women are taking on traditional male roles of assuming responsibility for decision making, and learning to execute wise responses to global challenges. We are moving toward an egalitarian society of partnership.

Balance of Feminine and Masculine Values. It is my hunch that an embrace of authentic feminine values, balanced with the concurrent emergence of true masculine values, will create a more emotionally intelligent and evolved consciousness and culture, wherein developing peaceful, co-operative relationships within families, communities and internationally will be the new and attainable goal. Authentic femininity contains, among other aspects, the arts of compassion, inner reflection, inclusivity, heart-centeredness, and caring. These skills are of utmost importance in the broader culture in building a positive future. Co-developing with the rise of women's equality is the liberation of men from rigid roles, and the emergence of an authentic masculine aspect, one that doesn't assume aggression and warlike behaviour as inherent expressions, yet retains the masculine propensities toward providing, protecting, goal-orientation and productivity. Many men are learning the traditional female social skills that equip them to be more communicative and caring in relationships. They are engaging more often in intimate conversation and through this are building emotional intelligence.

Accessible Education. A willingness to explore, learn, and change is becoming more available in the mainstream. People are looking further into what makes their lives work well, and are pursuing their goals and creating models of successful lifestyles that transmit to new cultural norms. There is less need of a powerful authority figure for guidance, and more compulsion to take personal responsibility for our own learning and development.

These major principles are producing cultural trends that are the context into which the possibility of sustaining vibrant romantic intimacy is possible. Within this inquiry there also emerged specific tenets of relationship that seem to contribute greatly to the success of happy marriages. Although each couple needs a unique approach to the challenges and opportunities they face, there are some overriding themes that seem to apply to couples in general. I outline several areas that I consider are the most significant ones requiring attention in order for a successful relationship to endure.

TENETS OF A SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIP

Devoting Attention to the Relationship. The relationships in the past worked when they fit into the cultural context and the partners complied with the norms. Now for a relationship to be vibrant, it takes conscious intention, because our expectations have changed about what we want to get out of the relationship and our lives. To achieve fulfillment, the partners need to come to an understanding of how the dynamics in their relationship are interacting, and how they can improve them so that both people are satisfied. They must make time to build meaning and connection.

Commitment to a Partnership. Making a commitment to caring about each other and working together to maintain a loving connection is important in creating both a practical and a romantic partnership. Living within the agreements and vows set out in a long-term commitment allows for freedom and creativity to arise within the supportive structures of security.

Feminine/Masculine Balance. This builds the container of a respectful relationship and supports the integration of the two partners into a well-balanced union. Honouring the freedom to choose roles that reflect our interests and talents will allow both people to express their natural femininity and masculinity. This means accepting and celebrating the differences in gender expression, and lessens the expectation that partners will be the same in how they respond to opportunities and challenges. The more feminine partner in a marriage is likely the one who needs and desires more intimacy, and also inspires learning and change for the benefit of both people. It's important that both partners recognize this need for intimacy as a valid requirement of the relationship and not just of the individual; each may then feel encouraged to instigate opportunities for deeper intimacy and connection.

Emotional Intelligence, Intimacy and Effective Communication. Valuing communication as a means for deepening intimate connection promotes an increase of emotional intelligence skills. Expressing feelings and needs, listening for understanding, moving beyond power struggle and resolving conflict effectively, are now becoming essential elements of a successful union. The major areas of challenge in relationships are related to money, career, chores, sex, in-laws, ex-partners, religion and children. All can be addressed positively with honest and compassionate communication. Though each couple's path of challenge is different, the necessity to get to know each other ongoingly by sharing feelings, needs, hopes and dreams is common to everyone.

Physical Intimacy. Putting effort and awareness on individual needs and desires can encourage a richer sense of eroticism, shared affection and sensuality. To create lasting sexual satisfaction, partners may benefit from being willing to enter into alluring, delightful, adventurous and sometimes novel realms of romantic and physical intimacy.

Autonomy and Connectedness. Feeling happy in one's own self often brings vibrancy to the relationship connection because of the individual's increased capacity to give and receive from a fulfilled place in themselves. For some, it involves creative or adventurous pursuits. For others it is more about exploring self-awareness, self-care and improvement. Supporting each other's pursuit of career, family and recreational interests encourages partners to live to their greatest potential.

Willingness to Learn, Grow and Change. Couples are increasingly open to learning new ways of enhancing their relational happiness so that both partners are not only satisfied, but also actually thriving in their connection with the other. It may take some searching, some receptivity to changing of opinions and habits. It might require admitting that we don't have all the answers and that we need to ask more questions.

Keeping the question alive may be more important than finding the answer, for questioning contains within it the seeds of curiosity, the awakening of the search, the presence of listening, and the vulnerability of the unknown. The endurance of a question is what moves the learning forward. Education is a process of asking questions and only approaching answers.

It takes interest and intention to make the discoveries and epiphanies happen in a relationship. Within a marriage it means engaging in conversations about the relationship, expressing and listening to the feelings and needs of each partner. If one person wants more of something, then the couple needs to delve into it together. Each relationship tours through the mysteries of romance and connection along a unique path, and there is no answer applicable to all situations. It is clear that everyone must be willing to take the journey of inquiry to reap the rewards of a happy marriage. Rilke (1903) writes:

“I want to beg you, as much as I can, dear sir, to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.” (Rilke, 1903, loc. 271)

CONTRIBUTING to the CULTURAL EVOLUTION of HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

It turns out that much of the mindset and skillset that make for a happy marriage are the same attitudes and practices that can be applied to create a happy world. The changes we're undergoing as a culture to get to this place of desiring the best in our relationships, are the core of what is transforming our worldview into one where we live from a place of experiencing our interconnections on a more regular basis. This is how the achievement of sustaining a vibrant, intimate romantic relationship contributes to the cultural evolution of Integral Consciousness - it presents a model for what is possible. It is a living example of how all the tiny choices we make to choose unity, intimacy, honesty and caring partnership, over their opposites, contribute to the betterment of the relationship. From there, our interconnections to family, and community feel the effects, and cultural norms are influenced. This is how social orders are formed, and they shape the patterns of unfoldment in the world.

Not everyone needs to be in a romantic relationship to contribute to the betterment of the world and to the cultural evolution of Integral Consciousness. We come with different stories (trauma levels, traditions, beliefs, talents, passions, capacities, opportunities) and these affect the needs we have and the choices we make. If succeeding in living in an intimate relationship, being in love, is a path to fulfillment and to living one's true potential, and if this then leads to living a life of creating more benefits for others, by mentoring one's children, and contributing to society in a richer and more positive way, then more happy couples could make the world a better place. Every relationship leaves a legacy.

At this point in human development it seems imperative that we see where opportunities arise in our lives and that we exert our agency and make choices that are wholesome and that make a difference not only in our own lives, but also out in the world. The importance of humans

having the capacity for conscious loving connection, decision-making and free will is highly significant as we are responsible for some of the most momentous changes to the world and environment around us. How we relate to each other matters a lot and it is an accessible point of focus for us. Like a hurricane force, the power of love and intimacy are not to be diminished.

For now, I know the challenges and opportunities will keep presenting themselves within my own marriage, family, community, and out in the world. Meanwhile, I expect to continue to learn and expand my comprehension and application of fascinating concepts such as partnership systems, feminism, gender equality, integral relationship, Interbeing, and Integral Consciousness, and to endeavour to be aware of experiencing them more deeply in my romantic relationship and in my community life.

Answer the Sky

Open the doorway and wander amidst the fresh face of morning
And tell me of your awakening
Behold the land as a journey from which we emerge
Recognizing our wholeness

What is your answer to the dawn's glory?

Sometimes the gift you bring of your attention
Reveals the feathers growing on your back

Leave your knowledge on the ground
Today is for the voices
Turn and face the calling that surrounds you
The sky is coming down to meet you

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APPENDIX - Couples Conversation/Interview Themes/Questions

1. Identification

Names, nationality, number of years together/married, children, education, age.

2. Beginnings / Commitment

How did you meet and how strong was your attraction and connection?

Tell me about your commitment and when you made it.

3. Autonomy / Connecting

What activities do you do individually and together to maintain autonomy and connection?

4. Communication / Resolving Conflict

What is your style of communication and how do you generally address and resolve conflicts?

5. Emotional / Physical Intimacy

Do you feel emotionally intimate on a regular basis and if so, how do you achieve this?

Do you share regular physical intimacy and how fulfilling is it?

How has the quality of your intimacy changed since the beginning of your relationship?

6. Evolution/Learning

How has your relationship evolved in general?

Tell me about what you've learned in your relationship.

7. Home, Work, Community, Economics & Roles

How do you share home and career tasks?

8. Feminine / Masculine Balance

Describe how you address any issues around feminine/masculine balance in the relationship, whether individually or together.

9. Most Important Factors for Success

What factors contributed the most to the success of your marriage?

10. Contribution to the World

How does the success of your marriage contribute to the evolution and advancement, the betterment, of the world?