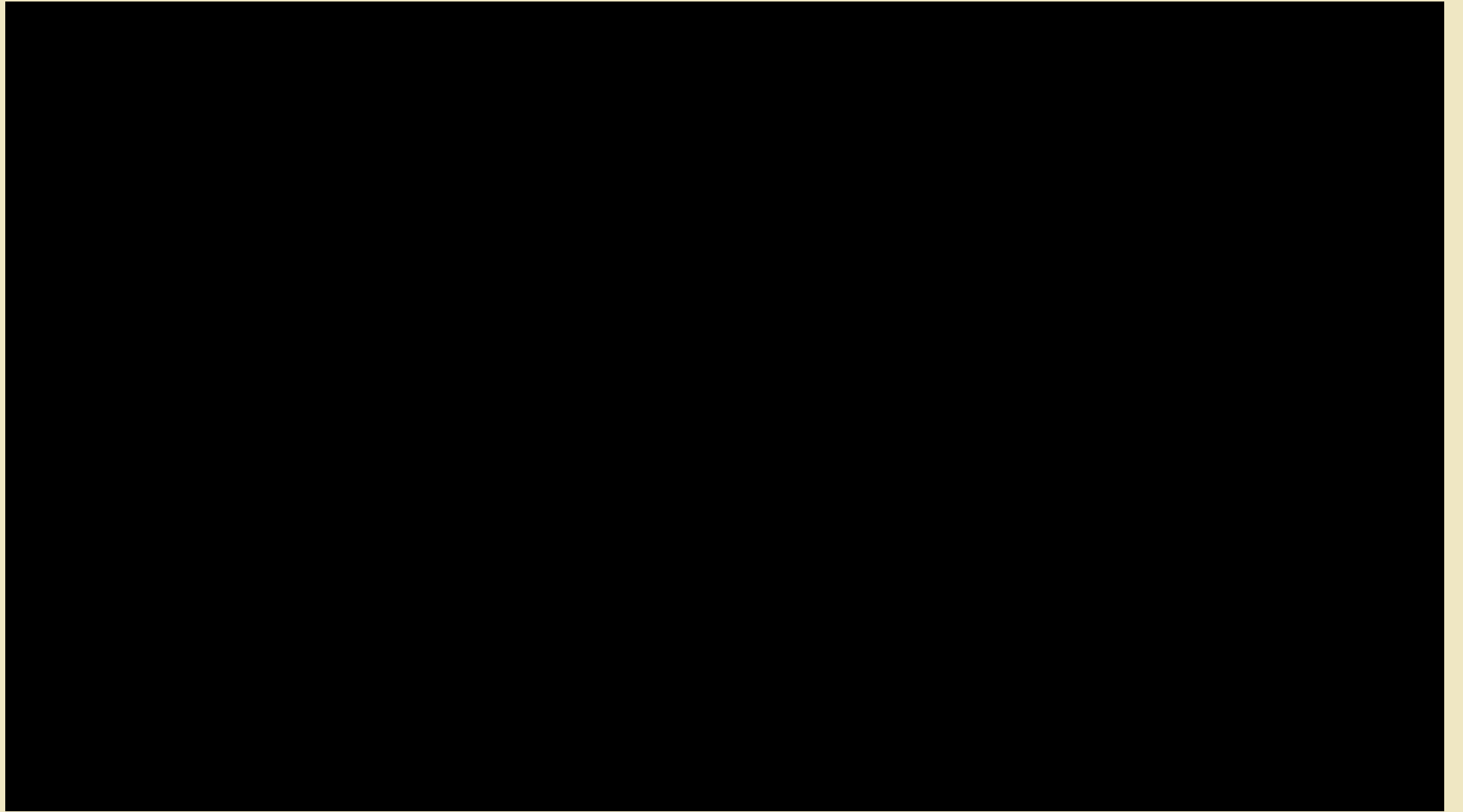





# Love Between Equals: Relationship as a Spiritual Path

Polly Young-Eisendrath, Ph.D.





# Love in the 21st Century

## Three Wishes for Intimate Love:

- Choose any partner, no matter the gender, tribe or background
- Develop an intimacy based on Equality, Mutuality, Reciprocity
- Feel seen, heard, and known authentically by partner

*MAKES LOVE MORE DIFFICULT THAN EVER*




# Taking Love Personally

**Personal Love Depends on Our Feelings:** *“I will stay as long as it suits me”*  
– makes us nervous to have so much riding on our feelings and preferences

**Traditional marriage** was hierarchical, arranged, grounded on the less personal vow *“until death do us part”* and the continuity of family, tradition, wealth and/or survival

**Our ideals of equality, mutuality and reciprocity** mean that we are very sensitive to being mistreated or treated unfairly; we can easily feel shamed or humiliated and then enraged: we are vulnerable to a humiliation-rage cycle even when no one has been abused or oppressed

**Perceived unfairness plays a powerful role in our self-esteem now**



## Personal Love Into True Love: Idealizing, Disillusionment, Enemy-Making, Acknowledging Limitations, Whole Self to Whole Self

- Begins with *falling in love* (*just right for me*) – idealizing the beloved and the illusion of completion, perfection, a beloved without flaws
- As we become a couple, *disillusionment* emerges as power struggles, feelings of pain and inequity, inevitably creating an *Intimate Enemy* who seems to cause pain, hurt, humiliation – communicated through projection, identification, projective identification
- Allows us to meet our own *enemy-making factors*
- Gives us an opportunity for self-knowledge, relating *Whole Self to Whole Self*
- We *find ourselves in someone else's eyes* and come to a fuller acceptance of self and other



# The Human Self is Relational

There is **no such thing as a self without other selves**: We need others to know ourselves, to be ourselves; the human self is an interactional process and not a “thing” -- emotions motivate our interactional self

***Primary Emotions***: at birth, motivational systems of joy, curiosity, disgust, fear and sadness compel interactions

***Secondary Emotions***: develop at 18 – 24 mos.: self-conscious emotions: shame, guilt, pride, envy, jealousy, self-pity, embarrassment

***Primary Compassion***: even before birth, the desire to soothe and care for another: directed, especially, to the (m)others on whom one depends after birth; the infant helps the (m)other



# True Love...

## Means Becoming a witness:

- Knowing the beloved well
- Accepting the beloved as she or he is, in reality
- Holding the beloved in mind
- Relating as Whole Self to Whole Self, with respect, through conflict as well as agreement

## Depends on:

- Mutual, reciprocal, equal relationship in which conflicts are negotiated
- mindfulness, empathy, equanimity, emotional maturity, open communication and truth-telling



# Idealization is the #1 Enemy of True Love

Idealization is the belief that the other person (or oneself) is perfect, complete or pure

- Parents idealize their children
- Children idealize their parents
- Romance demands idealization
- Romantic comedy feeds on idealization
- Pornography creates idealized and controlled “objects”





# True Love is Mutual

- Both partners are baring their hearts and are vulnerable
- Love on a two-way street is raw, challenging, and requires the skill of negotiating conflicts with respect
- Both people want to be seen and known and accepted for who they are: Whole Self to Whole Self
- We cannot control our equal, but develop a familiarity that is always mysterious in accepting our equal as Whole Self
- True love is not a prison because people are staying freely



# True Love Requires the 3 C's

- **Commitment:** staying with the same person over time, idealization transforms from disillusionment, into acceptance and growth of Whole Self to Whole Self
- **Containment:** learning how to create a Mindful Gap between yourself and your beloved by containing emotional threats and working within your own experience
- **Constraint:** accepting the constraints of being human, e.g. that adult pair bonding results in separation anxiety and grief (at loss); monogamy allows humans to trust the bond



# Enemy-making Factors

Our most useful enemies are close at hand because we can attempt to control them. We often find them among the people we are supposed to “love”: our partners, siblings, parents, children, leaders or teachers.

The more we idealize self or other, the more we are likely to need an enemy to manage our own feelings. For example, ideals of equality and reciprocity invite natural splits and competition of Self-Other. “You don’t treat me fairly or respond to my needs like I respond to yours.” The “subject” who projects harmful “otherness” is dependent on the “object” to defend the virtue or goodness or superiority of the self.



## To Make Matters Worse: Projective Identification

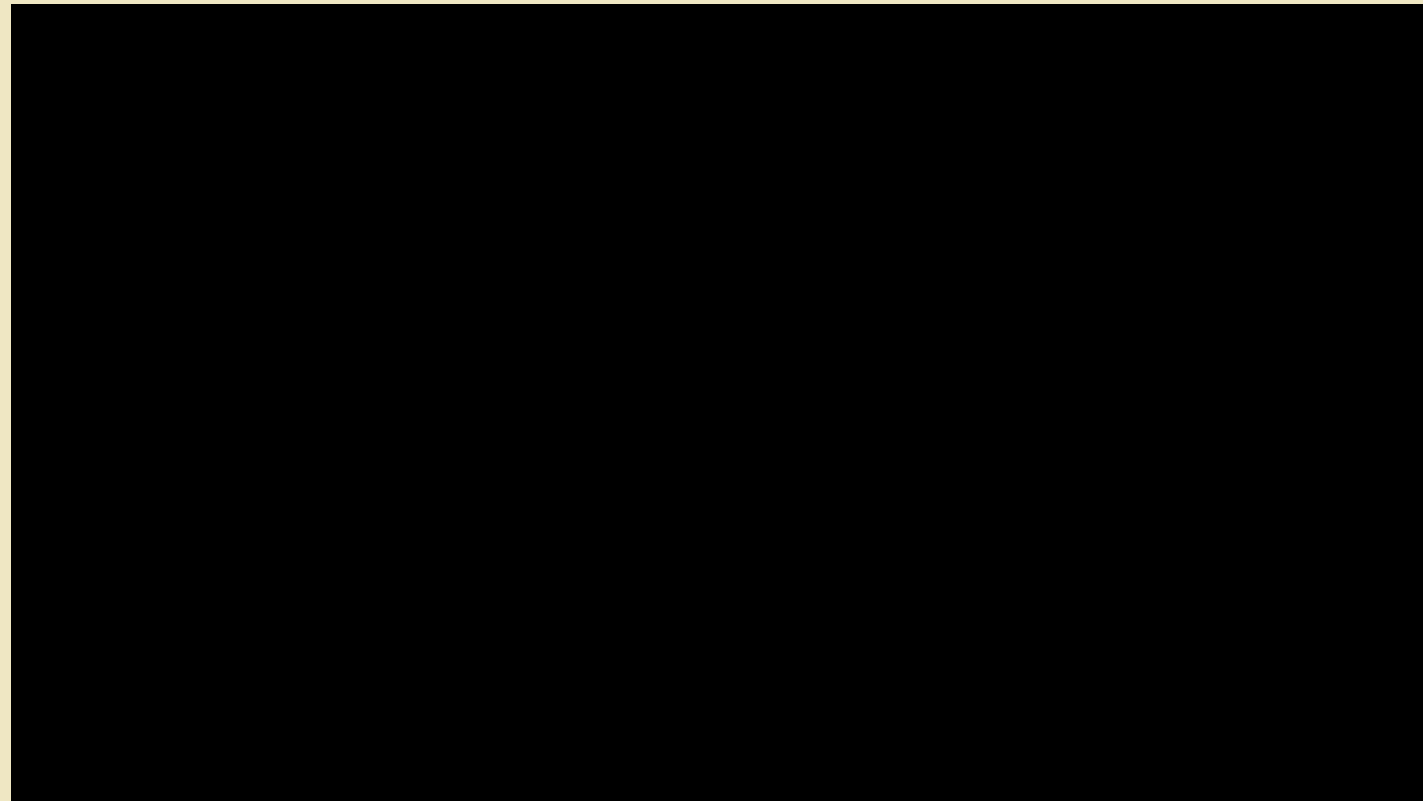
From infancy through adulthood, there is a confusing and pervasive emotional communication between people that takes place in a way that subtly or openly reinforces the splits and anxieties. In these cases, the projection of Otherness may be idealized or threatening, but it seems to be “true” when the receiver of the projection appears to “identify” with the projected meaning in a way that “confirms” the projection. In close relationships, projection and identification go both ways, with each person “directing” the other in a kind of “internal theater” of emotional meaning that is threatening to both.

Chronic projective identification in which the other person is perceived as the “enemy” will undermine trust and even make people physically ill if they experience being “stuck” with the enemy.



# Example #1: A Problem of “Freedom”

Katie wants her “freedom” to carry out activities “as she decides.” Katie structures her day because she does not have to work fulltime. Will works fulltime in a labor job and then comes home to cook dinner. He wants Katie to do the dishes.





# True Love Requires...

- Seeing/feeling/knowing your own need for an enemy in the specifics of your own emotional patterns and narratives
- Holding a “mindful gap” (mind the gap!) between you and your beloved so that you recognize your “not knowing” the other person: you never know another person “like the back of your hand”
- Real Dialogue: speaking for yourself, paraphrasing and listening and remaining curious and open
- Embracing the imperfection of human love especially the fact that we are about 95% unconscious



# Real Dialogue Creates a Mindful Gap

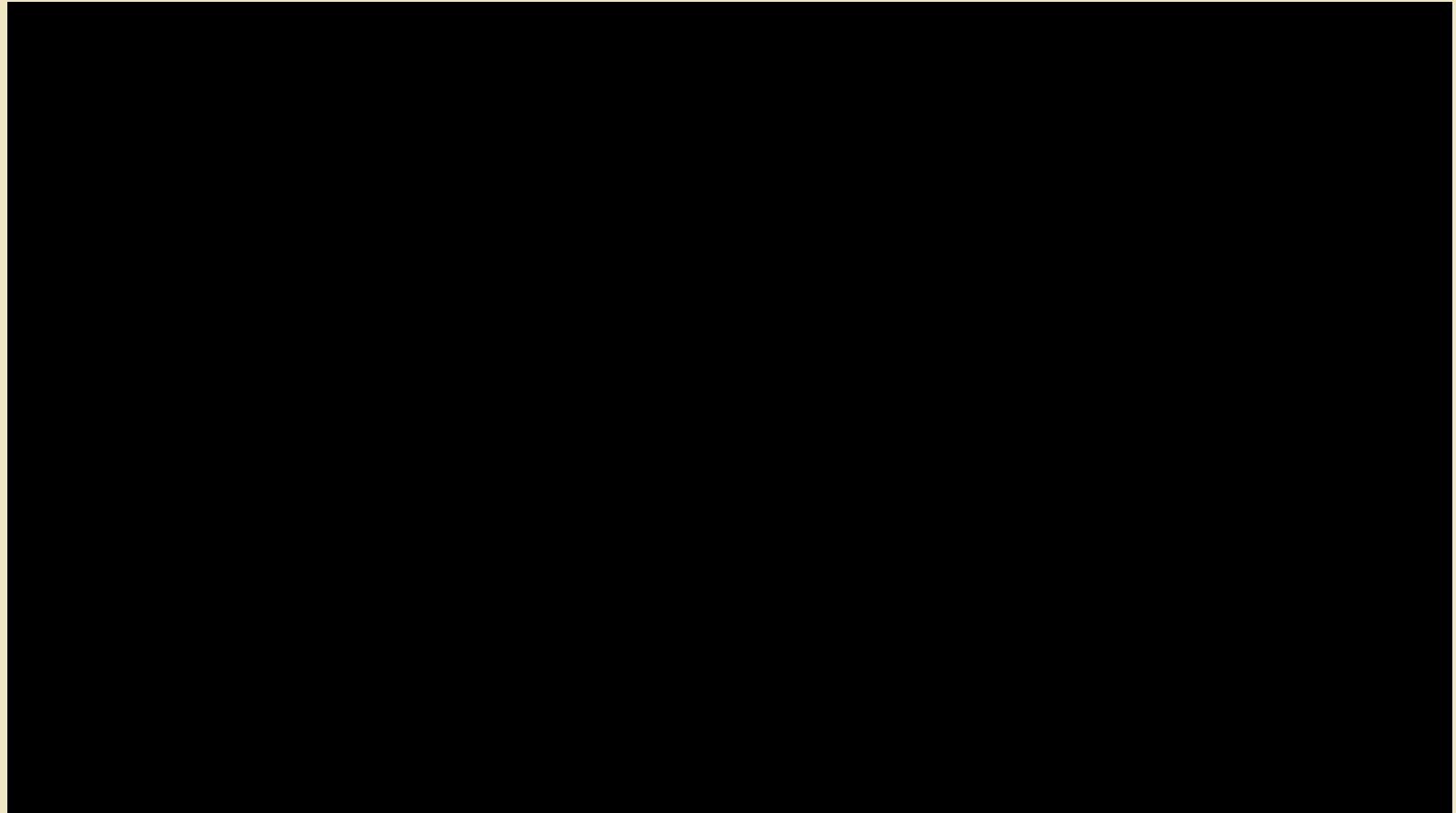
Special kind of conversation that permits those in conflict to create a “mindful space” or to “mind the gap” between them. Three fundamental skills:

1. *Speaking for yourself*: connect to your own subjectivity, feel your feelings, and know what is going on within you, and speak in a way that is both kind and authentic. This requires clarity, equanimity and empathy.
2. *Paraphrasing before responding*: step into the other’s words and experiences and find out if you understand before you respond. Always check as to whether you have the gist.
3. *Remaining curious and modest*: Keep in mind Self/Other are co-created.



## Example #2: Katie and Will Disentangled

In place of one partner blaming the other or shaming the self, Katie and Will begin to see each other as separate and different subjectivities in a way that leads to No Blame and no need for an enemy.







# How to Engender Real Dialogue Skills in Yourself

- Reflect on your tendencies and mental habits with the others around you so that you can see *why and how you create your enemies*
- Recognize yourself as a human being who naturally *creates enemies*
- Remember that you can also cultivate your in-born compassion about your human condition: that you cannot see your disavowed motives clearly and you need others to help you



## Assume:

1. *You are aggressive and self-protective:* you have a limbic system and an ego complex
2. *You will want to find an enemy in someone in order to protect yourself:* generally, you will want this enemy to be close at hand, to be someone who is “supposed to know” what you want and who you are
3. Be curious about what you are doing when you want to blame another or feel “superior” to someone – why?



# You Need Others to Develop Yourself

You cannot develop the skills of Real Dialogue by yourself. You cannot develop them solely through meditative practices, without engaging in dyadic relationships to test your skills. Within your closest relationships (those you are “supposed to love”), you will find your greatest challenges. Meet them or try to.

When your limbic system is activated and you feel emotionally threatened because *someone you love* has hurt, harmed, or rejected you, that is the #1 testing ground for your own skills: Can you remain committed, contained, and stay mindful of your own emotionally activated experience *before* you do or say something? Can you work within yourself in the presence of your beloved “enemy”?



# Wisdom and Compassion for the Human Self

- Compassion for the human self: it is profoundly interdependent and profoundly unconscious
- In order to act consciously, we depend on unconscious processes like projection
- Loving self and others cannot be perfected, but it can be embraced as imperfect