



The Well-Tempered Clavier revolutionized the history of the piano. Before Bach's famous publication, the clavier (the precursor to the modern piano) was limited in range. It was tuned to a particular key; the strings were strummed instead of hammered, and each note had the exact same volume and duration. Bach discovered that if you constrained the tuning only slightly, you could get all 24 keys (12 major and 12 minor) on the same keyboard. With that broader capability, the clavier became a more attractive instrument. With the addition of hammered strings and the sustain, the modern piano was born. It was an instrument of such impressive versatility that composers would create music for it alone.

Success in relationships requires the well-tempered heart. Most of us play only a limited range of melodies; we can play well with only a few others. We quickly run out of the versatility needed for robust and vital relationships. The well-tempered heart is a choice, a discipline, and a skill set. It is a way of increasing our range and adaptability by expanding the range of inter-actions we can easily entertain and support. "Being in love" is not enough; it is only the motivation to learn what is enough.



Starting a million years ago

- Mammals evolved 3 powerful brain systems
 - *Lust*: testosterone
 - *Romantic love*: dopamine, norepinephrine and serotonin
 - *Attachment*: oxytocin and vasopressins
- None of these systems involve the higher brain functions
- Although linked, they are only loosely so
- The effect was to ensure human(oids) would mate and rear offspring as a team through infancy

We share with all mammals a set of brain systems that gave us an evolutionary advantage over the reptiles and birds that once ruled the Earth. The first of these systems is LUST, which awakens our desire to mate. It is without object, merely an "intolerable neural itch". It is based on testosterone in both sexes. It is a drive as strong and as unruly as hunger or thirst. Apparently the culture may define the triggers, but the brain circuitry that is fired is firmly lodged in the mid-brain.

The second system is ROMANTIC LOVE, which serves to focus our mating energy on a particular mating choice. It is characterized by elevated levels of dopamine and norepinephrine and lowered levels of serotonin. We experience it as a sense of elation, of obsessive focus on our beloved, and an overwhelming desire for emotional and sexual union. We can become fiercely protective of sexual exclusivity as we seek to possess the target of our desires.

The last system is ATTACHMENT, which enables the couple to stay together long enough to bring their infant to the safety of a multi-age play group, in which other older children take on some of the responsibility for ensuring the survival of our genes into the next generation.

While these systems interact (oxytocin, for example, reduces levels of testosterone), they are still capable of independent and overlapping activation. We can "love" more than one. We can be attached to one person, and still feel intense sexual attraction to another. This system evolved to ensure our mating, but it was not designed to support long-term intimacy or monogamy. In fact, adulterous affairs are a genetic advantage to both males and females. (This is not an argument in favor of affairs; our genetic heritage is our starting point, but it is not our upper limit. We are certainly capable of making choices, adhering to values, or appreciating the long-term consequences of our behavior.)

Although we experience these brain systems as intensely personal, they are the chemical scripts written millions of years ago to enable humans to survive and to evolve. We are not a slave to our DNA, but neither are we able to simply ignore the siren voices that bubble up from our primitive beginnings. What we can do is acknowledge the newness of our desire for sustainable emotional intimacy. As we have in so many other spheres, we can define the skills and attitudes needed and stretch.



Starting from 200 years ago

- The individual was lost in the ebb and flow of the community
- Marriage was sublimated to the needs of the family
- As the individual emerged as economically viable, so emerged the concept of individuality...and the desire for intimacy
- In the mid-twentieth century, we started to *value* emotional intimacy...with neither a built-in brain system nor the requisite personal skills or social supports

As we found a new value on individuality, we also discovered the companion need for intimacy. For our ancestors in the 1600 and 1700's, intimacy was less of a pressing concern. The individual was immersed in the life of the community.

The emergence of the desire for emotional intimacy is a dramatic departure in the evolution of marriage. Originally marriage was a cultural afterthought to basic brain circuits; then it became an economic and social instrument. It was a mechanism for social order and distributing economic assets. But now we bring to it a distinctly modern desire for personal intimacy and support, for emotional closeness and authenticity.

So, despite its age, the institution is facing new demands. As a result, marriage is actually an untested crucible to contain a complex relationship. It houses a combination of primitive drives as well as sophisticated choices. It opens us to our deepest personal desires as well as to the strongest social forces.

And we have only experimented with our new vision of marriage for a few generations. The only thing really shocking about the 50% divorce rate is our expectation that it should be much less. Given the novelty and subtlety of the task, we shouldn't expect much better.

NOTE: The nostalgic belief that the divorce rate was once much lower is actually an historical distortion; the rate of marital dissolution (through death in childbirth, desertion, or divorce) has been constant since the 1820s (about 1.5%/year). The only change is the *method* of dissolution, but not the rate. Marriage is as (un)stable now as it has ever been.



From this broader perspective...

Emotionally intimate, personally satisfying relationships are a *novel* and *noble* experiment ...

But what does the early data suggest?

Sociologists conducted interviews with thousands of couples. They spoke with each spouse alone and then with the couple. The category scheme that resulted was their attempt to bring some order to an otherwise scattered array of couple experiences.

They found couples (1) constantly engaged in low-level, contained conflict. They found couples (2) who had lowered their expectations to the point that they were automatically successful, because they sought after so little. And they found (3) couples who were kind and considerate, but nothing more than fairly good roommates. They found a (4) surprisingly small cohort who were truly "intimate" in any sense of the word. Perhaps 1 in 10...or less

The need for the well tempered heart is obscured in our culture. We maintain a comprehensive denial that relationships are challenging, despite the obvious and widespread evidence that they are anything but simple. In all our fairy tales, the meat of the story is how the lovers find each other, and then "happily ever after" happens. And today we have a generation of young people questioning the fairy tale, but their peers and parents usually have nothing to offer by way of an adequate answer.

Most people in their 20's have spent way more time and money learning golf, swimming, or tennis than they have learning the critical skills for intimate relationships (fair fighting, clean emotional expression, sexual expression of intimacy, handling difficult conversations, etc.).

And so...



Healthy, well-
balanced
relationships are the
exception ... not the
rule

*And we should start
asking why?*

The net result of our cultural distortions and blind spots is that healthy, intimate relationships are rare. Among young people there is a widespread schizophrenic optimism that deep love and commitment will be enough to “make it happen”, while at the same time they remain pessimistic about how long it will last. So they invest little in relationship skills beyond the requirements of dating and courtship. And even if they were willing to invest more, there are few forums where the realities of complex relationships are openly discussed. Look at what passes for “sex education” in our culture; it is little more than a litany of anatomy lessons, potential diseases, and thinly veiled moral admonitions. Where are the widely available classes on how sexual intimacy and emotional intimacy are linked? On the typical stages of emotional bonding? How to fight well in close relationship? On the importance of boundaries between lovers?

The alternative to blind optimism, however, is not fatalism. Sound relationships are clearly possible; what we have learned is just that they are not automatic or straightforward. It makes more sense to pursue the well-tempered heart. That is, let’s assume that good relationships are an acquired taste, not some reward for good intentions or automatic genetic disposition.

And given the subject matter, we should not be surprised that some of the necessary disciplines are counterintuitive.

Because...

Our colloquial notion of 'closeness' is actually a cluster of different kinds of connections

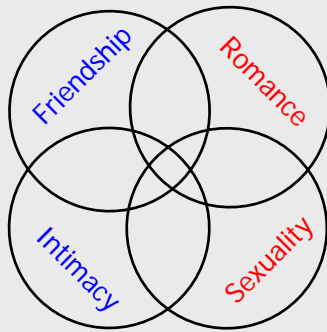


We don't see this aspect of our lives clearly. Experience is often confusing. Feedback is hard to secure.

What we think of as "intimacy" or "closeness" is not a single dimension; it is multiple dimensions. And they don't all fit together. The reason the game is played so poorly is not because the players are unmotivated, it is because the rules of the game are inherently complex. Only the most skilled can navigate this terrain successfully.

When so many people play the game so badly, it's time to stop flogging the players and time to start investigating the rules of the game.

The Gordian Knot



A more realistic approach to these dimensions comes only as we “unpack” our beliefs and behaviors within each domain. We have chosen friendship and emotional intimacy because they are the most generative. If we become more adept in these domains, romance and sexuality are much easier to navigate.

As a minimal set, let's acknowledge the presence of these 4 dimensions in complex, long-term, intimate relationships:

FRIENDSHIP is the most pervasive. It is the simple enjoyment of each other's company, shared interests, the giving and taking of support and comfort.

ROMANCE is more compelling, but also more brittle. Romance can erupt and evaporate in a second. It is heavily reliant on fantasy and mystery for its power. Friendship is more honest, but also less volatile.

SEXUALITY is often equated with love (after all, we call it 'love making') but in reality it exists somewhat independently. It may be the expression of our romantic attachment or emotional closeness, but it is also driven by lust, curiosity, anger, or simple social climbing.

EMOTIONAL INTIMACY is the most elusive of the 4 to define well. It is the ability to characterize and articulate our internal state, the courage to share who we really are, even at the risk of rejection. It means shedding the common self-presentation that we build through every facet of our lives. It means forever giving up the illusion that other people “make us feel” any certain way, and embracing fully our role in shaping our own perceptions and feelings.

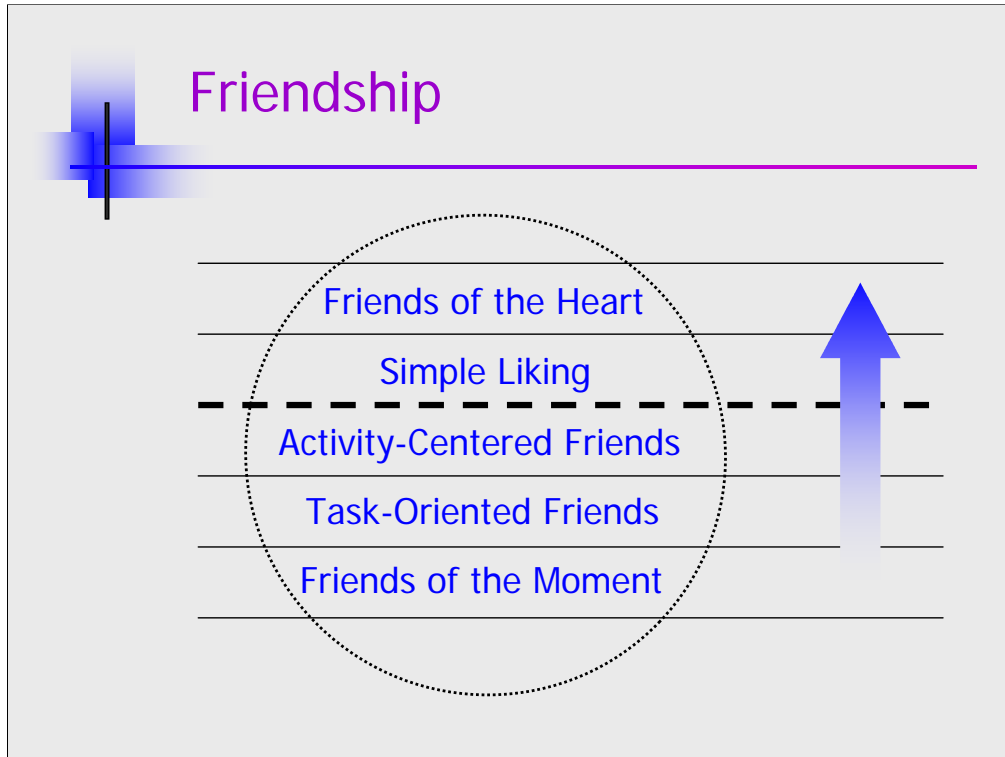
Emotional intimacy is rarer than the other dimensions, but it defines the outer boundaries of the relationship. That is, we often recall moments of our most intense sharing as the defining features of the relationship; those moments set our expectations for what might happen and what might be beyond our range.

Any particular relationship could have any subset of these 4 dimensions in almost any proportions. Most of us would hope for that elusive balance point in the middle, yet most relationships are decidedly lopsided.

This is not an exhaustive list. Couples could look for “closeness” on other dimensions as well: spirituality, art, even physical capability. I once worked with a student who would not date a man unless he could run the 100 yard dash as fast as she could; she just didn't want to bother with someone who was not into athletics as much as she.

Just making these distinctions helps to clarify some of the common problems in relationships. Just think how often do we...

1. Confuse one dimension for another. Such as mistaking romantic passion for emotional intimacy.
2. Assume that one dimension will generate the others. For example, believing that sexual intimacy will spark emotional intimacy. Or that simple companionship will produce emotional intimacy. Or that just because we are emotionally intimate, that the others will follow.
3. Assume that each dimension evolves 'naturally', without special attention, skill, or effort.



Friendship comes in at least 5 different flavors. We always start out as “Friends of the Moment”, drawn together by some circumstance, such as having a friend in common, living on the same floor, belonging to the same car pool, or taking the same class. In the interest of civility, we learn to “act friendly”, although the friendship would evaporate if the bonding circumstance were to change.

One step up is friendship borne out of a shared task interest. Perhaps we belong to the same study group, support the same candidate, or belong to the same software team. The concern for each other is directly proportional to our commitment to the task that links us, but goes no further. The other is instrumental to achieving the task.

Activity-centered friendships look similar on the surface, but the concern for the other person is deeper. The activity is merely the skeleton which structures the encounter. The Friday lunch time basketball game, golf buddies, or couples meeting to play bridge would be examples. In fact, there are often norms about getting “too involved” with the activity to the detriment of the relationships woven through it.

Simple liking surfaces when the desire to spend time together needs no pretense of structure. It is understood that I simply want the other’s company because I just like them (not their competence or their utilitarian value).

Friends of the Heart emerge when someone becomes “like family” to us. We cannot imagine *not* having them as a close friend. The bond can survive long periods of separation and even years of negative feeling.



What about Intimacy?

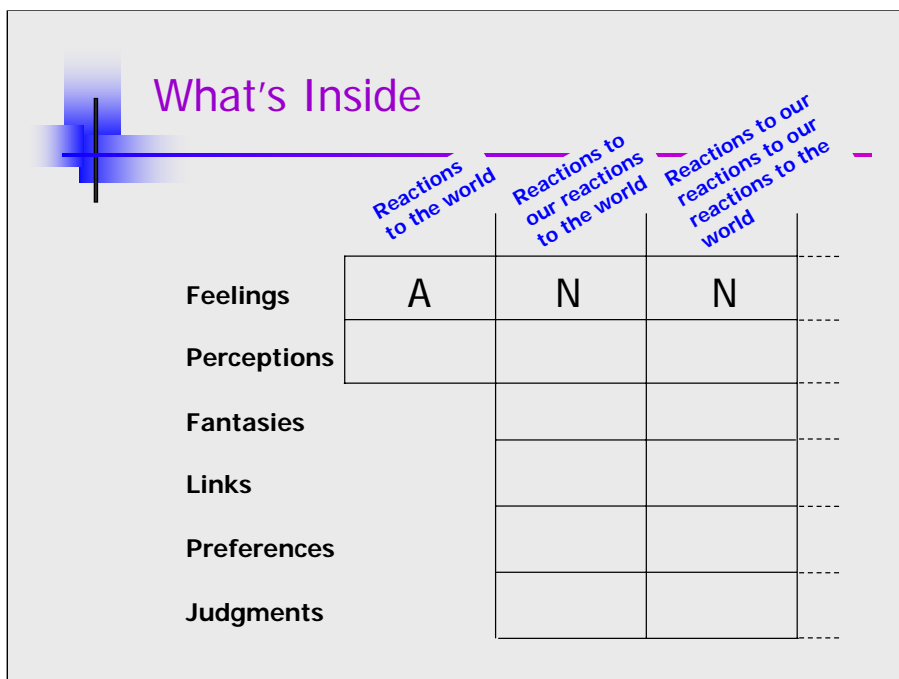
What separates humans from all other species is that we have thoughts and feelings *about* our thoughts and feelings.

Emotional intimacy does not have the same, neat layered structure. It is much more complex.

Unraveling emotional intimacy requires a short detour into a most interesting question. We have long wondered what distinguishes humanity from our more primitive relatives on the planet. Neither tool use nor language have proven to be key differentiators. A promising line of thought is the one above.

This capacity to reflect on our experience is both the source of culture and the genesis of insanity. It is a blessing and a curse. It is, nonetheless, the essence of our humanity.

It is also the starting point to understanding the nature of emotional intimacy. This most elusive of the relationship dimensions requires more than simply “spilling our guts” or “saying what’s on the tip of your tongue”. Unvarnished honesty can be cruel and selfish. Emotional intimacy is neither.

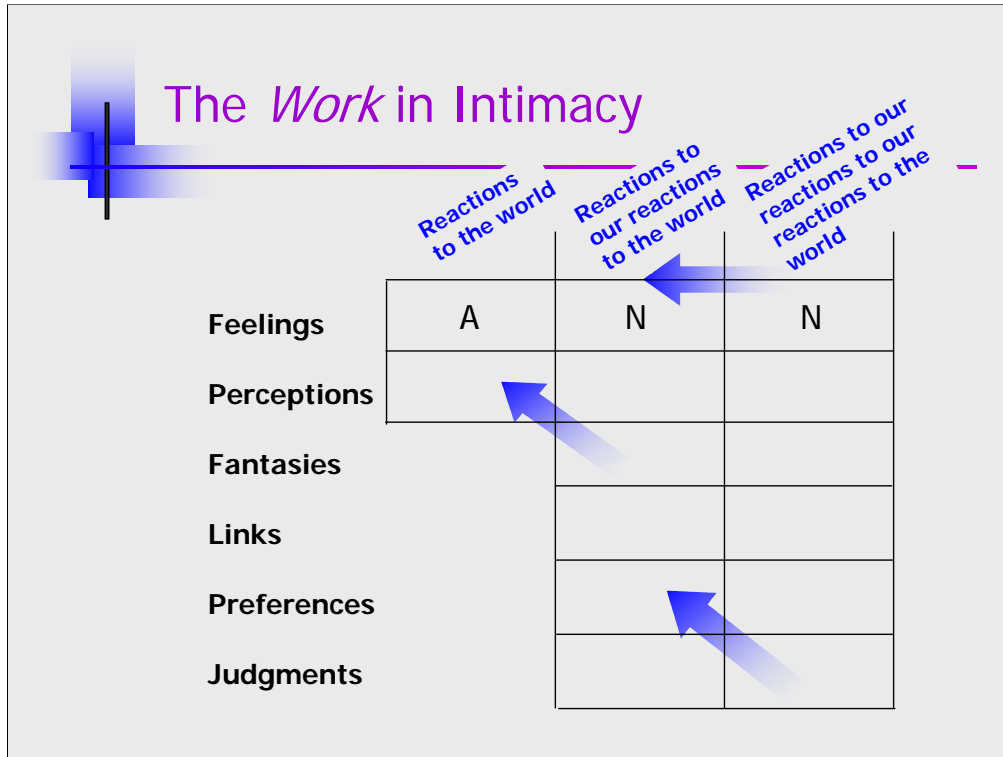


There are a variety of ways to characterize our internal, psychic life. But this listing will suffice. The important point is that our ongoing, subjective experience is a jumble of different elements. And they flow freely back and forth. And they are generative. Given our capacity to have thoughts and feelings about our thoughts and feelings, any subjective event can be a catalyst for a whole flood of additional events. Only a small portion of our psychic life is a direct response to the outside world. Most of the time we are responding to ourselves.

There are numerous expressions that pass for emotional expression, one of the supposed contributors to an intimate relationship. If we look at them more carefully, we find that they do not reveal emotions, they are some combination of judgment, fantasy, and subsequent emotional arousal (typically unnamed). They only borrow the legitimacy of emotion to add credence to our demands or our views.

- I feel like you don't care (my fantasy of your feeling)
- I feel like you're holding back (my judgment of your behavior)
- I feel like you never share your feelings (more judgment; no statement of feeling)
- I feel that you're not listening
- I feel betrayed (judgment of your behavior against some unstated standard of loyalty)
- I feel guilty (my imagined judgment from you of my behavior)
- I feel jealous (lots of fantasies and self-judgment)
- I feel second-rate with you (judgment from self or other)

So the work of being emotionally present is not simple. It requires that you respect the distinctions between feeling and other psychic events, and that you understand the distinction between first-order and second- or third-order "feelings". The work of emotional intimacy is not simply spontaneous expression; that would lead to sharing only the last event in some cognitive string. Rather it is a willingness to sort yourself out, hopefully with the support of a caring partner. And eventually finding the first events in the sequence. It is a process of self-discovery, not just self-revelation. The anxiety we feel about being emotionally intimate is not so much how our partners will feel about us when they know the truth. It is more likely our fear of finding out what our truth is.



The challenge in emotional intimacy is multifaceted, but some of the most critical are the following:

- Acknowledging our higher-order reactions (as in admitting that you're angry because of a fantasy you had about your partner's feelings) and working our back to lower-order reactions (such as "this is what I saw" and "this was my immediate feeling")
- Acknowledging that much of what we think we know or saw is actually our fantasy (such as imagining that your partner worked so hard on her chem assignment because she's attracted to the TA)
- Moving from our higher order judgments back to lower-order preferences (such as saying "I want your undivided attention for a few minutes" rather than "If you really loved me you'd want to know what I'm going through right now")



Some Counseling Strategies

Help your client sort their experience of friendship vs. romance vs. sexuality vs. emotional intimacy

- Don't confuse one for the other
- Point them to the separate work required for each domain

Help your client work back to 1st and 2nd order experience

- Honor their experience, but distinguish between fantasy, judgment, perception, and feeling
- Find ways to test out fantasies
- Help them restate judgments as requests

These strategies are different from the classical peer counseling approach; they go beyond reflecting feelings and encouraging more self-expression. So use them with some caution; they will take you into new territory as a counselor.

Mostly they suggest new ways to phrase questions.



Some Useful Questions

- What did you actually see? What happened?
- What did you imagine was going on “between the lines”? Behind the scenes?
- What was your initial reaction to all that?
- What meaning did you make of it in your own head?
- What do you tell yourself about people who behave that way?
- What do you wish had happened instead?



Questions?

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