

The Intimacy of Being Real

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What is intimacy? Is it a kiss? Knowing somebody's secret? Intimacy involves closeness, but is it the closeness of sharing an ice cream cone, or does it really mean touching?

Focusing on intimacy as a state of being will lead to a series of useful ideas like honesty, vulnerability, having faith in ourselves and in another, the sacredness of who we are, and connecting to the divine in the other and in ourselves. But all of that is only a flurry of mental activity around concepts that as it turns out, point away from the simple truth that intimacy is nothing more than participation...participation *with* our self, with another; participation *with* our real lives. It will take me some time to explain what I mean.

I recently saw again the movie *Dances With Wolves*. In it, the white hero has joined a Sioux village, taken up their ways and married. The Sioux have named him Dances With Wolves. He loved the people in this village, had been welcomed in and was fully at home with them. They were *his* village...but a point comes when he has to leave or put them in grave danger by his presence. The Chief tries to talk him into staying, but fails. He says his good-byes with each, but the last man, one with whom he had a special bond, cannot bear to say goodbye and rushes off just when his turn comes. Our hero leaves the village on horseback, followed by his wife and a pack horse with their belongings. They wend their way along the narrow track of a mountainside leading out of a deep valley. The valley is silent except for the quiet clip clop of the horses. Suddenly they hear a man shouting at the top of his lungs up ahead, from high above them. "Dances With Wolves, Dances With Wolves, don't you know that I am your friend? I will always be your friend." Our hero stops his horse and looks up. It is the man who could not say goodbye. He shouts it again, his voice echoing up and down the narrow valley. "Dances With Wolves, don't you know that I am your friend? I will always be your friend." The shouting continues, over and over.

In response to that man, Dances With Wolves simply sits motionless, with full attention looking up at him. The shouting fills the valley, "Don't you know that I am your friend? I will always be your friend." We see a long close-up of our hero's face. He is not proud, haughty or vain, not even humble or embarrassed by such a public display that the whole village can hear. He is just looking intently at the man shouting, focused on fully being with the man. The man high on the hill was expressing himself with all his heart, and in view of his shyness, this was particularly magnificent. Our hero is letting it all in. He is still for so long that letting in the full message can be the only thing he is doing. Eventually, he looks thoughtfully down, as if to say, "I guess there's nothing to do but go on," and urges his horse forward. The other man is still shouting.

Most of the time, when we hear a story we focus on the action, on what is being done. I'd like to review that story but this time look at it in terms of participation. Each man in the village had to say goodbye to a good friend, but Dances With Wolves had to say goodbye to everyone in the only village where he truly felt at home and at peace. Yet, in spite of this, and the fact that he was going into the unknown at the beginning of winter with virtually nothing, he did not shrink back from the task or avoid it as many of us would do. In this context, his goodbyes were courageous: they were warm, heartfelt and appreciative. Dances With Wolves, unlike many of us in a difficult spot, *continued to participate with the real world*, when he might have escaped to wishful thinking.

His friend, however, could not be with a real goodbye and took off. In the silence of aloneness that would have followed, he would have experienced what it is like to lose the friendship and end it that way. Like so many of us, he would have said next day, "I didn't even say goodbye." (pause) Fortunately, he didn't leave it there. He then put himself back in connection with the real world, figured out what he really needed to say, and found a way to deliver it before it was too late. We know he connected first because that is what allowed him to sort out what he

needed to say. "I will always be your friend." In the presence of that real truth spoken, no goodbye was needed.

Intimacy is participation with what is *real*, with the cold, hard facts, even if the facts are about opinions or feelings or concepts. Let's have another example.

In the story we heard this morning, Harriet told us about a man who grew a moustache and his merchant friend who grew jealous and picked a fight with him. Now, who was participating, and who wasn't? It sure looks like the jealous merchant stayed engaged with his friend, but now we should look closely, for he did not. His behaviour drove them apart and was heading toward murder.

Behaviour that puts distance between people is actually a form of non-participation. Stay with me; this sounds strange but it's very useful. In this story there is a flurry of arguments and sword-waving that is designed to take the eye away from the fact that the merchant is no longer engaging with his real friend about a real problem. He's living in a fantasy in his mind. The issue was jealousy over a moustache, but instead of the merchant keeping the friendship first and foremost as he attempts to be real about his feelings, and maybe having to mention it for months and make jokes about it until the friend gives in and shaves it off, what does he do? He takes an uncomplimentary point of view about his friend's intentions. The merchant assumes the worst of his friend, and then responds to the assumptions as though true. He creates a whole scene about honour with a duel to the death and waves his sword. It's a whole lot of activity and it is a story, a fiction; it's based on the unreal.

How did he get to that place? Put yourself in his shoes when he sees the moustache and then move time forward in very slow motion. First, he is jealous, then he puts the friendship at arm's length, then makes up a story about the man trying to make him jealous, (pause) but he distances himself from the friendship first. He breaks the intimacy and picks a fight. Then he justifies it with blame. (pause)

Now the friend has an interesting problem. His friendship seems to be over and his life is in serious danger. But he does not in response distance himself from the merchant. He sees the reality, that the merchant is heading to a duel, but he only relates to his friend as a friend. He shaves, then goes, puts his hands on the merchant's shoulders and says, "My friend, look at me." This man never stops participating with the real truth, and he interrupts his friend's unreal "dream" by inviting the merchant to look at him and start interacting with reality as well. When we maintain intimacy with real life we have true power, leadership and effectiveness.

In this story the way the merchant puts distance between himself and his friend is by arguing, by assuming false motives, and by getting into a fight. Let's look at other ways.

I got on a bus two years ago that was nearly empty. It sat at a subway station and a mom with stroller got on as well. The baby was about six months old; old enough to sit up but mostly it was a babbling, inquisitive lump. The mom was young, possibly only twenty. Now, my expectations of young mothers are quite low, and I gave her kudos for actually paying attention to her child...a boy, I think. He was lying down in the stroller. She played with him as the minutes stretched out, made noises, acted funny, gave him a small rattle, then sat back with a sigh when he became absorbed in the toy. As the bus pulled out and turned down the street, he fussed a bit—bored no doubt with the limited view from his back. She engaged him again, entertained him and then sat back. Next time, she let him fuss a bit longer. He grew louder.

She spent time looking at him, interacting directly, being funny and interesting. Her back was to me, but I got to see the look on his face. He was looking up at her with a smile and they were clearly looking into each others' eyes. That child's face was happy as long as mom was looking at him, and when she stopped, he knew exactly how to get her to entertain him again, and she did so, over and

over. He might instead have been very happy to stand on her lap and look over her shoulder at the scenery. It would have given them a few moments of quiet closeness and real connection. And it would have given her some relief from being the main act.

I can see him now at age twenty. Let's assume for the moment that this ten-minute glimpse on the bus is characteristic of her parenting style over his whole childhood. There are some useful things to note. At age 20 he now needs friends and partners who will pay a lot of attention to him. They won't have to be really *with* him, only be fun and entertaining, like mom. And he will like them only as long as they keep entertaining *him*. When he meets other people who are quiet, who know how to share a nourishing moment of silence together, who can listen quietly until the first wave of his words has flowed and the deeper, real communication behind it comes forth, he will pass them over. They will move too slowly for him. Opportunities for real connection will not be recognized. He's not living with depth; he's looking for surface entertainment.

How can I know this? I don't. It's an example, but the point holds and I'll try to show you how. Think again about mom and baby. They are doing a dance together. He asks for attention by his voice; she gives it to him. It's tiring work but she keeps at it. She is clearly experienced at doing this. And she drops it when she can. Her sitting back with a sigh is a clue, [no judgment here] and so is the fact that she has barely touched her child. Entertaining one another can be used as a subtle form of distancing, a way to keep someone from being with the real us. We can keep people at arms' length by entertaining them as well as by picking a fight. We tell stories or maintain some kind of act as we live our life. We might have a set personality as a mask, such as happy or goofy or businesslike...these are just a few examples.

I am not trying to say that all entertainment is escape. Sometimes it is the very opposite, a most useful and respectable tool for presenting *reality* for us to see and help us participate more fully with our lives.

There are many, many ways to avoid connecting with our real lives. I can't cover even most of them now, but I'll give you three common ones. Maybe we have mounting debt—to the point that we hate to look at our bills more than once a month? If so, it's time to participate with reality: keep track of everything we spend, pay for each item as we purchase it and stay intimately connected with our real situation, so that we can stay out of our make believe world of hopes and dreams, and make appropriate, effective choices now in the moment to moment, for our real life. Maybe we need a better paying job, and maybe it's time we do something about getting it. Keeping our eye on our real expenses helps us stay real about our situation.

Example 2: Maybe we are increasingly dissatisfied with our relationship, and we are finding ways to keep our distance? If so, it's time to participate with reality: quit performing our usual acts of being nice or dramatic or silly or nothing's wrong. You know, whatever we are doing that let us leave the present moment and not be with our real disappointment, our real anger, our real loneliness or dissatisfaction.

I once heard a man tell a story in which he said something and his wife responded, "That hurt! Why did you say that?" "So, I took a look," he said. And the man then said to his wife, "You know the other day when you told me about the blah, blah, blah?" "Yes," she said. "Well I was jealous. I wanted to hurt you. And I'm sorry." This is participating in reality. This is intimacy. And vulnerability is present, but intimacy isn't "being vulnerable," like the right thing to do. "Being vulnerable" and doing the "right thing" are also subtle but real exits that take us to live in the world of hopes and dreams instead of participating in reality.

Example 3: Maybe we have health concerns that we've ignored in the hopes that we'll get better. If so, it's time to participate with reality: talk to the doctor, take the tests, get the facts and the opinions. We sometimes even use the treatments as a way to escape reality, like the man I heard of who got a chemotherapy treatment the day before he died. I can understand very well why we choose to run into hopes and dreams, and I am not criticizing. But surely that man was not present to his full reality, and if he had noticed it, mightn't he have had some other more meaningful things to do with his last day?

The point of all of this is that the question remains as to what we are doing with ourselves as the minutes of our lives slip by permanently. Do we want a real life, or are we happy to have on our tombstone "She was busy living some other life"?

Thich Nhat Hanh put it this way:

"If we are too busy, if we are carried away every day by our projects, our uncertainty, our craving, how can we have the time to stop and look deeply into the situation—our own situation, the situation of our beloved one, the situation of our family and of our community, and the situation of our nation and of the other nations?"

Intimacy is participation with reality. It gives us power: we can look at reality, look at what we truly want, and make our choices. Furthermore, as we make our choices, there is support from life itself. The reading earlier about the child looking for the blue ball shows someone opening to his own inner resources. It shows the grace, the serendipity of the universe that is available when we stay out of our hopes, stay connected to ourselves and participate in the real world with our real selves and real choices.

I leave you now with this quote from Melvana Rumi as you contemplate your participation with what is real:

“Be occupied, then, with what you really value and let the thief take something else.