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Relationships 101

Love for the Long Haul: the emotional part

By Tracy Morris

The desire to couple is strong and, for most of us, both the most essential and challenging task of our lives. Few of us have had helpful, if any, role models in our lives for establishing and maintaining healthy, enjoyable GLBT love partnerships. Even the rare gay man or lesbian who grew up comfortably with same-sex parents has to confront a society that seems to actively pursue the disruption and dissolution of adult relationships in general.

"Your friendship with your partner should develop into the most important relationship in your life and stay that way over time," advises psychologist David Genac, Ph.D. Genac points to two key factors that make an emotionally healthy relationship: strong friendship and the intention, if not solid ability, to fairly resolve your inevitable conflicts. As sensible as the advice sounds, not all relationships are built on such a solid foundation. Some of that goes back to a lack of role models, and additional burdens can be brought to bear on a couple by the very folks who showed them how it's done.

"Unfortunately, GLBT relationships are not always supported by family members or the community," explains Genac, "so we need to take extra steps to make sure our partners are a top priority." As an example, Genac describes a quandary that many of us have faced: the family-event invitation for you, and you alone. Genac says it's important to your continuing partnership to speak up. "Let the host know that you want to attend the event as a couple, just like the other couples who will be attending. If your partner is not welcome, you should try to get the host to honor your request or consider declining the invitation. Standing up for your relationship is a symbol to your partner that he or she is the primary person in your life."

On conflict resolution, Genac suggests you first stop thinking that "good" relationships don't have conflict. Not only are conflicts part of the deal for all couples, he says, but they will bring you closer if handled well. "The best way to address your concerns with your partner is to try to focus on the problem behavior and avoid attacking your partner's character," he states.

Yet there are those of us who can't seem to find our way—together—over and through those normally occurring peaks and valleys. Besides the fact that few of us witnessed happy GLBT couples when we were kids, as adults we might have a tendency to bail rather quickly. Genac says it makes a sort of evolutionary sense, our wanting to split. "Evaluating your relationship to see if it is worth saving is very difficult, because human beings are wired to move away from pain. We are biased to letting go of our relationships in tough times. But tough times are not enough of a criterion for breaking up, because even healthy relationships will experience tough times." Part of the problem, Genac says, may be that marriage—an institution currently only available to male-female pairs in Texas—makes breaking up hard to do.

Kimberly Shockley, CPA, of Shockley Tax Advisors thinks Genac's on to something there—and even suggests that people who are eager to see the state of marriage equally available to GLBT couples need to be sure they fully understand what they're hoping for: with the legally approved relationship comes the burden of heading back to the attorney's office in the event of a breakup. She adds, "There's one thing in our favor. Since Texas is a community property state, if Texas did recognize gay unions, then if we divorced, we have to give each other 50 percent of both assets and liabilities that we accumulate during our union/marriage. The same rules of community property would apply to us."

Shockley adds, though, that she thinks legal marriage might bring a kind of maturity to some GLBT relationships. "If we have the same rights as straight couples, it might make us think longer



Psychologist David Genac

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and harder about entering into a union or marriage, because there would be more than emotional consequences to pay if we decided to divorce. Divorce lawyers are very expensive and, often, very nasty."

Friendship v. Partnership

Therapist Daniel Garces tends to shock folks when he announces, "Your partner is not your friend!" He's simply candidly clarifying that at this stage in the Game of Love, there are (or should be) marked differences in your interactions with your partner versus with your friends.

"Generally, relationships that allow people to be themselves do better over time than those who try to force their partner to be someone different," he states. It doesn't mean you have to be mirror images of each other or feel constant adoration for everything your partner does. Garces says that a common discrepancy he sees in client couples is varying comfort levels with their sexuality. One partner may be "out and proud," while the other is more subdued and possibly just starting their own coming-out transition. "Often the second individual is attracted to the comfort they see in their partner. They like the ease this acceptance brings into their life. However, they may not be fully ready for public displays of affection. With support, understanding, and time, this issue usually works itself out. The discomfort fades away as they experience life with their partner." Not only does the couple unit survive, says Garces, but the individuals grow from what might have started as conflicting approaches to the world.

For many, it's that first feeling of willingness and commitment to be there when your partner needs you, Garces suggests. He even thinks the GLBT community has a leg up in regards to this aspect of relationship, because of both our individual and societal histories with having to seek out and establish reliable resources.

From his personal experience, Garces adds, "My relationship felt more permanent when we committed to a 30-year mortgage. I'm certain getting married would have done this as well, but we didn't get married. We got a mortgage and a white picket fence. I often wonder, if we do ever get married, will it have the same sense of permanence or not?"

Things Will Get Better After the Wedding?

Therapist Tony Carroll echoes folk wisdom: When considering a relationship, if you hope they'll change, don't marry them. Carroll, who has shared the past 13 years with "the most wonderful man in the world" (his husband, dentist Bruce Smith), says anxiety about this level of commitment is to be expected. "It is a pivotal point in relationships, the moment where buyer's remorse sets in." Whether it's simply a fear of making long-term commitments or the realization that this is not The One, it is a point in your partnership that must be eventually confronted.

Carroll believes that financial and legal discussions can shed light on your love's potential. "Talking about these things is an excellent indication of the compatibility of a couple, and the sooner you learn if you are potentially compatible or not, the better off you are."

That said, securing your couplehood with documents will neither break nor make the relationship. As Carroll says, "Every therapist knows that having a child or building a house never solves problems in a relationship. How many of our friends had commitment ceremonies hoping it would calm their troubled relationships?"

On the other hand, officially merging relationships can have tremendous emotional value for happy couples. Tony Carroll's personal story of solidifying his partnership exemplifies the power of symbols and formalities in our love.

"When we first talked about being married in Canada, we experienced a good deal of anxiety. Being able to explore the fear together revealed some irrational dread of spoiling an already wonderful relationship. [Talking about our fears] allowed the anxiety to dissipate. Subsequently, our marriage in Toronto was far more profound and meaningful than we ever expected.

"There was an unexpected sense of legitimacy that emerged from being able to say without qualification that we are married. The terribly conservative wife of the keynote speaker at a dental convention pointed to my ring and asked. I pointed to Bruce. Her face lit up as she bubbled, 'We love the gay couple next door. Why are people so mean about gay marriage?'"

Of True Love, Papers, and Ceremony

As is sometimes the case, we who are not allowed to legally join our lives may do things in an order that's different from our straight neighbors, but that makes sense for our families.

Georgia and Cathryn are an example of how in the big scheme, real love pays no heed to the human boundaries of time. The couple is only now planning a commitment ceremony, though they've been a family unit for 15 years.

Like a lot of GLBT couples, Georgia and Cathryn have done a limited amount of financial and legal securing of their partnership. They have hand-written wills with the intention of following

through at an attorney's office one day. They are each designated beneficiaries at their places of employment. Thus far, no related obstacles have arisen for them. The couple has purchased a home together, obtained joint bank loans, and Georgia explains that she feels their separate legal status pays off in terms of taxes. We can both qualify for benefits in some cases, because we're not a married couple [in the eyes of the government]."

Much of what they have done is for the benefit of their son, whom they adopted from another country through an agency. Using the knowledgeable services of GLBT-focused attorneys, the women were able to secure joint custody after the initial adoption. Plus, Georgia says, "We leave a paper trail everywhere we go—filling in each others' names in the parent sections at school, church, Little League, the Scouts. If something did happen and there was a custody battle, it would be plainly evident what our wishes are."

Like so many of us, Georgia's concerns about custody stem from the fact that, though she loves her parents, they're not the people she and Cathryn have chosen to raise their child in the event of their untimely deaths. Before going through their church's dedication ceremony for the baby, the couple talked earnestly about godparents, in the end naming a lesbian couple "who we felt would parent our child the way we would want." The godparents are named in their handwritten wills, and Georgia downloaded guardianship papers from the Internet, given to the other couple any time she and Cathryn travel without their son. "My parents know this couple and of our wishes, but they would still probably fight for custody. On the other hand, we know his godmothers would let our son spend time with his grandparents, which is why we trust them with our most precious possession."

Out to their neighbors, employers, school personnel and classmates' parents, and virtually everywhere else, Georgia jokes that she's wondering "when this 'disapproved-of lifestyle' is going to pay off and get us out of being asked to volunteer for more parenting committee work!"

After years of thinking about it, Georgia and Cathryn are preparing for their first commitment ceremony, also in part for the benefit of their growing child. "We want him to have this in his memory bank as a special moment. Maybe it will help explain to him at some point that we don't need to be bound by laws together. We choose to be committed to each other."

Someone asked her why bother with the production, since it would grant the couple no special rights or legal protections. Georgia explains, like a brand-new bride-to-be, "It is amazing how empowering this has become for us. It is as if we have started anew. One of our favorite songs is by Clint Black—"Something That We Do." It talks about how love isn't some place that we fall; it's something that we do. It's something that you have to choose to do every day to make it for 15 years in any relationship. That's how we feel about this ceremony. We are choosing to share our love with those closest to us. Maybe it will give everyone, gay or straight, a little hope of finding a love to last forever."

As Georgia declares, "This is a little sappy, but true."

Tracy Morris is a Houston-based writer and editor. Morris has written the blog [How to Make a Family](http://www.howtomakeafamily.typepad.com) (www.howtomakeafamily.typepad.com) since 1986 and is the health editor for the new online site SingleMindedWomen.com. This is her first contribution to OutSmart.

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