

International Institute for Humanistic Studies

On Intimacy and Death

by *Elizabeth K. Bugental, Ph.D.*

It seems strange at the age of forty-three to be writing about my first full experience of love and intimacy, and yet this is so. It isn't that I haven't loved before in my life and been loved in return. In fact, looking back over the years, I see face after face emerging from my memory. They are young and old, men and women; and their expressions are filled with such tenderness, sympathy and understanding, I feel deeply grateful for all the love; receiving and returning it has kept me alive.

But now I am here today, in our house--Jim's and mine--knowing for the first time the experience of being in "my own place." When I say those words I mean my own internal place: the space I seem to have been searching out so many years. I know I am "at home" chiefly because I do not feel as if I have to try to prove to myself or to anyone else why it is right and good and truly mine.

Sometimes I am tempted simply to hand myself over to that gentle, loving man who is my husband, to make him a kind of god whom I lovingly serve, instead of my equal and partner. Giving myself over to him would be, at least initially, so restful. I would never have to risk withstanding him, or confronting him, or seeking my own wants. I could be pleasing and adjusting and certain of tomorrow. Yet if I did that, I know I would soon become absorbed into him; then it would no longer be possible to be intimate, since we would be "one." There would be no "other" with whom to relate. In time, my repressed and tranquilized I would either die or erupt in frantic revolt against its kind jailer and its own self-imprisonment.

At other times I am tempted to run away, to travel my own road in apparent emotional independence. In that case, the two of us might achieve a comfortable "living arrangement" of the kind considered ideal in so many sophisticated circles today. We would meet when we both wished--perhaps we would even arrange romantic interludes--each of us coming from our separate worlds. There would be a certain investment, a certain excitement, and then we would separate again, even if we continued to occupy the same house. In that case, although I might have close, even warm, moments, I would live essentially alone. There would be fewer risks, but the price seems very high.

These are the pulls of the two extremes, and it seems to me that many people I

know live somewhat uncertainly between the two; a few; live at one extreme, a few live at the other. I know that neither the extremes nor the uncertain middle would be enough for me, that none of these alternative offers me the real intimacy I am striving to live and these alternatives offer me the real intimacy I am striving to live and which at the present moment I find so deeply satisfying.

My free choice to live intimately rests basically on sustaining my strong sense for life as a "process" rather than a live-out plan. This lifestyle means a constant "being out side of myself" while being together with the other. It assumes a very large "yes" to being seen and known and therefore some strong fundamental sense of my own worth. I find that on the days during which, for one reason or another I am indulging in self-hate (I call them "ugly days"), I am almost entirely unable to "be with" Jim. He often describes my investment in these feelings as his "only real rival" and he is right. At those moments I am afraid my "true self" will be discovered so I shut down in order to avoid detection. When those moments have passed, I realize that in shutting myself away from Jim, however subtly, I have chosen to wallow in my self-contempt and closed off my best means of confronting and vanquishing it. I am now learning to tell him when I feel these first murmurings of self-loathing, and together we try to hear and confront them. I too have my rivals in Jim's fears, in his periods of anxiety when he tend to withdraw until he feels he can again present his controlled and "perfect" self for my admiration. Then I try to break through and stay with him as he has done with me. At these times especially, each of us needs to be aware of his own personal feelings, even if those feelings are confused or ambivalent or angry.

It seems to have taken me such a long time to arrive at enough acceptance of myself to allow another this close view of my messiness and fears. Dropping my defenses without relinquishing my identity still requires continuous awareness. However, this task does not feel nearly as heavy as the struggle to support that thick impenetrable mask of perfection with poor little weak I cowering behind. Whereas the former task is a process that I can manage little by little, moving from one moment to the next, the latter is a stance (or at best a strict march) that I must maintain vigorously lest I be caught unawares with my perfection down.

So in my search for a way to live intimately, I find no "method" except to be with each moment as it arrives: open to the experience of self and the other in a continual balancing of the strongly centered and the feely open I. But there is a feeling of danger that accompanies this lovely life-giving movement. There is no way I can "take care" of my future. Because I do exist in this moment, and because I can feel that it is the only one I have, I do not know how long this inner peace will last. If I am truly here and now, I cannot know what will be. Now I experience a twinge of pain, and I am aware of the wrinkles on my hands and the clock above the oven. They speak to me of time and contingency, and I know that even as I cherish this moment it dies to make room for the next.

This is the paradox about which I write: only at the moment in which I allow myself fully to realize my joy and my communion with another do touch that intensity of pain which bids me to let the moment go. I can only experience the joy when I do not clutch and freeze it; and yet when I do not imprison it, I must let it separate from me and die. And when I experience this moment as it moves through me, I see that I grow older, that the very vitality of the love between my husband and myself, the lovely easy sharing of the moment, must also move on. We must move where we must, and someday, finally, we too must separate and die. I have no morbid sense as I write this; I have only an acute awareness of the beauty of this moment and of the pain so deeply wedded to that joy. I cannot really have one with out the other; and I, from inside my own place, know this as I have never allowed myself to know it before.

I'm looking through our bookshelf into our yard, where the late afternoon sun caresses the bark of the giant oak, and I am remembering that I was sitting here looking at that same tree when I wrote the following:

Yesterday, someone I love died. I hadn't known him for a very long time--less than a year. Maybe it's his wife that I really know, because we have talked together for longer periods of time, while he was sleeping. He had been dying since I met, and that is important. There had never been time for pretending, for fake conversations, for stepping cautiously into private worlds.

I sat in his room in the green chair, looking at his wasted and frail body against the blue sheets. He sat on the edge of the bed in his red kimono, and he tried to tell me about the pain. We held each other across the space between us--he in his pain and I in my fear--and the brown wood of the walls and furniture cooled and soothed us, until a sharp spasm struck him and he asked, "What did I do just then?"

"You jumped suddenly. Was it a pain?"

"Yes, they come so suddenly. What shall I do, Liz?"

My fear held me by the throat, and nothing came out but my tears. He looked at me silently, without expression. "You are very beautiful. I don't know where you come from, but you are a very beautiful creature." When it was time for me to leave, he put his head back, and I leaned over and kissed him goodbye.

His wife and I sat on the green couch while he slept. She was a child-woman, romantic and tender in her black silk pajama. She had only just begun to live with him. We spoke quietly and gently to one another but all the while, within myself, I was screaming at her:

How can you be in here with me? You must touch him every minute. You must keep your hand on his arm. You must look at him, hold him every minute. You have only now, right now. Death is waiting, and he will be gone, and you will be alone. Your body, your skin and his--this moment, this moment, this moment. Then what? Run in there where he sleeps and touch his cheek with your finger. Run your hand along his arm, over his eyelids, his lips. Sit quietly on the floor near

his bed, and watch him sleep.

Yesterday I put the clothes in the washer, and I thought about him. I was in the middle of making the bed, and I saw their faces in my mind. I sat down at the typewriter, and I felt their presence. I know something was happening at their house, and as I gave way to the feelings, I found that was frightened. I told Jim there was something ominous happening there.

I was fixing lunch and telling Jim this when I became aware of another kind of feeling. I said, "Do you remember when you were a child, and you were looking forward to some special event? You felt secretly excited inside all the time. Then you would go to sleep or get busy doing something and forget about it. Then, suddenly, like a surprise, you'd remember again, and all the excitement would come rushing back even bigger than before. That's the same way I feel now--as if something very special is going to happen, and I've just realized it again. Only I don't know what it is, and I feel afraid."

At 7:30 pm, I telephoned my friend's wife and told her of my experience. Had anything happened that day? She said that for the first time her husband had talked to her about his dying. He knew it would come soon, but he found that was not afraid. He told her, "My body is dying." Later, she understood that he felt he would somehow continue to live. He was sad about death, sad to leave her so soon. He wanted to stay, but he knew he couldn't, and he was not afraid. She told me how they had cried together, how close they had been; she told me of the deep sadness she felt, and yet how much it mattered to know that he wasn't afraid.

I heard her talking to me and I cried her tears as I am crying now. And inside myself I am saying, "No, it can't be true. I only just came to life. I am a child and I am in love with life." But then I began to understand that she knew that it was time, even as he had known enough to wait in the other room and allow him to sleep. And that night, last night, he let himself die; and she let him go.

Intimacy with another--the closeness of living the shared moments, each as it arises, the easy comfort of being known with the disguises of attempted "perfection," the willingness to be where I am without a blueprint or an image to be fulfilled--this particular joy is what is so new in my life. Each moment seems to contribute to and nourish the next so that at times I find it almost too much to allow; whatever the next moment holds cannot possibly live up to this one. And yet, if I stay with myself, in my own present--if I allow Jim in, if he allows me--I do not find myself falling into some abyss. Rather, I am constantly surprised by what I am feeling now, and now, and now.

Once, when I was suffering great pain in relinquishing, someone I love very much told me, "There are no endings, there are only new beginnings." My gradual discovery of this truth, in the way I have been describing, makes continual

aliveness and intimacy possible; yet because that experience is so fulfilling, death seems all the more painful. Other contingencies are frightening, but they are not absolute, and I have some experience which will help me meet them. But I have no experience of the kind of new beginning offered by physical death. It feels like only an ending from where I now stand.

At the same time, I have some dim but hopeful awareness which has not yet found its way from the back of my head to the pit of my stomach. Right now I can only attempt to describe it: I would like to feel that whenever death comes I will be able to let go--of the moment, of myself, of Jim, and of others whom I love. I want to be there then, to be in my own death, rather than simply watching it happen to me. I would like somehow to see that it is time, and choose to let go, even as I am now learning to love and relinquish my present moments.

This article was written at the beginning of Elizabeth Bugental's marriage and has been published several times, most recently in *Challenges of the Heart*, John Welwood.

Elizabeth Bugental, Ph.D. is a member of the IIHS advisory board.

© 2003 by Elizabeth Bugental, Ph.D. All rights reserved