

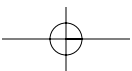
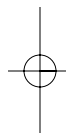
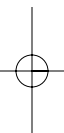
T H E F I R S T S T E P



Prepare Your Understanding: From Young Love to Mature Love

One reason why we have so much trouble with relationship today may be out of neglect of its study. We expect to find intimacy naturally, without education or initiation.

—THOMAS MOORE



New Beginnings

Since love is the most delicate and total act of a soul, it will reflect the state and nature of the soul. . . . If the individual is not sensitive, how can his love be sentient? If he is not profound, how can his love be deep? As one is, so is his love. For this reason, we can find in love the most decisive symptom of what a person is.

—José Ortega y Gasset



If anthropologists from another planet observed a young human couple in love, they'd be bewildered. When meeting, these humans seem so kind and thoughtful. They say sweet things: "You're great! I'm crazy about you! I can't live without you." They declare their devotion, make passionate love, and eventually marry—vowing to honor and cherish each other forever.

Then things somehow change. Six months—or five years—later the scene is very different. Bewildered, our foreign observers now notice that the same couple who seemed so "in love" are now at each other's throats, followed by a jagged parting of the ways and a sad parting of hearts.

Lisa, a young model, and Mark, an illustrator, epitomize this radical shift of sentiments. When she was newly married, Lisa had stated buoyantly, "I will follow Mark anywhere and anytime." But after

they separated, she remarked, “I have no idea where he is and I could care less!”

Why did Lisa’s romantic hopes fade? Why did Mark’s once kind words turn critical and accusatory? Why did their warm intimacy lapse into glacial distance and their sexual passion become sexual boredom? Are love relationships always destined to disappoint us? Or is there something we’re lacking—something that rarely graces the young?

As we age, a wistful regret may haunt us: that we weren’t wiser during our youth. “I wish I knew then what I know now!” is a recurring mantra as we move through life. Yet, no doubt, we did our best according to what we knew at the time.

Like many people in midlife who are married or partnered, you may feel that you’re doing okay but sense that something is missing. Maybe you’re not as close to your family or friends as you’d like to feel. Or you may be lacking the joy, depth, and delight that you clearly envision but can’t seem to manifest in your relationships. Rather than let yourself sink into apathy and cynicism, you can use midlife as a time to apply yourself with renewed devotion to create satisfying relationships.

One unlikely gift of midlife is a sobering truth: we won’t be around forever! This realization hits home gradually as one birthday follows another with increasing rapidity. Or our mortality may strike suddenly after some adversity: a frightening illness, the death of a parent or friend, or just seeing our children leave the nest. The sudden deaths of young celebrities such as Princess Diana and JFK Jr. serve as sober reminders of our mortality and the need to “seize the day.”

Wisdom rarely comes during the innocent days of youth, when life seems endless and we have an inflated view of our powers. The wisdom necessary to achieve meaningful partnerships and friendships often doesn’t dawn until we reach some crisis point that prompts us to become more serious about life and love. We might hit this wall during midlife—the proverbial “midlife crisis,” when we realize that our long-held dream of “making it” isn’t panning out. Failed expectations, romantic disillusionment, the drudgery of work or family life, the emptiness of materialistic values, and a nagging meaninglessness make us wonder, “Is this all there is? Is this the fruit of all my labors?”

The Advantages of Losing Hope

The good news is that disillusionment is often the beginning of wisdom. The philosopher Nietzsche, acclaimed by Freud as having a more penetrating knowledge of himself than anyone who ever lived, put it starkly: “Not a day passes when I haven’t rid myself of another comfortable illusion.”

Is your heart sometimes heavy, your mind restless, and your soul searching? Or are you simply wanting more love and joy in your life? Then you’re ready to ask these crucial questions:

1. What’s really important in life?
2. Do I need new priorities?
3. What’s getting in the way of the deeper connections I want with people?
4. Am I doing something that’s pushing people away?
5. Are my expectations too high in some ways and too low in others?
6. What can relationships provide for me, and what do I need to do for myself?

Allowing these questions to incubate in your heart and mind can bring realizations that lead to a new era of loving. As you practice the eightfold path that I’ll outline, you’ll be able to respond to these questions more clearly.

Midlife is a time to fulfill the deeper longings of your soul. The sacred salve of disappointed love can be an impetus to listen to what life is trying to tell you. Perhaps you first needed to chase the romantic fantasy of having a partner and two kids before you could realize that you had fallen into an alluring trap. Perhaps you needed to climb the corporate ladder before you could discover, as one forty-five-year-old executive put it, “Business achievements didn’t do it for me. I have money and status. I’m the American dream of success. I’ve made it, but I’m unhappy. There’s no love in my heart. During the next half of my life I want a new kind of success—fulfilling relationships.”

Men often lag behind women in forming friendships and strong social ties, which are important not only for happiness but also for health and longevity. During the middle years, many men are eager to move from “competing to connecting.” They want to “finally get

love right,” as one man expressed it. Many women in midlife also want deeper relationships, though without being defined and delimited by them.

When I was younger, I thought I had only to find the perfect woman and I'd be happy. I was so picky that I found myself alone much of the time. I didn't grasp the concept that love is something that grows by sharing our imperfect selves.

The possibility of deep, authentic loving can dawn only as you lose hope in the innocent romantic views that masqueraded as true love. You must lose faith not in love itself but in true love's alluring cousin: naive, romantic love. You must peer through the subtle veils that obstruct true connection with both your inner self and your partner before you can graduate to a more fulfilling, lasting love.

As one woman entering midlife realized, “I had to go through a period of giving up. But I was actually giving up the fantasy of being rescued—the dream of being taken care of by someone else. I gave up relationships so I could stop giving up myself! Now that I have more of *me*, I'm ready for a partnership, but in a new way.” This wise woman used her past disappointments as an impetus to listen to what life was trying to tell her.

The essence of Buddhism and many spiritual paths is to discover and express your true nature—to find your essence beneath the mask of your everyday personality. You can begin this process at any age, but midlife is an especially ripe time to discover who you really are. As you come to know and show yourself, you create the foundation for authentic love.

Old views must sometimes die in order to make way for the new. As you move beyond young views of love based on merging and blended identities, you are ready to learn what it takes to share your authentic heart and live in a way that is deep, joyful, and workable. You are ready for mature, midlife love.

Young love is the stuff of fairy tales and Hollywood. It's the romance of your childhood dreams. Society promotes naive romance through myriad movies and love songs that drip with the excruciating pain and pleasure of our longing. Young love is responsible for deep disappointment when you discover that the captivating romantic myth fails to match the reality of your life.

Prince Charles and Princess Diana were such a storybook couple. They seemed so in love as they trotted around the globe, smiling into television cameras. When their marriage dissolved, the bitter salt of reality was a shocking disappointment to many. Sadly, Diana's tragic death cut short her own quest for love, although it serves as a vivid reminder for us to pursue our heart's desire while we're blessed with the gift of life.

Young love contains seeds of something deeper. This riper love retains the sparkle of its younger cousin, yet it embodies an added quality of depth and substance. Searching for a word to describe this rare elixir is challenging. Dare we call it "mature love"? Oh no, not that! Mature? Has it come to that?

For some people the word "mature" rankles a bit. It can have the ring of being old—and in our youth-crazed society we certainly don't want to be accused of that! For others, "mature" sounds stiff and stuffy—nothing too exciting. However, the Old French word *maturus* evolved into the word *mur* meaning "ripe." Maturing involves ripening. Immature is green and tart. Mature implies the full glow—sweet, full of flavor, and ready to be enjoyed. A Latin derivative is "Matuta," the name of the Roman goddess of the dawn. Midlife is a passage to a new, more mature beginning.

EXERCISE:

Here are some questions to consider before delving into mature love.

- What does love mean to you apart from sex and romance?
- What does being in love mean to you?
- What are you looking for in a partnership?

The Passion of Mature Love

Mature love is thoroughly enlivening and passionate, but you're being more intelligent about it. You're beginning to know what you're doing and why you're doing it. You have an interest and excitement in knowing your partner more deeply—and in understanding more

about *yourself* through the relationship. You appreciate the delicacy of love and you're learning to nurture trust and intimacy rather than sabotage it. You feel the sparkle and pleasure of giving and receiving love—and opening to life. And if a relationship fails, you know that you have a refuge within yourself, and therefore know how to soft-land rather than crash-land into a wasteland of bitterness and despair.

Midlife is a time to move toward a love that is more stable and less hazardous to your health. And, perhaps more difficult to recognize, it's a time when *you* become less hazardous to others. Maturing beyond the narcissism of youth brings greater awareness of the effects you have on people.

As you learn to create conditions for love to ripen, you ride the tiger of your longings without being thrown around so wildly. You take responsibility for how you're contributing to not getting what you want. You learn to deal with conflict and differences in ways that bring closeness rather than disconnection. By allowing passion to be seasoned by wisdom and exuberance to be grounded in sobriety, you open the door to a more authentic and satisfying love. Far from boring, mature love is exhilarating. But the source of aliveness is within yourself; it does not originate from the other person.

When I refer to young or naive love, I'm referring more to emotional development than chronological age. Many people cling to naive notions of love well into their later years, while some younger people are blessed with a smoother transition to mature love. Although personal experience provides the raw material to create a more refined love, what is most crucial is what we learn from that experience. Some twenty-year-olds pursue love in a more mature manner than some fifty-year-olds.

But generally speaking, most people aren't prepared for mature love until they've had sufficient life experience—including ample failures—to gain the humility and wisdom that forge the foundation for maturity. The poet Rilke said it well: "Young people, who are beginners in everything, cannot yet know love: they have to learn it. With their whole being, with all their forces, gathered close about their lonely, timid upward beating heart, they must learn to love." Few people embody mature love in our culture, and therefore we have few role models to guide us forward.

My hope is that you will acknowledge—even honor—the young views of love that brought you where you are today. These experiences, however painful, have qualified you for a journey into love’s deepest chamber. Each failed romance can be a preparation for mature love—if you learn from your setbacks. Failures and reversals are a necessary rite of passage toward the joy of midlife love.