

**CREATING
RELATIONSHIP
WELLNESS**

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**An Introduction to the Techniques
of Mindfulness for Healthy
Relationships**

Stephanie Wijkstrom, LPC



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*Creating Relationship Wellness:
An Introduction to the Techniques of Mindfulness for Healthy Relationships*

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DEDICATION

To my husband Martin Wijkstrom, the greatest joy that I have known is loving you. I hope I tell you in ways that you can feel and understand, that you are my greatest inspiration. Even if there were a way to have a hundred lifetimes together, there could never be enough time for me to cherish your smile, your brilliantly curious mind, and your wise and patient heart.

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CHAPTER ONE

A GUIDE TO NAVIGATING THIS BOOK

Understanding mindfulness is the means to creating relationship wellness, but most of us need guidance to be capable of nourishing love with our conscious awareness. We know that few things touch us as deeply as when we are falling in love, but few things destroy us more thoroughly than losing our connection to that person we love. As humans, we live, we learn, we love, and in some ways, our love is the greatest legacy that we can leave on this earth during our limited time here. Perhaps you are finding this book in an frenzied effort to reclaim your stake on the feelings that once coursed within your relationship; perhaps you or your partner are thinking of ending things and you have agreed to one last ditch effort to whisk you both back to love. If the latter, I cannot help you. There is no recipe for resurrecting a dead relationship; rather, relationships must be allowed to die to then be reborn together in a different shape, formed anew with well-learned lessons and the optimism and curiosity that accompanies uncharted waters.

Let me introduce myself. I have spent 10 years practicing as a licensed counselor who specializes in helping people enhance their relationships. I am the founder of a large counseling center, and a significant part of what our center does is help people with their

relationships, whether they are seeking premarital counseling, family counseling, or couples therapy. I have also come by the knowledge and skills I will share in this book through the trials and tribulations of being a woman who has loved, a woman who has loved terribly, and a woman who has loved in the action of every fiber of her being. In the span of my own life, I am very happily married to my husband. Each day together, we come together and love each other up. We nourish this marriage with our collective wisdom and desire to enjoy each moment together. We are also committed to fighting fairly, to maintaining our health and pursuing our professional interests outside of our love. Thus, we are whole when we connect as well as the ways in which we are separate. We both have taken much from our unique past experiences. Personally, in the two engagements and one marriage before this one, I floundered, made terrible decisions, allowed myself to be treated tragically, and felt full-fledged hatred in one especially troubling relationship.

Yet, the heart and desire to love prevails. When our mindset is focused on gaining understanding, even the hardest lessons become victories for our own human evolution. As a counselor, I do encounter this everyday. Couples enter therapy hoping to find a therapist to solve their problems; instead, good counseling is teaching couples how they can become their own agent of change to work towards solving their relationship issues. I help lovers look at things differently so they can respond differently. When they come to understand the core needs under their common disputes, they are called toward compassion, empathy, and connection. For example, when a couple has a particular disagreement about the laundry, I seek to understand what is happening in that disagreement, what the issue means to both of them and how they should go about solving their problems and getting their needs met in love.

If you show me a bitter person, I will show you a person who has lost much in love. If you show to me a joyous person, I will unveil to you a person who has lost much in love. The difference between them, and therein lies the art of remaining happy in romance, is that one deals with the loss and hurt very differently. They choose

to focus intently on two aspects: first, on the spectrum of human experience, which means accepting losses and hurt as an important part of living in love, and then secondly, just as intently on gratitude, so that the hurt fades to the distance. It is a powerful exercise when I ask a couple to look at their partner and to share something that they are grateful for in them. Sometimes we hold on so tightly to our bitterness, and focus so much on the shortcomings of our love, that we forget to remember all that can be loved in them. Typically, when couples do the gratitude exercise, a cascade of tears erupt and a sort of tenderness emerges that fills both people in the room. What might happen to our love if we trained ourselves to focus on gratitude for our partner for at least a couple of minutes everyday?

If you are thinking this may be all quite jolly in theory, but can't imagine how this can apply to you, that is ok. I promise to illustrate to you within this text the ways that our mindset and response makes all the difference in our relationship outcomes. I have personally coached couples through tragedies like death, infidelity, and decades of sexlessness and disconnection. They have entered marriage counseling ready to walk the plank and end their commitments, but something held them back and they decided to try counseling instead. The collaboration of marriage counseling and their efforts worked. Through child care and work responsibilities, through years of hopelessness and fear, they succeed in creating a joyful, passionate, intimate marriage, and later, they were able to look back together and uncover the significance that those hardships had in shaping the strength of their newly built connection.

Love is eternal, connection a skill, yet, according to the National bureau of labor statistics, as many as 40% of marriages will end in divorce. By using the model of wellness and the path of mindfulness, we are called to understand what changes can be made to prevent relationships from suffering or declining. I have worked with thousands of couples, and I promise you this: all conflicted relationships walk the same foot path to demise and they enact the same destructive patterns, but they are each helpless to stop without learning a better way of managing their issues. Many tragedies of marital

demise could be prevented by turning towards preventative methods that enrich our relationships, by utilizing the nurturing effects of consistent tenderness, by making the effort to reach understanding of each other, by working toward regular interplays that create shared meaning, by reaping the benefits of creating trust, and by collaborating to share mutual attention. Our goal in creating a mindful marriage is not only to have a relationship which stands the test of time, but more importantly, a blissful relationship brimming with loving wellness that is a well-adjusted and nourishing bond for both partners and the entire family.

Mindfulness is a mental state achieved by practicing non-judgmental, focused awareness on the thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations which are evoked from observing the present moment. Sounds elegantly simple, right? The truth is, it is simple. Mindfulness truly is our natural state, the emotional and psychological current which courses through us when we unclutter our thoughts and unruffle our way of being. It is a natural reflex toward our innate state that allows us to achieve our optimal potential.

The only moment that we have is this one; we cannot go back to the early days, nor should we lapse into fretting over tomorrow. I assure you that those who encounter a marriage hoping to remain in the state of passion and the unknown, (the hallmark the earliest days of love), will forever miss the meaning of marriage. By living in the great expanse of now, we become mindful. When your partner arrives home from walking the dog, can you see them as they are, or are you still so angry over their non-response to yesterday's text that you fail to connect in this moment? Are you so worried that some doom may befall your bond next year that you don't even hear the door open, signaling their arrival? If you listen for the door, if you observe and pause to share a simple gratitude for walking the dog when they walk through the door, how might that feel in your own physical body? How might that feel for them? In this book, we will apply the core philosophy of mindfulness to enhance relationships—whether a marriage, long term dating partnership, or any other form of coupledness. We embrace mindfulness as the path to self-development.

What began in new-age spiritual communities has now turned into a hotbed of scientific inquiry, leading to the widely noted understanding that mindfulness aids us in accelerating our trajectory towards physical, emotional, and spiritual health. In a 2007 study by Barnes et al, it was found that mindfulness greatly affects our happiness in intimate relationships. According to the research, lovers report feeling more happiness in partnerships where mindfulness is practiced. Perhaps you are wondering how that works, how one's own psychological mindset can influence what happens in the world and in our relationship with others. While mindfulness for spiritual and psychological growth holds its merit, any practice becomes most relevant when it seeps into our interactions with the greater world. People who practice mindfulness exhibit a greater ability to regulate stress and emotions, as well as being significantly better at deescalating conflict than those couples who do not practice mindfulness. As this book will explicate, if you are going to have a shred of peace in a marriage, you must become very skilled at turning away from heated conflict and practicing forgiveness.

With so much to be gained by enhancing our mindfulness, this text devotes itself to helping the reader understand what exactly it means to practice it in the main areas of our love relationship, and how to achieve this beautiful state. Additionally, each chapter offers skill building exercises that we can strategically and consistently apply to enhance mindfulness techniques and utilize the scientifically validated and historically celebrated methodology of mindfulness. These exercises have been tested in the arena of my own marriage counseling practice and brought great results. The mechanisms of conscious awareness or mindfulness constitute a simple and accessible system of enhancement. Mindfulness is prized for its practicality and austere elegance by many around the globe. Its reach includes everyone from great spiritual leaders to business tycoons, as well as those on the path toward self-development. Everyone is able to apply this wisdom to enhance loving relationships.

To be mindful means that we practice focused awareness of our thoughts and actions by manifesting intimate consciousness of all

of the vital parts of our being. The second component of the process is that we are non-judgmental. It is not enough to notice that we lapse into despair when a loved person is out of reach for a couple of hours at work; we should also not judge ourselves too harshly for this abandonment insecurity and instead find ways to adjust our attitude so that we don't respond to them with unconscious irritation when they reemerge. Just as when we practice any form of meditation, to be mindful, we first attune to our thoughts and feelings. When aiming the well-honed laser beam of our awareness towards ourselves, we simultaneously commit to suspending judgment about the contents of our cognitive and emotive terrain. Thus, all forms of compassion begin with the self.

We are not going to admire all of the contents of our consciousness, and we are not going to admire all of the things that our partner says or does on a daily basis. There will be some defensiveness, aggression, fear, lingering hurt, and maladaptive communication floating around in our minds and hearts. However, the benefits of adjusting our approach to relating are plenty. When we tune in, we will be better able to increase empathy and compassion for our beloved. This will forge a love that is inextricably woven within the deepest layers of consciousness, where we are attuned to the thoughts and feelings that our partner is immanently expressing. Like all things, mindfulness in our relationship with our partner or spouse is something that has to be continually practiced within a relationship, and one that must continually evolve depending upon where our relationship is in the moment. Just as in the rest of the relationship, collaboration will pair well with the efforts of this text. Relationship change will have the best outcome when two lovers are working toward becoming more mindful together.

There is much at stake here. The great Zen spiritual guru, Thich Nhat Hanh proffers the wisdom that "To love without knowing how to love, wounds the person we love." In my clinical and personal experience, it is evident that it takes great effort to learn how to sustain and enrich another person with our love. Let us not mistake the length of a relationship for the strength of its bond either. There are

many people who stride through a mediocre twenty years of marriage feeling completely disconnected and only mildly unhappy, yet afraid to speak up. There are engagements that remain in their toxicity for many years, but they hold no strong bond of love. For any relationship that is suffering, you will find a couple that lacks the skills of understanding and connecting; yet the tools of mindfulness are within their reach. These tools represent a specific set of skills to help them improve the quality of their intimate interactions. Instead, they silently and bitterly lapse into the mires of discontent while their once cherished marriage slides down the cliff of unhappiness, leaving their shared daily life unbearable.

This book is for each lover in the world, to become mindful of the opportunities alive in the glorious and simple moments of each day. We will open ourselves to the opportunities that can be created as we are compelled toward the actions of mindful connection. These are ways to deepen our bonds and give us the tools to become mindful of ourselves and our partner, mindful of communication, mindful of intimacy, mindful of how we are connecting and ways to nurture that connection. Every rose bush will grow, but to continue producing roses, we must feed it, we must prune it, year after year after year. Yet isn't the scent and vibrancy of the rose's petals in full bloom worth the cost of the effort that went into tending it? Mindful relationships are a part of total body, mind, and spiritual wellness. We become well by recognizing the interplay between ourselves and each part of our being. Wellness allows us to outline and utilize preventative strategies and interventions which strengthen us and our relationships before they have the chance to fall into disrepair. The path to self and to loving relationship development is one to be walked with our head held high and faith in the eternal commitment of truly nourished love.

Each chapter of this text can be read together as a couple. Devoting one week to reading a chapter and completing its exercises will allow time for the kernels of understanding to be planted and for the skills to develop slowly in realistic and manageable chunks of time. Remember, long lasting change is a slow process, it is incremental, and skills build upon themselves in stages, so no quick or magical fixes here.

This book is intended to unfold exactly in this way, slowly as the intake of a long slow deep inhalation into our lungs. Others who are single or recovering from a divorce are also able to enjoy the teachings of this book. Perhaps you are recovering from a breakup and want to learn new tools to carry with you in your next effort to create lasting love. If that is the case, think about how different your last relationship was from the methods and process for loving that are discussed in these chapters. Use this as a new way of understanding yourself and any partner when you move forward in your life.

Here is a brief synopsis of the ideas discussed in each chapter:

1. **Curiously Me, Becoming Mindful of The Self:** Overview of thoughtful questions that will help the reader to gain a greater depth of understanding into their past, present, and to string together these concepts into an understanding of the self.
2. **Other, How Do I Know You My Dear Love?** In-depth considerations to transform the way that we think about who our partner is. Exercises to deepen your understanding of your partner. Questions to help you recreate the way you think about your partner, and to understand their sensitivities and personality on a different level.
3. **Merging, Two Whole Lovers Encounter Each Other and Create Harmony Together in a Mindful Marriage:** Looking at the points of contact, with emphasis on the two wholes of the individuals who are creating a healthy relationship. A battery of questions that will help you to assess the depth of closeness and understanding between you and your partner. This portion also takes into account some of the common points of conflict in troubled relationships.
4. **Communication, The Pathway to Communicating Mindfully:** A thorough examination of the many types of communication and communication styles, as well as their pitfalls. This will help the couple to experience a new way of experiencing their communication. This section will cue the reader into both

- the giving and receiving end of communication, and ceaselessly encourages introspection and growth.
5. **Speaking Mindfully:** Not all words are the same. This will allow the reader to differentiate between the various layers of sharing with their partner. Along with each of the layers of communication, there are opportunities to understand how to take it deeper. This chapter ends with a week-long challenge meant to encourage long term change.
 6. **From Emotional Reactivity to Mindfulness in Communication:** One major pitfall in relationships can happen when heightened emotions get in the way. This section is devoted to helping individuals and couples move beyond some of those common emotional hurdles. This includes practical exercises to modify behavior.
 7. **Mindful Self-Care and Self-Soothing Strategies:** Self-care is always the cornerstone of every relationship. While it isn't always intuitive, we must care for ourselves to get anything else done. This section will help the reader to form a solid self-care plan. This is specifically in relation to emotionally reactive personality types.
 8. **The Risk of Communication Avoidance and Inactivity.** This section examines the avoidant personality type in relationships and helps the person to overcome some of the potential hurdles to this style of relating.
 9. **Mindful Make-Up: If You Want to Make Things Better, Listen Before You Speak:** While everyone knows how to have a disagreement, not everyone knows how to make it right afterwards. This will help each partner understand more about influencing their partner, and offers a step by step process for repairing after a disagreement.
 10. **Being Accountable and Responsible:** This section is devoted to some internal mechanisms which will prevent discord from developing in a relationship, and addresses what will happen when we don't adopt these qualities.

11. **Forgiveness:** Some say that forgiveness is the alpha and omega of love. Here we enter a short discussion on what makes that so.
12. **Trust:** This section defines the different forms of trust that are necessary to foster a healthy relationship. After a thorough discussion into the important meanings of trust, the section provides some questions that will serve as a trust building exercise.
13. **Creating a Relationship of Gratitude:** Gratitude is the currency of mindfulness. This section helps the reader to understand its mechanisms before finishing with some opportunities to deepen gratitude for one's own relationship and partner.
14. **Compassion and Empathy:** This section describes compassion and empathy within the relationship, and uncovers the ways that it can change over time within the marriage or couple.
15. **Patience:** Most people who are interested in mindfulness or meditation have learned many lessons about the importance of patience. This section will help you apply patience to your relationship.
16. **Creating an Emotionally Supportive Marriage or Relationship:** You aren't reading this because you want just any relationship—you want a good one! That means that you commit to giving and receiving emotional support. This section will define and help you create opportunities for this important function.
17. **Celebrating Joy:** Knowing how to connect with your partner over positive feelings and celebration is an important skill that will help to ensure the joy and longevity of your relationship.
18. **Intimacy:** Sexual intimacy is a celebration of a well-connected and mindful relationship. This section also includes an examination of potential barriers to intimacy, and it finishes with a full sensory battery of intimacy enhancing exercises.
19. **Mindfully Connecting Through Time:** This helps to form a road map for the passage of time, and shows how a mindful married or committed couple can continue to use time to deepen and enhance their bond.
20. **Conclusion.**

CHAPTER TWO

CURIOSLY ME, BECOMING MINDFUL OF THE SELF

It all starts with the self and it is endlessly messy work. It is raw and painful when we are witnessing ourselves honestly. As they say, if we are going to get anything done in this world, we must begin with knowing ourselves. A component of that involves understanding our way of being in a relationship. Much like watching a good cinema production, we must know what major events have influenced our character development. We need to take a look at our emotional hygiene by coming to understand how we manage our emotions. Lastly, we need to create a method toward understanding and healing our childhood wounds.

Think, really intensely meditate upon this question: *Who are you?* Pause for a long time before responding. Put down this book and just be in your head for a bit while you think about this. When prompted to consider the answer to this, many people come up with responses that facilitate identification provided by their relationship to others, further illustrating the importance that we place on our relationships. For example, 'I am a wife and a mother.' Others may provide answers about their work, 'I am a Couples Therapist.' These answers, while they do identify parts of the self and what one does, they are not you! They do not completely grasp the ineffable components of being, all

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of the emotional, psychological, and even spiritual layers of the self that transcend job and relationships.

It often seems that it may be very easy to go along in life without developing true self-awareness, to plod along mindless of ourselves and of the deeper levels of our conscious awareness. Self-awareness means that we understand what our goals are, what brings us joy and sorrow, that we are keenly tuned into the phase of life that we are in, and have consciously created a set of values that serve as guidelines for our behavior. How do we process our feelings? In becoming mindful, it is not all about the fancy buzz words of gratitude and joy. We also must come to understand the shadow emotions, emotional realities like anger, jealousy, rigidity, demandingness. In the words of Carl Jung, "I would rather be whole than good." Becoming mindful and conscious of ourselves as we relate to our partner is a challenging goal. Think about your relationship and the way that you and your partner relate to each other. Just imagine your role in things. What If after you assess your total self you come to believe that you are perfect and everything that needs to be worked on in the relationship should be attributed to your partner? I can promise you, you have not been completely honest with yourself. The goal is to uncover which barriers exist within you that prevent the deeper love from unfolding.

Let us do some writing and reflecting to create a deeper awareness of ourselves. Remember that you don't need to show this to anyone so be very honest. Our current sense of self is influenced by our parental or caregiver relationships, as well as school year experiences, then work relationships, and even our self-perception. Let's look at those years and experiences, as well as current day concerns. Consider these questions:

Were your basic childhood needs of food, shelter, and safety met?

Who were the most important people in your life as a child and why?

What made you feel safe and valued as a child?

How did your parents or caregivers relate to each other?

- What was their relationship like?
- When you were upset, what did your caregivers do to soothe you?
- What did you do to soothe yourself as a child?
- What did you learn about emotions in your childhood?
- How did your family talk about or manage feelings?
- How did your family manage conflict?
- How were you instructed and taught lessons as a kid?
- What forms of punishment did your caregivers use?
- What was your biggest challenge in childhood?
- What were you most proud of as a child?
- Who was the first person you loved?
- What are five words that describe your style of being in a relationship now?
- How do you communicate about problems with your partner?
- What are some things that you would like to change about yourself?
- What are the barriers to making those changes?
- What brings you peace and hope now?

By doing a self-analysis and becoming unwaveringly introspective, we enter the pathway of demystifying the self. What were once mysterious and unconscious actions, the disagreements that hallmarked our past relationships instead become learning opportunities. The pathway towards understanding how the parts of our own character fit into our past and present will be a lifelong one. Remember the great Greek philosopher Socrates who said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Mindfulness will aid us in plotting a trajectory for how our character can be developed. Think for a moment about the weeds of consciousness, the overgrowth beneath our shrubs which could be plucked away, preventing us from continually stumbling over the same roadblocks on our life path.

Relationship Understanding, one component of knowing the self is also knowing what is important to you in a relationship; so

consider these things too. Are you reading this book all while imagining that the issues your relationship experiences should be fixed by your partner? What if I told you that is completely wrong, that instead, each of the perpetual issues in your relationship are clues into the unfolding of your own character and they represent areas that you can work on. What do you think is most important in a relationship? Does it include honesty, commitment, devotion, spiritual connection, monogamy, family, freedom, personal space? Probably all of those things or at least some of them are relevant to you in achieving awareness of your relationship values. How do you respond when you feel those issues are being violated or unsupported?

Imagine that freedom is placed high in your value system. While some may say it is difficult to have freedom in a relationship, I do not think that is true. We can be both merged and separate. What happens when your partner starts to inquire about the fifth round of golf you played this week? Do you explode, thinking how dare they ask about your time and freedom? The precipitating event and the response are always great places to analyze as they are often where our sources of miserable strife lie. Do you know what this situation represents to your partner, or are you so hyper-focused on your own needs that you fail to ask good questions that could lead you to see how the extended golf days violate your partner's core value of connection? Think about this very honestly.

Values are an integral part of the relationship. A person who holds no values can have no real relationship. A value system creates a way for lovers to prioritize actions. They also give us the chance to feel pride in our strengths and to develop our character. Without a value system, we are subject to chasing whatever shiny impulse presents itself around each corner. In contrast, by adhering to self-created values, we develop character, respect for ourselves and gain respect from others. Posit that we value commitment. We have practiced and enhanced our monogamous connection to our partner for years, and although at times we may notice others who are attractive or kind, we do not violate our commitment because that would shatter our values. This is an example of a value.

Time makes our relationship grow stronger

We all have different motivations for desiring the things that we hold passion for. We become mindful by examining the personal meanings attached to our decision to enter into a relationship with, and to remain committed to our partner or spouse. There are likely many reasons for the decision. Go ahead and ask yourself, why do you wake up each day still honoring your commitment? Some of us may become a little uncomfortable as we poke around in the layers of our unconscious and attempt to peel away at the layers of meaning embedded in our decision-making. Being committed to our relationships is a daily decision, although we don't always perceive it this way. If you don't recognize that, it's likely you feel trapped and suffocated. To be in love, we must actively choose to take part in being together every single day, and there will be times when we do not want to choose our marriage. We may want to work a few extra hours but our partner is waiting for us at home, and then we must choose between two competing scenarios. Some common reasons that we anchor ourselves into our commitment are that we care for our partner: we love them and we feel that they love us. We appreciate the time we spend together and we look forward to more time together. We love to parent together, we respect our lover, and we may even feel that we need our partner. It is likely that our daily decision to be in the relationship has something to do with our values, emotional, and physical needs being met.

It's essential to be aware of our deepest thoughts and impulses. The development of mindful self-awareness is not necessarily a comfortable process. The more these considerations feel slightly odd, the more we know we are doing something which deviates from our typical blind forward motion. When we feel a little uncomfortable, it may be a signal that we are outside of the comfort zone of our value system. Alternately, when reflecting upon our motivation to be a part of our relationship, we will gain confidence if we realize that we have taken the time to date, to experience love, then we will glitter with a perception which is strengthened by wisdom of past experience.

We have become very aware of ourselves and our needs. Thus, the character of the person we choose aligns with our own personality in such a way that the interactions of our daily life reaches the benchmark of our unique version of a good relationship. Awareness is a worthy goal.

Despite the importance of knowing ourselves and our motivations for being in a relationship, some people manage to enter and remain in a relationship for a long time without it. Others purposefully evade nurturing greater understanding. They sort of trod along in life. Maybe they are twenty years on in their marriage but feel unhappy about it because they don't believe that they have ever actively chosen anything in their whole lives. Imagine a woman who was told all of the time that she should get married as soon as she was old enough, and that she should look forward to having a grand and opulent wedding. Being a young woman who takes great pride in pleasing others, she was dutifully courted by a young man in her neighborhood and said yes when the proposal followed three months later. Although some people may end up developing themselves alongside their partner, feeling very happy in their marriage, others do not. Someone like this woman could spend considerable time wondering about that choice as the years go on. It may be difficult to remain within the relationship. The contract and decisions to commit were made very early in life, before ever really developing herself, and she may find herself always wondering what life may have been like if she had followed a passion or done something on her own. *What if I had gone to college or pursued my art for a few years before starting my family?*

There are many questions that we should ask ourselves. Part of knowing what we love and why means understanding the layers of fear and discontent. Life is in fact a journey. We will always be evolving in one direction or another. It takes awareness and finesse to grow internally as individuals as well as together with our partner.

Use this as a conversation point with your partner. Ask each other this: what parts of yourself do you feel that you are not being nurtured right now? What dreams or wishes are you harboring in secret? It's ok to say it even if it feels silly. When we become very aware

of the values that inform our decision making, we are then capable of attuning this awareness to creating and sustaining the kind of relationship capable of nurturing ourselves and our beloved on an emotional, physical, and spiritual level.

Our internal development and personality begin to take root in childhood, and our capacity for understanding our partner is viewed through a certain lens of innate hope and fear until we reconcile our misgivings and develop our character. We should also become acquainted with our partner's values and motivations. When we hold those values to be sacred, we know to nurture those matters of vital importance to us and our beloved. We will work tirelessly to maintain the internal commitment to our values. Our ability to choose and adhere to any given path is a product of self-understanding, even self-discipline. We can more easily affirmatively choose our direction in life and feel confident about it the more we examine ourselves. Examining the self and developing character happens as we spend time taking risks, making glorious mistakes that form a mottled road map for our personal identity.