

# Spiritual Intimacy in Couple Relationship

BY MAN-SEE MAH

Spirituality is defined as having a dual dimension: an outer and an inner orientation – 1) oriented toward what is beyond or larger than the self (God, the cosmos), and 2) oriented toward looking more deeply within the self (Wright, 1998:20; Van Ness, 1996). A person's highest goal in spirituality is "not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments".

Intimacy is a kind of closeness defined by mutual self-disclosure and an understanding of other person. It is found at the heart of nurturing and psychologically beneficial relationships (Long & Young, 2007:16-17, 189). Intimacy is more than just extending yourself to include the other person, but to tune into the other person's reality, risking being changed by that experience (Dowrick, 1992:183).

Hence, spiritual intimacy in couple relationship is a couple's psycho spiritual journey with the task of realising one's truest self in the context of reality understood as a connection to a larger reality (God, cosmos), and seeking to experience the essence of one's self in intense intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual communion with one's partner (Wright, 1998:20-28; Cox, 1979:10).

## CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES IN COUPLE THERAPY

A committed intimate relationship, for most heterosexual couples, means marriage (Wright, 1998:20-28). But, there is no one apparent guide in spiritual marriage or partnership (i.e. relationship of unmarried cohabiting couples who have made an intentional and usually life-long, commitment to each other). Not even in major religions is there a religious approach that provides a concept of marriage that integrates: i) a commitment to the sexual, economic, and spiritual union of a couple; ii) an acceptance of either heterosexual unions or otherwise; iii) a mindful, continuous development of intimacy as a couple; iv) an intentional nurturing of each other's individual multidimensional growth; nor a



framework that i) enhances gender egalitarianism and flexible role structures; and ii) addresses couples' issues from different spiritual traditions.

It is only recently that psychotherapists and main marital therapists convey an approach to modern committed relationship that is consciously grounded in the spiritual, and see this form of relationship as "instrument for the evolution of human consciousness" (Welwood, 1996:xii-xiii, Wright, 1998:20-28).

Spiritual intimacy may be ideal, but it may not be desired as a necessary requirement for a successful relationship for many couples. Moreover, this ideal may not be attainable at any one particular period of a couple's life, but possibly over their life time. Some couples prefer to build their relationship on other more easily achievable goals, like raising healthy children (Kersler & Yalom, 1996:51). Hence, counsellors will not make spiritual intimacy a necessary or singular goal for a relationship. Otherwise, they may blatantly or stealthily destabilize the relationship (Wright, 1998:20-28).

Even if the quest for spiritual intimacy is chosen, it poses challenges for counsellors, when the boundary between spirituality and psychology is blurred. For example, transpersonal psychology can encroach onto the realms of spiritual experience and meaning, and diverse spiritual technologies (e.g., meditation) can influence the advancement and form of the psyche (Wright, 1998:20-28, Cortright 1997). Counsellors need to have a wide knowledge of various spiritual orientations, and understanding of the couple's individual and corporate

spiritual beliefs, relationships and goals, in order to help them to adopt appropriate spiritual practices and communal rituals to enhance their relationship.

Concerns like staying true to one's spiritual ideals amid the hassles of daily life, differences, anger, and conflict might also threaten the relationship. Counsellors need to integrate relevant intervention strategies of couple therapies to help couples to build a strong bond of trust and respect within the unique dyad, before working with them a solution that satisfies the relationship of two individuals with divergent personality requirements and differing stance.

A useful concept to offer couples is a multidimensional approach to spiritual marriage/partnership, which includes (1) a spiritual philosophy: values connecting deeply with one's inner, deeper, more authentic self, as well as connecting with a "larger-than-self" reality (2) the high interconnection and mutual support of relationship and spirituality; (3) a close coalition of the partners' spiritual, philosophical, and moral values, especially a commitment to the psycho spiritual growth of oneself and one's partner; (4) a commitment to spiritual practice as defined by the couple and to sharing the fruits of the practice; and (5) a commitment to an ongoing process of developing relational intimacy (Wright, 1998:20-28).

Counsellors may encourage couples to (1) spend time in solitude regularly, (2) go on spiritual retreats with similar support groups to talk with God, and (3) practise mindfulness to develop self-knowledge, self-acceptance, self-encouragement, self-nourishment, to change old habit patterns; and to attune to each other (Wright, 1998:20-28; Dowrick, 1992:166-167, 302-303). Couples are to focus on the spiritual in everyday life, not on extraordinary, mystical experiences or a vision of future transcendence, so that daily communications, actions, and behaviours become opportunities for spiritual practice, and marriage/partnership interactions, not as limiting one's spiritual development (Wright, 1998:20-28).

The key elements of spiritual intimacy – 1) the oneness in self: a sense of identity and inner legitimacy, connecting to a deep, authentic inner core/self/soul; 2) the oneness with a larger-than-self (God, cosmos): deepest connections, individually and corporately as a couple, to the great mystery of the divine, and 3) the oneness of two in spirit: two selves not just living alongside each other, but in and through each other (Dowrick, 1992:21-26, 146-178, 205; Wright, 1998:20-28) – correspond with Scriptures regarding couple relationship, rendering the Christian perspective a valid alternative.

## THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Today, mainstream Christianity offers spiritual approaches to spousal relations, believing that only the spiritual is strong enough to sustain one through the vagaries of marriage and provide it with deeper meaning (Wright, 1998:20-28; Anderson, 1994; Yates, 1985).

Christianity offers heterosexual couples a strong tripartite covenantal commitment and an ordered mutuality that:

1. Gets beyond personal needs and wants – the oneness in self,
2. Calls for a commitment to God, individually and corporately, to keep the marriage permanent for spiritual growth, intimacy and wholeness – the oneness in the Spirit of God, and
3. involves intimacy in spirit as one unique system, as soul-mates with a kindred spirit, and as best friends and lovers – the oneness of two in spirit (Jones & Butman, 1991:364-365; BSF International, 2004; Genesis 2:23-25; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, Song of Songs),

The couple has an immanent view of spirituality and perceives the marriage as a necessary and challenging step in spiritual development: enjoying daily communication with God, individually and together as a couple, to have sanctification, unity in diversity of roles and responsibilities, and joy in their sacred union, reflecting the union of Christ and the church (Wright, 1998:20-28; Hersley, 1984:76-89, Jones & Butman, 1991:364-365; Eph 5:25-30). Such spiritual intimacy offers a more enduring foundation than simple romantic attraction. It secures emotional nurturance, and mutual pleasure, as couples talk and enjoy intimacy with God, and with each other, finding their vulnerability and incongruence, within and between themselves, dissipating. Intimacy, passion and commitment are the three components of love asserted by Sternberg's Triangular Model of Love (Long & Young, 2007:191-192). But true love is neither physical, nor romantic. True love is an acceptance of all that is, has been, will be and will not be.

## CONCLUSION

Intimacy, passion and commitment are the three components of love asserted by Sternberg's Triangular Model of Love (Long & Young, 2007:191-192). But true love is neither physical, nor romantic. True love is an acceptance of all that is, has been, will be and will not be.

Man-See Mah is on an educational journey with her children studying in Melbourne. She is enjoying God's provision of "a time such as this" - a season of transformational learning and preparation for life-long ministry as an international counselling student at Tabor College Mulgrave Campus, Victoria.

