

On Living Together
By Whitney Altopp

Living together grows love and care. Through the daily routines- eating, cleaning, setting up house, caring for animals, purchasing, greeting the morning and ending the day- there are infinite opportunities for couples to grow in love and care for one another. This is the generosity of God. How generous of God to make available such frequent opportunities for growing in love! In the living is the loving.

Living takes up so much time that it can be difficult to set aside the space for knowing ourselves and one another more deeply. Most couples move in together because they want to maximize their time together in an already full day. Having set aside time for just the two of them to get to know one another better outside of the demands of the daily routine through dating, they conclude that living together will increase the intimacy of their relationship in depth and scope. Five minutes here, ten minutes there, through the eating and the preparing and the cleaning, they'll have even more and better time together, more and better conversations like the ones they had while out on dates. Such an expectation can be true, but not necessarily. Correlation does not mean causation.

The way that a couple speaks to each other in the dating years, even the topics which they discuss, is the way that they will speak to each other in the living together years, unless the couple is intentional in exploring new topics together. Unfortunately, the comfort of living together can make a person nervous about sharing a concern, about raising a new topic, about noticing differences and respecting their significance.

It is my hope that couples who live together will recognize this fundamental truth and dedicate themselves to the effort of noticing and expressing. Whereas dating illuminates their motivation (or lack thereof) and skill in identifying their common foundation, living together can mask it.

Growing in love through living together can hamstring a couple's willingness to move beyond either of their comfort zones into the depth that is offered to us in a monogamous relationship. The ways in which they grow in love through living together can make it harder to recognize and appreciate deep differences in their foundations. It's the deep differences which ultimately end a relationship. And when a relationship ends, the embarrassment of having not noticed these things earlier, in the midst of real love, can turn individuals cynical and defensive.

Everyone marries because they love each other. How can a couple give themselves space to share real love while simultaneously being open to the discovery of deep differences which create undo a life together? How do they give themselves space to determine whether they want to commit to the effort for life? The first step is intentionality, of course. The second step is practice.

A woman in her 50s says to me, "My husband and I lived together before we got married." "Why'd you decide to live together?" I ask her.

“Because I wasn’t sure that I wanted to be married,” she replied.

She was here sitting across from me because her marriage was immensely painful. Her husband had had an affair. After coming out of that affair she found herself unable to be honest with him. Yet, it could be argued she’d had trouble being honest with him their whole marriage because she’d had trouble being honest with herself. She never gave herself the chance to address her deepest uncertainty. Now that the kids were grown she was back to her unaddressed wondering- Do I want to be married?

Divorce would be painful and expensive. What would she do? She was close to her husband’s family. How could she give that up? Yet, she couldn’t imagine how to address her own needs when she’d ignored them for so long.

This woman’s story is like yours (universal “you”) because the fundamental necessity in a relationship is to be honest with oneself in all of the ponderings and concerns. This necessity is true for all people. Both people in the relationship need to be honest with themselves. One might worry that there is a high percentage of a chance that honesty will destroy the relationship rather than grow it. The inverse is more certain. The inability to be honest will destroy the relationship, not by catastrophe, but by erosion.

How do you make time to be honest with yourself? How do you make time to let your partner know what you’re learning? How do you hear what he/she is learning from their honesty with himself/herself? When do you know to let go of what has grown in the loving of living together because the differences will continue to interrupt or prevent the growth of each person in this union?

Who might the woman in our story go to with her question?

We can imagine her saying, “Honey, I need to see a therapist to work out some questions I have inside. I don’t want to tell you about it yet because I’m concerned that you’ll take it personally.” By taking a first intentional step, any one of us can figure out what the concern really means.

Establishing times of practice allows for new understandings, so that real love can remain. It also allows for fault lines between the couple to be identified. Since life-long relationships always accept “what is,” a couple needs to determine the significance of their differences. Does your partner show up for places of importance for you without your initiation? Do they share the same places of importance and do their own work to partner with you in those areas? When you look at their family of origin, how do you see them bringing things forward from that experience into their adulthood? If they claim to want to distance themselves from it, how do they demonstrate that they’re developing a new way? With the intimacy of living together, any one should feel confident that they have immediate access to these answers. If they’re not seeing it in their living together, it’s not there.

Millions of people for thousands of years have partnered with another person for life. There are successful arranged marriages and “love” marriages; marriages while people were young and were old; marriages across religion and nationality and politics; same-sex and opposite sex marriages. Marriage is a gift. It comes to us; a relationship which is given to us. With living

together, we can come to believe that marriage is something that we construct, requiring only the honesty of both people with themselves and thus with the other. Unfortunately none of us can make the other honest. And it is heartbreaking when someone you love decides to refuse the deep work of honesty. It's also heartbreaking when the honesty reveals differences that either one wishes weren't there.

Since honesty is the realm in which God works, I think it's anyone's safest bet. Everything good flows from honesty. Everything good in your life has flowed from honesty.

This essay is intended to help the reader realize the priority of being honest with oneself.

Whatever the "stupid" or "picky" or "judgy" thing is:

I wish you were more/less...

Why do you do ____ that way?

I don't like it when you...

Maybe you'll get better at...

I can wait for you to improve on...

If I just model _____, then you'll surely pick it up.

I'm sure that _____ will get better after _____.

We're just going through a stressful time.

They're just stressed/tired/sad, etc.

There's something in these sentences which relates back to the work of the one speaking...a better understanding of the significance of this matter. Although such awareness can't eliminate hardship in a relationship, it can give you a sense of groundedness when you face the hard times.

Listen to yourself. Resist thinking that marriage is only the love which gets you through the tasks of the day, through living together. Marriage is intended to offer us the security of life-long covenant- of promises- so that we might grow as individuals in relationship with one another and grow into a couple together. The marriage union is a gift.

Living together is only what it is and should not be considered a downpayment on marriage. Since one can only promise to share what one has to offer, living together should allow each person the chance to continue to understand themselves better.