

## **Introduction: The Travel Route Mapped**

(All rights reserved, do not use without permission of author)

“That love is all there is, is all we know of love,” writes poet Emily Dickinson, joining sages, singers, writers and holy teachers who espouse the marvel, wonder, agony and transformational power of this tiny word. This mysterious force turns warriors into cowards and cowards into heroes. It is responsible for heinous crimes, outrageous acts, stunning poetry, and world wonders. The Taj Mahal, “the crown jewel” of India which was constructed as an act of love, reminds us of the advice of the spiritual masters: learning to love is the crowning jewel of our lives, a key to spiritual understanding, transcendence and enlightenment. Love has the power to help us heal old traumas and bear unimaginable burdens. It helps us live longer and happier lives. As neurobiological research has recently taught us, love alters the pathways of our brain, strengthens our immune systems, and contributes to healthy heart and organ functions. Loss of love, conversely, is linked to higher rates of stress, risk of illness and disease, and depression.

In short, love has the unique capacity to destroy, heal, and transform us. Love can open us to the deepest wellspring of what it is to be a human being. In love’s journey, we find the key to our continuation as a species, and to the discovery of our greatest potential.

But this path is not an easy one. Falling in love is an intense, powerful experience, but to traverse the road from this initial phase to the creation and maintenance of a thriving relationship that can withstand change, loss, and time—this is one of the hardest endeavors humans undertake. As Rainer Maria Rilke famously writes, “For one being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks.”

Falling in love is like being taken by helicopter to the top of the Himalayas. We step out of the plane unruffled, cozy and comfortable, awed by the views of the most spectacular

mountains in the world. We are dizzy, breathless, overtaken with wonder. We feel delight at our luck, and dazzled with possibility. But maintaining a real relationship over time is like climbing the mountain, step by treacherous step. Many slip, stumble into unseen crevices, lose their way, or find themselves stuck in terrifying conditions. Some will give up and turn back, deciding it is not worth the risk. Others will be injured in their attempt. All will struggle with uncertainty, fear, pain, confusion, and dread. But if we arrive at the top, after all our difficult exertions, we know that the journey itself brought us lessons nothing else could provide. The view this time is twice as exhilarating, the rewards infinitely more worthwhile.

This book provides a roadmap for this mysterious, difficult journey. It offers a framework for approaching love's path that combines insight into the newest research on the physiology and psychology of love with practical techniques for managing conflicts and developing greater intimacy. *Love's Four Journeys* presents a model that is easy to grasp, drawn not only from my counseling work with couples and individuals for over twenty-five years, but from the wisdom of ancient mythology, poetry, songs, folklore, and spiritual traditions. I hope this book will be an objective witness for your relationship, offering a context for your conflicts, a reflective space to examine your choices, and a guide to deepening and strengthening your connection with your partner.

The grounding principle of *Love's Four Journeys* is that love is a practice, a daily ritual we undertake. Love is not merely an emotion, a sensation, a resting-place we find ourselves in with our partner. To love truly, deeply, and well is to accept the idea that love is hard work, that it requires commitment to every step of the journey. Practicing love involves a set of skills—skills we will explore in depth in *Love's Four Journeys*. At the same time, this

book reflects an embrace of the essential mysteriousness and unknowability of love, highlighting its organizing power over our lives.

To begin this journey, we have to work against two opposed ideas about committed relationships, ingrained opinions that are passed along by our culture's narratives about love. The first idea is that "love is all you need." If we look long and hard, this narrative tells us, we will find that one "right" person who can fulfill our loneliness, meet our every need, and connect easily with us. Once we find this "soul mate," we will be forever enmeshed in the bubble of a shared psychic home, our anxieties and isolation melting away under love's perpetual glow. The second instinct is to look over the appalling divorce statistics, remember our parents' or friends' disastrous marriage, reflect on our own troubled history, and run away from love, shrieking. This instinct leads us to serial monogamy, uncommitted "hook-ups," and sworn singlehood.

Yet despite our jaded views and our cynicism, our doubts and fears, we return again and again to the hope love offers. We remember the stories of people on their deathbeds who dismiss the riches they gained, the power they wielded, the success and celebrity they treasured, acknowledging that all that had mattered was how well they had loved. We all want to end our lives feeling that we had loved as powerfully and fully as possible. "All, everything that I understand, I understand only because I love," says Leo Tolstoy. We all hope to discover the mysteries that love allows us glimpses into. This journey—what I call the four journeys of love—is a vital human journey, whose promise calls to each of us.

\* \* \*

In *Love's Four Journeys*, we explore love as a series of stages, from romantic bliss to rude awakening to disillusionment and even despair, and then finally, to a new sense of rich connection. We do not always move progressively through these stages, in one steady progress upward. Love's journey takes a form more like a spiral, where we can find ourselves back in earlier stages even after a long relationship. Learning the dangers and wisdom of each stage gives us insight into the path ahead, allowing us to take the "long view" of our relationship, even when we feel mired in conflict. It reminds us that learning to live with, and love, another person is hard; but from this difficulty arises wisdom, growth, and abiding connection.

Here, I outline the stages of *Love's Four Journeys*, offering a glimpse into the book's guiding premise.

### *Stage One: The Merge*

Falling in love feels more like a miracle than anything else I know. The rational mind may tell us that when we step through the doorway, there will be minefields and sinkholes. Experience teaches us that the initial frenzy won't last, that pain and loss will inevitably follow. We are dimly aware that we may even discover parts of ourselves that we don't want to see, or expose ourselves to new vulnerabilities. No matter. Even when we know, logically, that we are with the wrong person in the wrong time and the wrong place, we long to say yes to the pleasure that is romantic love.

Just as the infant merges with her mother after birth and cannot tell the difference between them, just as the new mother lives in constant awareness of her newborn child, holding her during the day, listening for her at night, so it is with new lovers. Boundaries

melt away, and the sense of “we-ness” is all there is. The similarities seem profound, the conversations endless. If something occurs that points to our differences, at this stage we romanticize them, seeing them as the “right” differences. Everything suggests that we were meant for one another.

One of the most marvelous aspects of this stage is not just the idealized way that you see your partner, but how idealized you yourself become. Your patience seems eternal, and your interest in the other rarely wanes. You feel you can listen to his stories forever. In the shelter of your love-bubble—and in the adoring mirror of the other—it is easy to think you can sustain these qualities under stress.

In many ways, the advent of love is akin to a religious experience, as the philosopher William James once described it:

An oceanic feeling, when everything comes together, oneself, everyone else, the world, and divinity, it is like the feeling that you get when you stare out at the infinite reach of the ocean: it is a little frightening, but it is also awe-inspiring and exhilarating.

There *is* sacredness at this stage in a relationship. It is not simply an illusion. You truly are able to see or sense the spirit of the other. Just as important, you experience your own potential, and how delightful it feels to live with an open heart, bountiful compassion, and unconditional caring. That feeling is a spiritual experience. And although some of the feelings associated with these mystical beginnings do not last, the best of them may be recovered, once we learn to traverse love’s rocky roads, and if we have chosen our partner well.

To select wisely, we must realize that our romantic feelings alone do not signify that the beloved is a good partner for us. We must learn to identify qualities in our partner that can outlast the initial pleasures of the “merge,” and to cultivate those qualities in ourselves. For no matter how strong the madness and the positive life changes it precipitates, we

cannot stay in a continual state of merging. Somehow each of us must find our way back to ourselves.

### *Stage Two: The Challenge*

Sometimes, like a bolt of thunder, the realization comes to lovers that they are not entirely perfect for one another. Sometimes an awareness slowly dawns that there are more differences between them than they first knew. Like a crack of light pooling through an open door, the realization might be able to be quickly shut out, as we reassure ourselves that everything is still blissful. The first fight can even become a romantic memory, a story retold between lovers like a good myth, with easy laughs that signify their union has not been challenged. But at a certain point in every relationship, we begin to settle into the awareness that we are different people with distinct needs that cannot be perfectly assimilated.

Humans are annoying, and living with another person necessarily brings challenges. It is during this second stage that the promise of pure perfection crumbles as we face this fact. Spending every moment with the other becomes less pleasurable, and we may find ourselves longing for time alone. Some of the traits we fell in love with in our partner begin to irritate us. Her gregariousness looks insincere, his reliability seems rigid. We begin to criticize, and to notice that our partner is critical of our habits and behaviors as well. We fall prey to what I call “infinity loops,” the bane of every relationship. She who fears rejection discovers that he fears intimacy. As he pushes her away, his aloofness makes her feel abandoned, and she may attempt to draw nearer, which in turn makes him retreat further. And round and round we go.

As these differences emerge, they may feel more threatening than they actually turn out to be. That is why this stage tends to be the “silent stage,” the step in love’s journey that goes largely undiscussed. We find ourselves smoothing over differences, fearful of broaching them with our partner, let alone our friends and family. We may secretly worry that these differences are a sign that the relationship is incompatible, that our partner is not who we hoped.

Though painful, illusion as it dies permits us to move closer to the possibility of real, abiding love. As romance recedes, we can learn to steer through difficulty in ways that deepen the relationship rather than damage it.

### *Stage Three: The Struggle*

This stage may feel like the end of the road. The power struggles in the relationship have come fully to the surface. Our original feeling of being passionately in love seems like a faraway memory. Unpleasant thoughts enter our heads, perhaps even being shared with others: “I am no longer in love with my wife” or “I realize I married the wrong person” or “my partner has turned into someone I do not know.”

Even if we don’t frame our differences in such dramatic fashion, we feel a sense of growing distance and estrangement from our partner in this stage. We feel that we are having the same argument again and again. Where we once saw the best in our partner, now we can only see their worst. Perhaps we even witness the worst qualities of ourselves. We may resort to behaviors that are unhealthy and damaging. In this stage, betrayals, lies, and transgressions often occur, and arguments escalate in their intensity.

At a certain point, every relationship hits what I call “the wall.” We arrive at “the wall” when we feel the differences are too intractable to handle, and we simply cannot bear to keep struggling over the same issues repeatedly. We need a change. “The wall” represents the moment when we make a game-changing decision about our relationship.

Many couples decide to separate when they reach this level of estrangement, feeling their differences are too intractable to solve. Some couples decide to live parallel lives, staying married or in partnerships but no longer seeking intimacy, emotional support, meaningful sex, and personal growth from one another. Other couples will simply stay stuck, playing out the same battles over and over, and banging their heads against “the wall” without being willing to leave or to change.

All of these options will leave us with unfinished business. Without fully exploring the difficult lessons of this stage, and coming to grips with our own role in the relationship’s conflicts, we will probably choose the same kind of person and recreate the same story again. If we stay in the relationship without putting forth the effort to change it, we may find ourselves doomed to an unfulfilling, lifeless partnership. Worse still, we will miss out on the opportunity for growth, renewal, and meaningful exploration that a true commitment to the relationship can offer.

The other possibility is to embrace this commitment—to take the fourth and final journey, which is to learn about, and learn through, love.

#### ***Stage Four: The Promise Realized***

This final journey of love begins with the hardest work of all: true individuation and self-discovery. Thus to enter this stage, we must find the courage to look inside ourselves, to

examine the fears and limitations that hinder us as individuals. It is only by working through our own shortcomings that we can truly meet another person.

In acknowledging and exploring our own imperfections, we learn to accept those of our partner. We recognize that we cannot change him or her. In committing to the relationship anew, we commit to understanding our differences and to cultivating curiosity about them. We learn to listen carefully, even when our partner voices an opinion we find threatening. We develop what I call the “counterinstinctive move”: when we want to shut down or turn away, we stay open. When we want to withdraw, we say something welcoming. Such moves draw us beyond the limits of our habitual responses and defense mechanisms.

The fourth journey is not just a somber, serious, steady march toward mature acceptance. It can be a lark, a thrilling adventure. In the fourth stage, we rediscover some of the joy and passion of the initial “merge.” We learn to play together, to laugh, relax, and enjoy each other more deeply. We might create art, build gardens and houses, travel, develop community, and share work and family life in new ways. And throughout, we discern new aspects of ourselves and our partner, as we work toward greater maturity and connection.

This stage of love teaches us to practice the key behaviors emphasized by all the spiritual traditions: compassion, humility, humor, gratitude, generosity, and patience. In taking this journey, we can discover immeasurable possibility and unexpected grace. The final journey of love connects us with an essential truth found in stories and myths from time immemorial: that the measure of a person’s true wealth and meaning is in how well they loved.