

The Essential Rules of Love

A Practical Guide to Creating a Harmonious,
Healthy, and Happy Relationship

Phil Russotti

To Susan's memory. Without what we had, this book would not have been possible.

And to Danny and Lindsay, your mother was amazing.

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Foreword

This is a book born of tears and laughter.

There is certainly no shortage of authors who have tackled this subject, but few have overturned as many rocks along the way and unearthed such a wealth of insights in the process.

Those of us who have managed to spend time with Mr. Russotti will attest to his resolve.

He takes us on a journey that asks for the courage to face some disquieting, albeit rewarding, truths that attend this condition we call love. He strips away many of the conventions of what we mean or think we mean when we speak of love. *The Essential Rules of Love* is an impressive foray into what at times can be an elusive and fickle quest. He can do the occasional deep dive when called for but keeps it accessible with the light touch that doesn't falter.

Mr. Russotti knows the terrain, having found for himself a life that exemplifies what he has set out to offer others. This book bears the weight of personal experience tempered by discovery and loss. It is a compelling read.

For all the light shed in this book, the author understands that understanding is not enough. Perhaps its greatest contribution lies in its practicality, working from the premise that love is ultimately an action. This book is a distillation of what couples can do and what they need not to do, and it reveals how seemingly small adjustments can have a profound effect on a relationship.

On a personal note and as a psychotherapist with a fair amount of mileage, I have sat with a good complement of couples in crisis. An honest appraisal would be to say that at times all one can do is to take out the duct tape and hope for the best . . . but much evidence exists of a genuine and at times desperate longing to improve or salvage what they have or have had.

There is an old joke that asks how many therapists it takes to change a light bulb. The answer is “only one . . . but the light bulb has to really want to change.” It’s very possible that in the process of changing this new light, from wherever it comes, it can illuminate for you that which is present but yet unseen.

Shakespeare said it well:

“Go to your bosom, knock there and ask your heart what it doth know.”

So, readers, take heart; you are in good hands.

—William Parker, LCSW

Introduction

December 20, 2009, 4:00 PM, Hotel Plaza Athene, Sixty-Fourth and Madison Avenue, NYC, private room, second floor, I am sixty-one years old and standing in front of my children, their spouses, my family, and closest friends, dressed in a tuxedo, about to proclaim wedding vows to a woman to become my third wife!

What the hell was I doing? I was formalizing a relationship begun two years earlier with a woman whom I had not only fallen deeply in love with but with whom I had also developed a relationship of mutual trust, respect, admiration, caring, honesty, romance, and sexuality. I was hopeful it would continue for the rest of our lives.

That hope was realized, and the relationship lasted until Susan's untimely death from complications from ovarian cancer eight years later.

Together with extensive scientific research, I share here the lessons learned from that relationship, insights that provide hope and promise to anyone, whether in their first or fifth relationship, that a positive and mutually rewarding, loving relationship is attainable at any stage in life. The advice and analysis I offer can help anyone who has found someone new after a breakup or divorce, because it is a primer for how to do things differently the next time around. It is also helpful for anyone who feels they need to reignite the fire that has faded from a long-term relationship or for any couple that has fallen into patterns or behavior not conducive to a mutually loving relationship. Finally, this book offers hope to those who have not yet experienced the kind of relationship we will discuss.

The methodology I present is unique in the self-help-book arena because I break down love and relationships into their component parts, both functionally and pragmatically. We will begin by examining what love really is, because without understanding what it is, you won't know how

to keep it. We will explore the process of love, how it develops and unfolds, and how it can transform into a lifelong relationship.

We will investigate love through the lens of an array of professionals, including psychologists, psychiatrists, philosophers, anthropologists, chemists, neuroscientists, evolutionary biologists, feminists, literary authors, and poets. We will focus on the basic components of love these disciplines encompass that influence the development, creation, and maintenance of a strong, positive relationship. You will learn from science that love develops through a combination of evolutionary forces, psychological factors, and chemical changes in the brain. You will see that these elements combine in each of us differently but can produce in all of us that wonderful feeling of wanting no one else but our beloved. We will explore the potential emotional and psychological benefits of having a loving, positive relationship that make all the work it takes worthwhile.

We will see, interspersed through the book, how love is expressed in music and poetry, which is remarkably consistent with and reflects what the researchers have found. As we will see, we inherently know many of the facets of love. And we will look at the physical aspects of love and relationships and navigate the pitfalls surrounding sex.

Finally, we will explore death and love, a topic that relationship self-help books don't cover but which I believe deserves thoughtful attention because it is something we all face. We might as well not bury our heads in the sand, and we should prepare for it.

I interweave the story of my relationship with Susan into the principles the experts espouse, explaining how we followed professional advice unwittingly to achieve the fabulous relationship we had. Scrutinizing our experience along with the voluminous research I did allowed me to conclude that the principles underlying a positive, loving relationship can effectively be reduced

to **Four *Don'ts***—that I believe are at the root of most problems in relationships—and **Six *Dos***—that nourish and allow relationships to grow deeper and become more fulfilling.

If you follow these rules, you will discover how to do the right things, regardless of the stage of relationship you are in, including how to sense the beginning of a problem and head it off before it becomes a serious impediment to a healthy relationship. If you've made a connection with someone with whom you envision building a life, adhering to my ***Don'ts*** and ***Dos*** will go a long way toward helping you arrive at a long-lasting, loving relationship.

The rules offered in this book are meant as a blueprint for fostering and growing the relationship you desire. The earlier you follow them, the better off you will be because they will become habits that will define your relationship. Your life together will be built on a foundation of respect and concern for one another. Like anything worthwhile, it takes hard work, planning, and careful thought, and based on what you learn here, I think you will agree it'll be worth the effort.

The title of the book, *The Essential Rules of Love*, refers to “rules” of love. The ***Dos*** and ***Don'ts*** are written as rules. I reflected on how the format evolved and realized that it occurred unconsciously. My entire forty-eight-year career as a trial lawyer has dealt with rules in every aspect of the work: rules of evidence, rules of civil procedure, rules of voir dire, and rules of trial practice. In my effort to understand and then explain how to have a great relationship, it was second nature for me to take the research and my experience and codify the advice into “rules.” The “rules” of love, in this case, condense my research and experience into easy-to-understand principles. Follow the rules, and you will be successful in your quest. If you can't follow the rules, you must ask yourself why not. This answer will lead you to appreciate what you need to

do in your relationship to reach the point of being able to follow the rules—because if you can't follow them, having a healthy, positive relationship will be near impossible.

If you read this book and try to follow these rules of any length of time and can't, and you *don't* find them helpful in strengthening your relationship, you may need to consider couple's counseling or individual therapy to get to the bottom of what is interfering with your efforts, or rethink whether you are with the right person. Being in a loving relationship requires having the desire and motivation to do whatever it takes to ensure its success, to do the things that nurture and advance it.

Love is manifested through action and fostered through respect. It calls for doing a variety of things for the other person, as described throughout the book, and *not* doing or saying things that disrespect them. If you can accept and abide by that premise, you have the necessary tools to create a meaningful and fulfilling relationship or rescue a flailing one and prevent a breakup, separation, or divorce.

Let's start by seeing what love is all about.

Chapter 1

What Is “Love”?

What is love?

Baby don't hurt me

Don't hurt me

No more

...

I want no other, no other lover

This is our life, our time

If we are together, I need you forever

Is it love?

(“What Is Love?” Lyrics by Dee Dee Halligan and Junior Torello, 1993)

Five weeks into our relationship, on a warm August night, Susan and I were enjoying a romantic dinner on the deck of an outdoor restaurant that overlooked Three Mile Harbor Marina in East Hampton, New York, where the summer sun shimmered across the inlet’s dark-blue water. Susan wore a simple white sleeveless dress that matched the sea of white tablecloths around us. She sat facing me and the water, bathed in the soft golden glow of the setting sun as it washed over her face and highlighted her beautiful blond hair that cascaded onto her shoulders. She radiated beauty and serenity. I hadn’t planned to tell her how I felt about her, but as dinner unfolded and the wine flowed, the idyllic, romantic setting worked its magic on me. I leaned across the table, looked into her eyes, and softly murmured, “You know, I love you.”

Susan simply smiled and nodded approvingly, saying, “I know,” and that was fine with me. I was relieved that I’d laid my heart on the table and she hadn’t reacted negatively, but I was also fairly certain she felt the same way and would eventually say so. To say those words and embark on a voyage without knowing where it will lead is one of the scariest parts of falling in love. Hopefully, it will be the beginning of a positive, healthy, and long-lasting love.

But many of us wonder, what exactly is “love”? We all have different ideas about what love is, but in this book I elucidate certain themes that are consistently discussed by authors and experts as I explore interesting and unique perspectives across a wide variety of fields.

Does love just happen? We all know the expression “love at first sight,” which refers to the immediate or instant attraction of two people to each other that may or may not develop into the kind of relationship on which we are focused here: a permanent, committed relationship between two people for their mutual benefit and well-being. There is a scene in the film *The Godfather* that offers a dramatic example of this love-at-first-sight phenomenon. Al Pacino’s character, Michael Corleone, flees to Sicily after killing a member of a rival crime family and a police captain. While there in hiding, he eyes a beautiful local woman and is struck by the “thunderbolt,” as his bodyguards describe it. He and the girl instantly fall in love and marry soon after. Whether you’ve never seen it or simply want to refresh your memory, I recommend searching YouTube for “Thunderbolt scene in *The Godfather*” if you’d like to see a perfect fictional representation of the phenomenon known as “love at first sight.”

As discussed more thoroughly in a later chapter about the science of love, experts acknowledge that love at first sight is real. Renowned biological anthropologist Helen Fisher studied the biological basis for this phenomenon and discovered, along with other researchers, that the feeling of being overtaken by love was accompanied by the immediate release of

dopamine flooding a particular area of the brain.¹ This part of the brain is the reward system that generates feelings of wanting, seeking, and craving, as well as energy, focus, and motivation. Those who study or write about this topic, however, all seem to agree that this feeling does not, unfortunately, last long. That could be due to what Chris Rock humorously spells out in a standup routine about the dating representative. He says that in the early stages of a relationship, women in particular are not dating the actual person; they are dating their *representative*, the press kit of the other, not the reality: “Relationships—easy to get into, hard to maintain. Why are they so hard to maintain? Because it’s hard to keep up the lie. ’Cause you can’t get nobody being you. You got to lie to get somebody. You can’t get nobody looking like you look, acting like you act, sounding like you sound. When you meet somebody for the first time, you’re not meeting them. You’re meeting their representative” (*Bigger and Blacker* HBO, 1999).

Once past the representative, you may not be so enamored by the real person.

The intense feelings triggered by love at first sight generally last six months but can last up to a year and a half or sometimes longer. One way or the other, they subside, forcing the pair to focus on “the business” of determining whether their relationship can evolve into what we generally think of as “true love.” Can they continue along the path toward a lasting relationship grounded in a commitment to each other? Can they lay a lasting foundation for consistent mutual caring about the other’s best interests, along with a healthy physical relationship that serves as the “emotional glue” that binds them together?

Most solid, long-term relationships don’t start out with love at first sight. It’s much more common for a lasting relationship to eventually evolve into love from an initial attraction or

¹ Helen Fisher, *Anatomy of Love: A Natural History of Mating, Marriage, and Why We Stray* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2016), 38.

courtship phase. In fact, between both of my marriages (before I met Susan), I was struck by the “thunderbolt” on two separate occasions, but in spite of feeling so strongly, both relationships ended disastrously, with me being the one who got hurt. Too often people discover that when the initial euphoria of love at first sight subsides, the person with whom they fell madly in love is not everything they thought they were. To be honest, Susan and I experienced “love at tenth sight.” We grew into it slowly and comfortably, and though we both said the *L* word after less than two months, we had already spent a great deal of time together. It was not love at first sight.

The type of relationship we are discussing doesn’t happen overnight but rather is the result of a concerted effort by two people, beginning with romantic love and ending in a lifelong commitment to each other. To accomplish this, most writers agree that “true love” is action. *It is active, not passive.* Erich Fromm, noted twentieth-century psychologist and social philosopher, as well as one of the most prolific writers on this subject, explains in *The Art of Loving* that love is an act of will: “To love somebody is not just a strong feeling—it is a decision, it is a judgment, it is a promise. If love were only a feeling, there would be no basis for the promise to love each other forever. A feeling comes and it may go.”²

As an activity, love is primarily *giving*, not receiving. Fromm says “giving” means giving to another’s joy, interest, understanding, knowledge, humor, sadness, and so on. By doing so, we enrich the other and enhance their “sense of aliveness,” as Fromm calls it, because we do not give to receive but rather to experience the “exquisite joy” that is giving itself.

Fromm references American psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Harry Stack Sullivan, who maintained that “love begins when a person feels another person’s needs to be as important as his own.” In their book *A General Theory of Love*, eminent psychiatrists Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini,

² Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper & Row, Inc., 1956), 52.

and Richard Lannon call this concept “simultaneous mutual regulation, wherein each person meets the needs of the other.”³ They explain that this type of relationship is not fifty-fifty; it’s one hundred-one hundred because each person takes perpetual care of the other, and as a result, both thrive.

Echoing this theme that love is action, psychiatrist and author M. Scott Peck, in his spiritual classic *The Road Less Traveled*, defines love as “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.” His expression “Love is as love does” is based on the idea that love is an act of will—both as intention and action.⁴ He explains that will implies choice, because we don’t *have* to love; we *choose* to love. Clearly, the consensus among experts is that love is not something that simply happens; it is intentional conduct directed at another that, if reciprocated, helps to make both people more complete and more capable of realizing their fullest potential.

These theories find support in the neuroscientific definition of love expressed by researchers Francesco Bianchi-Demicheli, Scott Grafton, and Stephanie Ortigue in their article “The Power of Love on the Human Brain.”⁵ They describe love as a complex state involving erotic, cognitive, chemical, and goal-directed behavioral components that cause the active striving for the happiness of a loved one. As I said, the scientific examination of love will be explored more deeply in chapter 5, but it is worth introducing here because it is consistent with and supports the views of the psychology experts.

³ Lewis Thomas, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love* (New York: Random House, 2000), 208.

⁴ Scott M. Peck, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Touchstone, 1978), 81–83.

⁵ Francesco Bianchi-Demicheli, Scott Grafton, and Stephanie Ortigue, “The Power of Love on the Human Brain” *Soc Neurosci.* 1(2):90-103. doi: 10.1080/17470910600976547. PMID: 18633778 (2006).

Love also helps the intended beneficiary discover who they really are. Leo Buscaglia, renowned author, motivational speaker, PhD, and professor at the University of Southern California, known as “Dr. Love,” believed that the essence of loving another is to assure them we are dedicated to their growth or realizing their limitless potential. He wrote that a couple should “use their united energies” to help each other through “the endless process of discovering who they really are, then revel forever in this continually changing knowledge and discovery.” He professed that this was the only way “that human love can flourish.”⁶

He provides further details: “Love, then, recognizes needs, physical and emotional. It sees as well as looks, listens as well as hears. Love touches, fondles, and revels in sensual gratification. Love is free and cannot be realized unless it is left free. Love finds its own path, sets its own pace and travels in its own way. Love recognizes and appreciates its uniqueness. Love needs no recognition, for if its effect is recognizable, it is not true love at all.”⁷

Through this process, love becomes an agent of change in both persons, because one lover bestows on the other an importance commensurate with his own. Lovers express this with acts of self-sacrifice, generosity, and thoughtfulness. In *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters*, Ethel Spector Person, who was a professor of psychiatry at Columbia University, believed that when love is directed outward toward an “other,” it provides a sense of direction, and therefore a purpose that isolated individuality lacks. This sense of direction and meaning alters our sense of self and enables us to feel capable of becoming something greater.⁸ In other words, Person refers to the same capacity for change that Buscaglia expressed.

⁶ Leo Buscaglia, *Love, What Life Is All About* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 1972), 117.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 135–136.

⁸ Ethel Person, *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters: The Power of Romantic Passion* (Ontario, Canada: W.W. Norton, 1988), 122.

We cannot, however, be changed from the outside. We must grow from within. Interestingly, and perhaps ironically, a commitment to true love includes a commitment to allow us to change. Acclaimed American author, professor, and feminist bell hooks says that we must permit ourselves to be “acted upon by the beloved in a way that enables us to be more self-actualized.”⁹ She goes on to say that the most common vision of true love she hears in her work is how it is “unconditional,” meaning that it calls for accepting the other person as they are. But she further observes that for love to flourish, it requires an “ongoing commitment to constructive struggle and change” from within. Such a commitment demands that we make more of ourselves and become a better person toward the other in ways that advance and strengthen the relationship.

I believe that this aspect of love links our own minds and bodies with those of our partner, so that each absolutely “gets” the other in every way and encourages their self-growth and development, which then allows the other to realize their full potential. Susan and I both experienced this in many ways throughout our life together. As our bond grew, we changed and grew in our generosity toward each other, as well as toward everyone around us, especially our children. We did this not only in the giving of our time and ourselves but in “doing” for each other without being asked. Sharing generosity of spirit through our actions and deeds continually brought us closer, which our children saw and appreciated. This behavior helped my children become closer to Susan and her children closer to me, because they trusted the stability of our relationship and the example it set for them. Susan used activities, in particular cooking, pottery, and sewing, to express her love, and these activities generated love in return. Her passion for cooking, which predated our relationship, became a love of cooking for the family, which was extremely beneficial for our gatherings and the development of close familial bonds. It also

⁹bell hooks, *All About Love* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 185.

enhanced our love for each other because we engaged in it as a couple, and our children witnessed this as well.

During our marriage, Susan renewed her interest in pottery, which allowed her to create beautiful vases, dishes, platters, and coasters. She sold her work at fairs, but more importantly, she shared them as gifts for family. She grew not only in her capacity as a potter and artist but in generating and receiving love, because she shared the results with all of our children. Below is a beautiful vase that she made for our home. The hearts to me represent us and our love for each other.



When my first grandson was born in 2014, Susan used the event as an opportunity to rekindle her enjoyment of sewing. She dusted off her sewing machine and began to make stuffed animals, such as dinosaurs, teddy bears, and dogs. She gave them to all the kids and to my grandson, Leonardo, now six, who still has his dinosaur in his bedroom. My children appreciated these acts of kindness because the animals were difficult to make, and they knew she had gone out of her way to make them colorful and cute.

I reciprocated this generosity of spirit and action by calling on my strengths to help her children. I started her son on his path to a career as a lawyer by suggesting that he work at my law firm as a clerk and messenger (as all my sons had done before him). That exposed him to the environment and allowed him to learn what being a lawyer was like. He soaked it up and one day

told his mother he was going to law school, which, fortuitously, was her dream for him. She lived long enough to see him graduate from law school and become a successful federal court litigator. She was immensely proud.

I also gave both her children substantial monetary wedding gifts that they saved and applied to their first-home purchases. Later, when her daughter and son-in-law found a home they loved, I lent them money to enable them to successfully negotiate its purchase. I can't tell you how much those acts helped to cement my relationship with Susan. Love was the catalyst for these actions on both our parts and fostered the growth of even greater love toward each other. That we succeeded in this effort is proved by the fact that, even now, four years after Susan's death, her children and I end every conversation with "love you."

When we feel safe in our relationship with another and in being who we are, we grow inside of that relationship. Accepting the other for who they are and entering into a relationship that encourages self-change allows both individuals the freedom to achieve self-fulfillment and become the best person they can be. That is what love can be and what it can achieve for anyone willing to grow as a human being.

Here is an example of these principles involving people familiar to most, if not all, of us. The love affair and marriage of Johnny Cash and June Carter epitomized the unconditional love we have been exploring. Their expressions of love toward each other aptly demonstrated the principles the experts espouse: an ongoing commitment to change and be acted upon, a willingness to extend oneself to nurture the spiritual growth of the other and remain resolutely dedicated to their growth and accept them for who they are.

Johnny and June met behind stage at the Grand Old Opry in 1956 and were immediately attracted to each other, although at the time married to others. They began touring together in the

early '60s, and presumably their relationship developed while on tour. June told *Rolling Stone* in 2000, "I never talked much about how I fell in love with John. It was not a convenient time for me to fall in love with him and it wasn't a convenient time for him to fall in love with me. . . . I was frightened of his way of life. I thought, *I can't fall in love with this man, but it's just like a ring of fire.*"

That inspired her to cowrite the hit song "Ring of Fire," which Cash recorded in 1963. After they each divorced their respective spouses in 1966 and 1967, they "officially" became a couple. In February 1968, Johnny proposed to June onstage at the London Ice House in front of 7,000 witnesses. They married a few weeks later. Whenever asked to describe his love for June, Johnny would say "unconditional." When once asked to explain what "paradise" was, he replied, "Having coffee in the morning with June!" He credited her for helping him overcome his addictions to alcohol, amphetamines, and barbiturates and always being there for him during his numerous stays in and out of rehab and for staying by his side when he was clean to encourage him. Cash told *Rolling Stone*, "She loves me in spite of everything, in spite of myself. She has saved my life more than once. . . . She's always been there with her love and it has certainly made me forget the pain for a long time, many times." She complemented those thoughts by saying she never regretted being with him and sometimes neglected her career for him: "I've always walked along right by his side, and he's always supported everything I do." They remained together for over thirty years.

June died in May 2003, and Johnny gave his final concert that July. He was visibly frail but nevertheless honored June between songs: "The spirit of June Carter overshadows me tonight with the love she had for me and the love I have for her. We connected somewhere between here and Heaven. She came down for a short visit, I guess, from Heaven to visit with me tonight to

give me courage and inspiration, like she always has. . . . I thank God for June Carter. I love her with all my heart.” Johnny passed away two months later.

That’s what love is.

Chapter 2

The Benefits of Love

*The greatest thing you'll ever learn
Is just to love and be loved in return.*

(“Nature Boy,” Eden Ahbez, 1948)

Now that we’ve explored what love is, you might be asking, “Is it worth it?” By all accounts, creating a long-lasting, loving relationship takes a lot of hard work, determination, and commitment, so it’s logical to wonder what could possibly make all that effort worthwhile. The *benefits*, discussed in this chapter, are what make it worthwhile.

On an existential level, Erich Fromm postulates that love is the only sane response to the problem of human existence. He explains that because humans possess reason, we have the self-awareness to know that we are a separate entity in the world. We are aware of our short life span, that we had no say in being born and may die either before those we love or after them, and that we have little control over this condition. Fromm contends that this helplessness against the forces of nature makes existence an “unbearable prison.” To cope with this realization, humans reach out to the world around them. For Fromm, then, “the deepest need of man . . . is the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness.”¹⁰

The question becomes, *how* do we do this?

¹⁰Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper & Row, Inc., 1956), 9.

The history of religion and philosophy includes our endless attempts to cope with this predicament. For Fromm, the answer lies in “the achievement of interpersonal union with another person, in *love*.” He believes that the desire for this union with another is the “force which keeps the human race together, the clan, the family, society.” In fact, this desire is so fundamental he asserts that “without love, humanity could not exist for a day.” Fromm maintains that love is the only answer to the emptiness of life. It is an active power that unites each of us with others for the purpose of overcoming innate isolation and separateness. In love, “the paradox occurs that two beings become one and yet remain two.”¹¹

So the first benefit of love is that it helps us overcome Fromm’s “unbearable prison” of aloneness. I can think of no greater benefit.

This theme is echoed in the writings of Ethel Person, who believed that love confers freedom from the “confines of the self.”¹² Love replaces self-preoccupation with a consuming interest in the *other*. This deep interest includes aspects of the other’s character that might otherwise be insignificant—idiosyncrasies and habits, for example—but which take on a heightened importance and meaning within the bubble of love. What was once insignificant becomes important because our partner notices and appreciates it. For instance, it is not that she wears perfume but the specific perfume she uses that takes on increased importance. She becomes aware of his mannerisms because she regards them with affection. When this process occurs, we are validated because all of our attributes are noted and are affirmed by our beloved. In becoming the object of love, “our insecurities are healed, our importance guaranteed only when we become the object of love.”¹³ Simply put, we feel “seen.”

¹¹Ibid., 19.

¹²Ethel Person, *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters: The Power of Romantic Passion* (Ontario, Canada: W.W. Norton, 1988), 38.

¹³Ibid., 59.

Mutual love also creates a new entity. It is not just the other who is celebrated or the “I” that is enhanced; there is a new being jointly experienced as “we” and perceived by others as a “couple.” The “couple” is the first child of the union. It has a birthday and its own anniversaries—the day the couple met, the day they first went out, the day they first slept together, the day they married, and so on. The “we” accumulates its own history. This new entity even has its own mutual secrets that are rooted in intimacy, trust, and commitment, and which serve to strengthen the bonds between the two individuals.

So a second benefit of love is the creation of a new space for lovers to occupy that serves as a buffer against the outside world, providing them comfort and safety where they are free to express their most private thoughts without fear of recrimination. The development of such a relationship makes life not only more enjoyable and worthwhile but helps us feel protected and secure from outside influences. It forms a shelter from the outside world, a benefit surely worth the effort.

For a more spiritual viewpoint on how love benefits us as humans, consider Thomas Merton, an American Trappist monk and theologian who wrote about the transformative power of love in his essay “Love and Need.” Merton believed that love completes life. He proposed that communion with another and the concept of self-transcendence are why we come into the world. He explains that we “do not become fully human until we give ourselves to each other in love,” and “love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life ourselves alone—we find it with another.”¹⁴ While these may be lofty ideas, they are included as a third benefit of a committed relationship because they add a new and powerful dimension to our discussion.

¹⁴ Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, Edited by Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 27.

Maryanne Fisher, professor of psychology at St. Mary's University in Halifax, Canada, and prolific author on the evolutionary basis of interpersonal relationships, expands on this theme from a more down-to-earth perspective. She observes that even without the desire to have children, there exists a universal human desire, rooted in evolution, to have the physical and emotional companionship of another. Fisher explains that evolutionary forces underlie the instinct to settle down to nurture offspring, forces that still manifest themselves today.¹⁵ Ethel Person, too, contends that love gives life a sense of direction and purpose, which is lacking in isolated individuality. Person says this sense of direction and meaning further alters our sense of self, enabling us to become something more than we thought we could be. Achieving mutual love is often “accompanied by spurts of energy, growth, and change and by a sense of richness and abundance.”¹⁶

On a more practical level, Fisher points out that couples that live together in love have in one another at once a lover, a principal companion, a sounding board, a coparent, and a housemate.¹⁷ To be all of these things requires that each member of the couple invest an enormous amount of energy in the other and take on the tremendous responsibility of sustaining that energy. But doing so offers an unparalleled opportunity for growth and change, with the possibility of living a rich, full, and rewarding life together. In *A General Theory of Love*, Thomas Lewis and his coauthors expand on this concept by explaining that each partner takes perpetual care of the other, and because of this reciprocity, both thrive: “For those who attain it, the benefits of deep

¹⁵ Maryanne L. Fisher, Justin R. Garcia, and Rosemarie Sokol Chang, Editors, *Evolution's Empress, Darwinian Perspectives on the Nature of Women* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Ethel Spector Person, *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters: The Power of Romantic Passion* (Ontario, Canada: W.W. Norton, 1988), 99.

¹⁷ Maryanne Fisher and Victoria Costello, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to the Chemistry of Love* (New York: Penguin Group, 2010), 57.

attachment are powerful—regulated people feel whole, centered, alive . . . they are resilient to the stresses of daily life, or even to those of extraordinary circumstances.”¹⁸

This ability to thrive and to be resilient is a fourth benefit of a strong long-term relationship.

The truth is we don’t need a psychiatrist, therapist, theologian, or philosopher to explain the benefits of love to us. Love has been the subject of songs, poems, and literature since the dawn of language and writing, expressed by lyricists, poets, writers, and yes, even lawyers turned authors. For me, the utter joy of being in love is best expressed in the song “My One and Only Love,” played by John Coltrane and sung by Johnny Hartman. The lyrics convey the exquisite nature of being truly in love:

The very thought of you makes my heart sing

Like the April breeze on the wings of spring

And you appear in all your splendor

My one and only love

The shadows fall and spread their mystic charms

In the hush of night while you’re in my arms

I feel your lips, so warm and tender

My one and only love

The touch of your hand is like heaven

A heaven that I’ve never known

¹⁸ Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love* (New York: Random House, 2000), 208.

The blush on your cheek whenever I speak

Tells me that you are my own

You fill my eager heart with such desire

Every kiss you give sets my soul on fire

I give my heart in sweet surrender

My one and only love

My one and only love

(Lyrics by Guy Wood and Robert Mellin, 1952)

I confess that this was our wedding song, and some of the lyrics were my vows to her. The line “you fill my heart with such desire, every kiss you give sets my soul on fire” is to me one of the most profound and succinct metaphors for love I have ever come across. In a later chapter, we will discuss the concept of “savoring,” which is talking about your love for each other, a technique recommended to reinforce the love you share. This song is a wonderful example of “savoring,” written long before that was recognized as a psychological concept. Sharing words like these, even if you didn’t write them but rather adopted them, cannot help but be beneficial to any relationship. I would often play this song on Sunday mornings, and Susan would simply smile. Nothing else needed to be said. It was a reminder of our wedding ceremony and how I felt about her. Playing the song made us feel good about “savoring” our relationship.

Poetry famously and frequently extols the benefits of love. Poets often show great insight into love, perhaps because they tend to be more sensitive or closely attuned to their emotions.

But we all know on some level what love should be and what we want it to be, and we simply need a little guidance now and then to achieve it. Our personal issues can get in the way of recognizing love, but this book will help set those aside so you can concentrate on your relationship as a couple and foster love between the two of you. Poet Kerry DeVore, in “God’s Gift to Me,” beautifully expresses some of the more visceral benefits of love:

You are my sunshine.

You are my shining star.

Everything I’m not,

You are.

You make me laugh.

You make my heart smile.

Everything you do

Makes life worthwhile.

You give lovingly.

You always have cheer.

Everything you are

I hold dear.

You are so sweet.

You are so very kind.

Everything I cherish,

In you I find.

You are a blessing.

You are an angel I see.

Everything about you

Is God's gift to me.

What greater benefit can there be than being a “blessing” to your love?

Psychologists, psychiatrists, theologians, evolutionary biologists, authors, songwriters, singers, and poets all recognize the enormous benefits of real love. That is a strong endorsement for diving deeper into what it takes to achieve a loving, long-term relationship. In the next chapter, we'll explore the process that takes you from your first meeting to falling in love to exploring ways to help build the lifelong relationship that so many of us are eager to experience.