Our relationship odyssey

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the atmosphere was alive with new advances in psychology. The field of humanistic psychology had arisen in the fifties in revolt against the limitations of conventional 'rat psychology' that left out the human being. We found ourselves very attracted to these humanistic approaches. We went to workshops, and read voraciously the works of humanistic writers. One such writer was Abraham Maslow, who suggested that human development is not just a process of coping with insurmountable challenges from the forces of nature. Rather, after an initial period of strengthening in order to learn to take care of the basic processes of life (security, power, acquiring food and shelter and finding ways to express love and sex interests), advanced states of human consciousness are possible. An example of an evolved state of consciousness would be when a person has community or national concerns that override individual concerns. As consciousness evolves, the scope of awareness and concern continues to expand. The ultimate would

be a realized being, who is cosmically conscious.¹⁴ We readily embraced this 'growth and development' model, and moved farther away from the therapy model that left patients dependent upon practitioners for their healing.

In the spirit of the times, we were investigating human communication. We recognized that people were heavily programmed by social expectations; we theorized with others that taking down defences and barriers would permit us to get closer to each other. We designed a simple but challenging experiment with each other. Our purpose was to study the blockages that were in the way of our being available and close with each other. In order to learn about our resistances to intimacy, we agreed to give each other access to our inner lives. We agreed that, upon request, we would share our thoughts and feelings with each other, without censoring. At any given moment, one of us could ask the other, "What are you thinking?" or "What are you feeling?" We agreed to do our best to answer such questions with candour. We discovered that this was indeed challenging. We found deeper and deeper layers of resistance to our sharing ourselves openly. In order to pursue this we started coming to the office early in the morning to discuss our new perspectives, and we also met when we finished work to process our day with each other before we went off to our respective homes and families.

We would often encounter some blockage or resistance in our morning talks, which we would work through by patiently questioning and sharing. This was the origin of the Model for Communication that we developed, and outlined in our book *The New Manual for Life*.¹⁵ We have included a description of the model at the end of this book (*see* Appendix B). In the present chapter we want to describe some of our early learnings, which ultimately we incorporated into the communication model.

Often, we would have a breakthrough in communication with each other, and would learn more about a defence or resistance that one or both of us had. After such a revelation, we would often find similar patterns in many of our clients during the day's work. It was as if we could not see the patterns of defence until we were willing to face them in ourselves. This was a new kind of research, a phenomenological research. As doctors, we had been trained to ignore our personal experiences with clients and our responses to them; now, we realized that the thing we had most to offer was what we were learning about ourselves, and about our deepening relationship. Our clients were fascinated, and some of them began to practice deeper communication with partners and family members.

It was at this time that illness began to take on a new cast for us. Instead of being something terrible, any situation, including illness, could be seen as a learning experience. As our minds opened up to this possibility, we found our clients too were dealing differently with their life challenges. Illness was no longer the enemy; it was just another learning situation. People are not

limited to either being ill or well (a temporary relief from sickness). There were larger dimensions to human life.

Our Learning: In the context of an intimate relationship, people can learn about themselves and one another in any situation, including when they are ill.

Note that an intimate relationship does not need to be a primary relationship. It is possible to have an intimate relationship with one's co-worker, or best friend, or a family member. Indeed, when we began, we were 'best friends' who had committed to this exploration.

Thirty-five years ago, when we first met and decided to work together, we had little understanding of the enormity of the task that lay ahead. Each of us had been maintaining full medical practices (one as a psychiatrist and the other as an acupuncturist). Both of us had come to our own understanding that people in emotional and physical distress were all coping with issues of relationships at some level. Yet, we were both aware of the lack of understanding of this subject in our training. Naively, we agreed to explore the issue of closeness and intimacy between ourselves. At first, we were afraid that intimacy meant sexuality and expected that our deepening intimacy would result in sexual feelings for each other. Remarkably, this never occurred. Jock remained very heterosexual in his orientation, and Ben continued to be more interested in art and aesthetics, with only a passing interest in things sexual. This challenged us to theorize

about what made up sexuality and how it was different from intimacy. We now believe that closeness does not necessarily lead to sexual attraction.

As we discussed this with friends and clients, we learned that many people do not experience sexual charge with their intimate partner, and are attracted to others. Furthermore, there is a tendency for sexual charge to lessen as the intimacy increases in an ongoing relationship. We do not suggest that partners go outside of their relationship for sexual expression; rather, we encourage them to discuss their sexual interests together, and find ways to incorporate these into their sexual life together. We addressed these issues in our book *The Relationship Garden*. ¹⁶

We maintain that the sexual charge and intimacy are very different phenomena, and can often be uncomfortable bedfellows. This can be a great challenge for couples who, as they become more intimate, want to keep the sexual spark alive. In relationships that begin with a sexual attraction, we have found that the sexual charge is highest at the beginning of a relationship when people don't know each other well, and naturally tends to diminish as they become more knowing of each other; it seems that not knowing supports the mystery that helps maintain the charge.

Our Learning: Intimacy and the sexual charge are separate, though our culture tends to use the terms interchangeably.

The word 'intimacy' derives from the Latin root *intimus*, meaning 'inmost.' To us, the word meant to really know the inner

world and workings of one another's minds and emotions. In our medical practices, we were accustomed to expecting such a situation with our patients as we delved into the contents of their subconscious minds. But that was an act of one-way intimacy, with one person (the 'patient') revealing to the other (the 'physician'). The one-way nature of the setup maintained a proper 'professional' structure of treatment. In contrast, what we two practitioners agreed to embark upon was a two-way sharing and exploring of one another's inner world. Our methodology was simple: at any time, upon request, we agreed to reveal what we were thinking or feeling. We each committed to honestly sharing ourselves with one another, to the best of our abilities at any given moment. Unexpectedly, we had set up our lifetime's exploration of intimacy and love.

Our Learning: The pathway to the deepest levels of intimacy is through a commitment to honest information sharing.

It all began with a commitment to honesty. We agreed that we would be 100 per cent honest with each other at all times. We quickly found that we had many subconscious methods of avoiding being honest, by leaving out details in order to skew what we were expressing. So, this commitment to honesty often found us acknowledging that we had unconsciously been deceptive. Often, honesty meant 'owning up' to misrepresentations, and sometimes outright (though often unconscious) lies.

One of our first sobering discoveries was how different were our individual interpretations and experiences of a given situation. For example, we each would have totally different experiences with the same client, or with friends at a social gathering. As we began to clarify what was happening, we discovered that each of us was experiencing different things because of the differences in our personalities.

Our Learning: There is never only one reality. We shape our realities through our own individual grids of perceptions and interpretations.

An example that illustrates this was when we were both in the audience of a lecture by a famous spiritual teacher. Jock was enraptured by her presentation, and found her to be very inspirational and uplifting. Ben, on the other hand, was not moved, and was sceptical, finding her to be too controlling and contrived. We were fascinated by the extreme difference in our responses. We did not argue about who was right. We talked about it without making each other wrong; nor did we find it necessary to determine who had the 'real' experience. We saw our different inner responses as interesting, rather than a focus for blame, justification or guilt. We were more curious about what we could learn about ourselves. We have continued to discuss this episode over the years, and still find it curious how we could be so different.

Through our intimate sharing, we began to understand that

there was no 'true' conclusion, no right or wrong. All we could do was to interpret what we were experiencing through our senses. Since our senses and personalities were so different, we each had radically different conclusions to report to one another.

Our Learning: There is no right or wrong. All we can do is either agree or disagree. Each of our realities is worthy of recognition and respect.

This awareness became the underpinning of the development of our communication model. We came to understand that most people assume the existence of one reality, and will argue to their death defending the idea that their experience is the only true one. For most couples, this is the beginning of the end of their relationship. In order to avoid this inevitability, we began to become interested in learning more about our differences. With an attitude of curiosity instead of an argument about who was 'right,' we began to reveal, to ourselves and to each other, many areas of vulnerability which we had hitherto kept hidden.

Initially, we were careful over what we shared with one another. Each of us was afraid that too much honesty would hurt the other's feelings. Gradually, we began to see that each of us is responsible for our own feelings. If we hurt, it is our own doing. The entire mechanism of hurting lies completely within each person. We hurt our own feelings by our own perceptions and interpretations. When we can appreciate this, we each can shift from an attitude of blame to one of curiosity and learning.

As an example of this, Ben recalls how he had suffered racial prejudice as a child, and was tormented by schoolchildren calling him names like 'chink.' One day, hurting from another assault of words, he sat down to investigate why this word 'chink' seemed to hurt so much. He broke the word down into parts, like 'ink' and 'chin' and these did not hurt. Whenever he put them all together as 'chink' he felt the stab of pain in his chest. He had a sudden awareness - the word 'chink' was like a dagger that the other children were trying to use to hurt him. But in order to hurt, he had to pick up the dagger and plunge it symbolically into his own chest. That day, he decided to practise not picking up the 'chink' dagger, and to learn to let go of his inclination to hurt over this. People still wanted to hurt him - but he had to cooperate by 'picking up the knife' before the hurt actually occurred. Ben says this has been a pivotal experience in his life; he has felt much freedom and self-assurance ever since.

Our Learning: No one else can hurt our feelings. We hurt over our interpretations of situations; if we can learn to see a situation in a new light, it is possible not to hurt. This is a process that takes a long time to learn... but a worthwhile one!

With this commitment to honesty, we found that we had a difficult time blaming each other. If we were really honest, we would acknowledge that the other was certainly strange, but not necessarily wrong, or to blame.

Most people are reluctant to give up blaming their partner

because to do so would be to abandon their chief method of controlling the other. Blame and control are successful only when they are able to stimulate the other to create feelings of guilt and remorse. Remarkably, the partner who is in guilt is also trying to control the other. The person feeling guilt is saying, "I am paying for my transgression with my guilt; so now I can expect you to stop blaming me." Choosing blame and control as a course of action (certainly for most people, the preferred choice) works to increase distance. Taking ownership of the hurt and sharing it increases the experience of intimacy.

Our Learning: We hurt our own feelings through our own perceptions and interpretations and expectations. Sharing those hurt feelings rather than blaming the other person will enhance the development of intimacy.

Any blocks to open sharing within intimate relationships will likely result in energy blocks ('fixations'). Unshared secrets, and attitudes of blame and control all contribute towards an unhealthy state of living. The accumulation of such experiences over time can ultimately be expressed as some emotional or physical illness.

Our Learning: The healthy state of existence involves an open sharing of feelings without control of one another.

All of these ideas about communication have been incorporated into the programs at what is today The Haven Institute for

Professional Training. The Model for Communication that we developed has become the cornerstone of our relationship, and of our work with people. We believe that if people were to master this communication process, they would discover greatly enhanced feelings of autonomy and personal wellbeing.

At the same time as we were investigating this process of honest communication, we were exploring in other areas too. We both had been interested in religion in our youth, and had sought answers with God. Even though we had tried out a brief atheistic period, we were both in our own ways always looking for bigger contexts. Thus, scientific materialism was simply not enough. Spiritual questions and spiritual seeking were of great interest to us both. We were intrigued to meet teachers in various religions, and to discover the common themes that lie beneath the apparent differences in the world religions.

We continued to read and think and discuss. In the counterculture of the seventies, ideas and theories were seen with great suspicion. The catch phrase of the day was "Get out of your head and into your body!" Mental analysis and intellectual ponderings were generally viewed with great disdain by alternative practitioners and philosophers. However, we ourselves continued to read and discuss; we sometimes were kind of timid to admit to others how much 'head stuff' we were doing. We were closet intellectuals! But our library kept growing, and we continued to learn in mental interactions as well as our physical explorations.

We were challenged to create a theory base that encompassed

western scientific notions and at the same time was compatible with theories of life force energy. We read ancient Chinese books about qi, the life force, and revisited textbooks in physics and chemistry. We wanted an explanation for the amazing things that we were discovering. People were experiencing newfound freedom in their communication processes, and in their body and breathing experiences. Some who had been ill for a long time were finding sharp improvements in their physical and mental sense of wellbeing. Some people who had been suffering from diagnosed illnesses such as multiple sclerosis or cancer were discovering that they could have a significant effect on their healing by investigating their relationship to their illness process. We theorized that the physical body and the energy body operate in different realms. The physical body exists in a cause and effect Newtonian model; the energy body functions in a domain of electromagnetic energy fields and subatomic quantum forces.

We closed our private practices and moved to the country in the spring of 1975. We initially went to lead a three-month program; however, as we've said, we never returned to the city again to live. From then on, we dedicated our professional lives to work in groups. We liked how individuals flowered in this environment, which was less therapist focussed, and more concentrated on dialogue, education and interpersonal communication. Having separated from our wives, we began to live together – so, our communication experiment went on without cease. In our

developing philosophy, we shifted from a therapeutic medical model to an educational learning model. As we clarified for ourselves the differences between therapy and education, we retired from medical practice entirely, and continued our work as educators, free of the mantle of the physician/healer.

Many other theorists and teachers were coming to the retreat centre where we worked, sharing their new findings with us. We studied ancient disciplines and modern science and tried to find the links between them. We were singular in our dedication to unfolding consciousness in relationship. Jock let go of his fanaticism to find 'the truth' in some ancient spiritual practice (with lots of humorous proddings from Ben). Our practice was a life practice of open sharing in a deepening intimacy.

The program we first taught in 1975 was called New Horizons. Since then, we have continued to teach this month-long residential program at least once a year. The first program was made up of people who were looking for idea systems and approaches that would help them in working with other people in a humanistic way, or in discovering deeper meanings in their own lives. We soon discovered that many people from other walks of life were also interested in learning in a non-traditional way, so the program was opened to include both professionals and lay people. We begin with the premise that there is no provable objective reality. All that people have is their sensory information, and their experience of it. We propose that people construct reality

by the interpretations and feelings they generate in relation to their sense-data. We teach the basic propositions that underlie various idea systems, and show that realities are created by the assumptions that underlie these idea systems. From this vantage point, no system is going to be 'true.' Rather, any system will be a by-product of the assumptions that go into making it. We see that science and religion are, in themselves, merely systems based on specific assumptions. Assume that there is a God, and you will have a theist reality; assume there is no God, and reality is atheistic. Individuals are in charge of what they assume, and thus are the masters of their own realities. This is a freeing notion, but also very frightening, since it removes habituated securities that the conventional reality provides.

Our students are thrilled with the lively interchange of ideas that comes when they no longer have to determine what is 'true' and can devote their study to what they themselves have assumed and believed. Each person can see that he or she has constructed and maintained a reality that is idiosyncratic – which can be transformed by changing assumptions! In this process, students question the conventional reality, and give birth to their own personal philosophies. We also teach traditional Chinese acupuncture diagnosis, bodywork, breathing techniques and exercises from gestalt, psychoanalysis, psychodrama and other disciplines. The program is a marriage of theory and practice. We have always been probing for people to discover their

own assumptions about life. Once this is begun, people can find language and models to fill out their appreciation of the realities that they create.

We have continued to teach this program annually for the past 30 years; each time is different. We have watched the change of people's attitudes to alternative approaches over the years, and our own ideas have developed and ripened. So, this program is a good forum for us to review our current thinking in the stimulation of classroom dialogue. Many people return year after year to update their own assumptions. We have even added a graduate program called Beyond the New Horizons for those who have completed the basic course.

In our own reading and thinking, we have been very attracted to the existentialist authors and artists. Sartre, Camus, Beckett, Kierkegaard and Kafka have been provocative. We are attracted to the basic notion of the wholeness of the individual, each responsible for his or her own life, with the ability to make choices and decisions and live with the consequences. Some have asked us whether we find this viewpoint bleak; for us, it is very stimulating, since it is so consistent with our own life experiences, and compatible with what we observe with others. When people adopt this existentialist viewpoint, they often find sources of strength and autonomy in themselves that are deeply invigorating.

We carried on working and learning together, and gradually

transformed ourselves from 'city slickers' to country boys. We enjoyed the camaraderie of talking with local trades people, who helped us in the ever-necessary construction and renovations on our aging home. We learned a lot from the commercial fisherman who was our next-door neighbour, a rough talking old salt who took us under his wing to teach us how to survive in the country. We saw that we could learn from anyone, not just from people with advanced degrees and fancy titles. Our lunchtime conversations at the seminar centre were known for 'going all over the map.' Some days we discussed the nuances of neo-Freudian psychology; other days we were immersed in conversations about water drainage and innovative construction tools. This blending of the practical with the theoretical was very stimulating to us. We were feeling fit in our bodies, alive in our minds, and fulfilled in our life and work with each other, our clients and our friends.

In 1982, we purchased a resort and established our own centre, Haven By-the-Sea Resort and Conference Centre. We were suddenly in the hospitality industry, and running a school! The resort we acquired was in an advanced state of disrepair. So, we had much renovation and building to accomplish. We poured all the profits back into the construction of new buildings; we built 13 new buildings in 11 years! At the same time, we were developing programs and curricula to meet the interest that was coming from people seeking a humanistic learning environment. Our

faculty grew with new members coming from different centres across North America, and including such pioneers as Virginia Satir, Jim Bugental, Paul Reps and Carl Whitaker. When they came to lead their programs at The Haven they would bring with them their current excitements in their work with people. So, the atmosphere was rich with the stimulation of forward thinking people. Soon, our school became recognized by the federal and provincial authorities. There was a lot of 'behind the scenes' work we had to accomplish and maintain, besides the rewarding times we were having in the session rooms.

Our relationship continued to deepen. We were dedicated to our experiment of investigating every obstruction to our growing intimacy. Whenever we found some defensive behaviour, we would discuss this for as long as it took (sometimes it took several days of ongoing dialogue and sharing, since we would put our interaction into the background when we were called upon to lead a group or work in the administration of our organization). When we had a problem arising out of some disagreement or defensiveness, we learned that we did not have to solve it all at once. We would investigate themes surrounding the particular behaviour. We struggled against our inclinations to have to be right (although it was sometimes very tempting to take this diversionary defensive stance!). We would share our investigations with our friends, who were themselves exploring intimacy in their own primary and other relationships. We found we

could learn with each other whenever we stayed out of the arena of 'right and wrong.'

There has been much emphasis in recent years, in the popular psychology literature and elsewhere, on the importance of forgiveness. We ourselves have found that forgiveness is a false cause, and fraught with many problems. Basically, when people forgive someone else, they have previously judged them as having done something wrong; thus, the process of forgiveness involves a moral context that keeps people at an objectified distance from each other. In our relationship of over 35 years, we have never forgiven each other. We maintain that forgiveness is not important, and indeed can make new problems; we think instead that we need to learn to let go. We need to let go of blame, resentment, hurt, investments and expectations in order to release inner bindings. This way, we can move from a defensive, closed position to an open, growing context. The onus is on each of us as individuals to let go; forgiveness would only keep us stuck in a fixated pattern of moralism. This has been the cornerstone of our communication model. When there is no blame, we can let go of fixations, and openly share our mutual realities. This is what we have taught others; people who have adopted this viewpoint have discovered remarkable freedom and intimacy with each other.

We saw disagreements and tensions as opportunities to learn about ourselves, each other, and our habitual defences that kept us closed off from deeper contact with the world. For the first few years, this was often very painful. Jock would often feel guilty for breaking contact with Ben by getting stuck in some obsession or fixated behaviour; and Ben would feel the pain of being abandoned when Jock became stuck in his obsessions. What got us through this was our commitment to sharing, openness, honesty and fairness. We gradually learned that our defensiveness with each other was a manifestation of a pattern of restriction that was everywhere in our lives. These defences did not come to the surface when we were in social situations. With each other, we were in a deepening relationship where the commitment level was high; we had more to lose, and our inner defences would come to the foreground. We came to value these disturbances as indications that we were 'digging deeper' with each other; the pain and insecurity we would feel in disagreements was a measure of the importance we assigned to each other.

Gradually, the clouds cleared, and we found periods of more calm between us. We felt a solidity in the knowing we had of each other. And when the going became rough again, we had the confidence that we could work through our difficulties, since we had a lengthening track record of having done so before. We felt close much of the time, and our awareness of each other became much more subtle. Often, we did not have to talk with each other to know what the other was thinking. We each felt a sense of fulfilment and wonder at our good fortune for having found each other, and an appreciation of ourselves for having the courage and perseverance to carry on to this point. Others found our interactions inspiring. When we were 'in sync' people

would experience a sense of flow between us; when we were in disharmony, they could learn with us, since we did not become combative or blaming of each other.

We came to see – from our own relationship and having worked with so many clients and discussed issues openly with friends – that all relationships go through a series of developmental stages. This is true not only for sexual partnerings or primary relationships; the same cycle takes place in parent-child relationships, friendships, as well as between siblings and in work associations. We named the stages of this cycle Romance, Power Struggle, Integration, Commitment, and Co-Creativity. We have discussed the cycle in detail elsewhere.¹⁸

This was also the subject that we were teaching our clients. We would tell stories of our personal disagreements, and found that clients could identify with one or the other of us, and found the stories useful to them in their own lives and in their various relationships, whether primary or otherwise. It seemed risky to bare our personal experiences to public view; but we found such appreciation and support from friends and clients that we continued to do so. Not everyone found this to their taste, and occasionally people left the groups. Remarkably, over the years, most of the people who left a group for fear of it becoming too intimate ultimately came back (sometimes years later), and addressed themselves to issues that they had previously been unwilling to face. One client put it this way:

I was not ready to face my issue at that time; the fact that you let me go without judging me gave me the space to assess my life and now I am back to have a deeper look.

This was of paramount importance to us – that each person could learn in his or her own unique way, without the pressure to accommodate to some external demand. Some people wanted to leap in and try bodywork and acupuncture and challenging dialogue. Others wanted to step more slowly. Some people would say, "I just want to be here, but I don't want to have you focus on me individually in the group." Many people found they learned a great deal by sharing in the process of other people. Often by the end of a seminar, a previously reluctant person would say, "Now I'm ready." That person would return to another seminar later, and would readily participate, having arrived at an organic appreciation of the process without coercion.

We often found that clients in our long-term programs were gradually shifting from concerns about being emotionally confused into a growing interest in meaning and creativity. Once someone has worked through some of their childhood traumas, and come to some peace with their versions of their family of origin, they often have a thrust to express themselves in a creative or artistic way. Group members might spontaneously write poetry, or become interested in learning to sing, or master a musical instrument, or take acting lessons. There seems to be

CHAPTER FIVE

an internal pressure for a creative urge to be manifested once a person has released enough restrictions for their soul to begin to shine through.

We define passion as 'the pressure of the soul to be expressed.' To assist our clients with this pressure to create and express, we began to include workshops on creative writing, dance, music and sculpting in our roster of events. We designed and constructed a performing-arts theatre at The Haven, and used more photography, video and theatre exercises in our longer residential seminars. We believe that children are less inhibited than adults; they learn to restrict themselves in becoming socialized. So, we also included programs where kids could share in creative pursuits together.

We have taught programs in numerous locations around the world, and group participants have come to The Haven from many distant places. Our seminar centre now has quite an international flavour; commonly, a group includes participants from countries other than Canada and the United States. We see that people are essentially the same around the world. Beneath the cultural differences, humans want to find significance and fulfilment in their lives through open communication, self-acceptance and connection. As we continue to study our own relationship, and observe the interactions of others, we clarify our own understandings of the stages of relationships, and the process of developing and deepening in love and connection with others, society, and the universe.

From victimhood to personal responsibility

The medical profession has achieved a very great deal over the last century in providing high levels of care. Today new technology can dramatically extend the quality and length of human lives. However, as the medical profession provides more and more, patients come to expect and demand more of those practitioners – *and less of themselves*.

North American culture was built with a pioneering spirit of independence and self-reliance. People knew that they had to take care of themselves, prepare for future hardship, assure themselves of good health so that they could survive, and teach their families how to avoid poor health. The culture prospered. With fully well-meaning intention, individuals wanted their progeny to suffer fewer hardships; toward this end, institutions were established to provide increasing amounts of protection and care management. Both within the family and in society in general, people grew to expect less of themselves, and more from