

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN WELWOOD
conducted by Pam Burton of KPFFK, Los Angeles

Q: Your book, *Journey of the Heart: The Path of Conscious Love* is a very special book, about conscious relationship. What brought you to write this book. And how did you come to develop your awareness and your consciousness in this area?

A. What brought me to this book was — failure. The failure of my first marriage twenty years ago made me wake up, look around, ask myself, "How could we love each other so much and still have the whole thing blow up? What is really going on in relationships?" Out of my pain and confusion I felt that I needed to understand what relationships are really about and what could serve as a basis for an enduring, enriching, enlivening relationship.

So I started looking for sources of wisdom or guidance everywhere I knew. I combed the bookstores and libraries, but couldn't find much to nourish or sustain me. Though I've studied and practiced Buddhist meditation for twenty years, I found little in that tradition or in any spiritual traditions that addressed my personal questions about intimate relationships. The spiritual teachers I respected the most were not a model in this particular area. Nor did I find much in my clinical psychology training that prepared me for how to be in an intimate relationship.

I was completely at sea. Since there was no guidance, no teaching, no education in this area, I decided I had to write a book about it. Little did I know what I was getting in for. If I had known how difficult this project would be, I don't know if I would have embarked on it.

Strangely enough, I wrote the first draft of the book in six months and thought I was done with it. That was in 1979. But it was written completely

from my head. It wasn't from my body, so it wasn't the real thing. It took me ten more years to finish the book, which required a personal journey—including getting married again and all the relationships that led up to that; working with psychotherapy clients; talking to friends late into the night who were interested in the same issues; going back and checking the spiritual teachings to see if they really had anything to say about this or not; deepening my spiritual practice and seeing how that applied to relationships.

I don't know how many times I came close to abandoning this project, out of feeling exasperated that something so familiar could also be so opaque and unfathomable. With each successive draft, I realized that I still needed to go one level deeper into the subject matter, in a very personal way. Every question I pursued would soon turn around and confront me face to face. Just when I thought I understood something clearly at last, I would be thrown back on my questions once again. I realized that I could only probe these questions by working more deeply on the source of the questions—myself. So it was that kind of journey.

There's something extremely difficult about bringing consciousness into this area. Sometimes it seems that relationships almost want to resist consciousness. After all, they've been unconscious for thousands of years, governed and guided by roles, by social and family traditions, and always supported and rationalized in that context. But that framework hardly exists in our culture anymore. Because there are few external supports and guidelines for relationships today, each of us to figure out how to go about having sane, healthy, alive relationships. This means bringing consciousness to something that has been in the dark for thousands of years.

It's like the story of Eros and Psyche. Eros, the god of love, has an affair with Psyche, who represents consciousness. Eros tells her, "I will come to you in

the middle of the night and we'll be lovers and then I will leave before dawn, and as long as you never see my face, everything will be fine." And that works for a while. But then Psyche becomes curious about who her lover is. And so one night she surreptitiously lights a candle to see his face and he immediately disappears. Then she has to go through a number of trials to win him back, so that their love can proceed in the light of day.

For thousands of years relationships have been like that—love in the dark, basically. And now we're lighting a candle to see, "Well, what are they about? What's going on here?" And to do that actually involves tremendous trials. To bring consciousness to an area that has never been conscious before is extremely challenging. It's a heroic journey.

A conscious relationship in my view is one that puts you completely to the test as a human being. It involves becoming clear about what we are doing with another person and what that requires of us. When I first began the book, I needed to go back to square one. I didn't know the first thing about relationships actually. I had lots of ideas and images in my mind about what they should be—but I didn't know a thing about what they really take. And that's because I really didn't know all that much about myself. So the question of how to have a conscious relationship is how to be myself, how to *be*, actually. How to be a human being.

It's interesting to ask yourself what are the moments you most value or cherish in a relationship. I'm sure we could answer this question quickly off the top of our heads, but it's a question to really contemplate. I've worked with this in groups, and it takes a while for people to dig down to what they value most. What we most cherish with another person are the moments of *just being* together. Not even so much *beingtogether* as *being* together. All the best intimate moments are those in which we are simply present—being ourselves,

not having to do something, not having to prove anything—and sharing that with someone we love.

So love inspires us to be more present. That is why we value it so much. Beyond all the particular things two people *do* for each other, their strongest connection is the quality of being they experience in each other's presence.

What *Journey of the Heart* is really about is how a relationship can keep us inviting us to explore how to be, how to be who we really are.

Q. Much of what you've told us about how you came to write the book and much of the book itself gives us a feeling for a certain kind of vulnerability, which is something that's very important in intimate relationships. Why is vulnerability so essential and central to a relationship? And attractive and terrifying?

A. Classically in our culture *vulnerable* is a pejorative term. We often imagine that being vulnerable means being weak or wimpy. There *is* a kind of vulnerability where we feel fragile—like if someone looks at us the wrong way we could crack into pieces. I call this "ego vulnerability." Our ego is fragile because it's an image, a construction, a belief about who we are that at any moment could be blown to bits.

But there's another kind of vulnerability that's more basic, more genuine, more central to our nature as a human being—our basic openness, or what I call in the book "rawness." The heart is raw, essentially. It's got a raw edge to it. When you feel that quality of rawness in a relationship, you either get turned on, or terrified, or both at the same time. In the book I describe that feeling as a razor's edge. It's exciting because it's where you start moving into unknown territory. At the moment when you're on your raw growing edge, you're not an expert. If you're used to always being in control, this is scary. So this is also the place where you tend to veer off and say, "I'm getting out of here."

Who needs this?" You feel shaky because you don't quite know what's going to happen next. "Can I really show who I am to another person? Can I really let her see me? Can I let *myself* see me? Is it okay to just be who I am, as I am? Is it okay to feel this vulnerable?"

These are very fertile, creative questions. Our nature is raw as human beings because we're not a neatly-defined finished product. We're the unfinished animal. Our nature is always in process. So when we feel that rawness, we're feeling our true nature. We feel how in process we are, how unfinished we are, how we're seeking, groping, finding out who we are from moment to moment—which is an endless journey.

Q. That process of discovery is exciting. But often in relationships—and you give examples of this in the book—we feel like we've opened up, we've been willing to risk showing our true feelings, but the other person is telling us, "I'm not comfortable with this. I don't like what you're telling me. I can't handle it." And that means we have to make a choice.

How do we know when a relationship isn't worth the bet, or when we should maybe stick around and risk a little more?

A. Classic question, one that women seem to ask more often. Because women, at least in our culture, are usually more sensitive and more in touch with their feelings. And men often just want to coast in relationships. We'll work hard in other areas, but in relationships we want it all to be okay and not have to work too hard at it.

In deciding whether it's worth it to keep opening to a given relationship, we first need to consider what kind of basic connection we have with the other person. Do we have a deep connection, what we might call it a "soul resonance," where something in us feels deeply seen and understood by this person? If we have that kind of resonance with someone, that's usually a

really good foundation.

Your heart opens when you feel that kind of connection. That's the easy part. But then we start to hit our personality stuff. And that usually makes us wonder: "Can I hack this? Can I be there for him, can he be there for me?" And so forth.

That's the testing ground of a relationship. In the book I talk about conscious commitment as a process of testing a relationship to see whether we can work with whatever comes up. In fact, whatever we would most like to avoid in ourselves is bound to come up in a really deep relationship. We don't understand this in our culture because of our Hollywood mythology that says, "All you need is love, it's easy, just fall in love and everything's going to take care of itself." So we don't understand that when we encounter that hard personality stuff, this is the real testing ground of a relationship, of love itself. In fact I think that love thrives on biting into that stuff and chewing it up. That's the real test of a relationship— can we work with all our stuff as it arises?

We all have parts of ourselves that are very open and light, and other places that are hard as a rock, where nothing can get in. What's so powerful about intimate relationship is that it brings those two sides right up next to each other. Because we feel so open to someone we love, we also get to feel how hard as a rock we are, how closed and tight and contracted certain parts of ourselves are.

Because we have no cultural context that helps us understand the real journey of relationship, we usually think something is wrong when we encounter these tight, contracted places. We think this shouldn't be happening: "I must be in the wrong relationship, or she must not be the right person for me."

If one person is totally unwilling to work with the personality stuff, then I don't think it's a workable situation for two people to keep going. How do you

know when to drop out? I think when you feel like you've done everything you can do and your partner is simply unwilling to work with the stuff that's coming up.

Q. Mainstream culture tells us that everything comes to us because we earn it. Could you say something about unconditional love, which is so hard for us to understand

A. Unconditional love relates to the unconditioned part of our nature. The Eastern spiritual traditions talk more about this unconditioned part of us, while the Western psychological traditions talk about the conditioned personality, childhood conditioning, how we get to be the way we are.

What is unconditioned is our basic openness, because we have no choice about it. It's our original nature. We're born open. A baby doesn't have any choice about being totally vulnerable to what's around it. That's the unconditional nature of mind, or heart. It's choiceless— it comes with the territory.

Where we do have a choice is that we can block this openness, cover it up, refuse to see or allow it. And we can also choose to remove these blockages and obstacles.

We feel unconditional love when we experience this basic openness toward another person. Falling in love gives us a glimpse of it because we suddenly feel moved, touched, affected by another person. This makes us feel high because for a moment we taste our unconditional nature, that pure openness which is beyond choice and control. It's delightful to surrender and let go into that openness.

We often get confused about this because we think we have to work at unconditional love, make it happen. But it happens on its own whenever we open. Another source of confusion is thinking that it means we have to go along

with everything someone does. But that's confusing two different levels— conditional reality and unconditional reality. It's fine to say, "Yes, I love you and, no, that's not okay with me." Or "No, I can't accept that. Or even "No, I can't live with you anymore." We can be open and still say no.

Q. Let's talk about sexuality, especially in terms of how our culture treats it as a commodity. Women's bodies sell products. Men's bodies are also sold, if you consider sports and how older men sit around on the weekend and watch young men with beautiful bodies play out their fantasies of power and mastery. Our culture promotes a fantasy about perfect bodies that few people have. So there's this sense of never having the right body and this affects our sexuality. And yet there is also the incredible intimacy that comes when you share bodies.

A. In the book I include sexuality in the section called *Sacred Path*. I regard sexuality as belonging more to the sacred aspect of a relationship than to the personal level.

What you're describing is how our culture lacks any notion of the sacredness of the body, the body as the temple of the soul. The two extremes in our culture are hedonism—treating the body as a plaything— and puritanism — ignoring the body or treating it as the devil's handiwork.

We don't appreciate the sacredness of sexuality because we don't have any notion of the sacredness of the body. What you're talking about is an alienated view of our body as some *thing* that's separate from us. And that misguided view is naturally going to express itself in an alienated sexuality, where we treat sex as a commodity or as a vehicle for ego gratification.

D.H. Lawrence called this "sex in the head. That's the problem in our culture. We operate from sex in the head— concepts of what sex should be. *The real nature of sexuality is mystery*. Therefore talking about it is very tricky, because

the more we try to understand it, write how-to books about it, and so forth, the more we risk losing its essence.

When we appreciate it as mystery, that's a whole different thing. That puts you in a different zone completely. It puts you in touch with the unknown, which is the essence of intimate relationship— always moving into the unknown. When we try to make sexuality something familiar and known, we actually separate ourselves from the experience.

Sexuality is an exchange, not really so much between physical bodies as between "subtle bodies." The Eastern esoteric traditions talk about the "energy body," and how the *chi* or *prana* flows through a network of meridians in the body. In the Eastern traditions there's no separate thing called "sexual energy." Sexual energy is just the flow of our vitality.

So the flow and exchange of energy is what sexuality is really about. Lawrence describes sexual exchange as a "renewal of the blood." I think he's talking about the circulation of *prana*, or *chi*. When male and female come together sexually, there's a balancing, a renewal, an exchange on that subtle body level. We have it all backwards in our culture. We think sex is about gross bodies, about techniques and manipulations of different kinds.

I almost included in the book some quotes from Albert Ellis, the founder of rational emotive therapy, who wrote a book in the fifties called *The Art of Erotic Seduction*. By going to such absurd lengths to describe techniques of seduction, it exposes the folly of the whole technical approach. Here are some quotes I left out:

After kisses have become long, good, and freely given, try to move in on the breasts. Although most women are clever adversaries in the sex game, in this breast bit many of them are unsophisticated and unaware... Get yourself a leather pillow and borrow a girl's bra. Fasten the bra and slip it over the pillow. With one hand hold the snap tight against the pillow and practice unfastening the bra with the other hand. *Go to department stores*

and study the construction of bras . Locate the snap exactly and learn to find it the first time you reach for it.

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How's that for alienated sexuality?

The original sex manuals, which first appeared in 1929, served a purpose. They broke the code of silence around sexuality. It's important for couples to be able to talk about sexuality, I wouldn't deny that. But we often go to the extreme of talking it to death. We need to keep the element of mystery intact.

Q. In your book you say that "relationships inevitably reactivate old wounds from childhood in the areas of bonding and separating." How do you as a therapist deal with the dysfunctional relationship patterns that people inherit from their families and play out in relationships?

A. Well, we're all suffering from those patterns. These issues come up in every relationship. If our parents were distant or unloving, we may fear abandonment—losing our partner; if our parents were too close or domineering, we fear engulfment—losing ourselves.

But underneath both these fears is the same thing: At some point in our childhood we disconnected from ourselves, we learned to develop a false self, as a way of protecting ourselves from pain. We've all assumed an identity that's less than the totality of who we are. So we're all in the same boat— we have a hard time connecting with ourselves, with who we really are. We have constructed character armor that keeps us from fully being who we are and thus distorts our relationships.

Most of the struggles and conflicts in a relationship grow out of this. Because two people are not fully conscious and awake, they do things that hurt and frustrate each other. Therefore every relationship conflict is an opportunity to look at how we are not fully awake. If we approach them in that way, relationships become a path that help us expand, break out of our character armor, and become more fully available to ourselves, to our partner, and to life

itself.

Q. Earlier you used the term "soul resonance." Could you elaborate on what you mean by that? How much of that is real and how much is it two people projecting ideal images on each other?

A. Relationships contain many different levels of reality at the same time. Two people can be projecting fantasies on each other while also experiencing a deeper level of soul resonance at the same time.

What is soul resonance? I don't know, really. It's that mystery again. So let's not try to explain it. Some would say it's past lives, some would say it's projection, others would say it's your "astral body." But I don't know what it is. I'm happy I don't know, actually.

Let me offer a description rather than an explanation. It feels like a being-to-being connection that goes much deeper than all our personality stuff. It's not just soft and sweet, but also contains a challenge. We feel stirred because we sense that we have something to learn from this person. Not just intellectually, but a sense that "My being is going to develop and evolve through my interaction with this person."

Q. I'm interested in your feelings about celibacy or singleness. I think it's true that relationship is a path, but do you feel it's the only path?

A. No. I think it's great to be alone. I would never say a relationship is the only way to work out one's "soul destiny," or whatever you want to call that. I think aloneness is our ultimate condition. Everything is alone in this universe— each tree, each bird, each individual is whole unto itself. For thousands of years the path of self-development or self-inquiry or spiritual growth has always been practiced alone, in a monastic or retreat setting.

From the point of view of relationship we often feel that aloneness is a deficiency. But we can also experience it as a kind of fullness. We can also use

our aloneness as a vehicle on the path of awakening if we dedicate ourselves to it.

So I think it's basically the same path, because what a relationship teaches us ultimately is how to be with ourselves. It's constantly throwing us back on ourselves, forcing us to ask ourselves, "How can I be with myself more fully, more richly so that I can be in this relationship more fully and richly?" If I can't stand being alone because it feels so impoverished, if I get antsy and bored when I'm with myself, then the relationship's going to reflect that sooner or later and become impoverished in the same way.

So I see relationship as a challenge to work on our aloneness as well. I personally love to spend time alone, and this time contributes as much to my relationship as anything else.

Q. Do you have any children and does having children get in the way of relationship as a path because they take so much time and attention?

A. It's a good question. I don't have my own child, but I have a stepson. I don't see any inherent reason why a child should interfere. Certainly the first few years they take so much time that you don't have much time for yourself. But my sense is that if there is a child in the relationship, that just becomes part of the path.

That's certainly been true with my stepson. In a stepfamily situation you often just want to relate to your partner and the child may seem like an extraneous element that keeps interfering. But then you realize that the child comes with the territory. So he or she becomes path in the sense that you have to work with those elements of yourself that are not willing to be with that. When I finally give in and say, "Okay, this is part of this relationship," then something expands. Painful as it can be sometimes (and it can be very painful), I have found that the stepfamily difficulties deepened my relationship with my wife.

They have forced me to open up in areas that I probably wouldn't have opened up in otherwise.

Q. As we open up more in a relationship, other people often seem to become more attracted or attractive to us as well. Is it possible to be monogamous and still stay open to others?

A. That's the \$64,000 question. At a certain point in a relationship we have to make a choice for monogamy or not. And if we take that route, then that becomes part of our path. That doesn't mean we can't dance with other energies, though. Just as we can dance with the energy of the hills, the mountains, the trees and the sunlight, we can still dance with other beings along the way. But we can't go along with the energy as fully as we might if we were single. We have to rule out the sexual channel of expression with them.

So there's a certain tension involved in maintaining a monogamous commitment. But it's an edge to explore. What doesn't work is to create heavy-duty "shoulds"—"I should never let myself open to anyone else's energy if I'm monogamous."

I think every couple has to have a discussion about this a number of times. We often buy into monogamy as something that comes packaged with marriage. But we may not have the foggiest idea what it really involves, what we bought into. Then we may rebel against it and say, "This is just another constraint, another prison. I'm going to bust out of this."

So I don't think we should buy monogamy as part of some unconscious package deal. But if we see it as part of a journey or path of exploration— we don't know what it really involves, it's a mystery, something we're going to learn about along the way— then it becomes more interesting. It's not something imposed on us that we have to rebel against.

When we approach it in this way, it brings us back to our rawness. There

are a lot of beautiful beings in this world we would love to intersect with, but we can't do that and still keep an ongoing primary relationship intact. Our heart breaks a little bit when we can't actualize all the love we might feel in this life. But that's okay. It's a very tender feeling, one that can bring us closer to our primary partner.

Q. When your partner hurts you, how do you deal with it so that the hurt doesn't just turn into resentment?

A. There's a lot to say about that. The most important thing is to let yourself feel the hurt. There's a cleansing quality in feeling it. We often tend to contract against it because we don't want to feel it. We imagine what might happen if we felt it: we'd be destroyed or victimized or disempowered.

These beliefs are what I call "stories"—what our mind does with the hurt, what we tell ourselves about the hurt. So we need to notice that these are just stories our mind concocts and come back to actually opening to the hurt. The hurt is "what is" right now.

When we open to our pain like that, we connect with our heart at that moment. And in connecting with our heart, we connect with who we really are, which is our strength. When we're connected with our strength and who we are, the hurt is not as big as it was when we were resisting it, thinking it was this horrible thing we couldn't possibly open to.

Then from that place we can start to expose our rawness with our partner — which is one the most difficult things we can do in a relationship. When my wife lets me see her rawness, I automatically feel more connected to her. And I learn something: "Oh, I didn't realize how I've hurt you." In fact, some of the most important turning points in our relationship have come from letting each other see our pain. My strongest determination to behave in a new way has come from seeing how much pain the old way was causing the one I love.

One thing that distinguishes *Journey of the Heart* from most relationship books is that it doesn't try to tell people how to get rid of the pain that inevitably arises in relationships. We don't need to get rid of the pain, because it is the vehicle that helps us connect with our heart, that source of tenderness and strength inside us. That's our richness as well, for it is what allows us to connect with ourselves and with another most fully and deeply.